

Churches: Our Everyday Superheroes

Stories of Hope and Inspiration from Our Churches Across the Country

Ashburnham Community Church in Massachusetts

Ashburnham, MA is a rural town. Main Street features two pizza shops, a hairdresser, town hall, a bank, a local grocer, a craft store, a shop for bagels, for hardware, and for liquor. The steeple of Ashburnham Community Church is lit at night, a beacon on the edge of a two-block downtown. Envision it on a postcard, covered in snow.

As beautiful as Ashburnham is, it is also small. The congregation struggles to keep its footing. Those coming to worship are aging, but not old. A few children, a tiny choir, the attendance dropping slowly, the income not enough to pay the bills. And yet, so many in the community depend on Ashburnham Community Church for food: a community meal six times a year, delivering dinner to a local shelter monthly, and a food pantry where food and conversation is shared with 24 local families.

All of that changed in March. Like churches everywhere, their first response was to clean everything really well, wash hands, greet with the elbow, and laugh nervously about staying away. As many congregations did, Ashburnham too moved to online worship with little or no technological expertise. But they saw church to be about who they were in the community; the light in the darkness, and to ask: "What about our neighbors?" When the sheep and goats of Matthew 25:31-46 ask the question: "When did we see you hungry?" both are surprised to discover that they did, or did not, feed Jesus. With no small amount of discussion, Ashburnham Community Church decided that now is the time they were called to see Jesus in those who are hungry, and to respond with food. Brenda, their pantry director, called all of the families to make sure they knew the pantry was open,

asking that they keep six-foot distances, come in one at a time, and let others know that food is available. It was only a few days later that calls started coming. People had been laid off. Brenda packed an emergency bag of groceries for one family; the next day there were two more requests. Then the senior center closed, suspending their weekday lunch. A couple of people called to ask if they could donate food, money, or time. Pastors of street churches reported that enough programs had closed that people without homes are hungry, and afraid. One woman called to explain she was laid off; and she starts to cry as she asked for food for her granddaughter. A neighbor called asking for a way to get food to the man next door, who lives alone.

Volunteers were afraid of getting sick, and of infecting others. People in need were cautious of illness, while more immediately anxious about hunger. "We just have to figure out how to do this as safely as possible," Brenda says. "That's what we do at this church, we take care of our neighbors."

So the pantry is now open three mornings a week. People wait their turn in cars, or stand on the front lawn, six feet apart wearing masks. Volunteers work alone, stacking cans and bags of rice, filling bags with non-perishable foods, or accessing the church voicemail so nobody gets missed. It's hard to say what will happen to the light from Ashburnham Community Church. They have lost income from renters, and they worship online. But they haven't lost their faith that Jesus is there. For now, they live out the good news that the light shines in the darkness.

Submitted by Elizabeth Magill

