



Bell Church



The Welcome Table

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“Good morning, welcome to our table today.” With this heartfelt greeting, Larry McLaughlin opens the door of the Leicester Community Center, which is filled with the aroma of a freshly prepared hot lunch. Here, the noontime meal is served with smiles and the conversations at the Leicester Community Welcome Table, supported by area churches together with MANNA FoodBank, also provide a healthy ration of food for the soul. Many of those in attendance have been looking forward to this weekly event. And the 25, mostly senior, volunteers won’t disappoint.



Norma Maney, Marie Whitener, Susan Kilker, and Carol Bryson serving their guests with a smile.

From humble beginnings, the Leicester Community Welcome Table has grown steadily, to the point where its volunteers served over 10,000 meals in 2018. They deliver about 80 meals per week to shut-ins, and the volunteers donated over 4,500 hours last year. So, what motivates them?

For that answer, we need to look back to the genesis of this particular project and the history of this community. In 2008, many people were facing serious economic challenges and uncertainty. Some seniors were forced to choose between food and medication while others found it difficult to provide balanced meals for their families. Although there are pockets of affluence, the people in this area are generally of modest means. On the other hand, their spiritual wealth runs deep. The area has a long history of faith-based activity, from that of the circuit riders that once traversed its hills to hearts for service.

These church people seem to get along splendidly, especially when there's work to be done. And it was in this context, of scarcity on the one hand and abundance on the other, that a culture of benevolence was taking shape. According to Betsy Mears, two methodist women, Cheryl Wallen with Life Ministries at Givens Estates, and Alice Lutz with the United Methodist Women at Bell Church, were meeting, talking, and praying about a plan that would bring much needed relief to those living in fear and poverty while also addressing their nutritional needs, at least in part.

Alice ran with a plan to provide at least one balanced meal per week to people in the surrounding community. She and her cohort Betsy Mears, also from Bell Church in Leicester, convinced their congregation of the imperative, overcoming numerous obstacles and pockets of resistance along the way. Alice was convinced this was something that needed to be done, according to Betsy. Alice, now deceased, gained a reputation along the way as one who would not take no for an answer when it came to ensuring the success of the program. Her rapidly expanding group of fellow volunteers wrote letters to, and met with, other area churches. Most of those pledged to help in any way they could.

Norma Maney can usually be seen, along with Marie Whitener, and Carol Bryson, standing at the steam table serving up individual portions of hot food. When asked why she does this Norma said, "I enjoy it. For many people this is about the only social activity they have during the week." Marie has similar reasons, but she tears up as she describes the profound hunger that still exists within this community. She says "There is a huge need, lots of live-alones. And, unless they go to church, this is their best social experience."

Carol Bryson says "There is no stigma attached to those who choose not to attend church. We don't push any belief system on people. The community center is a central place, not in a church where people feel like they're going to be asked to join a church. We don't allow any religious activity. The volunteers have a prayer circle, out of the public view, but there is no prayer at the beginning of the meal. People are free to pray individually. This program is about filling specific areas of need. Hunger, especially in children, was on Alice's heart."

Carol continued "For the kids that are on the school system's summer meal program, this is a site where they pick up their lunches. Last year the parents would bring the kids, but only the kids got the food, so the parents would eat inside and the kids would eat together at the picnic tables." This went on for about three years. When the county's program managers realized the kids were eating pre-packaged food while the parents enjoyed a hot meal, the county stopped delivering meals to the community center on Wednesdays so the kids could also go inside to enjoy a hot meal, according to Carol. Alan Cohlmeier later added, "We provided better food than the bag lunch."

According to Carol, area parents now schedule time on Wednesday for their kids to use the playground, and then they can partake of the hot meal. The kids are still eligible for a pre-packaged meal, from the county, on another day. "We have a lot of kids in the summertime. And the seniors clearly enjoy their presence. Alice was

especially interested in providing for the children and would be very pleased with the way the ministry has evolved.” Carol said.

Ron Gorby is another retired Navy guy. He traces his desire to contribute in a meaningful way, to the time he spent in military service. Before lending a hand at the Leicester Welcome Table, he was a volunteer at the VA. “The Navy teaches you to volunteer your time.” Ron said. “It’s one of the best things I’ve ever done. We have a great group of people and we deliver up to 80 meals for shut-ins. I can be having the worst day in the world and the spiritual uplift just perks me right up.”

Ron was the driving force in setting up a new food pantry which is now operating out of the nearby Sandy Mush Community Center. That effort has resulted in a once a week food giveaway. He did the research for the Sandy Mush board and they provided seed money together with the Leicester Community Welcome Table. That program is supported by Manna FoodBank.

Volunteer Sharon Grove performed almost 900 blood pressure checks last year. She makes a journal entry, or writes the result on a separate piece of paper, so that a patient’s Doctor can see any trend. “See those people out there, that’s what keeps me coming back.” Sharon said. She is a nurse and retired from the VA. She has been doing blood pressure checks at the Leicester Welcome Table for five years.

According to Marie Whitener, those dining can eat for free. The official policy: Give what you can when you can. “We maintain a small donation box near the door” Marie said.

Ron Gorby not only prepares meals for the shut-ins, he delivers them as well. He says “Shut-ins really appreciate the visit as well as the meals.” Helen (Everybody calls me Granny!) Mears delivers meals to the shut-ins and takes time to visit with them. “It gets me out of the house.” She says. “I get to see people I haven’t seen since leaving school.” Granny tells Mountain Xpress she does it for the enjoyment and the friendship.

Manna FoodBank’s Agency Relations Manager, Katy German told Mountain Xpress “Living in poverty can be isolating. The Welcome Table model is about more than just food, it provides people with a way to stay connected.”

According to just about everyone involved, setting up a Welcome Table is no small task. Successful programs, such as the one operating in Leicester, are always willing to share lessons learned. One of the first things Marie Whitener will tell you is “We couldn’t do it without MANNA FoodBank.” Betsy Mears agrees. “I don’t see how we could do it without Manna.” Area grocery stores receive so many requests for donations, the larger ones, such as Ingles, donate through Manna according to Betsy. She adds “You can’t get everything there. But if you want to get the food for the prices we’re gettin’ it. . .”

In light of just how one Welcome Table program, born in a small church and located within a small town, has grown, Carol Bryson said “I only wish Alice Lutz could be here to see how her idea has borne fruit.”

To get involved with the Leicester Welcome Table, send an email to Info@BellChurch.Org