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St. Albans ministry provides food, warmth

by Charlotte Ferrell Smith
Daily Mail staff

Jerry Bowles is a retired veteran who is a regular at Christ's Kitchen in St. Albans where he can get a hot meal and enjoy the warmth of visiting with friends.

"I've been coming here for two years," he said. "I come because I need to and it's a super place. I drive or ride a bike. I live two miles away. The staff is super. They go beyond their duty. They help people who would be a lot worse off if not for them."

Christ's Kitchen is housed inside St. Mark's Episcopal Church, 405 B St. in St. Albans, where anyone who needs a meal can eat with no questions asked. Some are homeless while others, like Bowles, live on a tight budget and struggle to make ends meet.

Bowles, a veteran of the U.S. Army, has held several jobs over the years from doing housework to working in a hospital's laundry department. Bowles, 64, and his wife, Norma, 55, who is disabled, survive on Social Security income. She sometimes accompanies him to eat at Christ's Kitchen.

While making ends meet is rough, there are others with bigger problems, Bowles said.

"Other folks are worse off than me," he said. "They have no income whatsoever. They are homeless. Some stay in shelters."

He said he has made good friends there with other diners as well as the staff. He said everyone is treated equally and with respect.

Mary McCoy, director of Christ's Kitchen, has worked there for eight years.

She said Christ's Kitchen was formed about 30 years ago when a group of area churches came together to provide a place where the needy in the area could gather and eat with no questions asked.

"There are no religious overtones," she said. "I keep a count of meals. The first year I was here we served 7,000 meals. This fiscal year from June to June we served 29,000 meals."

Those who eat there range from the homeless to the working poor who find it impossible to stretch meager incomes to cover necessities such as food, utilities and medicine.

Her guests are gracious and a scuffle is rare.

"They are my family," she said. "They are the nicest and most respectful people you would ever meet. It's a great job. We don't judge them. We are here to feed them and love them."

She is the only paid employee and the rest of the workers are volunteers. Donations from individuals and area churches keep the kitchen running.

"They give money and food, all cooked by me," she said. "We do breakfast and lunch and give them leftovers to take home for dinner."

Lunch is served 10:30 a.m. to noon Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday. A continental breakfast is available when doors open at 8 a.m.

"Breakfast is toast, cereal and pastries," she said. "Lunch is good. We have meat, a vegetable and fruit. It's really good meals. It's no soup kitchen. We rarely have soup. I can make 1,000 things out of hamburger."

Donations that are especially needed right now are canned meats and other foods as well as paper supplies such as plates, paper towels, toilet paper, and cups. Plastic eating utensils and cleaning supplies would also be appreciated.

"I'm thankful to have anything," McCoy said.

She is also thankful to spend the holidays cooking for her adopted family at Christ's Kitchen where special meals are planned with turkey or ham on those special days.

"I will be there Thanksgiving and Christmas Day," she said.

For more information about Christ's Kitchen, call 304-722-4284.

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