



Community meal program volunteer John Young prepares a casserole in the kitchen at the Goldendale United Methodist Church.

Welcome to the Table

Volunteers serve free meals to the community four evenings a week

By Jeanie Senior

An eclectic group of volunteers does its part to fight hunger in Goldendale by serving dinner four days a week through the community meal program.

Dinner time is Monday through Thursday at 5:15 p.m. at the Goldendale United Methodist Church. The food is free, and extra helpings are allowed.

Men's and women's group from the Methodist church regularly prepare meals, but volunteers from the Church of Christ, Seventh Day Adventist, Catholic, LDS and Greek Orthodox congregations also take meal slots.

Also in the dinner rotation are

the Grange, Kiwanis, teacher Becky Bare's high school class, Gleaners, Jolly Ranchers 4-H Cub and local Jaycees. Two other groups—one headed by Loren Johnson, the other called Community Meals Program—are involved, too.

The community meals program is co-chaired by Loren and Connie Pond. Loren, who also is involved with the Goldendale Community Garden, provides the program with fresh produce summer through fall, and does the grocery shopping.

The Seventh Day Adventists started providing community meals in Goldendale more than five years ago. They asked to use the Methodist church

because of its central location; the SDA church is on Bickleton Highway, a ways out of town.

"People who come to dinner have to walk," Connie explains. "Mostly, they don't have cars. This building's location is perfect for helping in the community. That's part of the mission."

For several years, the Adventists served meals two nights a week. When they stepped back, Connie and Loren got more volunteers involved. Now, the Adventists serve dinner every Thursday.

The program's co-chairs note the church has made a real commitment to the program. Loren points to newly installed secure shelving built along a

hallway near the kitchen, which greatly expanded the storage space for donated food and purchased items. The church also bought a refrigeration unit to keep salad ingredients cold. Two donated freezers—one from a member of Gleaners, one from a church member—hold more food.

As part of the initiative to help in the community, the church has new doors and windows, a newly paved parking lot and, in the dining room/fellowship hall, a new floor covering and new chairs at the round tables.

The church newsletter, “Taking Care of God’s House,” called the project “a sincere effort on the part of this congregation to provide a safe, accessible and welcoming environment for everyone who walks through our open doors.”

The Methodist church also provides space for the Backpacks for Kids program, which sends food home on Fridays with schoolchildren who are likely to go hungry during the weekend.

On a recent Tuesday night, the chief cooks were John Young and Tracy Gladden from the Church of Christ, with Connie and Loren pitching in to help. The menu included Italian chicken and pasta, salad, garlic bread and cake. About 20 people—including several children—showed up to eat.

Connie provides a list of 12 menus to the volunteer groups, along with a checklist for preparing and serving. Food for the menus is furnished, although some churches—including the Adventists and Latter-Day Saints—bring their own food when they prepare a meal.

The money that finances community meals comes from a variety of sources. Some members of the Methodist church, for example, make a regular monthly donation. Puget Sound Energy, operator of the gas-fired generating plant in Goldendale, also provides funds.

“And we’re always looking for donations,” Connie says.

She says Lynn Wanless, the community meals treasurer, compares the



From left, kitchen crew members Tracy Gladden, John Young, Loren Johnson and Connie Pond prepare to serve a Tuesday evening meal.

finances to being kind of like loaves and fishes—money comes in, money goes out—and it always seems to stay the same.

Dinners are served with just a few rules: Diners are admitted to the church at about 5:15 p.m. Children and women go first in the serving line. Saying grace is optional. And yes, diners can get a clean plate and go back for seconds—or thirds.

Sometimes there is an opportunity to

provide more than just a meal. When a family with four children mentioned they lacked funds for school supplies, Connie was able to refer them to the Nazarene Church, which distributes school supplies.

“Everybody just kind of works together,” Connie says. “That’s the advantage of a small town. Everybody knows everybody else. We can do things a little more quickly and try to cover the bases, rather than double up on things.” ■

Food Insecurity in Klickitat County

Community meal plan volunteers keep track of both the number of meals they serve and the number of diners. The number of people who come for dinner at the end of the month climbs as people run out of money and food.

For example, 14 people were served August 13, when the Grange’s menu included sloppy joes and green salad. Forty-six diners and 82 meals were served August 26 when Kiwanis offered hamburgers and potato salad.

What the Washington Department of Health calls food insecurity is visible in Klickitat County, where almost 30 percent of children and just less than 20 percent of residents live in poverty, according to Klickitat County’s 2012 Community Health Needs Assessment. Both figures are above Washington state and United States levels.

More than 50 percent of Klickitat County children apply for free and reduced-price school meals.

In 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture gauged food insecurity in Klickitat County at 17 percent. As defined by the Washington Department of Health, “Food insecurity occurs when people run out of food, eat less, skip meals or go hungry, or when they subsist on a nutrient-poor diet because they cannot afford to buy food.”