

Society of St. Andrew aims to take a bite out of hunger

Article on the website of the South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church

10/5/2011



By Kara Witherow, Editor

Last month, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that the total number of Americans living below the poverty line – 46.2 million – was the highest total ever in the 52 years the bureau has tracked such data.

And in late August, the Annie E. Casey Foundation reported that another 2.4 million children joined the ranks of the U.S. poor during the past decade.

As poverty rates rise, so do those who are considered food insecure, or hungry. Since the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) began keeping track in the mid-1900s, it has now reached an all-time high.

50.2 million Americans are food insecure, as are nearly 18 percent of Georgia residents. That means that 1,693,710 Georgians are not sure where their next meal is coming from. One in four are children.

But Georgia – especially South Georgia – has the resources to help eradicate its hunger problem.

The USDA estimates that 128,720 acres of vegetables were harvested in Georgia in 2007, and approximately 96 percent of those crops were in fields within the bounds of the South Georgia Conference.

Each harvest season, though, thousands of pounds of fresh produce risk going to waste in Georgia's fields.

The Society of St. Andrew, through its Georgia Gleaning Network, helps get that food from the fields onto the plates of hungry men, women and children in Georgia and around the country.

Founded in 1979 by two United Methodist ministers, the Society of St. Andrew is a nationwide, faith-based, ecumenical, nonprofit ministry operating a variety of programs to fight hunger in the United States. Their name comes from St. Andrew's role in Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5,000.

One of the Society of St. Andrew's programs, the Gleaning Network, works off of the Biblical practice of gleaning, an act of collecting leftover crops from farmers' fields after they have been commercially harvested or on fields where it is not economically profitable to harvest. Sometimes the produce is donated because it doesn't meet quality specifications for produce sold in stores.

"Hunger is real in this country, hunger is real in Georgia, and hunger is real here in South Georgia. It's not just a foreign problem we hear about on the news. It's real and it's happening to our neighbors," said Janet Sack, Georgia program coordinator for the Society of St. Andrew. "But we are very fortunate here in South Georgia that we have an abundance of crops and produce."

Sack works with farmers, growers, food banks, shelters and volunteers to find the produce and get it to the people in need. She also works to educate the community on the issue of hunger and how it can be addressed.

Last year, 30,000 Society of St. Andrew volunteers gleaned more than 28 million pounds of fresh produce – more than 85 million servings of fresh produce that was immediately given to the hungry.

Many of the Georgia gleanings are held in Tift, Colquitt and Mitchell counties, counties that produce much of the state's vegetable crop.

Bill Kelley, a resident of Tifton in Tift County and member of Tifton First United Methodist Church, has gleaned several times, for cabbage, tomatoes and green peppers, and helps transport produce with his trailer.

Helping others is a Biblical mandate, he says, and volunteering with the Society of St. Andrew helps him do what he has been called to do.

“As Christians, we are our brother's keeper,” Kelley said. “According to the Bible, churches are given the opportunity and the responsibility to take care of the widows and the orphans and those who aren't able to take care of themselves.”

Rev. Stephen Webb, pastor of Tifton First United Methodist Church, which houses the Society's Georgia regional office and also supports the ministry financially and with volunteers, says that having the opportunity to provide food to hungry people makes a significant impact on disciple making.

“The opportunity this gives us as witnesses is great,” he said. “It's hard to preach Christ when your backbone is scraping up against your ribs, but if you are able to feed someone, they're liable to listen to you when you tell them about the love of Christ.”

How to help the Society of St. Andrew here in South Georgia:

Pray for the ministry and the hungry.

Volunteer to glean.

Permit the Society of St. Andrew to glean on your farm.

Encourage your church to become a partner in ministry with the SoSA.

Encourage your church to participate in one of the Society's devotional giving programs.

Join the Saint Andrew Club. A \$25 donation two times per year will provide 2,500 servings of food.

The Georgia Gleaning Network can be found on Facebook at "Society of St. Andrew – Georgia Gleaning Network" Gleaning opportunities are posted online, so check often for opportunities to serve.

Visit the Society of St. Andrew online at www.endhunger.org.

Additional reporting provided by Linda Bloom and Kathy L. Gilbert.