

Getting Started: Food Pantry

The Call of God to Care for Our Neighbors:

While it's true that churches generally (and appropriately) spend a lot of time and resources on Sunday morning worship, Bible studies, and other activities focused on their members' spiritual growth, a church that does not also look outward to the needs in their community is not effectively following the call of Jesus. ". . . 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40, NLT). Bethany Baptist Church in Callao, Virginia has been loving its community well since 2011 through its food pantry ministry.

Sharing what you have with those in need is deeply embedded in Christianity from its earliest roots in Judaism. Jewish law states in Deuteronomy 15:10-11, "Give freely and spontaneously. Don't have a stingy heart. The way you handle matters like this triggers God, your God's, blessing in everything you do, all your work and ventures. There are always going to be poor and needy people among you. So I command you: Always be generous, open purse and hands, give to your neighbors in trouble, your poor and hurting neighbors" (MSG). Jesus spells out some specific ways we can give generously in Matthew 25:37-40, "Then those 'sheep' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me'" (MSG). Meeting the physical and emotional needs of our neighbors is a vital part of serving Jesus and fulfilling his purpose for us as Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us ^{Body}anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (NLT).

But we can't do this well if we arrogantly place ourselves as "better than" those we serve. 1 Peter 3:8-10 tells us, "Summing up: Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. That goes for all of you, no exceptions. No retaliation. No sharp-tongued sarcasm. Instead, bless—that's your job, to bless. You'll be a blessing and also get a blessing" (MSG).



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We are commanded to love our neighbors, to give freely and generously, and to do so with humility and grace as we live into what God (re)created us to do as we serve others. And Jesus modeled this for us when he fed the thousands of people who gathered to hear him preach in Mathew 14 “That evening the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.’ But Jesus said, ‘That isn’t necessary—you feed them.’ ‘But we have only five loaves of bread and two fish!’” they answered. ‘Bring them here,’ he said. Then he told the people to sit down on the grass. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he gave the bread to the disciples, who distributed it to the people. They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers. About 5,000 men were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children!” (Matthew 14:15-21, NLT). Jesus took what the disciples could gather, blessed it, multiplied it, gave it back to them to distribute, and everyone’s needs were not only met, but exceeded. And that has been Bethany Baptist Church’s food pantry experience as well.

Jennifer English, who heads up the food pantry ministry at Bethany says that, first and foremost, you need to be called to a ministry like this. “When God calls you to a ministry, you never know who He will bring alongside of you. But you quickly learn that if you lead with the mission, He will provide everything else: The people, the money, and any other resources you may need.” For her, that calling began when she attended a BGAV Hunger Dialogue that opened her eyes to a need that she knew was bigger than she could meet and a recognition that a one-time gift of food at special times of the year was not enough to fulfill the needs she was beginning to see around her. Then at the BGAV annual meeting in 2009, God used the keynote speaker’s phrase “Get off your donkey and do something” to encourage her to speak to her local WMU executive committee about what she was thinking and feeling about meeting hunger needs in their community in a more consistent way. That conversation began a five-month-long process for a team of ten people, planning and connecting with partners to accomplish what they could not do on their own. As part of this planning, they connected with what was then called the Northern Neck Food Bank (now the Healthy Harvest Food Bank (HHFB)) which, at the time, allowed the church to purchase food for seventeen cents a pound. Over the months, the group got a little “bottle-necked” thinking and talking about all the “what ifs” and the potential processes and procedures they needed, until one member of the group encouraged them to “just try it.” English says she had to learn that “if you are waiting for certainty before you determine what’s next then you are waiting too long!” And so, the group stepped out in faith and opened their doors for the first of what would become monthly invitations to their neighbors in need of food to be welcomed in and loved in a very practical way. That first week, they served 69 families and gave away all the food they had to distribute (down to one last package of chicken left behind in the freezer when someone came late and asked simply for some meat for her family).



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One thing that makes this food pantry unique is (with the exception of COVID restrictions in 2020 and 2021 that required drive-through distribution and uniform food packages), guests of the pantry are invited inside to a comfortable space as they wait their turn. Rather than simply being handed a “one size fits all” box of food, each recipient is given a menu of the month’s options and encouraged to choose the food items they will actually eat and the produce they would like to prepare for themselves. This kind of distribution helps the church be good stewards of the food they have as less is wasted when recipients aren’t required to take food they don’t like or won’t eat, and amounts can be tailored to the needs of different size households. This process respects the patrons as unique individuals with unique tastes and needs, and it provides an opportunity for personal relationships to grow as regular participants engage in conversation and personal stories of life with volunteers, catching up on the happenings of one another’s lives.

