

# Mercy Meals and More – food for the body and soul



*Around seven years ago, Pilgrim U.C.C. began opening it's church home doors ...*

"I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you took care of Me; I was in prison and you visited Me." "Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or without clothes and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and visit You?' "And the King will answer them, 'I assure you: Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me.' (Matthew 25:35-40)

These verses found in the gospel of Matthew are the cornerstone verses for Mercy Meals and More, a local outreach ministry that works from Pilgrim U.C.C.'s Church Home located in downtown New Bedford. Here is a little background on how Mercy Meals and More came into existence and what it is all about.



*Food for the body and  
soul has its regards:  
smiles!*

Around seven years ago, Pilgrim U.C.C. began opening its church home doors one Saturday morning a month for absolutely anyone who needed a meal, no questions asked. This was originally a community breakfast program that operated specifically on Saturdays when other food programs would close for the weekend. Very quickly three other local churches joined in supporting this effort so that breakfast would be available every single Saturday, instead of only once a month. Within a few years it grew into an outreach ministry called Mercy Meals and More and the doors are now open six mornings a week, Monday through Saturday.

On October 5, 2010, this ministry came into existence with a \$2,192.00 dollar budget. One of the founders of the ministry pointed out that while this was not a lot of money to propel a ministry catering to feed anyone who needed a meal, it was a great chance to see God at work, providing for every need. He called it a 'modern day miracle' as this ministry will be continuing into its fifth year next month.

Two important things that mark this ministry (apart from many others) are: the way guests are treated once they walk through the doors of the church and the community that has begun to exist among the guests.

It does not matter who walks in the doors to eat breakfast – they are welcomed. It is a point of this ministry to treat all

with dignity and respect, which is why those volunteering with Mercy Meals and More offer restaurant style breakfast to the guests. It is not a food pantry where people stand in line, get their food, eat and leave.



*Some great folks have rallied and helped fill empty stomachs.*

When guests walk into the church, there are tables set, there are about five breakfast options available to order, and their food is brought to them. This way, each guest has the opportunity to begin the day by making a choice, which, even in a small way, shows them respect as an individual and this gives them a sense of hope.

Because Mercy Meals and More has the guests sit down at tables to eat together, a sense of community has developed among those who come for meals. Through conversation, jobs and apartments are found and relationships are built. For some, it is the only family they have. And it is the guests who now make up most of the volunteers for cooking, serving, and cleaning up after the meals are finished. When someone is not able to come and cook the pancakes, there is always another one ready to step in and help. When someone can't make the omelets, there is always a replacement. They know the needs and work together to get everything done.

To date Mercy Meals and More has served 75,000 meals. But through networking with others, they have also been able to meet many needs outside of this. A woman once offered to

donate clothes, which they do on a regular basis now thanks to the generosity of the people in the Greater New Bedford area. Someone else donated books and Stop & Shop donates bread on a daily basis, which Mercy Meals then shares with other food pantries and programs.

Also, two years ago a student nurse from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth started a foot clinic. On Thursday they begin the clinic by washing the feet of those who come and then checking for sores and blisters. Clean socks are handed out, and Mercy Meals hopes that one day they will be able to provide shoes, also. Many wear ill-fitting shoes, which is the source of some of the problems.



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Mercy Meals has also acted as a temporary emergency shelter during the hurricanes Irene and Sandy, and throughout last winter it was open for 24 nights and sheltered over 600 people from the cold. During this time, the generosity of the community was evident as people brought by snacks and donated money to help the church pay for the extra heat while it was open during those nights.

The latest addition to Mercy Meals has been free haircuts on Mondays by a volunteer barber (they are currently looking into a salon that would be willing to give free haircuts to women).

The three founders of Mercy Meals and More are Reverend Dave Hammett, Pastor David Soto, and Reverend Russ Chamberlain. Reverend Russ provided most of the information for this article, and was clear about why this ministry is so important to him: every aspect of this ministry is seen as God doing the work and being the provider. And ultimately, Mercy Meals and More is about building relationships – it's not necessarily a program to just get a job done, but to meet people, to know their names and their needs, and to bless them.

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*Mercy Meals and More operates Mondays through Saturdays at 634 Purchase Street in New Bedford. The doors open at 5:45 a.m., meals are served from 6:40 a.m. to 7:30 a.m. , and the doors are closed at 8:15 a.m. The welcome mat is out, the coffee pot is on, and visitors are always welcome. For more information please call Rev. Russ at 508-728-1489 or leave an e-mail message at [rev.russ14jc@gmail.com](mailto:rev.russ14jc@gmail.com).*

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