

(Note: The first few pages are specifically about the food pantry – see starting page 4 for an interesting perspective on giving and receiving.)

To Give is To Receive is To Give...

Wendy Dennis, Director – Wakefield Interfaith Food Pantry
UU Church of Wakefield
March 30, 2003

I know that many of you know at least something about the Wakefield Interfaith Food Pantry, but if you are like I was close to a year and a half ago, when I became involved with the food pantry, you may not realize what it takes to support a food pantry and the level of need in our community. So, I thought I'd start by sharing with you the details of what the Wakefield Interfaith Food Pantry is all about – the hows and whys it exists, the reasons behind the recent organizational changes, who we help, and the level of assistance we provide.

Then, I will finish by talking a bit about the concept of charity – of giving, of receiving, and the connection between the two. But first, the history and background.

The food pantry in Wakefield was started in 1982 by members of the First Baptist Church. They knew that there was a need in our town, and they also wanted to create a way to expand their worship from the personal and out into the world. They envisioned the work of the food pantry as an expression of faith through service. And that is still the guiding principal behind the food pantry today.

While the founders knew that there was a need for a food pantry in our town, they soon realized that the need was greater than their congregation could provide for on their own. Within a few years, they invited the other congregations in town to join the effort, and the Wakefield Interfaith Food Pantry became firmly established.

Basically, each congregation has a month during which it collects food and cash donations for the food pantry. Smaller congregations share some months, and most congregations help support the food pantry at various other times throughout the year.

Now, this sounds like an easy enough set-up, but a lot of organizing and coordinating goes into this, especially by the person from each church who volunteers to be the "food pantry representative" for their congregation. And, I am still getting a handle on which congregation is doing what month – and how to make sure it gets publicized! As I hope you are aware, March is our month to donate to the food pantry. But, if it slipped your mind, donations are accepted all year long. <grin>

But – back to the history. Tina Cooper, one of the co-founders of the food pantry, took over as Coordinator in 1990. I stand in awe of Tina. Because of her outreach efforts and expertise, the food pantry has an amazing amount of support from the entire community. Along with the local congregations, schools, local businesses, employees of local businesses, civic organizations, scout groups, and many individuals donate food and money, and volunteer their time.

In May of 2001, Tina Cooper and Peter Brown, the minister of the First Baptist Church, called a food pantry meeting, asking that someone from each participating congregation attend. There were two concerns. First, another Coordinator, or Director needed to be found. Second, because the new Director would quite likely not be a member of the First Baptist Church, this seemed to be a good time to have the food pantry become a separate legal entity. This is because, along with donating the space for the food pantry for all these years, the First Baptist staff and members provided the bulk of the administrative and operating support, as well as handling all the finances, a job that was getting bigger each year. And, because the daily operations were so closely tied to the First Baptist church, it was difficult to create more opportunities for the other congregations to be more fully involved beyond donating food and money to the food pantry. It was just time for a change.

I ended up going to that meeting as our church's representative. A fluke – Edmund couldn't go, so I volunteered to attend. And, at that meeting, I volunteered to help with the process of becoming a separate legal entity, since I have worked with other groups when they became official nonprofit organizations. I also volunteered to help *FIND* a new Director. Well, to make a long story short, I found myself. That's a joke – but, on more than one level, it is also very true. I love working with the food pantry and all the wonderful people who make it possible. It has had a profound impact on my life.

I also met a great group of people willing to help keep the food pantry strong and guide it as it moved into a new organizational structure. This was, and still is, a big undertaking. It could not be happening without the commitment of so many people, especially those who volunteered to be on the Board of Directors and the Advisory Board.

At this point, I'd like to note a special Thank You to Gerri Lee, who is the Vice President of the Board of Directors of the Wakefield Interfaith Food Pantry and Board representative for our church. Like she doesn't have anything else to do! Along with chairing meetings and taking minutes when other officers cannot attend meetings, she is one of my "right-hand women" during the November and December Holiday Basket times. I'd like also to say a big thank you to Harriet Winsor, who, along with Lyn Chaharyn, handles all the day-to-day details when I go out of town. And, many of our church members have done their share of organizing and lugging boxes of food around. I'll be hitting you all up for help again soon – May 10th is the Letter Carrier's Food Drive. There will be, literally, tons of food to organize and put away.

