

Gardening in Partnership with Others

Upper Sand Mountain Parish

Sylvania, Alabama

If you are looking for an example of an extraordinary organization doing everything they can to take care of those less fortunate, look no further than the Upper Sand Mountain Parish (USMP). The USMP, a joint effort of eight United Methodist churches in northeastern Alabama, has become an indispensable and innovative ministerial group with a long history of devotion to people in need.

History

Thirty-nine years ago, nearly 20 Methodist churches in northeast Alabama came together to form the Upper Sand Mountain Parish. In this case, the word “parish” is used to encompass churches throughout northeast Alabama that are connected and that support the USMP. Because there was a strong need for outreach in the region, many felt that networking and forming one group parish would be most effective. The parish is centered in Sylvania, Alabama, in the southern Appalachian Mountains, but serves people over nearly 1,000 square miles. The USMP includes a food pantry, community and church gardens, a large cannery, healthy eating education, housing help, clothing and much more.

The motivation

Tayna Rains is the Ministry Center Coordinator and currently the only full-time employee at the parish. “We live in an area where people do not want to ask for help,” says Tayna. People have worked hard for generations and have a great deal of pride, which makes asking for assistance out of the question for many. According to Tayna, many people who qualify for food stamps but do not use them come to the parish for support. Because of this, the parish does its best to maintain the dignity of those in need.

At the moment, Tayna sees more support and enthusiasm than ever from local communities. “While we are church-based, the community is very receptive and has a positive attitude,” she says. She feels that a region that is poor to begin with is hit even harder when the economy worsens. Social services become scarce, money gets tight, and cheap and unhealthy processed food—rather than fruits and vegetables—finds its way to kitchen tables.



The project

A food pantry is based at the parish in Sylvania. Ten years ago, the parish discovered that it was not practical to give boxes of pre-selected food to those in need. A new system of food distribution was needed for a number of reasons. For instance, if a person was allergic to peanuts, a jar of peanut butter in that person’s weekly or monthly box would go to waste. A person’s pride, potentially damaged by walking out with a pre-selected box of food, was another factor.

In response, a new approach was launched. The new system has the appearance of a grocery store, giving the clients an opportunity to “shop.” Using a point system, based on family size, families can take food up to the total points allowed. “This gives them some of their dignity back and allows them to make their own food choices,” Tayna explains.

The food pantry is also supplied with fresh fruits and vegetables from nearby gardens through the “Gardens of Plenty” program. For 30 years, individuals and local businesses have donated seeds and fertilizer to local gardens for people to help support themselves. Currently, 400 families are served through this program. People are encouraged to plant gardens even if they have a small living space. The USMP purchases seeds in bulk and nearly 100 children ages 3-14 sort seeds and put them in plastic bags to be distributed.

“The children are a great part of the ministry,” says Tayna. Everyone with a garden is then encouraged to donate extra produce to the food pantry. About two acres of garden produce is donated. “Some people view fruits and vegetables as a luxury,” says Tayna. “Fresh apples and green beans should not be seen as a luxury.” Having these fresh foods available in season improves the diet of families throughout the region. Not only are the gardens helping those tending over them, but also families who receive help from the food pantry. More than 3,900 families (roughly 12,000 people) are served through the food pantry.

Also on the parish grounds sits a large-scale cannery. This cannery is fully licensed with a health permit. More than 2,000 quarts of vegetable soup and 3,000 pounds of sauerkraut are canned for future use through the food pantry. All ingredients come from the church and other local gardens. About 400 volunteers come to the cannery throughout the summer, and many help with both the cannery and food pantry. At least five people volunteer each day.

To raise funds, the parish launched their “Green Tomato Products” line. Green tomatoes are put in jars with strawberries at a 2 to 1 ratio, resulting in tomatoes with the taste and color of strawberries! “The kids love them so they must be good,” says Tayna. Jars are sold at local retailers and the money raised is used for parish ministries. A farmers market was recently started on the parish grounds, giving local people a chance to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Without this market, those who do not use the food pantry, or have their own garden, would have to drive on average 20-30 minutes to find fresh produce. The USMP is also teaming up with an organic garden for the first time.

Finally, the USMP is starting a health education program. “We are planning to have a registered dietician who will use our kitchen facilities to teach a 10-week healthy cooking class. We will offer scholarships to people from the community to learn more about making healthy lifestyle choices and how to put those into place,” says Tayna. “If people knew better, they would do better.” These classes began in fall 2008.

Lessons learned

Tayna encourages faith communities who want to give food away to become connected with a food bank or similar organizations. She also says it is much more effective for parishioners to donate money to a food pantry than buy food at a grocery store and then donate it. Tayna ex-

plains that food banks can often make their money go further through discounted prices. Working together across churches also helps. Tayna sees it like this: There are eight member churches. It is easy to break one stick at a time, but eight sticks are hard to break at once. “When we pool our resources, we are able to meet the needs of the community,” she says.

As for the success of the food pantry, Tayna explains that “you can’t expect people to live off canned vegetables and peanut butter sandwiches all the time. They need fresh fruits and vegetables.” Rather than eating macaroni and cheese every meal, clients can take advantage of fresh food in season and canned produce through the fall and winter months. What has been pleasantly surprising to Tayna is how many people come back and offer their time and services to help out. “What warms my heart is that many volunteers are people who struggled at one time and were helped,” says Tayna. “So many people might be down on their luck for awhile, but many of them want to come back to help.” Everyone who has been helped is encouraged to come back and volunteer. “The economy makes it difficult to be successful, and fewer and fewer people can afford to make donations, but whatever the cost or creativity, we will continue.”

Web resource

Upper Sand Mountain Parish: www.uppersandmountainparish.org

