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First Baptist parishioners reach out to those in need in Newfane

By Julie Obermiller Apr 10, 2015



In Newfane, First Baptist Church food pantry volunteer Bonnie Eiffert, left, and state Assembly Member Jane Corwin shel Corwin's drive last year to assist local pantries. Donations are always welcome, director Linda Peace says.

     

In the hamlet of Newfane stands a cobblestone church with a big red door. While the door wasn't part of the original building in 1843, it has long served as a beacon for those hungering for the faith experience of the First Baptist Church community. It is also a beacon for those hungering for their daily bread.

About a decade ago, the food pantry in Olcott, which was serving the Migrant Ministries, was moved to First Baptist. The pantry continues to serve local families and is undergoing a transformation under director Linda Peace.

The local population swells in summer as migrant farm workers and their families come to stay and work. They are working 12-hour shifts preparing local fruit trees and farms for the season, and have not yet started collecting paychecks.

This past week, Peace extended the hours of the pantry as families came out to register for assistance. The pantry is now open to the public from 1 to 7 p.m. each Wednesday.

"Families who are registered with us can come twice a month to receive food," said Peace. "We give them a three-day supply each time to help stretch paychecks and get them through the month and we strive to provide healthy protein as well as staples. Our freezer holds chicken, fish, ground turkey, etc. that can be used in many meals. Fresh bread and bakery products can be picked up every week. It really helps to stretch the food budget."

Parishioners at First Baptist regularly donate food to the pantry, and take up a special monetary collection a few times a year to supplement a New York State grant and USDA donations. As part of the WNY Food Bank network, First Baptist is able to purchase available foods at a low rate per pound, so cash donations really go far.

Don Peace makes the trip to Buffalo every other Thursday, driving his truck with a trailer attached, to pick up the food. Mr. Peace also travels to the local Tops Market twice a week to pick up bread donations. Now retired from his job as a nurse at the VA Hospital, he cheerfully devotes many hours to the pantry.

Wife Linda still works as a lunch lady at Newfane Elementary School, continuing her mission to feed the children with her food pantry ministry. "It breaks my heart to see these kids come to school hungry," she said.

Don and Linda Peace have children, grandchildren and a great-grandchild of their own, but see all children as part of their family. Why do they devote so much time and effort to the food pantry? They say it's "for the kids."

There are 13 main pantry volunteers at FBC, all of whom recently received certification in Basic Food Safety after training by the Food Bank. Bruce Aikin, Kevin Bowes, Dan Brown, Julia Drake, Bob Eberhart, Bonnie Eiffert, Karen Garcia, Steve and Renie Gerhardt, Tom Hartley, Sue Pritchard and the Peaces are the church volunteer core.

"We are blessed to have additional assistance with some of the heavy lifting and unloading. The Junior Rainbow of Help group, led by adviser Connie Kyle, is a wonderful group of kids who provide a lot of muscle that we need," laughs the director.

The facility is currently undergoing a makeover with new paint and repairs. "Our goal is to provide a brighter, friendlier place for our clients so they feel welcome and have privacy when sharing their information," Mrs. Peace said. "Many are working poor who are trying to make ends meet and seeking assistance is hard for them. Everyone deserves respect and kindness."

The group is looking into options to hook up with local farmers to get leftover fresh produce, which is so essential for good nutrition. They are also planning a non-food drive to stock up on items that clients are unable to purchase with food stamps.

"We have a huge supply of toothpaste, but no toothbrushes, razors, soap or shampoo," Mrs. Peace said. "Those are basics that people need, the same as toilet tissue and facial tissues, and are luxuries for some. We are not meant to be a grocery store or a client's primary shopping source, but we try to meet basic needs in a caring way. We are all a part of the same family and we're meant to care for each other and to share our own blessings."

First Baptist Church is located at 6047 Main St. in Newfane. Appointments may be made to fill out the necessary applications for service, or to receive emergency food rations, by calling 778-9216.

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