



All faiths on the menu at Stoneham community dinners

By Dorothea Cassady / stoneham@wickedlocal.com

Posted May 17, 2012 at 12:01 AM

Updated May 17, 2012 at 5:19 PM

Are you having trouble making ends meet, dealing with illness, out of work or just want some social company or to meet new friends? You can join the 65 or so people each week who take part in the Stoneham community dinner program in the basement of the in the basement of First Congregational Church.

Are you having trouble making ends meet, dealing with illness, out of work or just want some social company or to meet new friends? You can join the 65 or so people each week who take part in the Stoneham community dinner program in the basement of the First Congregational Church.

As part of the program, all of the food is prepared on-site by a group of volunteers and served with a smile on a real plate. Families, singles and couples of all ages come together once a week to enjoy this free service each Tuesday throughout the year at the 1 Church St. location.

The community dinner program is an interfaith effort started in 1995 by the First Congregational Church and other churches in town. A wide range of churches, businesses and service clubs in Stoneham support this outreach program. They serve meals to 50-70 guests of all ages by teams that take turns week to week. Local churches taking part, besides First Congregational Church, include St. Patrick's Parish, First Baptist Church, St. James Methodist Church and Temple Judea. These interfaith teams collaborate with StonehamBank, Hallmark Health nurses and Excelsior Realty staff, who are all actively involved.

“It is a place to unwind from the stress in life and enjoy good food and good company,” said Rebecca Jacques, coordinator of the Community Steering Committee. “Both workers and guests are blessed to share in this special program.”

The program operates separately from the town’s Food Pantry and must supply its own needs to serve the community. Volunteers hope to make sure this is the highlight of the week for those who attend. However, assistance from more area restaurants and business sponsors would help to ensure that happens.

“Monetary donations are also gladly accepted and appreciated and make a difference in how much the community dinners program can do,” Jacques said.

Karen Sokol represents the Jewish community of the former Temple Judea in Stoneham and co-leads the efforts on the first Tuesday of each month. Their congregation merged in 1992 with Temple Shir Tikvah, in Winchester, which also provides more volunteers to serve at the dinners. They receive assistance and volunteers through StonehamBank and call their combined outreach the Interfaith Community Group.

“The bank has been absolutely wonderful,” Sokol said. “They have not only provided financial help but also help in the kitchen.”

Sokol goes in early to start the dishwasher, coffee and salads, then the bank volunteers arrive and finish the preparations.

A labor of love

For the First Congregational Church, this 16-year ongoing outreach is a labor of love. As host church where the meals are prepared and served, they take the second week for their Tuesday to serve, and call their group the Hungry Helpers. Lynn Haddad has led the program for about five years. She is constantly planning menus and shopping for food bargains throughout the month. Then, along with Jocelyn Wise of Miss Fork Catering, she helps cook the meals.

“I see a sale and buy ahead,” Haddad said, then plan meals around what I bought to be sure all of the basic food groups are included.”

It was not always done this way, as volunteers used to bring parts of the meals prepared at home. However, the state's health code, enforced by the town's Board of Health, required such a venture to have a certified kitchen, inspected regularly for safety and cleanliness, to be within the law. It almost shut the program down, but former Board of Health agent Robert Bracey saved the day. He suggested they contact Jocelyn Wise and see if she could help. Wise loved the idea. Participating ever since, she helps cook the meals at the church, which is now BOH-certified, and through her own certified kitchen of Miss Fork Catering.

Haddad receives help from many other sources, including members of the church, Excelsior Realty who help on a quarterly basis and St. Patrick's Parish teens who complete their school community service projects by volunteering at the dinners.

"We have our own system down pat," Haddad said, "but each [church/group] does things a little differently and whatever works for them is OK."

