Church Together

DINE AND CONNECT

Editor’s note: this article was completed in late, pre-COVID 2019, but publication was delayed for a number of reasons. Pastor Dot Lundgren retired earlier this year. Because it is an important story we publish it now, and alert you to a “sequel” coming soon. Trinity, Alameda, is one of the “two area churches” mentioned late in this article, and has become a Dine and Connect site as well. Their story includes more current information about how this ministry continues to serve during pandemic restrictions.

In 2017 Immanuel Lutheran Church, Alameda, wanted to reach out to nearby homeless people, and was trying to imagine how to accomplish that. At the same time the City of Alameda, having received a grant from the State of California to help it address homelessness, was looking for a site to begin an outreach called “Dine and Connect.” Do you think that was a coincidence, or do you, with Immanuel’s Pastor Dot Lundgren, hear the flutter of Holy Spirit wings?

Pr. Dot gets goosebumps (Spiritbumps!) when she considers how Spirit-blessed this ministry has been. But the Spirit needs “earthly means” to bring her blessing, and the story of “Dine and Connect” overflows with such earthly vehicles.

- A pastor who made the effort to show up for meetings of the Alameda All Faiths Coalition, and shared her congregation’s dream;

- A leader of the All Faith’s Coalition, Sister Pat, who listened to Pr. Dot, knew of the city’s search for a site, and facilitated the connection;

- Church and city leaders willing to partner with non-profits like
the Alameda Cares Team (administers joint funds), the Alameda Food Bank, Operation Dignity (connects homeless persons with housing, transportation, and other available services), and Building Futures (connects homeless persons with possible housing solutions);

- Committed volunteers from Immanuel Lutheran, including head chef Terry O’Connor, the church’s organist and choir director;

- Volunteers from other churches, from the nearby Coast Guard base, and more.

Here’s how it works. “Dine and “Connect” happens at Immanuel once each month on the last Monday. Volunteers come at 10 am to begin meal preparations. Some diners arrive at 3 pm to “visit” beforehand. New volunteers are trained each month at 4 pm, an hour before their work begins. Dinner is served 5-7 pm, and during that time representatives of the various non-profits involved, along with the evening’s volunteers, are there to “dine and connect” with the homeless or food-challenged guests. Some guests ask if they can remain at the church for some after-dinner companionship, and this is often possible as clean-up continues to about 8 pm.

Early each month the “Dine and Connect” partners meet to debrief and evaluate the previous month’s experience, and to plan the menu for the coming meal. Participants include two lay people and Pr. Dot from Immanuel, Sr. Pat, and representatives from the City of Alameda, Building Futures, Operation Dignity, and the Food Bank. Menus depend on what is available that month at the Food Bank, supplemented by some shopping at Costco and elsewhere. Meals have included barbecue baked chicken, meat loaf, fried chicken, spaghetti, taco bar, beef stew, and always a vegetarian option, along with salad, bread, and desserts. Leaders plan to prepare more food than will be needed, so guests can take some leftovers with them and enjoy an experience of abundance.

Pr. Dot, still hearing the flutter of Holy Spirit wings, reports these early months have been filled with delightful, Spiritbump-producing, surprises. Though a small congregation with about 50 at worship each Sunday, Immanuel members speak of new energy and excitement for this mission and their life together, and increased understanding of and compassion for their monthly guests and others like them. The guests often bring surprise gifts, including one homeless guitar player who provides music. People of various faiths and backgrounds work smoothly together in this service. Two area churches who have provided volunteers at Immanuel are now moving toward becoming “Dine and Connect” sites as this effort expands. And what began with 40 meals being served has grown in just over a year to 145 meals (Oct. 2019), as guests have been treated with dignity and trust has increased.

Some final Spiritbumps. We call this electronic storytelling ministry “Church Together” for good reason. Our stories often describe partnerships, some obvious, some more hidden, between congregations, our Sierra Pacific Synod, and ELCA
Churchwide. About 2-3 years ago a Synod congregation, in the process of closing down its ministry, gifted a sum of money to the Sierra Pacific Synod and asked that it be used to help smaller congregations grow. Immanuel, Alameda, received a $5,000 grant, and used it to produce a “street fair” celebrating their 125th anniversary. That fair brought together some of the non-profits that now work together with “Dine and Connect,” paving the way for this present cooperation. So the Synod served as catalyst for the present fruitful partnership.

I hear the flutter of wings. Do you?

by Carl Wilfrid and Pastor Dot Lundgren

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