

The Episcopal Church of the Redeemer's Food Pantry Offers Weekly Food Distribution and Additional Services to Clients In Need

By Ellen Fitch, Director and Jackie Wilson- Assistant Director

The food pantry at Redeemer began in a closet! A small classroom was later designated and two people (who still play a major role in our volunteer team), began the pantry using personal funds and a few donations to somewhat “stock the shelves.” We started out in 2011 serving around 12-15 people each week. We then began to offer personal care items, and assisted our visitors with meal planning advice. By 2014, we doubled in size and in demand, and with added volunteers began serving between 45–65 people each Wednesday. Soon after, and without our knowledge, we ended up on a Google search for “food pantries.”

In 2014, we reached out to an organization named ‘Feeding Northeast Florida’ and became an approved agency to purchase donated food stuffs at a nominal fee. We passed their inspection and requirements to become a provider but needed more space to house the donated freezers and a refrigerator to store the purchased perishable items. We were able to secure the attached classroom to our present location, and doubled in space... not to mention the number we served each week! Also in 2014, we applied for a grant from Walmart and we were awarded \$500! Each Tuesday, parishioners and helpers used their personal vehicles to load two to three pallets of food from ‘Feeding Northeast Florida’ and then off-load them back at the church for distribution on Wednesdays.

Early in 2015, we were blessed with a lady who had prior food pantry experience, and who joined our group of volunteers. With her help and expertise, we expanded our client-base once more. We also applied to, and were approved, as a provider for Farm Share (the USDA representatives for Duval county), which also means a lot more food, but at no cost.

Currently, we receive twice-weekly ‘stales’ from Publix (picked-up by a parishioner), and Winn Dixie allows us to bulk order their items on super sale. Another parishioner picks-up up to 36 flats of bread and assorted bakery items each week from the day-old bakery, and delivers them to the pantry on Tuesday evenings.

With the proceeds from past golf tournaments, the annual rummage sale, ‘Souperbowl Sunday,’ VBS week, and donations from friends and parishioners, we are able to further expand our stock and our weekly distribution. God blessed us with the donation of a van from the generous folks at Ring-Power, (saving us over \$80 plus each week in a U-Haul rental), and with the help of two of our initial male clients, we have the ‘manpower’ to help us load and unload our pick-ups each week.

Today, we are blessed with approximately 15 parishioners who help us weekly and 15 non-parishioners who come from a bible-study group and local 55 and older community. Each Tuesday, a crew arrives to pack boxes of TEFAP food, and another crew to pack bags of purchased food. We now make weekly trips to both Farm Share and Feeding

Northeast Florida to select food items. Another crew arrives on Wednesday mornings to help distribute the food with donated Publix and Winn Dixie carts filled with food. Two parishioners act as our parking lot attendants to distribute numbers as our clients arrive. Each Wednesday, we have four ladies that greet and sign everyone in, along with the Wednesday crew that loads the designated items into the shopping carts. We are blessed to add to this wonderful group of volunteers a director and assistant director, who oversee the distribution, compliance and monthly and quarterly paperwork required by the member agencies, along with applying for grants and seeking ways to bring in the various outside agencies to provide additional services to our clients.

Presently, we serve between 145-165 needy people each week. We are one of a small number of food pantries in Duval County that offers weekly food distribution. We have further expanded the inclusion of auxiliary agencies that offer our clients services such as: dental and vision works for children and adults, Eldersource, closed captioned phones, and free cell phone service. In 2016, we were approved as an ACCESS agency, where we are able to assist clients in applying for government benefits online.

We strive to include additional food items during the holidays to help brighten these hard times for those in need, and this year we packed over 50 backpacks full of Back-to-School supplies for the children of our clients. Thanks to additional donations, we now have five freezers and one refrigerator to stock fresh and frozen food items each week.

God has truly blessed us over the years and thanks to our wonderful volunteers, and the generosity of our friends and parish, we are able to continue to serve the many who are in need within our county.

God is great, and God is good...and we thank him for this food...along with all those who give of their time, talent and treasure to support this wonderful ministry!