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Salem UMC's Sharing Fridge Provides 24/7 Food Access to Hungry Community

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A volunteer at Salem UMC places donated food inside the Sharing Fridge.

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When we think about feeding people who are in need, we often think of traditional outlets for food distribution, like a food pantry, food bank, or food donation drive. But what if there was a way to get food to people who need it 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and cut down on food waste at the same time?

At Salem United Methodist Church in Conway, their Sharing Fridge food ministry is an amazing example of innovation at work, and provides a way for people living around the Conway community to anonymously access the food they need whenever they need it.

"The idea for the Sharing Fridge came from a news article that the former pastor at Salem, the Rev. Todd Vick, had read about a community fridge that was helping hungry people in Spain. He thought it would be a great idea to start at Salem, and he and Teri Moffitt, one of our laity volunteers, launched the Sharing Fridge in spring 2017," said the Rev. Andrew Suite, senior pastor at Salem UMC.

The Sharing Fridge is an actual working refrigerator that is open 24/7 outside the church, underneath a covered, lighted walkway. Anyone who needs food from the fridge can drive or walk up to the fridge and take what they need from it. There is no need for anyone taking from the fridge to sign any paperwork or make a note of which items they take from the fridge.

Larry Jones, another laity volunteer at Salem, said the food for the fridge comes from a few different places, one of which is a local grocery store. Most of the items they get from the store include bakery items, like donuts, pastries, cakes, pies, and other sweets.

"People really like getting the sweets, especially kids. But as far as protein items go now, like meats, we really depend on restaurants for that," Jones said.



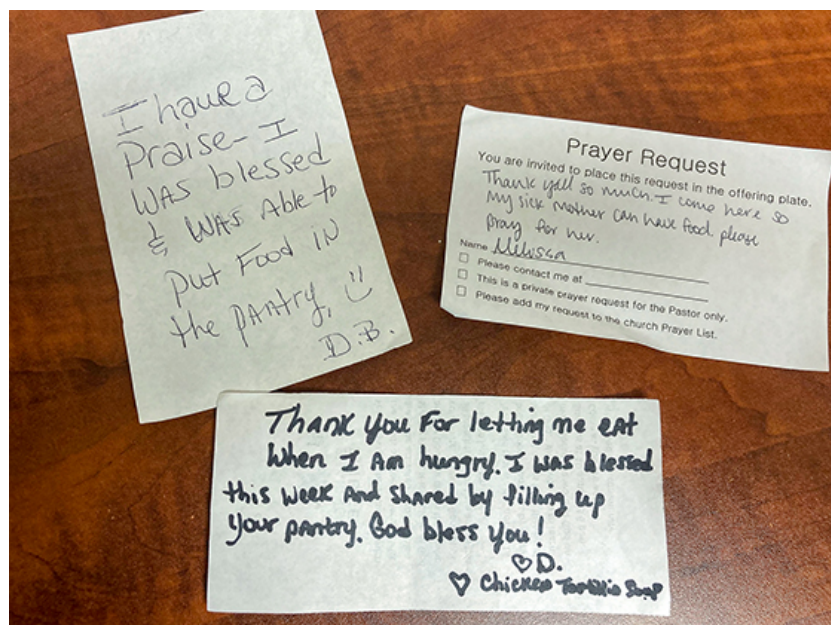
The food they receive from restaurants, and some catering places, are mostly items that the restaurant has more than enough of at the end of the workday. If not for the Sharing Fridge, these items would most likely be thrown in the trash instead of going to a hungry person or family.

The Sharing Fridge provides a way to keep fresh food from being wasted. Most items are gone within a day of being placed in the fridge, said Jones, so there's almost no chance that an item will spoil before it gets into someone's hands.

"We have volunteers inside and outside of our church who will go to grocery stores and bring back food to donate to the fridge. And some of this food I never even get to see before it's gone! That's how needed this ministry is in our community," Jones said.

Jones also said that one of their biggest volunteers is a guy who lives in his neighborhood but has no connection to the church other than donating food. He said this volunteer just wants to be able to help out his community by donating food.

But for other volunteers, getting involved in the Sharing Fridge has led to them attending Salem and then eventually joining the church.



Over the years, people who have benefited from the Sharing Fridge have left notes to the church to show their appreciation.

"As a pastor, this is just incredible to me. Most people's vision for ministry follows the funnel strategy. This is where we used to think of the church as a way to get people to come to worship, and then trickle down, and maybe they'll get involved in discipleship or a small group. And then at the bottom of the funnel, maybe they'll be serving somewhere," Suite said. "But I like to think of it as the exact opposite, an inverted funnel, where

someone gets involved in a volunteer ministry and then becomes a part of the church family. And that's exactly what's happening here."

And although the pandemic has made it more difficult for volunteers to interact with each other in ministry, it has not slowed down the need for food in their community. Suite said it seems like COVID-19 has sped up the rate at which the food disappears from the fridge, meaning they need more donations now than they have in the past.

Jones and Suite said anyone can donate to the fridge if they have the means to do so, but there are a few items that they don't accept, such as raw meat, eggs, and other perishable items.

They are also looking for non-food donations to help out their ministry. One of the biggest items they are always in need of is quart-sized plastic storage bags. Most of the food is placed in these bags and a date is written on the outside of them before they are put inside of the fridge. Jones said they are also in need of jars with lids, like glass Mason jars, in order to store soup and other liquid food items.

If you would like to donate either of these items, get in touch with Rev. Andrew Suite at pastor@saalemumcconway.org or Larry Jones at joneslarryn@gmail.com.

Suite said that he knows this ministry has been a blessing to not just the community around Salem, but the broader Conway and Central Arkansas community as well, and he hopes that it will continue to be a blessing to the area for many years to come.

"The church, especially during this time, isn't what happens inside the building. It's what happens outside the building, especially right outside our building," Suite said. "So whether or not these people ever darken the door of the church, we want to help them understand that God loves them. And that they can have a home here too. But there are no strings attached to the food, and that's God's grace."

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