

Feeding the hungry in Big Stone Gap District:

'We understand poverty'



Photo by Annette Bender, The Call

Trinity UMC's Betty Fleenor is one of 50 volunteers who regularly staff Big Stone Gap Food Bank.

By Annette Bender

The Rev. Ronnie Mutter has traveled overseas on mission trips, but it's unlikely that he'll be doing that again soon. "There are people here that we really need to help," says the pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church. "I don't have to go to Haiti or Jamaica to see poverty. People in Southwest Virginia understand what poverty is."

Parishioners in Mutter's church and at Midway Memorial UMC seem to agree. The two Big Stone Gap District churches are spearheading massive food pantry efforts that feed as many as 250-300 families each month.

The Big Stone Gap Food Bank started in Trinity's building more than 15 years ago. In 2003, an old

grocery building was donated to house the food bank. Now the food bank is a community effort involving 11 churches that provide volunteers and funding. East Stone Gap and Legion Memorial UMC are among them.

While Big Stone Gap Food Bank serves the immediate area by opening two days each week, Midway Memorial's pantry serves all of Scott County with a monthly distribution day. The Rev. Don Large, the retired pastor who helped start Midway's food bank in 2000, and the current pastor, the Rev. Phyllis Hankins, say they are still amazed by the long line of cars appearing outside the church on the third Monday of each month.

"It's quite an operation," says Hankins, describing Midway's organized process for getting folks in and out with a big box of food. With only 70 active members, Midway pays or raises most of the food bank's expenses, while welcoming donations that come from Holston View UMC and other community groups.

"People are getting laid off. They're working part-time now. We're in an area where there are no jobs," Mutter says. "The people who come here are good, deserving people. The Holy Spirit lays it on our hearts to help them." ■



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The Rev. Ronnie Mutter (above, left - pictured with Larry Spears) purchases the food through federal grants, community fundraisers, and church donations.



Photo courtesy of Midway Memorial UMC

On the Sunday before distribution day, about 20 Midway Memorial members gather to load boxes with food. A trucking company donates strong boxes, and the community helps with a turkey drive at Thanksgiving.



Bob Tyus of Midway Memorial unloads a truck of food.



Photo courtesy of Midway Memorial UMC

The Rev. Phyllis Hankins (above, left) brings in a donation of food with the help of Holston View's Melissa Farmer. Standing in the doorway is Midway Memorial's John Stallard.