Backpack Buddies Serves Hungry Students

By John La Boone

“Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” – Hebrews 13:16

Christ Church has a hunger outreach mission for children in our wider community called Backpack Buddies. This ministry allows us to live out our faith by helping disadvantaged kids get enough to eat. Food insecurity is present throughout Glynn County (including St. Simons Island) and it is especially a problem in inner city Brunswick. Sixty-one percent of students in Glynn County receive free or reduced-priced meals at school which is quite an indicator of how hard many local families are struggling. That helps a lot on school days but what about the weekends? That’s where the ministry aims to make a difference.

Backpack Buddies was started at Christ Church in 2012 by our Senior Warden, Susan Shipman. It is a ministry in which bags of food are prepared by church volunteers and sent home with students to make sure they get adequate nutrition over the weekends. Susan was introduced to the concept by the local
America’s Second Harvest organization, based on a similar program in Colorado, plus a presentation she attended that was given by a South Georgia Conference Methodist bishop on the lack of food security among children in struggling families. She also took inspiration from a similar program that is operated by the Jewish Community Center in Savannah.

Packing days take place about once every two weeks. A dedicated team of volunteers meets at our parish hall and packs 400 bags each time. In addition to Christ Church volunteers, there are also people helping from the local Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist and Community Church congregations. It is a ministry that has a strong ecumenical appeal. “This is quite a faith-based effort,” said Susan. “People from different religious backgrounds recognize the need and want to help. We are making some great partnerships across denominational lines.”

Each gallon zip lock bag is packed with about 14 nonperishable items that will feed the child on Saturday and Sunday, including: a protein source; breakfast items like oatmeal or granola bars; fruit such as applesauce; milk; juice; and snacks like fruit gummies, Rice Krispies treats and crackers or cookies. Parishioners sometimes donate fresh fruit like tangerines and oranges for the bags. When holidays come around, they try to furnish some kind of special treat like chocolate Santas or candy Easter eggs. Periodically, toothbrushes provided by local dentists are also put into the bags. An inspirational written message for each child is included in every bag. Then an interdenominational team delivers crates of bags to designated teachers or school counselors in time for distribution to students on Fridays.

The schools that are currently served are:

- Burroughs-Molette Elementary – 55 bags
- Oglethorpe Elementary – 50 bags
- St. Simons Elementary – 35 bags
- Golden Isles Elementary – 40 bags
In addition, 20 bags are furnished each week to the Safe Harbor Street Beat program that serves homeless teens who are still in school.

None of this would be possible without the compassionate support of ordinary people who care. “Because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the orphan who had no helper.” – *Job* 29:12. Funding for Backpack Buddies comes from grants provided by Hello Goodbuy Non-Profit Retail Store; St. Simons Presbyterian Church (committed to supporting 30 children per year); Christ Church Mission and Ministry Fund; the ECW Tour of Homes; and substantial donations by very generous parishioners and individuals in the community. Donations can be made to the program at any time. Checks should be made out to Christ Church with “Backpack Buddies” written on the memo line. It takes about $100 per child for the entire school year, an investment that produces long-term benefits. Food is purchased mainly from America’s Second Harvest. Some items are obtained from Sam’s. There is total transparency in how the resources are used.

Here are the statistics on the work of Christ Church’s Backpack Buddies for last school year:

- Bags distributed: 16,717
- Pounds of food distributed: 30,226
- Program revenue: $16,705.33
- Program expenditures: $16,819.73
- Cost per bag: $2.51

As Susan likes to say: “Hunger does not take a holiday.” Summer feeding programs in local schools provide disadvantaged children with breakfast and lunch just as they do during the school year; however, they do not provide food assistance for the weekends. Christ Church partners with other Episcopal churches in the county through Glynn Episcopal Ministries (GEM) to provide a Friday afternoon summer program in the Glynn Villas neighborhood in inner city Brunswick, that is physically hosted at St. Athanasius Episcopal Church. The program includes art activities; card and board games; wholesome, safe socialization; and a hot meal at the end of the day. Children’s
books are also given to the kids to keep. Then each child takes a Backpack Buddies food bag home for the weekend. Before the next school year starts in August, the students are given book bags and school supplies by GEM.

Ironically, we live in a society where there is luxury, frivolous spending and waste everywhere, side by side with hunger, urgent neediness and financial desperation. As the people of God, we do not have the option of not responding, because we know we can make a difference. “...if you give food to the hungry and satisfy those who are in need, then the darkness around you will turn to the brightness of noon.” – Isaiah 58:10. In the United States, 49-million people – including 13-million children – live in households that lack the means to get enough food on a regular basis. More than 17-million American households – that include 4-million children – are termed food insecure, meaning that they have limited or uncertain access to nutritionally adequate, safe food. Plus, in poor households, parents are forced to buy the cheapest food, which is also the unhealthiest, in order to try to get enough for everyone.

Children who grow up hungry have significant additional problems that can include developmental impairments like diminished language and motor skills, as well as low self-esteem and social/behavioral maladjustment. Food insecure children are more likely to have chronic health problems like anemia or asthma and they will have more hospitalizations. These kids will have poorer quality of life and are less likely to engage in wholesome peer experiences. They are much more likely to have problems at school that include tardiness, truancy, bullying, tantrums, hyperactivity, inattention, social withdrawal, depression, mood swings and aggression.

Food insecurity is more prevalent among those near or below the poverty line, in single-parent households (as in 35 percent of female-headed households with children), and among minority families. Although food insecurity is most common in large cities (25 percent), it is also prevalent in small towns, resort communities,
suburbs and rural areas. “There is hunger on this island,” Susan commented. “We definitely have hunger among our school children right here.” Nearly 60 percent of food insecure households participate in the three largest federal food and nutrition programs, but that is usually not enough to insure that children are sufficiently well fed. It is good to press our government to have a humane approach toward helping our disadvantaged citizens and protecting our children, but still more is needed. Plus, some things are especially well done by faith-based partnerships. We have the power to communicate caring. That’s where churches and other religious institutions have wonderful opportunities for ministry.

The problem of food insecure families and childhood hunger in our society is very big, but it is still far better to light candles than to curse the darkness. Backpack Buddies at Christ Church is a success story, and it can be an even greater success story if we give it the level of support it deserves. “Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.” – 1 Timothy 6:18.

For more information or to make a donation or to volunteer, contact Susan Shipman at (912) 222-9206 or susanshipman@att.net.

Look with mercy, O heavenly Father, upon the students and their families in our community who live with hunger and uncertainty as their constant companions. Stir us up and motivate us to eliminate the cruelty of food insecurity among our children. Strengthen and inspire those who organize programs to feed young people, bless the generous, and grant that every child in our community may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.