

Dinnertime in the Kingdom of God

By John La Boone

"Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over."

– Luke 9: 16–17

How does an Episcopal church become a church? For that matter, what makes anything a kind of church? Is it the building? Stained glass, pews, a steeple, a bell tower, a pulpit with a carved eagle attached to it? Does a building with a baptismal font, prayer books and hymnals become a church once it is blessed by a diocesan bishop? Interesting questions, but not ones that most people ask out loud. We just sort of know what's a church and what isn't... don't we?

I recently learned about a real Episcopal church in Texas that describes itself as "a church without walls." It's called St. Isidore's Episcopal Church (named after the patron saint of peasant laborers), and it is a church plant from Trinity Episcopal Church,



located in The Woodlands community, which is part of the Greater Houston Metropolitan Area. It all started when the Rev. Sean Steel, associate rector of Trinity Episcopal, was given several hours a week from his normal work schedule to dream, research, plan, imagine, study and ponder what it means to be a church in the 21st-century. The result is St. Isidore's, which Steel launched in 2015. No church building at all – and that's by intention. At this point, the congregation is not even interested in having a church building. They say St. Isidore's doesn't have walls – but it has many doors. Really, no walls but it's still a church. There is a strong desire to not have anything that could become a barrier separating the people of God from the people of God or to distract from literally

doing what the Gospel asks us to do. And the main physical feature of the life of this congregation is – a food truck!

There are many food banks and soup kitchens across the country that do a great deal of fantastic work in the world, and thank goodness they do. The people of St. Isidore's try to go beyond the basic food bank model and combine feeding people physically with embracing and feeding them



spiritually and socially, and they do it with a remarkable gusto. When people are hungry, they are doing without a lot of other things besides food, including a sense of being respected and welcomed in most parts of society. The role model of the St. Isidore's members is Jesus, who shared meals with everybody – saints and sinners alike. Steel and the food truck workers have gained national attention for blending the work of their feeding ministry with Episcopal traditions, placing an emphasis on the sacramental nature of the relationships being formed while people are serving and being served.

“There is something about how we eat and who we eat with, that says something about how we relate to God above,” explained Steel. “Feeding people is a huge part of everything we do. It has shown us what we are capable of.”

The outreach ministry of St. Isidore's is called “Abundant Harvest,” and the food truck has become its most visible public sign around the Houston area. It is operated on what they call the “Christian economy” which is radically different from the secular, for-profit economy. There is no charge for the hot meals they serve, no charge for the bags of food they send home with their clients. Sometimes people who receive food “pay” for it by doing things like smiling at three people that day, having a conversation, helping to process food donations, or helping serve food to other clients during the food truck visits. No one is forced to do those things but experience shows that people tend to feel good about doing something in return and being part of the force for good in the world. The work of Abundant Harvest is made possible with money from grants and

private donations of money and food. It's all part of something St. Isidore's refers to as being "offensively generous." They also do some local catering which helps bring in enough money to finance a very significant part of the free meals for the needy.

The truck is a sight to behold and a pleasure to work in. It has a six-burner stove, a full-size convention oven, a flat-top grill, two large refrigerators and two prep stations. The appliances run on propane gas and there is also a 12K generator for electricity. The outside of the truck features the Abundant Harvest logo and the *#offensivelygenerous* motto. Molly Carr, a member of St. Isidore's and full-time food truck missionary, said, "It's really our idea not to just pop in and get people fed and leave again. Ours is really about community, about building relationships around the table, and that is how we think Jesus built relationships. We're kind of following that lead."

These folks know how to think outside the box. Besides feeding people on the streets, St. Isidore's Abundant Harvest ministry brings faith and shared meals to eight faith communities in the area. Their numbers are not huge but they are steadily growing. The workers try to reach people where they are spiritually, as well as geographically, just like Jesus did. They meet as a house church for a weekly corporate prayer, a meal and discussion. There is a family-oriented, child-friendly house church group and another house church that is geared toward people without children. There's also the "Taco Church" that meets at a local Taco Bell restaurant. They gather for breakfast and prayer and then move into Christian formation, discussion and discipleship.



Then there is my personal favorite: the "Laundry Love" church group that meets in a laundromat from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on the second Sunday of each month. The St. Isidore's volunteers go there to give service to others with no strings attached, providing free laundry, food, haircuts, flu shots and health checks. The Eucharist is celebrated right there in the

laundromat, too – in English and in Spanish. *¡Que maravilloso!* Every Tuesday evening there is the "Pub Theology" congregation that meets at

a local ale house for respectful theological and philosophical discussions, welcoming all religious and secular perspectives. On Wednesday nights there is “Youth Church” which is adult-led for students in grades 7–12, meeting at a Panera Bread restaurant. And then on Sunday evenings there is “Warrior Church” that is held at a boxing and fitness gym. They strive to integrate worship, exercise and fellowship that is designed for all physical capabilities and open to anyone looking for a way to explore their faith in that setting. Just like Jesus, the congregation of St. Isidore’s creates worship and fellowship where people need it.

St. Isidore’s began October 2015 with one community of eight adults and five children (including Steel’s own family), meeting in a house for worship. It has grown steadily since then.



In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, that struck in August 2017, the Abundant Harvest food truck volunteers served about 10,000 meals to those who had lost their homes and everything else. Fortunately, the need from that disaster has grown less severe as many other relief efforts have helped those people start getting back on their feet. Today, the truck serves about 750 meals every week. Community interest in the mission has not decreased, as Houston has made progress since the hurricane. In fact, in the last few months, the number of Abundant Harvest volunteers has tripled and donations are up significantly, too. Besides the congregation, some of the volunteers are actually clients who depend on Abundant Harvest and other charities for their food. That includes poor people and the homeless, and also college students, single parents and senior citizens.

The volunteers are a close-knit community. They meet at 6:45 in the morning to unload the food deliveries and sort the items. There is always prayer. They get a lot of produce and dairy donated by supermarkets that is still perfectly safe and edible, but not very sellable in stores, like cartons of eggs that contain one or two broken eggs or bananas that are turning dark. Cheese, bread, eggs, milk, meat and lots of vegetables and fruit are put to good use. No need to let any that go to waste. Many of the people receiving the food will take it home to households where there are young children. There is a lot of urgent need for food all over America that is



not always visible. The work of Abundant Harvest tends to be enjoyable and the atmosphere promotes making new friends among people of very diverse backgrounds, just like it was in the original Jesus movement.

The people of St. Isidore's Episcopal Church have chosen to put the resources at their disposal into social ministry rather than into land and a building with all its usual trappings. Taking it to that level and full-time focus probably wouldn't work for every congregation, but it's working very well for them, and what a wonderful witness it is. As Steel says, it has shown them what is possible. To me, the most important take-away of this story is that they thought about what was important to them, prayed about it, talked about it, and then made their own creative decision on what path was best for them to take, instead of simply doing what convention and habit would usually dictate. I think that's very Jesus-like. After all, one thing that Jesus probably never said was: *But we've never done it that way before!*

So, is St. Isidore's really an Episcopal church, considering that they don't have a regular church building? Well, they believe that they are, and everyone who encounters them seems to believe it, too. They have a pastor and lay leaders. They have prayers, study and fellowship. They have the sacraments. They are a community that has made a firm commitment to do all they can to fulfill Jesus' final instruction: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." – *John 13:34*. Sounds just like a church to me, a church whose people have a lot of faith in God's abundant harvest.

Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor you with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your abundant harvest, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.