

Reflection: NBA Mission and Ministry Grant impact

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Joy unspeakable, as the young boy danced in the pew. Authentic welcome, as dinner guests made their way to a table set with linen table cloths and centerpieces. Visible abundance, as a large table in the front of the room overflowed with fresh artisan breads, garden produce and eggs, all free for the taking. Hearing this description, one might not necessarily understand the power of each moment. For, although Good Shepherd Christian Church is located in-between two growing upper-middle class suburbs near Cleveland, Ohio, many of the

people God welcomes for dinner at The Welcome Table community meal struggle: with loneliness, poverty, illness, or sometimes even “affluenza.”

The tables are set twice a month in the church Fellowship Hall. Partnerships with Costco, Gordon Food Service, and Panera Bread provide an abundance of free (or greatly reduced) food which is prepared fresh. Guests choose their own seat at round tables set with flowers and a bread basket. A volunteer server greets each guest with a salad and choice of dressing. Following the salad comes a fully plated dinner served at the table and a dessert buffet. To-go meals are dished up while guests peruse the big table piled high with extra free produce and bread. It is truly a picture of abundance - in food and in grace - for people who don't typically experience abundance in the world around them.

At the same time, it's about so much more than food. Equally important to us is the nourishment of the spirit and nurturing of relationships in community. This is especially evident in the story of a beautifully blended, large family who started coming to dinner and through relationships of love now participate as volunteers with set-up for the meal and in worship and life of the whole church.

The first time N came to church, she was hesitant. A single mom with six children walking into an unknown church is enough to cause anxiety for anyone. The kids were

quiet and clung close to mom. The baby smiled up at the grey-haired greeter. Over the weeks and months to come, the girls opened up and began skipping through the halls like all the other children, the oldest boy dancing with a huge grin at VBS. N tells me that this is the first church she's felt real belonging without judgment.

In November, Good Shepherd hosted a community worship service in partnership with the local clergy association. We began with our usual Sunday evening meal and moved into the sanctuary for worship. When my turn came to lead a prayer, I stood in front of all who gathered and began sharing a welcome on behalf of Good Shepherd. As I spoke, N's youngest, just 3-years old, walked up and silently stood next to me. I looked down and smiled, offering my hand to her. She beamed as we led the prayer, together, for the unity and wellbeing of our community. It was an important moment for me, and for the church, symbolizing safe and welcoming space for all people (even the little ones) to be themselves in God's presence. The Welcome Table community dinner is just the beginning of growing relationships with God and one another here at Good Shepherd.

Thank you, National Benevolent Association, for the Mission and Ministry Grant that allows us to widen the table each week at The Welcome Table community dinner.

As the health and social services general ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the National Benevolent Association partners with congregations, regions, general ministries, and a variety of Disciples-related health and social service providers to create communities of compassion and care. Founded in 1887 by six women responding to the needs of the day and on their doorsteps, for more than 130 years the NBA has continued to serve "the least of these." Learn more at www.nbaca.org.