

On Saturday, April 27, 2019, Northern Association Churches and the surrounding communities came together to fight world hunger. With the benefit of a Penn Central Conference Innovation Grant, the smallest association in Penn Central Conference raised over \$10,000 with the goal of raising hunger awareness and packaging over 30,000 meals for shipment to those in need. To achieve this, the Association partnered with the global ministry, "Rise Against Hunger", a nonprofit group founded by Ray Buchanan, a United Methodist minister. During his service in the U.S. Marine Corp, Ray Buchanan quickly recognized the dire need for food assistance around the world. Over the past thirty years, Ray's mission has been to eliminate world hunger and the organization has now established a goal of achieving this by 2030. Ray also recognized that ending hunger meant more than just feeding people, so Rise Against Hunger focuses its feeding programs in areas where there is transformational development occurring, often partnering with other aid groups and programs. Most recently meals have been shipped to Mozambique, Tanzania and Italy to assist with refugee and natural disaster relief.

For several years the Northern Association of Churches held annual workshops in an effort to provide education and training opportunities around topics of interest to the church and community. While initially successful, attendance had dwindled over the years, and last year, the Executive Committee made a decision to try something new. It was decided a hands-on mission project might provide the energy boost we were seeking, so the first Association meal packaging event was held. The response was tremendous. The event was such a great success that every participating church and community organization requested we do it again, except bigger! This year, a call for volunteers to staff two shifts of approximately two hours duration resulted in over 100 volunteers, far exceeding attendance at any previous Association event. In addition to church volunteers, advertising resulted in many other community members participating as well, and in the course of about six hours, including set-up and tear-down, the group packaged over 30,000 meals.

The energy and mission-mindedness this project brought to the Northern Association Community far exceeded our expectations. Even though the project was a one-day event, many people came together to plan, fundraise, and organize to ensure everything flowed smoothly. Our goals of encouraging community and church involvement, raising hunger awareness, and generating enthusiasm and connection to the wider church were achieved in ways we never expected. Penns Valley High School wrestlers showed up at 7:00 a.m. to help unload the truck, Local Lions Clubs and

American Legion organizations donated facilities, provided volunteers, and contributed almost \$3,000 to the cause. A local restaurant provided pizzas at a large discount so we could all take a mid-day break and have lunch. And every Association Church was represented through donations and volunteers. People are already asking when we'll be doing this again!

We are also excited to find out where our meals will be shipped. Rise Against Hunger barcodes each box with information about when and where the meals were packaged. Using these barcodes, they then notify us when the meals are shipped, and what their destination will be. One volunteer commented, "It's a really good feeling knowing we are making a difference in someone's life."

I shared with my congregation the following Sunday that while these meals will not solve the many underlying problems associated with hunger, they will bring something essential for survival—something even more important than the calories and nutrition—and that is hope. Simply knowing that someone cares—that somewhere, someone in a little valley in Central Pennsylvania noticed, and cared enough to help.















