



St. Athanasius food bank chairperson Velma Crosby (left) and Christ Church volunteer Penny Szwast are shown in the food pantry of Feed My Sheep.

St. Athanasius Feed My Sheep Food Bank: The Hands, Feet and Voice of Christ

By John La Boone

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in"
- Matthew 25:35

A few weeks ago I wrote about supporting Heifer International as a way to help feed the world's hungry people. I still think that's a wonderful program and I encourage you to consider periodic donations (visit www.heifer.org). But it's good to remember that we don't have to leave Glynn County to find hungry people who need our help. There is a local faith-based charity that we can support that is working hard to look after

our own poor by providing food, clothing, prayer, encouragement, acceptance, smiles and lots of hugs.

The St. Athanasius Feed My Sheep Food Bank program began 12 years ago and has steadily grown under the capable leadership of Velma Crosby, a member of St. Athanasius Episcopal Church in Brunswick who continues to serve as food bank chairperson.

"We never turn anyone away," explained Velma. "No matter who you are, if you get in line, you get fed. That's what we do. We feed people."

According to the Feeding America website, 42-million Americans — including 13-million children — live in households that are food-insecure, meaning that there is limited or uncertain access to enough food to support a healthy life. And about 5.4-million senior citizens routinely do not get enough to eat. Seniors often have to decide whether to spend their money on food or on the medicine they need. In desperation, poor households often resort to spending their food budgets on cheap, unhealthy food in order to try to have enough, which leads to or negatively impacts many serious health problems like diabetes and high blood pressure. In a country famous for abundance, this type of poverty and hunger is everywhere, including here in Glynn County. There is plenty of missionary work that needs doing here at home.



St. Athanasius is a small parish with limited resources but they have an abundance of faith and a whole lot of heart. The Feed My Sheep ministry got started when the county Health Department Wellness Program began approaching churches to see if they could respond to some of the needs of the local poor. The first church they approached declined. Then they talked with the St. Athanasius vestry – and the answer was an immediate and resounding yes.

About 25 clients were served in the beginning. The health department provided the volunteer workers with a \$100 gift card each month to buy food. That didn't go very far, so people at the church did what they could to gather resources. The Adult Sunday School started giving its fourth



Sunday offering to the program each month. Other donations were sought both inside and outside of the congregation. Soon they were successfully serving dozens of people. It was a bit like the Gospel story of the loaves and fishes.

After two years, the financial support from the health department ended but fortunately other support emerged. Today, Feed My Sheep is supported not only by St. Athanasius, it also receives additional food, clothing and other donations from members of Christ Church, St. Ignatius Chapel, St. Mark's and Holy Nativity Episcopal Churches. Hello, Goodbuy, the thrift store operated by St. Mark's, is a very significant regular contributor. And there are a number of local individuals in the community who are regular donors as well.

Currently more than 100 people show up to receive food on each distribution day. That number is usually closer to 120 or 130 and it has been as high as 181. Feed My Sheep depends entirely on volunteers to manage, operate and promote it. At present there are about a dozen regular volunteers. Christ Church member and retired school social worker Penny Szwast has been enthusiastically involved in this ministry for more than 10 years.

"Becky Rowell was very active in soliciting food donations at St. Ignatius when I first heard about it," she recalled, "and one day I called up Bucko [Velma's husband Buck Crosby], who I used to work with in the school system, and said, 'Where is all this food going?' And he said, 'If you come to St. Athanasius right now, you'll see for yourself.' So I got in my car and went, and that was the beginning of my volunteering for the food bank. I never looked back after that."

The volunteers do much more than just hand out bags of food. They raise funds and solicit donations of various kinds. Penny negotiated a discounted price on a freezer (which she then paid for) so that meat could be stored in the food bank pantry. A special rate on ground turkey was negotiated with a local supermarket and now the program provides 100 one-pound packages of ground turkey to clients every month. Volunteers also deliver food or provide transportation when they know of needy people who cannot get to the church on their own.

Good stewardship is paramount. In trying to make every resource go as far as possible, there is a carefulness mixed with gratitude for what they have to work with.

