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As food pantry grows, so does demand

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A congregation with only about 90 families as members is providing food to hundreds of people in the area each week, with the help of local grocery stores.

The Hillside Church, a Free Methodist Church at 2727 Crawford Ave., Evanston, within a mile of both Wilmette's and Skokie's borders, reports its food pantry is growing more popular each week with residents of all three towns and Chicago.

"We are providing food to 500 to 600 people a week," said Hillside's pastor, the Rev. Mark Taylor. "We have some people who live in upper-end neighborhoods and who've lost their jobs, or working people who are struggling to pay their bills. It's not just the destitute who come."

People line up before the food pantry opens on Wednesdays and Saturdays, he said.

Modest beginnings

The effort started small a year ago with one Evanston couple's effort to help a refugee family from Burma. Faith and Mike Albano agreed to sponsor a Burmese family at the request of a friend who volunteered with the Willow Creek food pantry. Through that church's food pantry, the Albanos got packages of food they delivered to the Burmese family and other needy families in the Evanston area.

He and his wife drove to a grocery store in Barrington with the Willow Creek volunteers every Saturday for about six months starting in November 2008.

"We would fill up our Suburban with food, bring it out here and make up boxes of food. We would deliver about half immediately. The rest would go in the deep freeze."

"Any overflow would go to the Good News Community Kitchen in Rogers Park, so it wouldn't go to waste," Albano said.

But the distribution project became too big for an at-home operation. The new pastor at Hillside, the Rev. Mark Taylor agreed to store the food in the refrigerator and freezers in the basement of the parsonage where he was living.

Pantry from a garage

But the requests for food kept increasing.

"Our church met and decided to convert a large two-car garage (on the church property) into a food pantry," Mike Albano said. "In April, we cleaned it out. Rich Short and Mark Sandstrom and I put up drywall and insulated it."

The new pantry is equipped with five large chest freezers and six refrigeration units obtained via church funds and donations, Taylor said.

Affiliation

The pastor took a course at the Greater Chicagoland Food Depository to become officially affiliated with that organization. Hillside Church is allowed to pick up food at the depository on the southwest side of Chicago and receive food donations directly from participating grocery stores.

Every day of the week, a church volunteer picks up food donations from either the depository, the Jewel Food store on Green Bay Road in Wilmette, or another Wilmette grocery store, Albano said.

The stores are very generous. They give away produce, meat, dairy products and items from the delicatessen. "Basically, everything you see that goes out the (store's) front door," Albano said.

A team of 30 to 40 volunteers from the church and neighborhood pick up, sort and pack the donations.

Hillside has no residency requirements for receiving the free groceries, but a person must show identification.

Pantry volunteers also ask how many family members there are, so they know how many groceries to provide. About two weeks ago, the pantry provided food to more than 300 different households, representing at least 600 individuals, Taylor said.

Need keeps growing

Although the pantry has been open only a few months, "we are already bursting at the seams," the pastor said. "We hope to hold out through the winter." Church members think they may need to expand the pantry next year, if the economy does not improve.

"When we were remodeling the garage, a woman came out to talk to her husband, who was the electrician," Taylor said.

"He learned money was so tight in their home, the woman was on her way to the pawn shop to pawn her wedding ring to buy groceries," Taylor said.

"And she was a Realtor as well. We told her what her husband actually is working on is a food pantry. We sent her home with a carful of groceries so she didn't have to pawn her ring.

"We see stories like that all the time," Taylor said.

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