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St. Paul's, Ruth and Tim Pitts partner on fresh-cooked meals for those in need

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Ruth and Tim Pitts in the kitchen at St. Paul's Church.

PHOTO BY CHRIS TRAN

Posted Thursday, August 11, 2022 12:41 pm

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(Aug. 11, 2022) While the mask mandates and stay-at-home orders from the early days of COVID-19 have disappeared, one of the few bright spots from the pandemic remains.

Since the spring of 2020, St. Paul's Episcopal Church has been providing free meals each week, delivered to members of the community. The program, called St. Paul's Suppers, was initially meant to help people in quarantine but the church has since discovered that the need for prepared, healthy meals is much larger than that.

"We just became so much more aware of the needs on the island during COVID, by us bringing food to people that were quarantining. People are affected so much by the cost of rent, the cost of housing, that they're putting so much of their money into housing that they don't have the normal amount of money to spend on food and other necessities," Rev. Max Wolf said.

The program was originally funded by a grant from the Community Foundation for Nantucket and the meals were provided by Eithne and Mark Yelle of Nantucket Catering Company.

The grant funding has since run out and Wolf said the church now absorbs the majority of the cost of the program, with some assistance from the Shirat HaYam Jewish congregation and the Siasconset Union Chapel.

Former Centre Street Bistro owners Ruth and Tim Pitts now do the cooking, as part of their agreement to use the church's commercial kitchen for their new business, Bistro at Home.

"We never really expected to do anything like this but it seemed like a magic combination and it fell into our laps and it was a perfect fit. It feels great to do and the church has been super helpful and accommodating to us," Tim Pitts said.

Meals include staples such as chicken and rice and pasta and meatballs. Pitts said they try not deviate from the classic formula of protein, vegetables and starch.

“People have just been so enthusiastic. They say it’s so wonderful that you bring us delicious food, not food that I would normally find in a soup kitchen,” Wolf said.

Wolf said the people served by the meal program include a cross-section of the community, with many of them being working families or people confined to their homes. St Paul’s also serves several homeless people and has partnered with Fairwinds and A Safe Place to provide meals for their clients.

Fairwinds executive director Jason Bridges said the food assistance allows people to focus on their mental health rather than how they are going to feed themselves or their children.

“Food insecurity, mental health, housing instability, they’re all in some way connected. So helping people have access to healthy food, it helps. It’s one less thing someone has to think about.” Frejae Burrows, a senior domestic violence and sexual assault advocate with A Safe Place, said the food program has provided the organization over 2,000 meals, with about 35 people from nine families now receiving meals each week.

“A lot of the families that receive meals have smaller children and especially in the summer months when they’re working an extra job to make more money, they find it really helpful because it’s one night a week they don’t have to worry about going home to cook a meal, they just pop it in the microwave,” Burrows said.

The program is similar to Meals on Wheels. The Pittses prepare the meals on Wednesday morning and church volunteers deliver the food in the afternoon. Wolf said there are no eligibility requirements to participate in the program and the church does not ask for any financial information.

The Pittses rent the space from St. Paul’s and the church reimburses them for each meal.

The Pittses offer takeout meals Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings. Tim Pitts said he and his wife appreciate the flexibility of their new arrangement after 20-plus years of running Centre Street Bistro.

“It’s kind of low-key which is good because restaurant work is hard work and we’re glad to not necessarily be in the full-blown restaurant business. We’re sort of working on our terms now, which is great,” Pitts said.

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