

Feeding the Masses

The doors won't open for another 30 minutes, but already a crowd is gathering at the side entrance of All Saints' Memorial Church on the west side of Providence. Right at 4 o'clock a sea of people crams through the entrance, along a downstairs hallway, around a corner and into the parish hall where one of the best meals many will have this week awaits.

Welcome to City Meal Site. Started in the mid-1980s, it got new life when the operation moved from the East Side two years ago. The Rev. David Ames is the priest-in-charge at All Saints, founded in 1872 and the largest Episcopal Church in the state. But like some parishes in the diocese, All Saints was experiencing declining numbers when Father Ames arrived four years ago.

"All Saints is the only Episcopal church on the west side of Providence now and it has to bring value to the surrounding community, as historic buildings have to do. I saw a need and saw what was possible here and began to develop a number of programs that could meet those needs," Father Ames said. "And the meal site is one of them."

When the Episcopal Cathedral of Saint John, the home sanctuary for the diocese and the City Meal Site for decades, closed in 2012, Father Ames agreed to bring the program across town. With it came Alane Spinney, who became head chef after graduating from culinary school six years ago when the program was still at the cathedral.

"I walked into that kitchen the first time and I've been doing it just about every Tuesday ever since," said Spinney, who works as a barista at a bakery just up the street, but volunteers her time and talents here. "We try to put out the very best meal we can on our budget. Things that maybe other meal sites wouldn't serve. And we run it like a restaurant."

And like a restaurant Spinney quickly learned what the customers like: Lasagna is a hit, tuna casserole not so much. She also has to keep in mind that many of those who come every week have dental issues and some have high blood pressure or diabetes.

Spinney and a staple of others arrive mid-day Tuesday to begin food preparation. They are joined as the day goes on by an army of volunteers who all make it work as 4 o'clock approaches. "Our volunteers are the heart and soul. They make it happen. We serve between 100 and 250 people a three-course, sit-down meal, and we'll do it in an hour," she says.

"There are a lot of very hungry people out there, and I've learned there are all kinds of hunger," Spinney said. "There, of course, is the physical hunger. We can take care of that of that physical hunger. But a lot of people come here just to see friends. And to sit down, be served a meal and talk to each other."

City Meal Site feeds an average of 150 to 200 people a week, depending on the time of the month. And it does so on an annual budget of just \$20,000 a year in donations and grants. That works out to under \$3 per meal.

Jack Nolan was recruited by Father Ames seven months ago to serve on the board of directors for City Meal Site, which is incorporated as its own non-profit entity and not under the umbrella of any one

church, even though it operates out of All Saints.

“When was the last time you bought a meal for \$2.70 that was balanced and hot and served over your shoulder?” Nolan asked. “That’s incredible and can only be done with volunteers. That is enormous bang for the donated buck.”

Father Ames said the weekly meal helps bridge a gap for many. “They can’t make it and a meal like this helps. And one of the goals of this is to help lift people out of that poverty trench, which is so pervasive. And I think if people can get a little help, even if they’re working two or three jobs, and find a meal for themselves or their family once a week, that’s a big help.”

So what’s the message?

“That this is a hospitable place, that it’s welcoming, that the food is excellent and that they will go home feeling satisfied.”

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