

Brotherly Love: How a small parish supplements PVD's COVID response

On one of those mornings with looming gray clouds and skin-piercing sleet, I went to **St. Peter's & St. Andrew's** over in Mt. Pleasant for my booster.

A line of people stood outside the tiny parish's arched red double doors. Some people held babies in their arms, some shifted toddlers on their hips, some rested their palms on plastic rolling cart handles, and most held empty tote bags in their hands.

Once inside, I was handed a number on a Post-It and instructed to sit in the pews on the right side of the church. On the left side, sat people with empty bags and rolling carts, they too held Post-It notes with numbers in their hands.

In the church crossing, two women sat at a folding table administering vaccines. To the left, people walked in and out of a doorway stopping every so often to call out a string of numbers to the people sitting on the left side of the church.

The numbers were called in English, then Spanish, and when a word was unknown, whoever was doing the calling used whatever Spanish they had. One exchange went as follows:

"Okay," a woman said. "*Doce, trece y...* what's next? How do you say 14? *Cómo se dice...*" And she drew a 14 in the air.

"*Catorce,*" said a voice from the pews.

"Okay, yes! *Catorce! Doce, trece, y catorce!*"

There was laughter. People smiled. And several people walked off in the direction of a side room.

Before the pandemic, St. Peter's & St. Andrew's ran a bi-monthly food pantry that provided food and toiletries to 60-80 families a month. Now, they provide food and toiletries to 80-110 families a week.

"It's mind-boggling," says Reverend Maryalice Sullivan of St. Peter's & St. Andrew's. "At the beginning of COVID, the RI Food Bank was wise enough to know this was going to get worse, not better. They reached out and when they did we all just looked at each other and said, 'Of course we can.' We didn't have any idea how, our space is *very* small, but we said 'Yes' and it's worked."

Last year, St. Peter's & St. Andrew's gave out over 100,000 pounds of groceries. "That's enormous compared to where we were," says Sullivan. "And we're still a small parish of 30 people, so it's not like we've expanded into this great huge organization, but we have in a way because we couldn't do this on our own. We reached out to other parishes and organizations, like Brown and Johnson and Wales, and now they help unload groceries on Fridays."

In March of 2021, St. Peter's & St. Andrew's opened as a COVID testing site through a partnership with Lotus Noire Health; in June, they began offering vaccines. The woman administering my booster said she preferred holding the clinic in conjunction with the pantry because it gave people the opportunity to

Speak with medical professionals about the virus and vaccine in a safe and trusted space.

“Because we are trusted, people come to us who wouldn’t get a vaccination otherwise,” says Sullivan. “They wouldn’t go to the Dunkin’ Center because it’s too intimidating, they wouldn’t even go to a state-run site. In the beginning, the National Guard was coming and we told them, ‘You can come but you have to be in plain clothes, you *have* to look like us.’ And they did.”

In addition to running weekly food pantries and vaccination clinics, Sullivan’s congregation of 30 runs a pop-up thrift store. “It’s not a *thrift* store, thrift store,” says Sullivan. “It’s more like ‘What can you give us for it?’ And that honors [a person’s] dignity.” They also participate in Free., a program that provides free menstrual products to all who need them, and Sullivan’s small parish has plans for growth.

“We want to make work terminals [in our basement] so people can access computers and work remotely. The dream is to get people from the pantry to where they can support themselves.”

Since the start of the pandemic, Sullivan has noticed an increase in conversation. “That’s the beautiful part, that’s the community part, it’s not just people asking, it’s people sharing... There are a number of people from the pantry who now come and unload groceries, or help with the thrift store, or wash the floors. It’s truly a community, it’s not one-way.

“If this was a program to fill our pews, then we have failed, totally failed. If this was a program to say that you are of value, you are of worth, you are loved—and you don’t have to sit in our pews for that to happen—then we have succeeded.”

To volunteer or donate to St. Peter’s & St. Andrew’s visit stpeters-standrews.org/join. Current needs include: Spanish-speaking volunteers and a volunteer thrift store manager.