

LABOR OF LOVE

Downtown churches

serve a free lunch

to those in need.

by Jennifer Willis

Twelve years ago five area churches formed the Downtown Cooperative Ministry, inviting men and women to come in off the street on weekdays for lunch and fellowship. The group — composed of Second Presbyterian Church, St. Peter's Catholic Church, Third Street Bethel AME Church, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, and Centenary United Methodist Church — refers to the program as their "walk-in ministry," rotating lunch days during the week and offering additional services.

Monday is Second Presbyterian's turn to serve up a hot lunch from noon to 12:45 p.m. Kitchen volunteers arrive around 9:30 a.m. to begin preparing lunch: cheese sandwich, meat-based vegetable soup, fruit and dessert. Those in need are brought into the lunch room in groups, and everyone is assigned a number to keep the line running smoothly. There are no records kept of who receives the meals, and lunchers can make unlimited local telephone calls while waiting their turn.

Ben Sparks, senior pastor at Second Presbyterian, says, "When I came here 12 years ago, this was the only free meal in town. Period." He is encouraged, however, by the number of other meal programs which have since sprung up in Richmond. The program originated from a demand for food that was so great that it was easier to justify preparing meals rather than simply handing out restaurant vouchers. "There really was hunger, and we really are meeting the need," says Sparks. Stewart Rawson, parish assistant at Second Presbyterian, says that one of the main arguments against the program is that it is only "feeding the problem." He feels that the DCM is definitely filling a need, though the lunch cooperative is not a permanent solution.

Rawson says that his volunteers see up to 250 hungry faces each Monday. The small room holds nine large folding tables, and the lunch line sees a steady stream throughout the hour that the doors are open. Though the beginning of the month can have much lighter traffic due to the distribution of social services, the last Monday of the month is often particularly crowded.

All food is donated to the program, with contributors including the Virginia Food Bank. While some locations serve a set menu every week, other churches do not know what they will be preparing until the day before, as food donations from area restaurants and grocery stores can vary widely from week to week. So some lunch menus can be quite creative. Leftovers are either packed up and frozen for re-use or are taken to the Freedom House.

The City of Richmond provides a police officer for each lunch, an official presence that seems out of place in the congenial and extremely polite atmosphere of the lunch room. Rawson admits that before this element was added, there had been some problems.

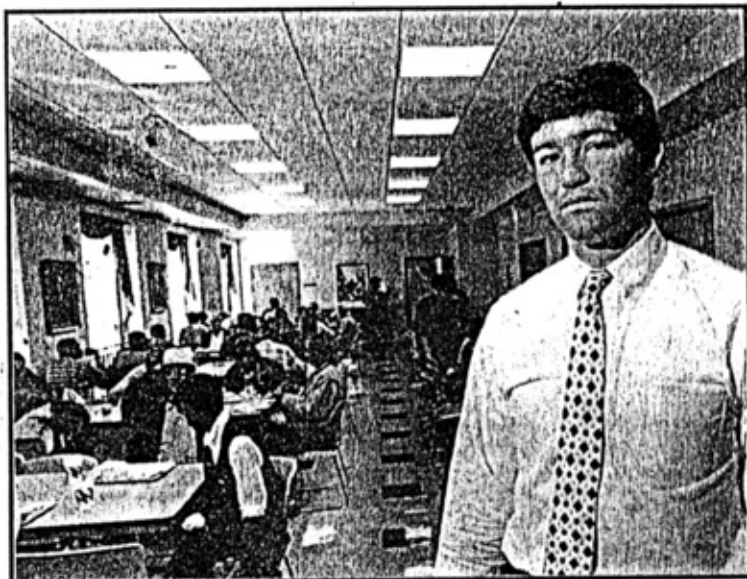
The program's volunteer pool is formed of church members and parishioners from other area churches, as well as employees of nearby businesses who donate their lunch hours. One volunteer new to Richmond came to the program as a means of getting involved in the city.

Another participates because she can see that the soup kitchen "makes a difference."

Food is not the only sustenance offered by the DCM program. St. Paul's Episcopal, for instance, provides supplemental support in the way of rental and utility assistance as well as counseling services. Peggy Fogg, a staff member of St. Paul's, feels that the purpose of the program as a whole is "to empower rather than enable people."

Sparks points out that these people are "hungry in more ways than one." He sees a very real need for strong companion programs, as many of the individuals who take advantage of the lunch cooperative suffer from addictions and mental illness, and one of the goals of the DCM is to coordinate the social services of the city.

Though the DCM has started other programs which have since become successfully independent, such as CARITAS, Centenary United Methodist's lunch program coordinator Luke Wolfe is happy to focus on the good that each location can do through this simple contact on a daily basis. Since "they know they can get lunch, they'll come to the church for a lot of other things, too," he explains. It's all a matter of reaching out and being there. For one woman who has been volunteering with the program for the past five years, "It's what this church is about." ■



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