

A rural church, a small budget, and a giant community meal

## Feeding bodies and souls at Everyone's Table

by [Kathryn Haueisen](#) in the [January 26, 2022](#) issue



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When Lutheran pastor Larry Johnson retired in 2007, he and his wife moved north from Minneapolis-St. Paul to Pine County, Minnesota. Like many rural areas, Pine County includes a lot of households that struggle with food insecurity. More than half the students in local schools qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

The church Johnson joined, Grace Lutheran in Sandstone, participates in a community food ministry that provides 50 local schoolchildren with backpacks of food each weekend. As he got more involved in his new community, Johnson began to feel called to address local food insecurity—and the need for authentic community—in a different way.

In 2018, after a period of praying and pondering, Johnson approached Kim Sturtz, then the pastor at Grace, with an idea: he wanted to start a community meal. “It immediately stirred my heart with gratefulness that someone else was seeing this

great need for our community,” Sturtz recalled. “Together we made a list of others from the community who might also buy into this concept.”

A team started meeting weekly that fall to think about how to offer food and fellowship to area residents with limited financial resources. They formed a board, registered with the state as a nonprofit organization, and prepared to launch Everyone’s Table.

In January 2019, the group hosted its first free sit-down community dinner in the basement at Grace Lutheran. Sandstone mayor Peter Spartz was among the guests. While everyone is welcome, the focus is on those who lack the financial resources to enjoy a good dinner out at a restaurant. The aim is not just to feed people but to treat them with dignity.

Volunteers personally welcome each guest. Others work as servers, reviewing the menu with guests, inquiring about any special dietary needs, and bringing drinks to the table. They often sit with guests to facilitate conversation among people who may not know one another. Other volunteers work in the kitchen preparing a delicious homestyle meal, which volunteers serve to the guests as if they were dining in a restaurant. Yet another volunteer crew handles cleanup chores.

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Dinner participants have included two guests who are blind, one who is deaf, and several older, homebound guests brought by friends or family who recognize that the social interaction is as important as the food. The number of guests has ranged from 50 to 91. Volunteers prepare for 100 each time—working with a budget of \$300. Leftovers go home with the guests or get delivered to a facility that helps families transitioning out of homelessness.

Each Everyone’s Table dinner has a theme. Johnson established the practice of preparing handouts with quotes, a short education piece, and some jokes. “The handouts encourage people to have a more positive approach,” he explained, “to make the world a better place to live. For example, since February was Black History Month, that handout focused on race relationships. When one of our meals focused on cuisine from India, we focused on different cultures and religions. In April we focused on the environment. Since May 1 was International Workers’ Day, we focused on relationships in the work world and the idea that success should not be

defined by how much money one has, but rather how we use what has been entrusted to us.”

By April 2019, support for Everyone’s Table increased enough to offer dinners twice a month. When one of the dinners fell on August 6—National Night Out—the City of Sandstone provided the community meal at a local park. August 6 is also the anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, and Everyone’s Table gave guests a handout about survivor Sadako Sasaki, along with 100 origami paper cranes made by one of their volunteers.

Joan Bloemendaal-Gruett is a school psychologist, a member of Grace Lutheran, and an Everyone’s Table board member. “My work on the board has reinforced over and over the importance of building community,” she said. “Everyone’s Table has truly developed such important human connections between everyone involved.”

Eric Sturtz—Pastor Kim’s husband—came to the board after working in restaurants for 15 years, with experience as both a chef and a manager. “Getting involved with Everyone’s Table was a great way to put my experience to use in a new way, helping nurture and feed the community,” he said.

In addition to raising funds for Everyone’s Table, board members promote the program with flyers, articles in the local paper, and a Facebook page. They are also planning a direct mail outreach.

At the community meals, volunteers range from age six to over 80. The six-year-old came with his two sisters and his father, Chris Cundiff, pastor at Sandstone Evangelical Free Church. “Everyone’s Table has given me an opportunity to teach my kids the importance of serving others,” said Cundiff. “All three of my kids have served with me, and it is so amazing to see them getting excited about serving others.”

“Volunteers love working together here,” said Johnson. “They may disagree about theology and politics, but here they work together. Part of our goal for Everyone’s Table is to help people from the community get to know one another better. This is true for dinner guests and volunteers alike.”

What began as an idea in 2018 has evolved into twice-a-month gatherings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Everyone’s Table had to change how it provided free meals to those in need. For a while the group offered meals for pickup only. When it was

safe to dine inside again, Sandstone's community center began providing rent-free space for the gatherings. The pickup meals continue as well.

Sturtz, who has since left Grace Lutheran for another call, welcomed the move to the community center, adding that it was "a blessing to hold these dinners in the basement of Grace Lutheran Church . . . to help our siblings in Christ eat and have one less thing to worry about."

Johnson has moved away from Sandstone as well, but the work of Everyone's Table continues without him. "It's really all about getting people to gather around the dinner table again, to get to know one another, and to talk to each other," he said. "I have been inspired and taken to heart Jesus' words to his disciples after a long day of speaking to a large crowd of people. The disciples told Jesus to send the people home so they could get something to eat. Jesus said, 'No. You feed them.' This is what Everyone's Table is about—working together and sharing what we have with others."

Johnson recalled an Everyone's Table dinner at which 17 volunteers helped out. "Some of them weren't even scheduled to help that night," he said. "They just saw that something needed to be done and jumped in to handle it. It is a good thing when people see a need and step up to do something about it. It is easy to see that God is at work here changing hearts and lives by building community around a table."

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