

Covenant Food Cupboard

Butler, Pennsylvania

A BRIEF HISTORY

After nearly four decades of service to the Butler community, Covenant Food Cupboard ceased operation and closed its doors on June 1, 2017. It was a bittersweet occasion, with many expressions of gratitude from the patrons for whom the Cupboard volunteers had become family over the years.

There were many factors which weighed in the final decision to “retire” the mission project which began on December 19, 1977 under the direction of Rev. Don Campbell. At that time it was just one small cupboard in the basement, and church members would donate goods to keep it full. When it first began, the cupboard served about six families.



Rev. Don Campbell standing in the “original cupboard” (~1979)

After Pullman Standard closed its operation in 1982, the needs in the community became much greater. Catholic Charities and the Red Cross referred people, but by the following year, the Cupboard went from being a “church ministry” to a community center for the distribution of food.

More recently, Covenant Food Pantry was affiliated with Butler County Community Action which supplied commodity food. Additional food, paper products and other goods were made available through the generous donations of local churches, schools, organizations and individual donors. In the years just prior to closing, the “extra” food and supplies were purchased monthly from Aldi Food store in Butler. A team of dedicated men could be counted upon to load, haul and unload these provisions as needed; and they enjoyed coffee, donuts and great fellowship in the process.

Eight teams of volunteers handled the scheduled days for monthly distribution, some individuals serving faithfully for as many as twenty years or more! The teams were organized from the following churches:

- First United Methodist Church
- Christ Community Methodist Church
- St. Peter’s Anglican (Episcopal) Church
- Grace @ Calvary Lutheran Church
- Faith Presbyterian Church
- Trinity Presbyterian Church (Loyal Team)
- Hill Presbyterian Church
- East Butler Presbyterian Church
- Covenant Presbyterian Church

Many local congregations and schools have donated food and other products generously over the years, most recently: Trinity Lutheran Church, Grace at Calvary Lutheran Church, Christ Community Methodist Church, First English Lutheran Church, Meridian Presbyterian Church, Saint Andrews Presbyterian Church, Hill Presbyterian Church, St. Peters Parish Family, Emily Brittain Elementary School, McQuiston Elementary School, Butler Middle School / Jr. High School, Armstrong Communications, Butler 4-H Clubs, and many, many more.

At the peak of demand, Covenant Cupboard served an average of 250 families per month. Records show that during the period October 2005 to March 2006 an average per month of 156 families (419 individuals) were served. In 2015 the average per month was 84 families (175 individuals); in 2016, the average fell to 75 (or 159 household members); and during the first four months of 2017, the average fell even further to 59 families (108 individuals) per month. (During some distribution days, reduced from four to three times a month, it wasn't uncommon for there to be more volunteers than patrons served.)

Each volunteer team had a designated “Coordinator” who made sure that plenty of help would be available. Since its beginning, the Cupboard Managers and Treasurers have been volunteers from Covenant Church who served faithfully and dutifully for many consecutive years.

In November 2016, David Blewett retired after 11 years as Cupboard Manager and Pastor Jim Swanson assumed his duties for the last few months until closing. Prior to that the managers were (in order): Jesse Hoffmeister, Charlie Thompson, Orville Nicholas, Les Dunmire, and Sam Peters.

Many thanks are due to Debbie Gould and June Naugel, Coordinators of the Food Program with Butler County Community Action (Sunnyview distribution center) for their help and guidance along the way. Their dedicated service to all the food pantries in Butler County deserves high praise, not least from Covenant Cupboard managers and volunteers who know what hard work it is.

There is no praise high enough for the many volunteers (most of whom are retirees) who have given their time, talents... and muscles... to the Cupboard. One of the factors which precipitated the closing of the Cupboard was the undeniable fact that the volunteers who picked up, packed and sorted the food were all growing older (and the stairs to Fellowship Hall in Covenant Church were not getting any fewer). David Blewett, past manager of the Cupboard, said in an interview with the Butler Eagle, “One consideration was that many of our volunteers have been advancing in age and some of the groups were having difficulty assembling a six-member team.”

All in all, *four decades of faithful service* is a very worthy goal to have reached. Praise God!

Former Cupboard patrons are now being served at other food banks in downtown Butler (St. Vincent de Paul and Salvation Army). It is fair to say that their friendships, smiles... and distinctively “colorful personalities” will be greatly missed. We wish them well!

