

“Food from Heaven”: MANNA Soup Kitchen Turns 30

By Victoria Ix

It's been nearly thirty years since the Rev. Jim Munroe began the “MANNA” ministry at St. John's, Northampton. It started as a response to the real physical and spiritual hunger of women and men living on the streets of Northampton - many of whom were part of a massive release of clients from a local mental health hospital. According to Carl Erickson, President of MANNA's Board of Directors, Jim “was the epitome of loving and helping people.” Erickson joined the Board at Munroe's invitation in 1991. “He gave MANNA the good start that it needed so we were able to carry it on from there.”

Five years later the weekly Sunday meal grew into three MANNA meals in two churches – St. John's and Edwards in Northampton. At the heart of this ministry is Bob Saalfrank who began in 1986 as a guest. He had lost his job and needed help so he ate his Sunday dinner at MANNA and started to do dishes and set the tables. In 1991 he took over as Program Coordinator. In 2001, after Manna lost its cook to cancer, Bob took over the kitchen. He had cooked in the army so it felt like a good fit. Bob prepares 85-150 meals three times a week. St. John's MANNA meal is on Monday from noon - 1 pm. Edwards has two MANNA meals – Wednesday at 6 pm and Saturday from 11:30-12:30. “We're here for them,” Bob said, “and we're here for the Church.”

The guests who come for a MANNA meal are homeless and/or hungry for a variety of reasons. Some are veterans reintegrating into the local community. Some folks are struggling with mental illness, physical disability or with the consequences of the Great Recession in 2009. They come because they receive welcome, respect, nourishment and a dose of real community.

MANNA is an ecumenical institution now – a not-for-profit entity solely responsible for raising its own funds. James Godfrey, Board Member since 2009 and a member of St. John's, Northampton, recalls when the bank account hit \$2.92. “We limp along. I've had to borrow money but divine providence always takes care of us.” With the exception of a small government grant, MANNA is funded completely from donations. An annual appeal reaches over 600 now. St. John's has supported fundraisers for MANNA, like the annual “Messiah Sing.” MANNA even received a donation of \$2,500 from Ben Cohen – that's Ben from “Ben & Jerry's” ice cream. A board member reached out when the account was low and Ben's foundation was happy to step up.

The high-functioning board is largely responsible for the ongoing viability of the ministry. It has grown in diversity and become quite specialized in function. Beyond the initial partnership of St. John's and Edwards, the board now includes representatives from the Unitarian Society and Congregation Beth Israel. There is also a wonderful relationship between the staff at MANNA and the Roman Catholic soup kitchen run by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton parish. The overflow of donated food moves between the two kitchens regularly. St. Elizabeth's meals are on Tuesday



Bob Saalfrank, MANNA Program Coordinator and Chef

“You don’t know the burdens that people are carrying within themselves,” Godfrey said. The team of volunteers is trained to refer to everyone as a “guest” and to maintain the highest standards of respect for each person. That is the MANNA way.



and Thursday. With “Cathedral in the Night” serving a hot meal Sunday evening, hungry souls are fed six days a week in the city of Northampton.

After interviewing board members and staff, I watched the preparations for the meal. Volunteers set the tables and arranged desserts on the buffet table. Bread and butter were placed on every table. Along the far wall, donated food items were organized so that everyone who comes for a meal can take them “to go.”

The doors open at 11:30. Many guests take advantage of the early welcome because of the cold. Many know each other or know members of the MANNA team. There is conversation among the guests but some choose to sit alone. “You don’t know the burdens that people are carrying within themselves,” Godfrey said. The team of volunteers is trained to refer to everyone as a “guest” and to maintain the highest standards of respect for each person. That is the MANNA way. Carl Erickson, President of the Board, places the ministry of MANNA in the context of faith. “I think the best thing a Christian can do is realize that we all have the same spirit within us and therefore we should love and help each other.”

I was introduced to a guest named Gerri – a regular benefactor of MANNA - lives in an abandoned warehouse with no heat or hot water. Gerri panhandles in town and gives what he gets to those who care for the homeless community. I’m told that a special St. Patrick’s Day feast was financed by Gerri’s contributions. A man of faith and conviction, Gerri spoke about the need to support what MANNA does in the community. I couldn’t help noticing the two buttons on his satchel. One said, “Stop Whining!” and the other said, “Trust Jesus.”

At 12:00 noon Program Coordinator and chef, Bob Saalfrank said the blessing. Bob reminded us to be grateful for what is before us and to pray for those who have not found a warm meal this day. The community gathered in the undercroft was still until the final “Amen.” Then, the volunteers served the

guests a healthy, hot, delicious meal. “MANNA is the Lord’s help,” Bob tells me. “It’s the food from heaven open to anybody who wants to come and we’re not going to turn anybody away.” 🇺🇸

Editor’s Note: MANNA gives gainful employment to four people and coordinates a multitude of volunteers. Anyone wishing to support MANNA is encouraged to make a secure donation on the MANNA Soup Kitchen website:

www.mannasoupkitchennorthampton.org

