

Faith at WORK

Story by Christmas M. Beeler
Photos by Dave Ducane

In a low-income New Jersey neighborhood where most people wouldn't want to be out at night alone, Kim Quinn hesitated and looked again at the sign in the window: "Lighthouse Food Ministry, Saturdays 9 a.m.-12 p.m." For days she had tried to think of another way to feed her two children without having to ask for charity. How had she come to this? She stuffed down the feelings of despair and frustration, recalling how her husband had died two years ago at age 38, how she had recently lost her job with a phone company, how she had been hurt by the leaders of her traditional church, and how all of her friends had abandoned her after she was widowed. She faced the grim reality: She had nowhere else to go.

Walking inside, she approached a sign-in table. The man asked her name and why she had come. She sat down, opened her mouth, and began sobbing.

"It was just overwhelming—everything that had happened in the last two years," Kim recalled. As she shared her story, several men and women volunteers gathered around her, first listening kindly, then encouraging her that she was not alone and that God loved her. "I remember the joy I felt when I found out that somebody really cared."

The single mother continued to look for work and returned to the food bank—the Lighthouse Ministry of Calvary Chapel



Volunteer Christine Ducane, right, talks with Lisa, a needy visitor.

North Plainfield, NJ—several more times. "Each time, everyone was so nice to me. It wasn't just about the groceries; it was getting stuff off my shoulders, feeling like I was loved."

Susan DiGraitis, who heads up the Lighthouse Ministry, invited Kim to fellowship at a woman volunteer's home. "It made me feel like I had friends again," Kim recalled. She noticed the way they talked about God—more personally than her traditional church's approach. Soon after, Kim met with Pastor Tom Dickerson of CC North Plainfield; he and his wife, Amy, listened to her questions and invited her to come learn God's Word. She began attending the CC fellowship and several months

A NEW JERSEY CHURCH FEEDS NEIGHBORS

I will show you my faith by my works. James 2:18b



Youngsters from the church help.

Melissa Hidalgo, center, talks to a woman as youngsters help her give Thanksgiving turkeys and trimmings to 169 families at the Lighthouse Ministry in November.

“We want to make sure that they are well fed, but we also want them to know who God is—and that they can cry out to Him individually.”



Pastor Tom Dickerson



Lois Vollmer, right, of CC North Plainfield, NJ, plays with children at the Kids Corner while others minister to their families at the Lighthouse.

Backed by the Church Body

Susan added that the church family at CC North Plainfield is an essential part of the ministry. Nearly 20 people from the fellowship volunteer at the Lighthouse regularly; many others serve at special events. “We have people who are committed to praying every day for these Lighthouse families. If we’re going to see people’s lives change at the Lighthouse, it’s not going to be because of the food but because of the prayers of the saints.”

During the recent Thanksgiving holiday, nearly 100 of the 150 believers in the church “adopted” a Lighthouse family with a \$20 donation through the “Feed and Intercede” program. Susan explained,

“I send them a list of their adopted family with their names, what circumstances are going on in their lives, and their prayer needs. If there are any updates, I let the [church] family know. ... They are committed to praying for that family every day between Thanksgiving and Christmas.”

God’s Provision

While CC North Plainfield meets every Sunday in a local school, the church rents the building for the Lighthouse Ministry year-round.

How does a church provide groceries for nearly as many people as attend it? The Lord has provided—through believers and through government-based grants, Susan

shared. CC North Plainfield has nearly 150 people in regular attendance on Sunday morning, and the Lighthouse gives groceries to nearly 100 families twice a month. Susan explained that 80 percent of the food comes through state and federal grants—the NJ State Food Purchase Plan and the USDA Co-op Program. To qualify, the Lighthouse is a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and must provide monthly reports of everyone who comes through the doors—names, addresses, ages, and income. “It’s a lot of paperwork, but it’s well worth it,” said Susan, who also attends required workshops.

Though the grants are a blessing, the Lord is the true provider, Susan emphasized. She recalled last Thanksgiving, when they had exactly enough turkeys and chickens to provide food for an unprecedented 169 families in one day—more than had ever come to the Lighthouse at one time

It Started with One Servant

The ministry began 17 years ago when Pastor Tom’s mother-in-law loaded her station wagon with food and headed to the streets of North Plainfield. She handed out food to the area’s homeless week after week with Tom’s basement serving as a food bank. “After several years in the basement, we realized it was easier on the people to come to us,” Tom said. “And we’ve seen with the Lighthouse that the food has become secondary: It’s become a place of fellowship and a gathering for people. They don’t want to leave; they want to talk and share. They feel at home.”

North Plainfield is one of the poorest cities in Somerset County, related the pastor. Many who come to the Lighthouse are unemployed, disabled, or elderly. “We want to make sure that they are well fed,” Tom said, “but we also want them to know who God is—and that they can cry out to Him individually, and He’s going to be there for them even when we can’t be.”



Jenny Audain bags fresh fruit.



On Thanksgiving, a line forms as those who come to the Lighthouse must first talk to volunteers before receiving food.



Susan DiGraitis gives a hug.

later asked to be baptized. Kim found a job and got back on her feet.

Four years later, Kim, 44, is still attending CC North Plainfield and serves at the Lighthouse Ministry. “After I started volunteering more, I could feel God’s presence there. It’s this awesome place: It doesn’t matter who you are or what you do—if you need something, it’s there.” Her own experience has given her a deep empathy for those in times of hardship and a firm belief that Jesus is the answer. Now a phone receptionist for a moving company, Kim said, “None of these guys at my job are saved, but I can sit and talk to them about the Bible. I can sense God’s leading to go ahead and tell

them. I’ve learned more about God in the past four years than I had learned in my [traditional church] in 40 years.”

Being part of a church family has meant a lot to Kim. “Even when I’m struggling or missing Mike, my [late] husband, I still sense that God is with me saying that it’s going to be okay.”

Not Just Another Food Bank

The Lighthouse is open two Saturdays a month. When people come to the brick storefront on Somerset Street, a volunteer greets them at the sign-in table asking for their name, what circumstances they are in, and their prayer needs. Many times, as with

Kim, this allows for a relationship to be built and the visitor to know that this is not just another food bank. “We want them to know we care for them with God’s love and in His name,” explained Susan, who heads up the ministry and also serves as church secretary.

If a visitor returns, a volunteer inquires about their previously expressed needs. Pastor Tom Dickerson of CC North Plainfield explained, “It’s a relationship-based ministry. We want to know what’s going on in people’s lives. ... There are plenty of other service-based ministries where people can get a bag of food, but we want to be more than that. We want people to know that God loves them and that we care about them.”



Karen Cote, a volunteer, chats with a client, Bill, at the sign-in table.

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