



Soup's on

A Maryland church serves up hot meals—and connection

by **Walt Wiltschek**

The second Tuesday of the month has rolled around again, and the west side of Ridgely, Md.—population 1,638—is popping with activity.

Sitting at the center of the buzz is the little white church at the corner of 2nd St. and Park Ave., Ridgely Church of the Brethren, and on this weekday evening people are flowing through the doors. For about three years now, the second Tuesday has meant Soup Night at the church, and it's become a popular attraction for good food and conversation.

“We serve those who need a hot meal, we serve those who are lonely, and we serve for the fellowship,” says Peggy Hutchinson, one of the regular volunteers at the event. “A lot of people come for the fellowship.”

Despite the name, soup isn't always on the menu. On this particular night, three varieties of homemade soup fill one end of the table, but sometimes the offerings feature spaghetti, tacos, hamburgers, casseroles, or—in November—a hot turkey dinner. Side dishes, desserts, and beverages fill out the meal.

And it's free. Completely free. The church won't even accept donations from anyone who comes in. That's because they see it as part of their service and mission, so they want it to be a gift.

“People usually tell me what they're going to bring after I let them know what we're going to have,” says Barbara Thompson, chair of Ridgely's outreach and witness committee and coordinator of the monthly events. “I go shopping for paper products and such if we need it. But it's all donated, except if there are big things—like the turkey and ham or hamburger and hot dogs. The church has a budget for it, and I will buy that.”

It wasn't always such a big operation. The idea began when members learned that about a dozen people in their small town were homeless. They decided that providing occasional healthy meals would be one way to reach out. They started putting up a few signs in the community and spreading the word.

For the first year or so, they served maybe 30 to 40 people on a given night—about the same as the church's attendance on an average Sunday morning. And the homeless people they were trying to reach rarely came. So they started encouraging members of other area churches to come, and others from the community. Things began booming.

“We just say, ‘Come!’ The more the merrier,” says another of the volunteers, Joann Schuyler. “We'll use the Sunday

school rooms if we need to. We just have to put everyone somewhere.”

Over the past year, the total has topped 125, sometimes exceeding the space in the fellowship hall and overflowing into other rooms. Most of the homeless community comes now, along with residents in local Section 8 housing and others in need, sitting side by side with church members of all ages, some from as far as half an hour away. Takeout boxes are also provided to anyone who requests them.

“It started off very small, but it has gotten large,” Thompson says. “People come and enjoy it, and the food is very good. People feel welcome, and we try to talk to them. We don’t have room for many more, but we don’t want to turn anyone away. The first few times I was getting discouraged because we didn’t have many there, but now we’re reaching the people we need to reach.”

Pulling it all off, of course, requires a lot of help. Thompson quarterbackes the process. Various members cook homemade dishes each month. Some donate supplies. Youth help to serve and clean.

“It’s a total church effort,” Hutchison says. “Men and women, everyone has jobs to do. We’re small, so we know we need everyone.”

Schuyler agrees. “If you’re part of the church here, you just pitch in,” she says.

Take, for example, Victor Reynolds, a former restaurant manager who began attending Ridgely in the past year. He quickly found the meals to be a place where he could use his gifts, making sure the kitchen is sanitized and running smoothly. He was amazed by the skill the church puts into the meals.

“They know what they’re doing!” Reynolds says. “It seems like they’ve been cooking for 1,000 years.”

And others toss the jovial praise right back.

“We couldn’t do it without Victor,” Schuyler says. “He does everything in the kitchen. He cuts cake, cooks the hot dogs and hamburgers—he just does everything. If we’re short on something, we just say, ‘Hey, Victor!’ and he’s right there.”

Amid the lightheartedness, Thompson says running

out of food is indeed a concern, especially as attendance continues to grow.

“We’ve come close a few times, but God always provides,” she says. “One time we were almost out of desserts, and one lady walked in with Oreo cookies. Sometimes we’ve had to raid the food pantry and come up with extra things if we’ve run low, but nobody has gone away hungry.”

Ken George, a second-career ministry student who has been leading the congregation’s ministry for the past two years, loves what he has been seeing.

“I think it shows that a small church can do big things,” George says. “Everybody pulls together. It’s a wonderful thing—a wonderful opportunity to serve.”


He says the fact that it’s all offered as a total gift to the community is important as a theological statement of who the church is.

“When Jesus washes the disciples’ feet, he’s not expecting anything in return,” George says. “All he was expecting was for the disciples to go out and do the same. I hope maybe here we have one or two people go out and do the same.”

The community has taken notice. George says at least four people have started attending Ridgely as a direct result of the Soup Nights, and nine people are currently enrolled in a membership class. The energy has undergirded other outreach efforts, too, such as assisting a family center, collecting supplies for a school, volunteering at nearby Camp Mardela, partnering with a Scout group, and more.

“It’s kind of exhilarating,” says Miriam Garey, another of the many volunteers. “It was hard when there weren’t many coming, but then it picked up. You feel good about what you’re doing.”

They plan to keep on doing it. The work can stretch the small congregation at times, but they’ve felt that stretching is good for them, forcing them to think about how they can maximize the resources God has given them.

“We’re a small church, and we ask, ‘Can we keep doing all this?’” Hutchison says, gesturing around the hall. “But I’m sure we’ll continue it. We feel like it’s our duty. Our whole church is really involved, and it’s helped us to grow. We just enjoy this.” 



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