The Little Church That Could

Stewart County, Georgia, is one of the most impoverished counties in the nation, with a population of 6,621, a poverty rate of 37%, and a food insecurity rate of 21.8%. One grocery store, a Piggly Wiggly, serves the entire county. This is a typical picture of life in rural Georgia. People living in our rural counties face hunger at higher rates, in part due to the unique challenges of living remotely. The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the problem of food insecurity in rural areas.

There’s a little church with the smallest congregation in Richland that takes this problem seriously. Pastor Lisa Terry of Saint Paul CME Church will tell you that being small doesn’t stop them from assisting families in their community. When a Stewart County grandmother taking care of her grandchildren called us for help, we connected her with the St. Paul Church. When the USDA’s Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) was in effect, we saw that St. Paul received the food commodities for families in the community. They were able to provide about 130 with food boxes for 5 months.

In addition to providing food assistance, the church gives personal care items to homeless individuals and school supplies to children. If anyone needs clothing, there is a small clothing bank to help them out. All of this happens with a core congregation of five people with big hearts and are committed to serving others through this ministry.

“Feeding the Valley is truly a blessing to us and has enabled us to help others. There are only five of us, and three of us have full-time jobs, so our resources are very tight. We are very thankful for our partnership, and so is the community,” says Lisa.

St. Paul CME Church in Richland, GA. is a caring, shining point of light, making a community stronger.

“Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world. For, indeed, that’s all who ever have.”
- Margaret Meade

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By the time this newsletter finds its way to your mailbox, we will have passed the first anniversary of COVID-19. Our lives have changed and we’ve learned a lot. At Feeding the Valley, we had to quickly react and go into disaster relief mode. All of a sudden, many of our Partner Agencies who rely on older volunteers closed or paused their assistance programs. We had to ask the agencies remaining open to order online and pick up from our loading docks. We restricted public traffic into our warehouse to ensure the safety of our volunteers. Georgia National Guard soldiers have served with us since April 2020 and filled the essential volunteer role, and we are grateful for their service. They have become part of our family.

People continue to face job losses, furloughs, and layoffs. Businesses have closed, and suddenly our Mobile Pantry lines have tripled at our sites. Unemployment is still at record highs, many more people are experiencing hardships, and that means our work continues.

The nation now knows what a food bank does and how we are an essential resource during a global health crisis. “Food insecurity” is now a familiar term.

It was the perfect storm.

But with this storm came some clouds with silver linings. We know that children and seniors are the most vulnerable groups we serve. The pandemic has revealed that one in three children in Georgia are food insecure. Good nutrition is vital to children. It has an impact on their growth, development, and ability to concentrate and learn. Out of safety precautions, we no longer feed children in congregate settings, and this has caused us to re-imagine our Kids Café Program.

Through a grant donation, we have been able to purchase flash freezing equipment that will enable us to provide healthy frozen meals prepared in our kitchen. Our Kids Café and Senior Meals Programs will benefit greatly from this new method of meal preparation, and we will be able to offer meals to our agencies as we expand the use of this method. This will touch many people in the rural areas we serve where there is little or no emergency food assistance. We are excited about this new process of meal preparation and look forward to implementing it soon.

We continue to move forward in our new counties.

Calhoun, Dougherty, Lee, and Terrell counties are very much on our radar and we have a sense of urgency to pour more resources and energy into these new counties. The need is great, as three of these counties are some of the most impoverished in the state. We are focused on building relationships in the community and growing all of our programs. We will eventually establish a permanent warehouse in this area to serve families more efficiently.

We’re in this together.

We had a hunger problem before the pandemic, and it’s not going away anytime soon. We are essential workers, and we are committed to working hard to ensure that every family has food on the table. The good news is that we have received generous support from our donors, Board Members, Partner Agencies, team members, and the communities we serve. With this support, we are able to provide the resources families need.

Sincerely,

Frank Sheppard
President & CEO
Always There. Always Ready.

Volunteering with us for a year in April, we have bonded with our Georgia National Guard “helpers”.

