



Serving Christmas Dinners to Those in Need is Holiday Tradition at St. Anne's

By Jen Reed
The Catholic Witness

There's a Christmas tradition at St. Anne Parish in Lancaster that furthers Christ's work of welcoming the stranger and feeding the hungry.

For 22 years, the downtown parish has been serving traditional Christmas dinners on the day of the Lord's birth. The meals are free to all who come to St. Anne's gym, which is transformed into a great dining room where hot food is served from 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.

Year after year, folks line up at the door as early as 9:30 a.m. Year after year, they're greeted by a host of faithful volunteers who happily give up their Christmas Eve or Christmas Day to spread tidings of joy to those who can use some extra cheer.

"The people are just so grateful for what we're able to provide them," said Keith Kirchner, who facilitates the program and coordinates donations for it.

On Christmas Day, he gives gift cards to the people as they leave the gym after dinner. The folks who eat there also receive other gifts, such as fruit or pastries, as well as a visit from Santa Claus and musical entertainment.

"You can't not feel good about this effort," Mr. Kirchner said.

Along with many of the 70-80 volunteers who make the project a reality, Mr. Kirchner has been serving at the dinner for 20 years.

The annual Christmas event started as a Thanksgiving dinner in the 1970s, when the parish endeavored to serve free meals on that day. It ran annually for 20 years, but as other local groups began to serve Thanksgiving dinners, St. Anne's elected to focus its efforts on Christmas Day.

The dinner is just one among many of the parish's outreach efforts. Daily, St. Anne's brown-bag lunch program feeds 150 people who come to the parish door.

In its first year, the parish served 300 meals, a number that continues to increase, noted Frank Nardo, who coordinates the cooking. He's been volunteering at the dinner - especially with Christmas Eve preparations - for 20 years.

Last Christmas, St. Anne's provided 800 meals for the hungry - including those who dined in the gym, those who took meals home, and those to whom meals were delivered, noted Ted Dzubinski, committee chairperson.

With an assembly of drivers, meals can easily be delivered to the homebound, and those unable to travel to St. Anne's can be offered transportation.

Volunteers fill all roles associated with the dinner, as hostesses, servers, cooks, drivers and set-up and clean-up crews.

Financial support and donations of food come from local businesses and from individuals who wish to lend a hand. For example, Dave Stoltzfus of Clark Equipment assists with prep work and equipment needs, and the turkeys for the 800 meals are prepared by Ray Hottenstein, chef at the Olde Greenfield Inn in Lancaster.

Mr. Hottenstein connected with St. Anne's Christmas dinner program several years ago when the parish was seeking a place to cook the turkeys during a time of a kitchen renovation. The staff at the Olde Greenfield Inn stepped in to help, and have been preparing the turkeys ever since then.

"Our focus all along has been to give the people as high quality a meal as possible," Mr. Nardo said. "This effort wouldn't be possible without the support of local businesses and individuals."

St. Anne, St. John Neumann and St. Leo



JEN REED, THE CATHOLIC WITNESS

Longtime volunteers of St. Anne's annual Christmas day dinner - Ted Dzubinski, Frank Nardo and Keith Kirchner - gather in the kitchen to discuss plans for this year's meal. Last year, St. Anne's served some 800 meals to people in Lancaster.

the Great parishes in Lancaster assist with the program by providing the gift cards that are distributed at the end of the meal.

Prep work for the Christmas dinner gets underway in September, as Mr. Kirchner begins seeking donations and Mr. Dzubinski starts making a list of volunteers to help before, during and after the event.

"It is such a parish-wide and community-wide effort," Mr. Nardo remarked. "I personally appreciate everything that everybody does, from the servers, to the trash guy, to the dish washer. They're all invaluable."

"Year-in and year-out, our volunteers keep coming back," Mr. Kirchner pointed out. For many families, it's a Christmas Day

tradition of service.

"My son just turned 26, and he's been part of this effort since he was five or six years old," Mr. Kirchner said. "He still goes with me on Christmas Eve to pick up some of the donations. He said to me, 'I don't know what it would be like on Christmas Eve if we didn't do this.' It's embedded in us. It's just part of what we do."

(Monetary donations to help support St. Anne's Christmas dinner can be mailed to the parish at 929 North Duke Street, Lancaster PA, 17602.)