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Answering the Call Answers the Call

Carroll County Churches Come Together To Feed the Community

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At the beginning of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, jobs were lost, church ministries were temporarily shuttered, and for many people in rural Carroll County, they were now faced with the dilemma of figuring out how they were going to feed their families and take care of their most basic needs.

Determined to not let the people of Carroll County suffer alone and without aid, volunteers at Eureka Springs First United Methodist Church decided to do something to help their community and formed a volunteer ministry called Answering the Call.

“When the pandemic began, we received a \$10,000 gift and were asked to do something for the community. And so we decided we’d try to feed people that were sick, quarantined, unemployed, and had a loss of wages,” said the Rev. Blake Lasater, senior pastor at Eureka Springs FUMC.

The gift was given by the [Living Legacy Foundation](#), a California-based nonprofit. According to LLF’s website, their mission is to “financially support organizations that are helping those struggling daily with the circumstances of poverty.”

Lasater said he personally knows the person who runs the foundation, and they reached out to him asking “what could be done for your community if you were to receive this \$10,000 gift?”

Lasater and a group of church members decided to gather the next morning at the church and discuss how they could use this financial opportunity to benefit their community. After much discussion, the group decided that the mission would be to feed people that could no longer provide for themselves and to name the newly formed ministry Answering the Call.

“In naming it Answering the Call, we didn’t want to be stigmatized by a religious label, you know, like a denominational label, because a lot of people are still hung up on thinking, ‘oh, that’s the Methodist Church. Well, I’m not Methodist, so they won’t help me.’ And that’s kind of been, I guess, the culture in this county, that churches only help people within their churches,” Lasater said. “So we chose Answering the Call because it shows our community that anything they need, not just meal deliveries, but groceries or anything you can’t get out of your house to get, we can get it to you.”

Kim Stryker, a member of Eureka Springs FUMC who also volunteers with Answering the Call, said everyone in their group feels a call to help the people living in their community who can’t help themselves right now.

“We all felt a sense of urgency to somehow get food to the people who needed it most: those who were health compromised, suddenly unemployed, alone and afraid,” Stryker said.

“Facing a situation that, to the small human mind looked impossible, the clear message we kept receiving was ‘I will make the crooked road straight.’ So we shook off our human fear and doubt and trusted completely that God was in charge of this deal and our job was to just get going,” she said.



Two volunteers with Answering the Call prepare to make a delivery at a resident's home in Carroll County.

To feed the community safely, the church needed help getting meals to people's homes. Besides a few larger towns like Eureka Springs, Berryville, and Green Forest, Carroll County is a mostly rural area that winds up, down, and over the Ozark Mountains of Northwest Arkansas. This makes it difficult for many people, especially those who are elderly or sick, to leave their homes and travel to the nearest food pantry.

Stryker said they were able to partner with a local representative for Ben E. Keith, a food distributor, who provided fully prepared meals in bulk. The meals were then loaded into vehicles and distributed throughout Carroll County by way of more than 50 volunteers.

The first meals were delivered on April 1, 2020, and more than 200 volunteers have "answered the call" to help feed people in Carroll County.

"Statistically speaking, we have sure fed a whole lot of folks: more than 27,000 meals delivered, thousands of pounds of produce, thousands of delivery miles driven, and tens of thousands in monetary contributions," Stryker said.

After the initial \$10,000 gift, Lasater said they were able to fundraise for the rest of their expenses. A few grants from various groups, like an \$18,000 grant from the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas, helped to fund the project throughout the summer and past the end of the year.

The Methodist Foundation grant came about thanks to the Rev. Michael Bolin, senior pastor at Green Forest United Methodist Church.

Lasater said he and Bolin partnered up in the **late summer of 2020** to help deliver even more meals to people living in Eastern Carroll County. With Green Forest UMC's volunteers now helping to deliver meals to their part of the county, Eureka Springs was able to focus more on providing meals to people living on their side of the Kings River in Western Carroll County.

"We got involved because Blake extended the olive branch out to us and asked if we would be interested in covering our side of Carroll County," said Bolin. "We've covered from the east side of the river to Berryville and all the way to the town of Alpena."



Rev. Michael Bolin, left, and Rev. Blake Lasater have not only become partners in ministry but great friends as well.

Bolin and Lasater's partnership might be surprising for some who know both men and their congregations. Eureka Springs FUMC resides in the quirky, Victorian-style town of Eureka Springs, which is known for its openness toward the LGBTQIA+ community. Likewise, Eureka Springs FUMC is a Reconciling Congregation.

Green Forest UMC is a more traditional congregation theologically, and likewise, the town of Green Forest is a more rural town, with far fewer tourists than Eureka Springs.

But for Lasater and Bolin, two men who sit on opposite sides of the theological debate within the UMC, they don't see this as a hindrance to their mission and partnership.

"I wanted this partnership to be a testimony to our Conference that even though we may have different theological views, we could still work together and that the mission superseded our individual or corporate dogmas that we may represent," Bolin said.

"It's allowed me to embrace a brother in Christ in a new way. I understand that we may have different ideas theologically, and probably politically as well, but there's nobody that's a greater person that exemplifies the love of God [than Blake]. And I'm not trying to minimize any of my other clergy friends or laity friends. I just want to say that this has allowed me to make a new friend who was already a brother in Christ."

"It's been really cool to see the partnership that Michael and I have built between two churches that are on opposite ends of the spectrum theologically, and we've grown pretty close in the midst of this," Lasater said. "And like I told him, you know, this pandemic is a paradigm shift for our Church. Maybe we need to rethink these fights we're having and focus on some shared values of serving the community that all of us can get behind instead of talking about how we're going to split everything up."



A volunteer poses with a stack of meal boxes. Each box will make its way to a person in need in the Carroll County community.

As a result of Answering the Call's efforts in the last year, the state of Arkansas' EngageAR program awarded the ministry with the Volunteer Community of the Year Award in January 2021.

"I believe I speak for all of us when I say we were humbled by the recognition and placed it squarely where it belongs – with the community who owns and powers this effort," Stryker said.

Lasater said the group has plans to continue providing meals for people in 2021, and they have been able to secure a steady stream of monetary gifts and donations to help power the ministry.

"We've been asking ourselves the question, what comes next for Answering the Call? What's the big need in our community? Because we've got the money, and we've got the volunteer force. We're going to be brainstorming very soon to try to figure out what we can do next."

For more information on Answering the Call, follow their Facebook Page at facebook.com/ATCforEureka.

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