



# Sharing God's Abundance

By Linda Carter

In John 21:17, after asking Peter three times if he loved him, Jesus said to him "Feed my sheep." Remember that our pantry was originally called the Feed My Sheep Pantry. A few years ago, at a Newcomer's luncheon, I commented that my husband fed people's minds while I fed their bodies. We both continue to do that, only now there seem to be many more bodies to feed. With the start of the Evening Table on September 17, the number of households we serve has grown by 60% with a 65% jump in new cases. Our goal is to distribute more produce and protein than non-perishable foods (pasta, rice, cereal, canned meats). Since the Spring, we have been averaging close to 60% in perishables (produce & protein). The beautiful, fresh produce that we have been receiving from the Flores farm at 40 to 60 cents a pound has allowed us to do this. Our last delivery for the year is scheduled for December 15<sup>th</sup>, barring any major weather issues

Where do we go from here? The Food Bank is our best source for the non-perishable part, but they rely on what they can glean from local supermarkets and food drives. Produce and dairy are also gleaned from stores and are tougher to get plus they have expiration dates. We have begun to look at alternative sources for produce, such as who delivers to restaurants downtown or to the UMW dining room. So, if you see Chris Cook chasing a produce truck, you know what

she is doing! We will be reaching out to our circle of friends to see what sources are available to us. Our aim is to be able to continue distributing 60% perishable items during the winter months. I have great faith that it will happen. We have an amazing group of hard-working volunteers who will solve this problem.

As I was racing back from the vet's (with an itchy Beagle) on Tuesday morning to get back to The Table, I met one of our shoppers leaving Sydnor Hall, who stopped and blessed me for what he had just received. He told me that he had recently moved to a new apartment; but more importantly, he had been declared totally disabled because of his osteoporosis and spinal degeneration. He had challenged this classification because he wanted to continue working; but they said no, he faced being paralyzed by a wrong move. This gentleman did what many of us would do in the same situation, he fought it and then became depressed; he finally came thru the other side, realizing that there were other things that he could do. Fortunately, he found The Table, because with all his other expenses increasing and government cuts to SNAP, he needs the food that we hand out weekly. Somehow, my unhappy itchy Beagle with the shaved tail no longer looked like an emergency. I can afford

the not so inexpensive care for my dog, and continue to dine out if I wish. This gentleman doesn't have that luxury.

Returning to The Table, I talked to Maria from the VA Department of Health, who was handing out information to shoppers on WIC and SNAP. She reported an increased interest in these programs. I was then approached by one of our shopper volunteers, who was angry and upset because his SNAP benefits had been cut. We are back to "Feed my sheep". There is so much abundance out there that we need to tap; we must make food available to all the hungry children, who face weekends without school meals; the elderly, who have to routinely choose between medicine and food; and, the working poor, who need to pay rent or utilities but also have to eat. These people are our family and can't be ignored.

"If you love me, feed my sheep." We are a community that cares; we feed our sheep.



# The Table

## Sharing Food and Friendship in the Spirit of the One Who Loves

*"The Word of God is not found in the letter of scripture but in the mutual relationship between community and scripture. Thus the meaning of scripture--the Word of God can only be understood within the context of the living community, the church."*

*-Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, Old Testament Scholar*

Church. The word evokes smells, images and feelings. What are yours? Do you picture large, quiet buildings? Stained glass windows? Sleepy Sunday mornings?

For some in our community, 'Church' happens each Tuesday morning in Sydnor Hall. The lights snap on at 6:30 a.m. as chairs are set out, coffee made, tables lined up and old friends are greeted and hugged. Welcome to The Table, a ministry that began as a feeding ministry but has become so much more than the simple distribution of bread, rice and soup.

In September of 2007, our Rappahannock Area Food Bank let us know that they would begin to rely on local food pantries in neighborhoods as the sole method of food distribution to the community. No longer would individuals go to the Food Bank's warehouse itself to shop from its shelves and freezers. Most of these pantries, St. George's included, were designed as emergency food pantries available for handouts to families once a month or so, giving out a pre-

packed bag or two of food. How could we feed this community at the same level that shopping at the Food Bank had provided?

This news sparked a deep conversation at St. George's about how we feed, who we feed and most importantly why we feed others as the people of Christ. We know that Christ calls us into community, to love and support each other. Christ tells us that when we feed someone in need, we feed Him; that when we show love for another, we are sharing His light. We knew that we needed a model of helping others that was community based, respectful of people in need, and creative. From the first we focused on being open each week- inviting people to let go of fear that there would not be enough, secure in the knowledge that they could return for more. We focused on fresh healthy food, and leadership that develops community. We focused on becoming a Church to one another.

# Us Most

by Carey Chirico

photos by Sheryl Stroud Bryant



Early on we realized that our local Food Bank would struggle to provide the amount of fresh produce we could distribute each week. Serving 800 households a month, over 400 children and more than 100 seniors, we needed a steady, quality supply of vegetables delivered weekly. The average grocery bag leaving **The Table** is 60% fresh fruits and vegetables. The generous grant we received this May from the Diocese of Virginia's Mustard Seed Fund gave us the means to find such a supply. Exploring connections with area farmers and organizations to find ways to increase the quantity and quality of food available at *The Table*, we developed a plan. We would reach out to a small local farming operation. One that grew the variety of produce we were seeking and one that could benefit from the extra income this arrangement would provide. They would have to be willing to deliver the food close to distribution time and

at a cost we could afford.

Enter the Flores family. Veronica and Geraldo Flores have owned their current farm in Westmoreland County for three years. There they are raising five children, three sons and two daughters. Their oldest son at 25 years old is an active part of the farm. The youngest are 12-year-old twins. Veronica says she hopes to send them to college with the money they are making from their partnership with St. George's.