What You Need to Start a Food Pantry Ministry:

- **Financial Support:** Bethany Baptist’s food pantry is supported 100% through donations and community partnerships. It is not even part of the church budget. They have twice been awarded \$1000 grants from the BGAV Hunger Fund. Once, a stranger passing the church while the pantry was operating stopped in and donated \$300. Local Boy Scouts, a bank, and other churches have also donated food items over the years. Even some pantry recipients have made donations when they were able. Walmart and Food Lion also provide bakery items at no cost. In addition, because they have gone through the certification process and make the necessary monthly reports, the pantry receives roughly 2,000 pounds of USDA food each month at no cost to them and the rest of the delivery (sometimes as much as 2,000 additional pounds of food) is billed at between \$.09 and \$.19 per pound (or roughly \$150-\$300 per month) to serve an average of 65 families each month.
- **Volunteer Support:** It takes about 25 volunteers to do all the tasks necessary to offer the monthly food pantry and while church members are a primary source of those volunteers, people from the community and recipients of the food pantry help also. Plan ahead for volunteers to unload the truck on a different day than food is distributed. You will need plenty of volunteers both days – in Bethany’s case, this means 6-10 people to unload, organize, and store food on Thursday night and 20-25 volunteers on Friday to comfortably execute the distribution.
- **Space and cold storage:** Every month, Bethany Baptist has 3000-4000 pounds of food delivered that must be unloaded, sorted, and stored between delivery and distribution (some frozen or refrigerated).
- **Administration:** As a USDA-supported pantry, records of recipients must be collected and reported to FeedMore in Richmond. USDA procedures must be followed, including keeping records of recipients which are entered into a statewide database, keeping an accurate inventory of leftover USDA foods after each monthly distribution, and generating a report of the number of households and individuals (broken down by age) served each month.



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- **Wheels:** If you can get donations of grocery carts, it makes selecting food and transporting it to vehicles much simpler.
- **Bags and/or boxes:** to re-package food into household-sized portions for distribution
- **Focus:** For Bethany Baptist, when they started their pantry, they had four goals:
 - o To create a positive presence in our community hoping to make a difference in the lives of those we serve.
 - o To be the hands and feet of Christ through loving and helpful actions.
 - o To develop relationships with the people we are serving thus lessening the “us” and “them” mentality.
 - o To provide nutritional food to those who are hungry, focusing on families in Richmond County (as requested by the HHFB, but NO ONE is ever turned away).

Potential Challenges:

As with any human endeavor, there are always things to be on our guard about and running a food pantry is no different.

- Work hard to **serve without judgement**. People will not always fit your stereotype of a person in need – they might have a nice manicure or drive a fancy car, they might be off-putting in some way, or they might seem to be just like you . . . we may never know the struggles someone is having behind closed doors even when their outward image does not advertise “need.” While there may be a few who could get along without the help, most people who come genuinely need it.
- **Be aware of the power dynamics** involved in providing needed resources for people – volunteers may need coaching in how to meet patrons as equals with needs that are perhaps different than their own, recognizing that we all need support in one area or another – all people should be treated with respect and dignity and volunteers should work at creating a welcoming environment that invites connection and on-going relationships and not just service provider-client relationships.
- **Plan well, but don’t be afraid to get started** before you feel like you are completely ready. Some things are learned best by doing.
- **Be flexible**. Rarely will things go exactly as planned. You cannot always predict what your resources will be from month to month. But the God who called you to this ministry is faithful and he will provide.
- **Don’t limit your volunteer or donation pool** to only church members – be open to God’s provision, wherever it comes from! Partnering with your community and with other non-profit or government resources may mean working within some boundaries and regulations your church does not control, but it can also be a significant avenue to resources that meet the needs of your neighbors.
- **Don’t be afraid to make changes** as you discover what works best for your neighbors and for your location.



Additional Resources:

- Martin, Katie S. (2021) *Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries: New Tools to End Hunger*. Washington DC: Island Press. *This book focuses on strategies for creating a dignified experience for those food pantries serve and exploring longer-term solutions to hunger on a local and national level.*
- <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tefap/tefap-fact-sheet> for information about how individuals and organizations qualify for federal programs like The Emergency Food Assistance Program that utilizes USDA foods.
- <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tefap/foods-available> for a list of USDA foods available for distribution.
- <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fns-contacts?f%5B0%5D=program%3A27@page=14> for state-specific contact information regarding The Emergency Food Assistance Program.

If you'd like to talk more with Jennifer English about the food pantry at Bethany Baptist, you can reach her at tjenglish720@yahoo.com. You are also invited to visit the Bethany Baptist Food Pantry. It is always held the 3rd Friday of every month at 16256 Richmond Road. Callao, VA 22435. Volunteers are usually at the church from 8:30 am -11:30 am.

