

# Community Meal sets a growing table



“When you have more than you need, build a longer table, not a higher fence.”

A sign that bears this challenge has a prominent home in Westwood’s kitchen these days. It was a gift from members Nancy and John Scott. Nancy and John are long-term volunteers, and Nancy has led kitchen crews. “It is a fitting reflection of our weekly Community Meal effort,” said Ann Kisch, Westwood’s Kitchen Coordinator and food specialist.

What began as outreach has become Westwood’s growing table – available to all in the community, members, and non-members. These days the table still embraces those in need, but it has extended to include busy families, retirees, the elderly, people who work from home, youth, musicians, new members, potential members, and church volunteers. Just how many are at that table? On some Wednesday nights, the count hits 200, others 250, and still others closer to 300. The top was a holiday dinner—turkey with ALL the trimmings—that provided 325 meals.

“Jesus said ‘Love one another,’ no exceptions,” said Carole Wogen, a volunteer team leader with the program, who, along with Stephanie Seubert, has volunteered in various forms almost since its beginning. “This is what God is calling us to do, feeding the hungry and providing socialization for people. For some, the socialization is as important as the meal,” Carole said.

Ann also manages the daily lunches for Westwood’s Early Childhood Center and coordinates the Community Meal teams. At least 26 people are needed each week. Some are from Confirmation classes or youth doing community service work, but she has a strong core of regulars and willing reserves. “It’s amazing that it gets pulled off each week,” Ann said. “It’s like having company for dinner once a week, and you never know how many are coming.” How many sometimes depends on the meal. Taco, pizza, and spaghetti meals rounded out with fruit and veggies, and dessert are the most popular!

People love being part of the work. Some have specialty jobs. Others, like Donna Bushway, who manages the meals’ beverages, consistently show up to wash dishes or prepare the donated bread. Dean Almquist bakes dessert for almost every meal. In 2023, he turned out 6,254 cookies, 296 muffins, and 500 servings of cake.

Volunteer Judy Christiansen is in her second year as a volunteer chef. She looked for volunteer opportunities after her 2019 retirement. After a hint to Pastor Jason that she liked to cook and bake, he sent her in the direction of the Community Meal. She was a helper for several months before she claimed the spatula and ladle. Her prior work in computer technology involved project management and application management in the retail grocery business, so she’s well equipped to plan, order and cook for large groups. Her parents and Godmother made and served food for weddings. Judy cut fruit, made chicken salad, and filled fruit bowls at an early age. “I like to think there’s a little part of Mom in there with me when I cook,” Judy said. “I’m not real good at following recipes. I cook like my mom. But I’m good at documenting things,” she said. “If I create the recipe, we debrief and figure out if we bought the right amount.” She has added recipes for tater tot hotdish and cheesy potatoes to the mix, but she has a different favorite.

“When we do the holiday meal and make gravy and dressing from scratch, that’s probably my favorite.” Judy also makes cranberry sauce from fresh cranberries for the meal. “We served 10 quarts of it,” Ann said. A few other stats: They cut sixteen 20-pound turkeys basted with 16 sticks of butter, used 10 rolls of sausage and 20 sticks of butter in the stuffing, and 20 gallons of milk in the gravy.

The church pays for the food Ann orders for the meal, always aiming to be economical. That’s supplemented by specific donations to the program, free-will donations at the meal, the Cause of the Month funding, and a Holiday Fair grant. This year, the Holiday Fair grant will buy more highchairs for the growing number of children.

Judy likes the idea that the meal fills a great community need and a Westwood mission. “We’re helping others, bringing people together, helping moms and dads. We’re promoting the family. It helps with the seniors, making sure we care for people, that we take good care of them, and help them eat healthy, well-balanced meals. The food is not fried. The meals are well-rounded with fruit, protein, and veggies,” Judy said, “and we’re having fun.”

This season’s final meal is May 22, though the program will also provide a meal for the Pride event on June 26. The Community Meal will resume after Labor Day.