"We have complete accountability and documentation for all money and other donations that we take in," said Velma. "We are very careful and organized about everything. We don't place any requirements on people to get food. If they have someone in their household who is under 18 or over 65, it helps if they tell us that so we can qualify to buy discounted food from other specialized programs. But we don't turn anyone away. How can you tell someone they can't have food?"

There are several Christ Church volunteers who work on procuring additional items to round out the nutritional value of the bags of food provided to clients. One of those people is Christ Church Senior Warden Susan Shipman, who uses monetary donations to buy food from America's Second Harvest and other special sources at discounted prices.

"Penny got me involved with the food bank four or five years ago," Susan commented. "Along with Marty Carnes and Jolly Goss, I go to Second Harvest and shop for the items that we are short on so that all the bags we give out are healthy, balanced and nutritious. This is a wonderful program and it fills a very important need in our community. We have plenty of underserved people right here and we really need to help them.



"I love how this inter-parish collaboration works," she continued. "We are

people from every walk of life, from different churches, different genders, different races, all working together to feed people. It's really inspiring."



their behind the scenes work year-round). The distribution hours are 9 to 11 a.m. Distribution takes place in the parish hall of St. Athanasius Episcopal Church which is located at the corner of Albany and Monck Streets. People usually start lining up at 8 a.m. The atmosphere is always one of gratitude, goodwill and mutual respect. When the doors open, everyone comes in and holds hands to pray together. There are announcements. Birthdays and anniversaries are celebrated with songs and hugs. There is also a prayer table where clients are able to sit with church volunteers to confidentially discuss and pray about whatever may be on their minds if they choose to.

Velma points out that feeding the body is important but it is just as important to feed the person's spirit. Generous amounts of acceptance, respect and encouragement are a big part of Feed My Sheep. Each distribution day is like a little homecoming. Many clients are regulars and they tend to encourage and help each other, a testament to how hope and kindness grow and rub off on our neighbors when we get involved. "We have had some people coming in for food and actually make a donation," said Velma. "It's not much but they can't really afford to do even that. Out of the goodness of their hearts, it sometimes happens. The clients who are able will carry the groceries home for those who are not able. These people are not just concerned with themselves: they help each other in different ways."





Items that the food bank has a continuous need for include: Tuna and other meats in cans or pouches; peanut butter; jelly; cereal; canned stews; Vienna sausage; soups; macaroni and cheese; all canned vegetables; canned fruit; canned pasta, rice, dried beans; and boxed cornbread. Non-food items needed include toilet tissue; soap; toothpaste; toothbrushes; any other toiletries; used clothing; and new underwear.

Bibles and other books are gratefully accepted. There is a book table set up on distribution days and the books are always taken by clients. Actually, Feed My Sheep will accept anything of use. Wheelchairs have been given out. Reading glasses are made available. Right now there is a big need for a baby stroller for one of the regular clients whose stroller was recently stolen. Clothing is always needed as well. Used clothes that still have some mileage in them will definitely be put to good use.

Usually there are grandparents who come to the food bank with their grandchildren. Things like children's clothing, toys and children's books are a big bonus for those clients.

Some clients are homeless persons and the volunteers give special consideration to their needs. When possible they try to direct them to safer options for sleeping, to social services, and they provide foods that can be consumed without a can opener or cooking. Pop top cans are especially solicited for this reason. The homeless clients are welcomed just as warmly as anyone else on distribution day, and the volunteers do their best to convey that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. "There are always lots of smiles and hugs," said Penny. "I just keep coming back for those hugs."

Food, clothing and other donations can be dropped off at the Christ Church narthex or parish hall or at St. Ignatius at any time. For more information about the St. Athanasius Feed My Sheep Food Bank or to volunteer or discuss donating money or delivering donations to St.

Athanasius, call Velma Crosby at (912) 265-8521 or email church secretary Nakkia Stanley at nakkiastanley@yahoo.com. Bless you.

Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all hungry and neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, the working poor, the unemployed, the deprived children, those on the verge of giving up, and all who have none to care for them. Help us feed the hungry, clothe the naked, encourage the downtrodden, and heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, loving Lord, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.