

SERVICE + COMMUNITY = A SUCCESSFUL FORMULA

How the Chatham Chuckwagon serves the Pittsboro community and inspires action beyond

For 14 years, the Community Lunch run by St. Bartholomew's, Pittsboro, has served a chef-prepared lunch once per week to anyone who wants to partake. The program served more than 125 guests each Thursday in 2018, as members of the community—people experiencing food insecurity, 9-to-5ers in need of a hot lunch and many who simply wanted to enjoy a delicious meal—gathered around community tables to meet their neighbors. Local farmers, bakeries and home cooks donated everything from fresh produce to homemade desserts, and volunteers from across the community helped prepare food each week. The ministry represented beloved community, both in the kitchen and around the table.

Then COVID-19 arrived in March 2020 and brought the collaborative ministry to a temporary halt, as it did so many other essential services. While the Community Lunch was able to restart in July 2020 using a drive-through distribution model, it was clear from the jump in people accessing the meals that the community needed more help.

Luckily, Jim Vaughn, the Community Lunch's cook, had a vacuum packer he was itching to use. Other churches in the Pittsboro community also felt a call to help their neighbors but didn't have the capacity to provide an ongoing service. As a new idea began to take shape, Terry Transue, who took over as director of the Community Lunch in January 2021, convened a meeting of potential partner churches to discuss a new model of food distribution: vacuum-packed freezer meals. Under the guidance of a board of directors, the Chatham Chuckwagon began to take shape.

One of the new partners, Pittsboro Presbyterian, is a small, older congregation with a heart for service and an interest in interdenominational work. The only thing the congregation didn't have was a clear idea of how best to help their neighbors. The invitation to talk about a broader partnership was a welcome one.

"We were thinking we could serve folks in the community—not necessarily just folks who are hungry but folks who need some support and who need some love," Bobbie Morel of Pittsboro Presbyterian, explained.

Ultimately, churches from five different denominations joined the collaborative to serve in some way. Cooking the meal each week rotates among partner churches, with two—St. Bartholomew's and Pittsboro United Methodist Church—serving as cooking sites for churches that do not have adequate kitchen space to accommodate bulk meal prep. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints donated 4,000 pounds of pork roast and ground beef, along with

a freezer to store it, which is installed at St. Bartholomew's. The partnership extends into Chatham County's business community, too. Mountaire Farms in Siler City, one of the Southeast's largest chicken-processing facilities, donates 800 pounds of boneless, skinless chicken thighs each month, and a Pittsboro restaurant, Carolina Brewery & Grill, also cooks proteins for the ministry.

Each week, the church responsible for cooking appoints a lead cook to formulate an entree recipe, arranges to pick up the protein from one of the storage sites, and coordinates volunteers, often in multiple shifts, for prepping ingredients, cooking, sealing and freezing. Some churches partner during their designated weeks, like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and Pittsboro Presbyterian. On the following Tuesday, 4:30-6 p.m., volunteers then distribute meals at St. Bartholomew's from a table covered in a red-and-white checkered table cloth. The portions are generous; each freezer pack contains two servings of protein, and a family of five receives three or four packs. The local Panera Bread donates leftover baked goods, which are also distributed.

Transue and Morel joke that sometimes the Chatham Chuckwagon can feel like the Chatham Chickenwagon due to Mountaire Farms' generosity, but with the diversity of delicious entrees, no one minds. Recent meals have included meatballs, teriyaki chicken thighs, meatloaf, pulled pork, chicken tikka masala, lasagna and veggie lasagna, chicken lemon thyme, chicken and gravy, taco chicken, roasted pork loin, and two community favorites: chicken Ranch parmesan and Sweet Baby Ray's BBQ sauce on chicken breasts.

Not only is the food delicious, but it is safely prepared, too. While the cooking sites are not certified by ServSafe, a food service safety organization, the volunteers follow ServSafe guidelines as they prep, cook, cool, vacuum seal and freeze the meals. Each meal also comes with reheating instructions and a complete ingredient list to assist those navigating food allergies. In order to embrace as many people as possible, all written instructions and printed in both English and Spanish, and vegan options and kids meals are also available each week. If there are meals left over from previous weeks, volunteers distribute those, too.

Just like with the Community Lunch, those who receive food from the Chatham Chuckwagon are not necessarily food insecure, though many are; others might be busy parents who need a break from cooking or people who are undergoing treatment for serious illnesses. Newcomers might hear about the meal distribution through weekly write-ups in the Chatham Chatlist, a local daily email digest.



From left: One of the Chatham Chuckwagon's most popular freezer-packed meals is chicken with BBQ sauce. Volunteers both prepare and distribute 150-200 freezer packs, or 300-400 servings, each week, including the chocolate adobo chicken pictured here. *Photos by ?*

“Somebody that’s trying, and they’re still having a tough time, I’d just do anything for them,” Transue said. While there is interest in expanding the ministry further, the umbrella organization of churches that runs the Chatham Chuckwagon, Alliance Serving Chatham County, is proceeding carefully and deliberately to avoid creating a dependence on a community service their volunteers can’t maintain. The board thought about extending the Chatham Chuckwagon into nearby Siler City but decided to hold off for the time being in order to ensure continuing sustainability. When representatives from a church in Siler City approached Transue to learn more about the ministry, however, he was happy to offer assistance. After conversation, the church decided to run a monthly pilot program, using St. Bartholomew’s kitchen, to test the idea in Siler City.

The Chatham Chuckwagon recently added a second cooking site to the weeks when Carolina Brewery & Grill cooks, which creates an additional 150 freezer packs, or 300 servings, during those weeks to allow for experimentation with satellite distribution locations. So far, the ministry has distributed meals in a mobile home community and government-subsidized housing, places far enough away from the main distribution site that travel becomes an obstacle. The Community Lunch already delivers approximately 25 meals per week to a nearby housing complex, and the Chatham Chuckwagon has also begun experimenting with meal delivery to the same neighborhood. The manager of a local retailer recently confided in Transue that the Chatham Chuckwagon is a boon to employees who are working hard but struggling, and the ministry is working to distribute some of the extra meals to the store so employees can also access food there. Every foray into an expanded ministry, however, happens deliberately and carefully.

“We try to be careful so that, once we do it for you, we can do it again,” Transue explained. The board of Alliance Serving Chatham County takes seriously the idea that creating a community dependency only to halt services later on has the potential to be even more destructive than not addressing a need in the first place.

“If you create a dependence in your community and then you just fall off, you’ve actually caused harm,” Morel agreed.

For now, the Chatham Chuckwagon is having a major impact on the community. From the organization’s start date on August 3, 2021, through the end of the year, volunteers prepared and distributed 4,812 meals, plus 1,200 Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner boxes with partner Mountaire Farms. The Community Lunch also distributed 6,300 meals throughout 2021, for a total of 11,019 weekday meals. As of publication, the Chatham Chuckwagon’s largest single distribution was 344 meals in one week during January 2022.

The model is spreading. Morel has shared the idea with friends in New England and an ordained family member in South Carolina, all of whom are excited by the prospect of trying something similar and want to learn more about the ministry model, which combines tangible community service with building relationships among volunteers and throughout the community.

“I might come in and everybody else is in the kitchen cooking, and I hear everybody laughing and having fun, and that’s a beautiful thing,” Transue said. “And, then during the distribution, the same thing’s happening. If you can have that [fellowship] and the community good, it’s a great formula.”

Summerlee Walter is the communications coordinator for the Diocese of North Carolina. Contact her at summerlee.walter@episdionc.org.