On one fall afternoon this year the family was busy harvesting for the weekend markets, trying to beat the upcoming rain. They pick everything by hand and grow an enormous variety of produce. Everything from celery to bok choy, Brussels sprouts to jalapeno peppers, kale to tomatillos. This third-generation Mexican immigrant family will harvest and sell at farmers' markets

as far away as DC and Richmond until mid-December. Then they take the only break of the year for three weeks at Christmas time. In January, they start again with seeds in their greenhouses and begin cleaning the farm for the next season. They will be ready to plant in the fields in March. It is hard work with long days and no weekends off for most of the year. However, Veronica says when she thinks of those in her native Mexico who have so little, she feels very blessed. This is why she is so pleased to collaborate with St. George's to supply healthy options for hungry families. Veronica hopes to visit *The Table* soon, once things slow down a bit at the farm. "My son says when I see it, I'll cry," she says.

The arrangement with the Flores is representative of the community-building work that we are pursuing in our commitment to work to cre-





ing hours prevented those who are working during the day from taking advantage of our market. After much prayer and conversation we decided to step out in faith and look for a way to fund an evening version of the market. The Spirit was strong and our prayer constant and in mid April we were asked to submit a proposal to Community Foundation of the Rappahannock River Region for funding. One month later we received word that the Honeywell family, acting through the Community Foundation, would like to give us \$20,000 dollars to fund a second version of the Table in the evening and to help us deepen our conversation with the local farm community about getting fresh food to the most food insecure. Just recently we have received word of an additional \$10,000 grant from the Honeywell family to continue the work of **The Table** in 2014.

The need is intense. In October of 2013 alone we, at St. George's, provided food to 2,429 people – 808 households with 418 children. With the recent cuts in food stamps or SNAP benefits the need will only increase. One of our regular volunteers saw his SNAP benefits go from \$200 to \$16 and food stamps don't cover many essentials like toilet paper, soap or toothpaste. In the National 2010 Hunger Study an estimated 13,000 children in our area

ate a stronger healthier community for all. We are building another community, too; dedicated volunteers who come together each week to serve the community operate **The Table**. Initially, most were members of St. George's. Soon their ranks grew as guests of **The Table** came forward, volunteering to work at **The Table** in addition to partaking of its bounty. The participation has greatly enriched the feeling of "a community family drawn together in service" that is so evident in Sydnor Hall each Tuesday.

One volunteer, a native of Puerto Rico, helps the many Spanish-speaking guests communicate with volunteers, most of whom speak only English. Another, a man with an infectious smile and a big but compromised heart, takes his post by the door, making sure guests receive a proper goodbye as they exit **The Table**. Another guest, a grandmother, gives out baby food and friendly advice to the young parents who come to St. George's in need of both. Nell, a strong member of the leadership team, hails from Jamaica and offers advice on herbal remedies to all the volunteers. Tom, who is completely deaf, lives in a tent and came to the Table to volunteer and only occasionally accepts some food. He now trains our high school volunteers and provides all with rec-

ipes and cooking tips courtesy of his culinary arts degree. Students from a local alternative school work at school to earn the right to come and work at **The Table**. Another volunteer, a young deaf student, told a friend through his sign language interpreter that they "needed to come and see this Church (**The Table**). Everybody is welcome there!"

Originally we intended to be open each Tuesday from 9:30 a.m. until noon but we quickly realized that we would be lucky to stay open until 11:00 a.m. before the food on hand ran out. Additionally we worried that our weekday morn-



were found food insecure – they do not know where their next meal would come from. A 2010 Commonwealth Institute report revealed that supporting a family of four in Northern Virginia at a minimal standard of living without relying on public assistance required, on average, an income of over \$63,000.

St. George's has a long history of leading the charge in areas of community ministry. So in working with the FarmersMarket.Co., the non profit behind matching SNAP dollars at local farmer's markets, Dr. Yum, a local pediatrician, Mary Petro, a local farmer and representatives from our community health services, we are continuing that legacy as we look to start an HCAT or Healthy Community Action Team in our locality. This team will look at who is eating, what are they eating and how to improve access to healthy, locally grown food to those most in need – financially stressed elderly folks, working families, and the homeless. St. George's will be

looking to assess the capacity of local church feeding ministries to accept and distribute fresh food. This may mean coming up with a storage unit located in downtown that is available for storage and pick up of fresh food by local churches. It may mean developing gleaning teams who work in partnership with a local farmer to collect all that will go unharvested or it may mean contracting with a local farmer to grow for us in a kind of unique CSA. Harriet Tubman once said, "Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars and change the world."

Each morning and each evening the Table begins with prayer, offered up, outside, on George St. for those who volunteer and all who come to shop. As our baptism calls each of us into ministry, we take turns leading the opening prayer. It has been said in English, Spanish, Swahili, sign language and in song. The

prayer has been said by homeless people, former prisoners, chaplains, deacons and the unemployed. Each prayer offers us a glimpse into another person's life and story – their cares and concerns and makes us the richer for it.

There is no way to express just how grateful, we, who began the Table, are to those who have entrusted us with their friendship, their volunteer hours and those who have made all of this possible with their funding. It is when we listen for where God is calling us to be that we find that wonderful place of Being; the place where our hearts, our labor, our tears and our smiles all combine in love and faith to grow us into followers of Christ. As we walk forward into the future we hope to remember all that we have been given and all that we have shared and to continue to share food and friendship in the Spirit of the one who loves us most.

