

Lutherans Lending a Hand

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What can people of faith do to make a difference in their world? Part of the answer for many Lutherans is combining hunger advocacy with Bread for the World and other efforts with volunteering at a food bank, meal program or homeless project. It makes sense. Over the past 4 years the economic downturn has increased the number of people in need, stretched available resources, and reduced many sources of support for programs that serve them.

For example, the twice-a-week Community Lunch of Capitol Hill, where many of us volunteer, was designed for 100 to 150 guests per meal. In 2008, it served 170 to 240 people. Over half the meals in the past six months have topped 240 guests. Food Lifeline figures show big increases in visits to food programs across the state.



As you might expect, the staff and volunteer leaders of many such programs are struggling to handle the increased volume and other challenges. Few have the energy to offer support or training beyond practical food service tasks. Yet the influx of new, often less experienced volunteers increases the need for training and support. Moreover, guests often come with needs and problems that can be challenging or unsettling for program volunteers.

By early 2009, we were talking with staff and volunteer leaders of a number of food programs, tapping the experience of other seasoned volunteers, finding receptive audiences for our workshops and expertise, and receiving encouraging feedback on what we had to offer.

In late 2009, Wheat Ridge Ministries saw the merits of these efforts and awarded our project, "Lutherans and the Hungry Poor," a challenge grant to support this work. (It was one of only 8 funded out of 58 proposals they received.) This assistance has enabled us to lead several dozen training workshops and conversations with lunch program volunteers and to mentor scores of volunteer leaders.

The response has been very positive. Among the topics participants are asking to explore: the emerging needs of homeless people today, going beyond charity to companionship, dealing with conflict, strengthening leadership skills, and addressing root causes of hunger and poverty.

The key elements of this project have been at the center of LPF's work for well over a decade – advocacy to end hunger and poverty, leading workshops and forums, training and supporting leaders, and developing resources where needed.

So what practical impact has this project had? Here is a recent example: Brandon Byrne directs the food bank at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Seattle. He reported that a recent attempt to confront a belligerent guest at the food bank didn't work out well, and came close to ending in violence. He asked our project director for help with skills outlined in a workshop with his core volunteers a few weeks earlier. The two spent an hour of mentoring time discussing and practicing our approach and methods for addressing conflict.

Brandon describes the result: "A few days later, I faced a remarkably similar situation when I attempted to intervene with two men who were yelling and swinging at each other in the men's room. I used the methods we had discussed, making my tone of voice and body language engaging rather than provocative, asking for their help rather than demanding change, and in other ways working to lower the tension and avoid becoming tangled in the power dynamic. The difference in the result was amazing. In just a few moments, I was able to de-escalate and end the conflict! I was able to be a peacemaker!"



If you would like to know more about this effort or would like to explore volunteer opportunities, contact the project coordinator, Glen Gersmehl, at 206.349.2501 or ggersmehl@hotmail.com.