In mid-2018 Immanuel Lutheran Church, Alameda, in partnership with the City of Alameda and several non-profits serving homeless persons began preparing and serving a once-a-month meal in a ministry called “Dine and Connect.” (Click here for the previous issue of Church Together.) The meal gathers an increasing number of homeless persons who, as they “dine,” “connect” with each other, with the volunteers who prepare and serve the meal, and with representatives of the various local non-profit organizations that offer services to homeless persons.

Immanuel invited other congregations to help with meal preparation and serving. Two of those churches, Trinity Lutheran and Twin Towers United Methodist Church, each volunteered to host a monthly meal with Dine and Connect. Now three meals are served each month: Twin Towers on the first Monday, Trinity on the second Tuesday, and Immanuel on the fourth Monday. By inviting others to send volunteers and experience this ministry, Immanuel planted a “seed” that has produced much fruit.

Trinity Lutheran hosted our first meal in January 2020, as did Twin Towers Methodist. We had begun to build a relationship with the homeless community through the dinners at Immanuel, and slowly the word got out that people should come to our dinners as well. We had just begun to see growth in numbers of diners when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, forcing us to change how we serve these neighbors. The best part of the Dine and Connect program is the connection – sitting down with our neighbors and getting to know one another, taking time out of our day to share a meal with someone. Suddenly that piece of the puzzle was going to have to change!
Trinity’s third meal was hosted on March 10, just days after the county issued its shelter-in-place order. We quickly turned our program into a take-out meal. Together with Immanuel and Twin Towers churches, we began to use careful protocols to offer safe, delicious, no-contact meals to those in need. We set up our tables on the sidewalk next to our church; guests sign in at our check-in table, line up six feet apart, and then receive their meals. We do still have opportunity to touch base and see how people are doing, and this is important.

Here at Trinity we appreciate this tangible way to serve our neighbors. Our children have gotten involved by creating art about God loving us and being with us, and their offerings are included in meal boxes. Our adults continue to volunteer to prepare and serve the meals. When the question came to the leadership team about continuing or discontinuing this ministry in this time of crisis, there was no hesitation. We recognized that people would need this program even more at this time, and we needed to be a reliable source of assistance and connection.

Rather than scaling back Dine and Connect, we are reaching out even farther during this pandemic by helping to provide these take-out meals to a homeless day center and safe parking program that the City of Alameda launched this month. In addition, the Alameda Food Bank has been stretched very thin in these past months, going from feeding 800 families per month before the crisis, to feeding 500 families per week more recently. This means more groceries need to be purchased by our congregation. This expansion of feeding ministry has been made possible by two recent grants. First, the Sierra Pacific Synod awarded Trinity and Immanuel Churches a Lutheran World Relief grant of $750 to support our efforts. Most recently, I applied for and received the ELCA World Hunger Fund Daily Bread matching grant that was offered at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. The grant was for $500, and we matched it (plus!) with $700. We are truly grateful for this support, and thank all of you who contribute to Lutheran World Relief and ELCA World Hunger. It has been a great encouragement for us to realize we are not alone in this ministry, but are truly “church together” with so many partners.

There is a great need, and there is every indication this need will continue and even intensify. With the Holy Spirit God’s people are ready to meet it.

Pr. Stephanie Johnson, Trinity, Alameda

Do you have a story that you would like to share? Send any Church Together story requests to mic@spselca.org.