But, back to how the Board of Directors of the food pantry is set up. I don't want to bore you with legalese, so I will paraphrase a section of our bylaws that is important to the understanding of how the Wakefield Interfaith Food Pantry is now organized: "Each Board member must be a resident of the Town of Wakefield or active in a congregation based in the Town of Wakefield. Board members will first be recruited from each of the participating congregations willing to be represented on the Board..."

What I like about this is that each congregation now has the opportunity to have direct input into how the food pantry is run. It also provides more volunteer opportunities, gives balance to the

interfaith aspect, and yet does not limit participation only to those directly involved in a local congregation.

The congregations are the backbone of the food pantry, but I love that this is also a community-wide effort. And also, a community-wide opportunity for everyone - whether they belong to a congregation or not - to experience the joy of giving. I strongly believe that service and giving is an expression of faith, whether our faith is in a specific or general concept of God or a secular humanist belief in the sanctity of all life. I also believe that giving helps us feel more connected to each other, and even to our own selves. To quote Friedrich Nietzsche "He who cannot give anything away cannot feel anything either."

I'll be talking more about giving and charity. But right now, I want to tell you what the food pantry actually does.

The food pantry hours are Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:00-11:00 am, except on major holidays. Anyone who needs food can receive assistance; the only requirement is that the person or family lives in Wakefield.

We helped over 170 households in the year 2002, with 73 of those households coming to the food pantry for the first time. About half of these "households" are individuals living alone or couples, the other half are families with children. Some only came once or twice during the year. Many have a continuing need.

I think that the clearest way to envision the scope of our work is with these figures: Please note that they do not include the 39 Thanksgiving and 45 December holiday baskets that we provided to families last year. During 2002, the food pantry provided individuals and families with enough non-perishable food to feed 1,453 people for 4-5 days. In addition, we gave out \$12,225 in grocery store gift certificates so people could purchase fresh foods. To add some perspective: Our current policy limits households to one visit to the food pantry per month, and people can receive grocery gift certificates only once every three months. Although, we do always consider emergency situations on a case-by-case-basis. No one...no one... should ever go hungry.

So, a question I have not yet answered is: whom exactly does the food pantry help? The answer is: All kinds of people. In the past year or so, there has been an increase in requests from people who have suddenly lost their jobs, have reached the end of their unemployment benefits, or have lost part of their savings. And there are folks who just can't make ends meet due to any number of circumstances - temporary health issues, the fixed incomes of the elderly and those with long-term disabilities of all sorts. Single and two parents households who just can't keep up with growing bills - families faced with sudden financial emergencies. People of all ages, backgrounds, and problems. People who are your neighbors.

So, that is what we do. But, we are concerned that we are not reaching all who could use our help. And, we are concerned about the rising needs stemming from the current economic situation. We are currently analyzing research that we have done regarding the level of need Wakefield, what other services are already provided, and how food pantries in surrounding towns operate. We are using this research to help us decide if we should work toward increasing

our level of support or add additional services. But, with the number of requests increasing each year, and especially during the past two years, and even more so in the past few months, we really can't increase the level of help that we provide without a very careful expansion in programming and fundraising. ...

I think that people throughout the ages have always said, "We live in difficult times." But, I am very concerned about how things are right now. I think we all are. Yet, for all the troubles we are facing these days, I am seeing an increase in concern for others. People who have never donated to the food pantry before have handed me checks saying "I know that things are really hard for a lot of people. I want to help." Employees of local companies are calling me, asking how they can help. People who, right now, have at least "just enough" and want to help others.

And, most heartening of all are all the parents, teachers, group leaders, and religious educators who understand the importance of teaching our children the joy and importance of giving. This commitment to encouraging giving at an early age is by no means new in this community. But I HAVE had a significant increase each month in calls during the past year from youth leaders and teachers, looking for ways for children to help those who need an extra hand. It is a wonderful thing.

And, I offer these words:

"Thanks, but save it for someone who really needs it." I was told this by a single woman who is struggling with serious health problems and can barely pay her rent. A homeless man insisted "No thank you, I am staying with friends for the holiday," when offered some extra help for Christmas. And, a person who used to come to the food pantry called a few months ago. "I have a few boxes of food to donate. When can I bring them to you?" He has continued to make a monthly donation.

These people, for all their troubles, are concerned that others may have even less than they have.

I think I have learned more about the true nature of people in my year and four months of running the food pantry than I have in all my previous years. People are good. People are caring. People are giving. I've always believed that, but seeing it in direct action has been quite an amazing experience.