In December, we celebrated their 381st Anniversary with a luncheon. Throughout the year, they have packed Mobile Pantry food boxes, Buddy Pack bags, and produce bags. They have worked at Mobile Pantry sites distributing food, sorted and inspected food, delivered school grab-and-go meals, and cleaned our warehouse. They have gifted us more than 19,000 man-hours already, and we could not make the impact we have without their help.

Cooking Up a Better Life

We love to celebrate our Partner Agency outreach programs! Open Door Community House in Columbus, Ga. has been our partner since we were founded in 1982. They were at the table along with many other organizations and community leaders, and started the Interfaith Action Food Bank. Our name has changed over the years, but our long-standing partnership with this ministry has not. Their mission statement is “to empower impoverished people in our community to realize their full potential as children of God by creating long-term solutions to poverty”.

Open Door offers a culinary skills program for those seeking living wage employment. Their program consists of a 16-week training program of culinary and life skills for women and men who are living in poverty. This program is specifically for those who want to learn new job skills in order to earn a living wage. Octavia Downing, Director of the Culinary Skills Program, describes her role as “encouraging and empowering”. Students learn first-hand from a local chef and study for their ServeSafe certification which is a credential required by restaurants and the food service industry. It’s a very comprehensive food safety program that includes about four weeks of classroom work. This hands-on learning with a local volunteer chef takes place in our 3,000 square foot commercial kitchen. Carita Johnson, a member of the culinary program, says she plans on opening a restaurant after graduation called “Marely’s Soulful Creations”. She says “I’ve been on a journey trying to figure out what to do with my life.” She goes on to say she wants to do something that has a meaning. “I love to feed people,” says Carita. When she found out about Open Door’s culinary program, she applied immediately, and after the interviewing process, she secured a spot. She is thankful for this program because it is free and gives her an opportunity to grow. After graduation, she plans to work towards her dream of opening a restaurant.

“Feeding the Valley helps our community by working closely alongside their partner agencies,” Octavia says “they help tremendously by sharing their kitchen space for this hands-on training experience.”

Working hard and dreaming big is a worthy mantra for us all to live by. We congratulate these culinary students on their success. The Open Door Community House is always welcome in our kitchen!
FOCUS, Fellowship of Christians United in Service, is a faith based non-profit organization in Hamilton, GA, with a mission to spread “Christian fellowship and to minister to the material, emotional, educational, and spiritual needs of the people of Harris County, Georgia.” That mission hasn’t wavered since Valentine’s Day 1984, when the ministry was founded through a collaborative effort of the churches in Harris County.

There are multiple ministries under the roof of the old historic home just down from the town square in Hamilton. Serving Harris County, FOCUS ministers to people across the county and provides food, emergency relief, home repairs, children’s programs, spiritual guidance, and other programs. A thrift store boutique, where everyone in town enjoys finding a precious bargain, serves as a major revenue stream for FOCUS.

Until the COVID-19 pandemic struck, FOCUS served mostly elderly clients. Now, they serve all demographics, including families who are experiencing job losses, furloughs, business closure, and hardships. With a bit of creativity, they have re-imagined their food distribution program and found a great way to expand it, providing more help to more people.

Making good use of their space, a remodeled food pantry is set up like mini grocery market, stocked with shelving, refrigerators, and freezers. Clients can now shop for the groceries they need. They receive a small grocery cart and a special prayer with a pastor after necessary paperwork is completed. Then, they visit the pantry rooms and shop for canned goods, fresh produce, and frozen meats.

Throughout the summer months, FOCUS took advantage of the free fruits and vegetables in abundance at Feeding the Valley. During the Thanksgiving season, they were able to offer hens to their clients. Kathy Carlisle, Executive Director of FOCUS, says, “We can purchase a hen for sixty cents, and we are able to give freely because we can afford it. Without Feeding the Valley Food Bank, we would possibly have to solicit the community, our churches, and schools to donate food.”

Before the pandemic, FOCUS was serving 296 individuals monthly, and now they are serving 838 every month. In 2019, FOCUS distributed 25,402 pounds of food, and in 2020, their food distribution increased to 60,000 pounds.

The pandemic is everywhere, and it touches everyone. Harris County is not a poor county, but it has been impacted by the pandemic. There are many people who are underserved and many people have become displaced by their jobs. The mission of FOCUS is to serve their needs.