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Religious groups step up to the plate in tough times

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BLADE RELIGION EDITOR



Shirley Hancock, left, Puffin Coe, and Jane Musgrave prepare salads for the free meals that are offered on the last Sunday of the month at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in the Old West End.

(THE BLADE/HERRAL LONG)

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As a struggling economy makes hunger an increasing concern for Americans, a number of religious groups are stepping up to the plate to feed the needy.

Among the churches providing free meals are St. Mark's Episcopal Church in the Old West End, which feeds its neighbors on the last Sunday of every month, and St. James Lutheran Church in West Toledo, which will launch a weekly meal ministry on Tuesday.

One of the most popular community-wide events is the annual CROP Hunger Walk, which takes place tomorrow in Ottawa Park in Toledo and Pearson Metropark in Oregon.

An estimated 200 people from a cross-section of local churches will participate, with each walker collecting pledges from individual sponsors who donate money for them to take a 2.3-mile stroll through the park.

"Twenty-five percent of our proceeds stay right in this area, going to feed the hungry," said Bobbi Anderson of Sylvania United Church of Christ, the chairman of this year's CROP Hunger Walk.

The rest of the donations will go to Church World Services, a nonprofit cooperative of 35 Protestant and Orthodox Christian denominations. Based in Elkhart, Ind., Church World Services raised \$77 million for poverty and hunger relief efforts and refugee assistance in 2006

"Yes, we're in the United States of America but we still have starving people in this country," Ms. Anderson said. "We need more events like the CROP Walk."

The public is invited to sign up at the parks and participate, with registration at 1:30 p.m. and the walk starting at 2 p.m.

The first CROP Hunger Walk (CROP stands for "Communities Responding to Overcoming Poverty") was held in Bismarck, N.D., in 1969, and several thousand communities nationwide now participate each year.

More information is available online at cropwalk.org.

St. Mark's started its monthly free meals as a way to reach out to its Old West End community, according to the Rev. Kelly O'Connell, rector.

"We were trying to think how we could serve our neighbors, given the building that we have and the resources we have," Ms. O'Connell said. "We brainstormed how we could best do that, and it was by feeding people."

The meal is served at 4:30 p.m. on the last Sunday of the month at St. Mark's, 2272 Collingwood Blvd.

The church served dinner to about 120 people in September and 200 in June, Ms. O'Connell said.

"I used to try and predict how many people we're going to get, but I stopped doing that because we never know," she said.

The free meals are served on the last Sunday of the month because many people on fixed incomes, welfare, or disability receive their checks at the start of the month. By the end of the month their budgets are often stretched thin, Ms. O'Connell said.

After the meal, those in need are invited to visit The Giving Store at St. Mark's, where they can take home three to five items - toys, clothes, household appliances, and the like - that have been donated to the church.

More information is available online at stmarkstoledo.org or by calling 419-244-3707.

St. James, at 4797 West Sylvania Ave., will serve its first free meal to the community from 5:30 to 6 p.m. Tuesday.

Bob Bella, a member of the congregation, said a group of about a dozen of the church's leaders came up with the idea at one of their regular Sunday night meetings.

"Somebody mentioned that Our Saviour [Lutheran Church] on Alexis Road was having dinners to feed the hungry on Wednesday night and we kind of talked it over and felt that would be a good mission for us," Mr. Bella said.

The church founded Wind River Ministry to provide the meals and the first meal will be funded by Thrivent, a fraternal benefit society for Lutherans.

The main course will be sloppy joes, Mr. Bella said. But the free meal is not only for people who have financial needs, but also for people who may feel lonely.


"We opened it up to everyone, including people who can't stand to eat alone and are just looking for companionship," Mr. Bella said.


Information on the St. James weekly meal is available online at www.windriverministry.org or by calling 419-882-6311.


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