

'Serving U' teaches teamwork at North Texas Food Bank

BY JOHN A. LOVELACE
Special Contributor

Looking for a way to build a strong team at your church? Staff? Council? Missions committee? Trustees? Choir? Whatever?

Try this: Put your group literally on an assembly line that provides food to hungry people in 13 counties, all within North Texas Conference boundaries. You can do it with "Serving U," an ingeniously named new program at the North Texas Food Bank's 72,000-square-foot warehouse headquarters in southwest Dallas County.

Here's how a Food Bank promotional publication describes the process:

"In just one day, your team will be working together, setting aside differences, planning common goals, and building stronger bonds. And, at the same time, they'll be helping to feed thousands of North Texans in need."

"Serving U" is aimed

primarily at the corporate market because of the volume of potential response, but non-profits such as University Park UMC have found that it works for them, too.

Team-building was a priority for that church's staff of 30-plus after a leadership change in June when Rev. Leighton Bearden was appointed as senior pastor to succeed the Rev. Thomas Q. Robbins, who relocated to the Texas Conference in the Houston Area.

Associate Pastor Rev. Rebecca Frank described the process and the results.

"Our experience with the Food Bank's team-building program was extraordinary. It was the single best 'staff retreat' or 'team-building' event I've ever participated in, and I've done a lot," said Rev. Frank.

"The Food Bank staff helped us become more familiar with the work they do. We learned a lot about how they leverage giving, how they connect with other agencies, how they help teach job skills, how they address hunger in school

children... all very important and inspiring," Rev. Frank continued.

"Our staff had the opportunity to actually prepare boxes for distribution to senior citizens. We challenged ourselves to see how many boxes we could pack in an hour, and then – over a great lunch – we debriefed our experience and refined it and went back for a second hour. We increased our productivity by 60 percent!"

Rev. Frank said, "The Food Bank facilitators helped us identify the gifts, skills, dynamics, communication strategies, etc, that emerged, and invited us to see how those same things might be applied to the work we do together everyday at the church.

"The 'take-aways' from our day included: increased appreciation for one another, new eagerness to tackle things as a team, lots of laughter, awareness of each individual's unique gifts and strengths, encouragement to use our own gifts and strengths. (Did I mention laughter?) And...we provided over 12,000 meals! A

good day's work."

There's no charge for enrollments in "Serving U," but the suggested donation is \$1,000 for the first 10 participants and \$25 per person after that to a maximum of 40. Team sizes are typically 10-12, and all donations go 100 percent into Food Bank expenses.

"Serving U" is the brainchild of the Food Bank's chief marketing officer, Colleen Brinkmann, whose late father, Rev. Hendrix Atkinson Townsley, served as an associate pastor at University Park UMC in the 1980s after a distinguished career as a United Methodist missionary in India.

Brinkmann told the NTC Reporter that the idea for "Serving U" came about 18 months ago after 15 or 20 people from one corporation, dressed in matching men's and women's corporate-logo T-shirts, volunteered for a day on the Food Bank box-filling assembly line and said they got a lot



University Park UMC staffers developed team skills on the North Texas Food Bank assembly line.

out of it.

A short time later, during a Food Bank staff meeting, "a light bulb came on," she said. "We realized that we have a laboratory for team-building right here in our warehouse."

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Food Bank staff “noodled” on the idea for a couple of months. Then Food Bank CEO Jan Pruitt, who has headed the agency for 10 of its 25 years, gave the go-ahead on a trial basis.

Brinkmann said, “We give each group the freedom to innovate, to falter and move on.”

She told how one group, “stood there and looked at me, waiting for directions. They were out of their zone and afraid they would fail. I said nothing. Finally one woman in the group had enough courage to say, ‘Come on, Bob, start putting the cereal in the box.’ And, before the day was over, they met their goal!”

Corporations that have successfully put teams “on the line” include Southwest Airlines, KPMG, Capital One, Steak & Ale, Wal-Mart and CVS.

They and numerous non-profits like University Park UMC provide part of the 10,000 volunteers who provide 50,000

volunteer hours on-site in a typical year. But, as public relations manager Martha Jansen explains, “We require all volunteers to make a reservation, even during the week. So there are no walk-ons any more. So many people want to volunteer that we have to keep a schedule – a nice problem to have!”

The list of Food Bank food donors fills five pages of small type in the bank’s 2006 annual reports. The list of financial donors fills an additional three pages, including Highland Park UMC in the highest-giving group of \$100,000-plus.

Food Bank member agencies pay 14-cents per pound for food, a “shared maintenance fee” to help defray a fraction of costs to operate the warehouse. These nearly 700 agencies dispense food locally through such services as food pantries, Kids’ Cafes and soup kitchens. One such member agency is Seagoville Community Breadbasket, housed at First UMC,



Rev. Leighton Bearden gets a grip on the taping tool as his contribution to team-building at the North Texas Food Bank.

Seagoville. (see story in this issue)

“*Serving U*” is only a small part of the picture. But when you can measure growth like University Park’s — they needed 12 minutes to fill their first pallet of 48 boxes but, by the end of the day, had hit their goal of 4-

minute pallets — you know that not all the benefits belong to the Food Bank and its clients. At the intersection of Preston Road and Caruth Boulevard some folks got a glimpse of just how strong a team they could be.