

"A New Thing" - A Story of The Table & The Closet

"See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland."

Isaiah 43:19

A few years ago, Bishop Lynn Thrush shared this scripture at a Pastor & Spouse Retreat and inspired us to consider what God was doing in and around our various churches. Since then, Lakeview Church in Goodrich, Michigan has been given the opportunity to watch God as He "did a new thing."

This story begins in 2018, when Lakeview Church was asked by a Food Bank representative, if we would consider operating a food pantry on site for the families in our community with food challenges.

A New Vision:

For several years, Lakeview's teens and adults had participated in mission trips to inner-city Nashville, Tennessee and Flint, Michigan during the water crisis. We also served at the food bank, sorting food donations.

During that time, we asked God to engage us in effective hands-on outreach into our community. We wanted to connect to people and serve our community in a direct and personal way.

Our efforts away from home were quite effective, but everything we tried locally seemed to fall flat. Our outreach efforts had stalled. We needed a new vision.

When this new opportunity presented itself, we saw new possibilities. We prayed about it, and visited other food pantries to observe their operations.

We learned of a pantry concept called "Client Choice" - where people choose from options instead of receiving a pre-selected box of food items.

This allows families to better meet their specific needs and leave items they wouldn't use for another family to take, potentially making the operation more cost effective. Another goal of this concept is restoring a sense of dignity to those who need food assistance.

This resonated with us and our desire to connect to people and serve them in a personal way. A new vision was born.

New Challenges

As we weighed our options, we identified new challenges. After all, Lakeview Church is a small congregation, with limited resources.

This would require dedicated space, people, and funds. Since we were still recovering from one of our worst financial years ever, we knew it would also require great faith.

New Provision

During the previous year, God had miraculously provided for our needs. We believed that if He opened the door, and we stepped out in faith, He would provide the resources we needed. After all, this is His Kingdom, right?

Once our Missions Coordinator stepped up to lead the effort, volunteers stepped up to serve - some who attend worship at Lakeview, others who attend a fitness group at Lakeview, and still others from the community who wished to serve. We prepared some space, and set up a small pantry operation. Hours were set for Sundays 2-4 pm, and word went out.

That first Sunday, The Table food pantry served a a dozen families. In just a few weeks, it grew to nearly 20 families each Sunday. Eventually, we were serving around 35 families each week with a grocery cart filled with food items.

New Results

In 18 months, the pantry has grown to 4 times the size of the original space.

During that time, we've served and connected with hundreds of families from our community. Dozens of new committed volunteers have dedicated roles and responsibilities. Some have offered to serve alongside us after being clients of The Table, so they can "pay it forward." Other new volunteers are members of the community who have heard about The Table, and it's impact on our community.

Both clients and volunteers have attended Lakeview on Sunday mornings as a result of The Table. One family joined Lakeview as members.

Resources have been provided. Financial donors have come from both inside and outside the Lakeview congregation. Local farmers have donated fresh produce. Local businesses donate food, including Panera Bread.

During the statewide Covid-19 shutdown, The Table kept operating, utilizing curbside service, and still offering client choice. During this time of curbside service, we were able to stand next to the client's vehicle, speak to the family, and pray with them before they left.

The Table ministry has also improved the engagement and enthusiasm of the congregation. New relationships have formed and continue to grow.

God has used this ministry to demonstrate his ability to bless the efforts of those who step out in faith and obedience, and answer the call to serve those less fortunate.

In 2019, The Table saw 294 visits: 149 separate households, with 452 individual family members.

In 2020, there were 714 visits: 250 separate households, with 630 individual family members.

So, in 18 months, with just over 1,000 household visits, each valued at \$150 - \$250, The Table has distributed food valued at \$150K - \$250K to families in our community with food challenges!

New Opportunities:

In the fall of 2020, Lakeview Church was contacted by a group of ladies who had operated a free clothing ministry in our community. The church they had partnered with was closing permanently, and they were without a home.

Again we prayed, and explored our options. With the help of new volunteers, we converted two unused classrooms into a beautiful boutique filled with clothing for all age groups.

The Closet opened on November 1, 2020 serving those in our community with clothing needs. We offer free gently used clothing as well as new socks and underwear with each visit.

The Closet has brought along a new team of volunteers, more new clients, more opportunities to serve the people of our community, build relationships with them, and pray with them. It has also provided our congregation with new opportunities to engage in ministry.

All this happened when Lakeview decided to follow God's call, and give a room in our facility a new look and a new purpose.

See, God did a new thing!