

## Offering Healthier Food Options

### Wednesday Community Lunch Program

#### Central Presbyterian Church

#### St. Paul, Minnesota

The sound of conversation rising from dozens of round tables gives the appearance of a crowded restaurant on a Saturday night. But actually, it is a Wednesday afternoon in the basement of Central Presbyterian Church in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota.

### History

Central Presbyterian Church's lunch program dates back nearly 30 years, and has ebbed and flowed with changes in the surrounding neighborhood. However, the lunch program really took off a few years ago after a staff member at the church brought cookies and homemade bread to the construction crew working next door on a building addition to the church's neighbor, Minnesota Public Radio.

### The motivation

According to Reverend David Colby, "Meals have been very important in churches from the beginning. People gather around food." He makes it clear that these meals have "no strings attached" and that all are welcome from any—or no—faith background. "We wanted to create a community," says Reverend Colby. This community includes office workers, construction workers, local residents and homeless people. But people are not only embracing the community building aspect; they are also taking advantage of healthy and balanced meals. "Your body is your temple, and we must be good stewards of the body that God has given us," says Reverend Colby. He adds that America's frenetic lifestyle does not encourage healthy eating. "Even just sitting down and making time for a meal would encourage a healthier diet," he says.

### The project

Chef Barb Westman has served as Food Service Manager at Central Presbyterian Church for 18 years. Self-taught, Barb brings years of experience to the lunch menus she creates, spending each Tuesday arranging a menu for Wednesday. The seasons help decide what will be featured. Vegetables come from a local, organic farm from spring to fall, and the fruits come from Barb's brother and sister-in-law's orchard. Barb enjoys cooking with the freshest ingredients possible. In the off-season, Barb relies on local stores. On any given Wednesday, the menu could include: vegetarian paella soup, couscous salad with pineapple, a whole-grain



salad with rice and barley, and tomato basil soup or southwest pumpkin soup. In the colder months, hot dishes are prepared, including a red pepper creamy pasta, and pork and sauerkraut soup. The favorite bread is apple-cranberry-walnut.

A line forms around noon at the basement door of the church and people check out the menu on a large display board and pay for their lunch. A modest price of \$6 is asked of everyone, and of course, added donations are welcomed. If someone cannot afford the cost, they are invited to eat as a guest of the church. It is not the intention to make money, but costs must be covered to continue. Financial backing is needed from the church at various times to keep things balanced.

Lunch is served buffet style and attendees are asked to take only what they need so that everyone can eat. People are also encouraged to take seconds. In 2008, an average of 140 diners participated in each lunch, with one lunch recording 170. "I don't know if we can feed many more than that," Barb says. "140 is a good average for the space we have and the food we can provide."

### Lessons learned

The success of the lunch program has followed the success and new life of downtown St. Paul. Workers in nearby office buildings, construction workers, and others now have a healthy and very reasonably priced Wednesday lunch option. "People are surprised that this is a church basement, but we don't have church basement food," says Barb. Fried food is nowhere to be found. There is a sense of excitement among those waiting in line, trying to catch a glimpse of what is on the buffet line.

Barb acknowledges that none of this would be possible without the help she receives from volunteers. “Volunteers are a wonderful support group, and what an interesting way for people to give back.” Eight to 10 volunteers help Barb prepare the food every week. Everything except the bread is made in the church kitchen on Wednesday mornings. Volunteer Mary Price believes that for some, “It is their major meal of the day.”

Barb thinks that besides her main menu of freshly prepared soups, salads and other dishes, her homemade desserts are what keep people coming back. “It’s good to have something unique, some kind of specialty to get people talking.” Regular customers would argue that everything on the buffet line is a specialty in itself, especially in this era of fast food and unhealthy diets.

Maureen Smith, the church’s Pastoral Associate and a lunch volunteer, says the community building that occurs around this lunch program is special. There are only round tables, encouraging lively conversation and new connections. No reservations are taken and some groups have their business lunches there. Maureen explains, “Those who come to lunch feel at home eating well-prepared healthy meals. But the meals are not only healthy, they’re good to eat!”

### Web resource

Central Presbyterian Church: [www.cpcstpaul.org/index.html](http://www.cpcstpaul.org/index.html)