So, I've made it pretty obvious that there are people in Wakefield who need a helping hand, that there are many generous people in our community, and that giving makes people feel good. And, as pointed out in the today's first reading from the Gospel of James, service to others is an honored way to express one's faith.

But, what about receiving? Needing help?...Asking for help?...Accepting help? Accepting Charity? Charity is a loaded term. It is a splendid thing to be Charitable, to give to Charitable cause. But, what about those of us who are on the receiving end? The term "Charity Case," for example, has a very negative connotation.

Granted, charitable situations resulting from so-called "Acts of God," such as grave illness or a natural disaster, don't tend to bring up as many feelings of discomfort. And, what school or civic

organization is "too embarrassed" to ask for money? Who feels bad about receiving financial aid for college? But, it is often a different story when a person is struggling to provide their family with the basics – food, shelter, clothing....

George Orwell once said, "A man receiving charity always hates his benefactor - it is a fixed characteristic of human nature." That is a harsh statement, and I do not agree with it. But, it does address the feelings of embarrassment and imbalance of power that can underlie even the most well-meaning acts of giving.

There is an aura of shame about asking for food. There should not be, but there is. I can't count how many times I've had people say to me "I am so embarrassed to be here. I hope no one I know sees me." Or, apologizing for coming to the food pantry. Apologizing!

And, even though giving can feel so good, there are issues around people needing food or other basics that those of us who have never needed such assistance often struggle with.

A group of youngsters came to the food pantry last winter for a field trip. They brought a wonderful donation of food and then I talked with the group about the food pantry. At one point, one of the children, suddenly looking rather panicky, asked, "Is anyone going to come for food right now?"

Then, there was the young woman who, with her small child, brought in a donation of food on a day the food pantry was open. With all good intentions, using simple language so her young child would understand, she said, " Give the bag to the nice lady (meaning me) Remember, honey? We are giving this food to help the poor people who don't have enough to eat." I very quietly told her that the people in the hall were there for assistance. She was, of course, mortified. And I, of course, felt embarrassed for those who heard those words, as innocent and well meaning as they were.

And, I also sometimes have people question whether certain people who come to the food pantry really deserve our assistance. Maybe they appear more well off than they are. Or, maybe they look "disreputable." Or, in some cases, it is known that a person has a drug, alcohol, or gambling addiction. In all cases – the little girl in the first story, the young woman telling her child about "the poor people," and those suspicious of the backgrounds or intentions of those coming to the food pantry, we all – and I struggle with this, also, can too easily see those who are struggling to survive as "OTHER." Different. Possibly at fault, or weak, or just plain lazy. And, those of us who need assistance often also see themselves that way, too. Thus the shame. And, even worse, that feeling of shame can stop a person from asking for and receiving help.

The second of today's readings reminds us that there is more to giving than a person "doing the right thing," or gaining a sense of self-satisfaction.

"The giver by giving is receiving, and the receiver by receiving is giving. It is proactive and both giver and receiver are equally involved in the process."

One way to describe this process is, simply - Connecting with each other. And, to draw from one of the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes – this process actively reflects the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

But, in less abstract terms, I like to describe the work of the food pantry as doing a favor for someone. And, for those of us who are helped out by the food pantry, as accepting a favor.

How many of you have done a favor for someone? Everyone, right? How did it make you feel to help someone out? Did you think less of the person who accepted the favor?

And, how many of you have had someone do a favor for you?

Did you ask for that favor? Someone to watch your child? Feed your pet while you are away? A quick piece of legal or financial advice? Fix a doorknob? (That's a favor I'll be asking someone for, soon – before I get stuck either inside or outside of my condo!)

Did you feel ashamed to ask for a helping hand? How much would you have had to pay if you had to hire someone for that service? If you had to pay for all the favors you have received, what would you have had to do without?

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, the Etymology of the word Charity is this: (and I'll probably pronounce these all wrong!) Middle English *charite*, from Old French *charité*, from Late Latin *caritat-*, *caritas* Christian love, from Latin, dearness, from *carus* dear; akin to Old Irish *carae* friend, Sanskrit *kAma*..... Love.

To give - Or Receive anything, on any level, is to participate in an act of Charity. It is, simply, an act of love.

To Give is to receive is to give is to receive is to give...

Amen