

We Just Wanted to Serve Our Neighbors A Bowl of Soup! by Carrie Macaluso, Highlands Presbyterian Church/Grayson, Georgia

[Editor's NOTE: Carrie Macaluso is the Co-Director of Highlands Soup Nite. She shares how Highlands was blessed to be a blessing through this adventure in faith.]

Our beginnings started with a concept in 2011. My friend Jane and I were working full-time, but wanted to do something as a service ministry with our church, Highlands Presbyterian Church, in Grayson, Georgia. Highlands is a rather small, loving congregation of 150 members. At first Jane and I took baby steps. We tossed around the word “soup”, and the idea of working with programs that included mothers and their children, but that is as far as we got. We didn't know how to get started so we both prayed about it. The first answered prayer was when a deacon in our church suggested that we should contact the local Food CoOp, the Southeast Gwinnett CoOperative Ministry. The church had been donating food items to that ministry for years, so we gave it a try. We contacted them on a day that the CoOp was supposed to be closed and Laura Drake, the director, picked up the phone. Answer to prayer number two! This was definitely a God thing and the seed was planted. Soon afterwards, Laura came to our church to discuss with our volunteers what was needed to start this program. The name, Soup Nite, was chosen because at the time, we thought that we would only serve soups – little did we know how rapidly that little idea would grow. With approval from the church, Soup Nite was launched in September of 2012.



Soup Nite Team – Dressed in T's

Immediately, we suffered growing pains. We started out with a team of about 15 people, older adults from the congregation, both men and women. We started serving Crock Pot soups at the CoOp, while their clients waited to be interviewed to receive their monthly food boxes. It was very important for us to build relationships. We needed the clients to feel they could trust us, not only with a healthy meal, but with being consistent and having a welcoming attitude. We served outside on the CoOp's picnic tables until it got cold in November, but our prayer was that we would be able to serve these meals in the Highlands Fellowship Hall. In December of that same

year we moved serving our meals from the CoOp over to our church. Answer to prayer number three! Highlands has a commercial kitchen and the Fellowship Hall seats about 80 people. If guests wanted to sit and eat that would be our capacity, so we started out making enough meals to serve 80 people. The CoOp gave out vouchers to their clients, which asked for the number of meals needed and the family name, and we also posted flyers letting people know where to go, what was being served, and when we were serving. The vouchers were then brought to us at Highlands, all filled out with a family name and the number of meals they requested. The first couple of months our numbers were sparse, maybe 20 people came. We got signage to place out in front of church so people would know where we are, but also to make our neighbors aware of our ministry. We were careful to serve only food that we would serve to our own families.

Using the non-profit status of the church, we partnered with the Atlanta Community Food Bank in May of 2014. We scheduled an additional Monday per month for Soup Nite, making it the 2nd and 4th Mondays of the month to meet the requirements of the Food Bank.



Xavier & Pops – at Soup Nite

So many blessings followed, as the CoOp was able to get two other churches in our neighborhood to serve hot meals on the 1st and 3rd Mondays of each month. These churches serve their meals at the CoOp. Now guests were being served a free hot meal at least once a week! In the beginning, with so much interest in the ministry, getting volunteers to make 8 crock pots was easy. It got a little tougher as some of our volunteers dropped off due to various reasons, but we still maintained a core team of about 6-8 older Highlands ladies to prepare meals and 10 people, men and women, to serve. We started to get more guests coming to us and saw the greater need. Our biggest challenge was never knowing how many guests we would have on any given Soup Nite Monday. This still is a challenge today.

Jane began a church garden, and we use the fresh produce in our meals and sometimes are able to give out produce to our guests. We also began preparing readymade meals for the seniors at the CoOp's Seasoned With Love project. Seasoned With Love takes food boxes to seniors who are immobile or have trouble getting out of their homes or have no family to help them. Now, they get two prepared meals to heat up in the microwave every time we go out on a route. This

is where we were at the end of 2015, when Jane and I were finally able to do this ministry as retirees.

Presently, we make enough meals to serve 100-120 people. There have been true “fishes and loaves” stories, where we ran out of food and started defrosting items in the freezer to serve. On some occasions, when we serve a recipe that we know is a group favorite, like Chicken Teriyaki, we prepare more and can reach up to 180 meals! We don’t serve just soups anymore. That changed due to partnering with the Atlanta Community Food Bank and having a greater selection of food products to make into meals. Another change is that most of our guests take meals to go. Their families are waiting on them to get home from work or they have school functions to get to or their elderly parents don’t want to go out late in the afternoon/evening.

In 2018, we served over 3,000 meals at Soup Nite, including the Seasoned With Love program, averaging 35-40 households. We have guests that have become very close to us and we look forward to seeing them. We offer prayers, hugs, smiles, and encouragement to each of our guests. There are scripture verses on each brown bag that contains the meal. Soup Nite has also developed vendor and merchant support in the Grayson community. The Public Library comes over to reach out with library card sign ups and free books. Grayson Coffee gives out coffee at our Christmas celebrations, and McDonalds donates their oatmeal containers to us for our soups. Soup Nite has reached into other ministry groups in our own church, making it an intergenerational program. On occasion, the youth group helps serve on Soup Nites and our shut-ins are delivered meals by our Congregational Care team. One of the greatest pleasures in serving began in 2017 when a neighboring church, Faith Community Church, partnered in serving with us. Every Soup Nite they are there to prepare, serve and pray with our guests.



Serving Line at Soup Nite

Looking forward, we would like to serve even more meals to families in need. Our most current prayer, which God has yet to answer, is for a truck. We are currently fundraising for a non-profit Food Truck, aptly named, On Eagles Wings. Our truck would mainly be utilized to deliver meals prepared in our church’s kitchen to the Seasoned With Love immobile seniors and to our Soup Nite families who cannot get to our regular Monday meals. We also want to reach out to the children in our community. It is our hope to use the truck’s counter window, like an ice cream truck, to give out that much-needed meal that is lost during the summer months when school is not in session. The truck will start conversations and build community.

All of the volunteers working on the Highlands Soup Nite ministry have a servant's heart. It is our prayer that we will continue to build relationships with the addition of our Food Truck. God has answered so many of our prayers in very specific ways. Our most fervent prayer is that this example will be embraced by other churches so that there would be a fleet of food trucks serving the greater Gwinnett community and even throughout the state in the not-so-distant future. So, we are continuing to pray ...

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