One of the churches that has been involved since the beginning is St. Patrick's Parish. Rev. Mark Hannon, who was the priest at that time, received a letter from the First Congregational Church, asking if St. Patrick's would be interested in joining an interfaith outreach program to feed the hungry in Stoneham. He gave the letter to Cyril O'Neil to determine if the church should participate. O'Neil was not sure if there was a need, but said yes, figuring it would not last. However, within three months, it was obvious there was a need and the attendance has only grown since then. Guests look forward to their special dinners of ham with macaroni and cheese, the third Tuesday of each month.

"To me, community dinners is a way the interfaith community comes together with the Stoneham community, because it is not just the churches involved, but businesses and other organizations that help, too," O'Neil said. "It enhances the town as a whole."

Michael Ellis of First Baptist Church is also an enthusiastic team leader of the church's week four Tuesday, each month. He has volunteered alongside Pastor John French and his wife for 16 years.

One of the corporate groups that helps with the community dinners is Hallmark Health System. It has groups of people in different communities who actively participate in community organizations and programs. Formed about five years ago, Team Stoneham includes Hallmark employees who either live or work in Stoneham. Members include nurses, managers, administrators, Internet technology specialists and more.

Kathy Harlow, who is the Program Manager for a Hallmark Health affiliate, North Suburban Child and Family Resource Network, leads the team.

“As part of our outreach, I found out about the community dinners at the Congregational Church through Becky Jacques and our team began to serve the fifth Tuesday of the month,” Harlow said.

Through their involvement, they have become familiar with many of the regular attendees. They recommend that a person contact their doctor when appropriate, discover previously unknown high blood pressure readings and offer encouraging words with a smile. Paired with volunteers from the St. James Methodist Church on that fifth week, they not only help in serving the dinners and taking blood pressure readings but also share information on health topics, answer questions and hand out give-aways.

They work alongside people like Cindy DuLong, a volunteer for seven years, who for the past five years was team leader and did all of the tasks in preparing and managing the week five Tuesday dinner. DuLong has retired from being team leader and now focuses on the desserts and beverages. She and her husband not only work there, but enjoy the meals as well.

“I love [helping with the meals] because I love the people,” DuLong said. “I personally have made so many friends; we are one big, happy family. It is a way to get out and talk to people — a night out I really enjoy. I can’t do as much as I used to but still do the baking and bring the milk.”

It’s all about the people

The people who attend each week make the free meals a success.

“I like the price the best,” a regular participant known to everyone as Bob, said jokingly, “and the food is good.”

One woman on disability pension explained how she was, at first, embarrassed to attend but she was encouraged to try it anyway. Now she is so grateful for the program, meets people from many communities and enjoys their company.

“I thought, I am not that poor,” she said. “But it is not about that.”

Marlane Codair, a single parent of three children, likes the community meals because it gives her a night off from cooking, saving her needed funds, and allows her a chance to meet people in the community. Her adopted son, Joshua, 7, and adopted daughter, Bertude, 11, are from Haiti. Jenny, her adult biological daughter, attends with the family as well.

“The kids look forward to it,” Codair said, “and it is a blessing to us.”

The program succeeds because many people in town, and from the area, care about its success. Such volunteers and sponsors include the Stoneham Rotary Club with Jack and Trudy Anderson, CSM Bakery Products with Giovanni Kelly in Woburn, Harrow’s Chicken Pies with Wally Arsenault in Reading, 99 Restaurant with Craig Dumont in Stoneham and Brothers Deli and Restaurant in Wakefield. Brownies and Girl Scouts often contribute by setting the tables and donating flower centerpieces and Girl Scout cookie desserts.

“It’s impressive to think about over 46,000 meals being served right here in the past 16 years,” Jacques said. “From the beginning, it was important that we create a welcoming place and I think we have done that.”

To make a donation to the Stoneham community dinner program, make checks payable to the First Congregational Church of Stoneham, with “Community Dinners” in the memo section. To learn more about the Stoneham community dinner program, contact Rebecca Jacques at 781-438-5596 or at bjacq@juno.com.