Beyond Filling Plates: Reimagining Food Pantry Ministry as Food Justice

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Abstract

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Food insecurity is a serious threat to communities with limited resources. Addressing food security is not enough. Food justice should be a goal for every church, nonprofit, and community partner. Food insecurity is an unsustainable solution that can only be solved by enacting Food Justice Measures. A food Justice roundtable, collaborative with vested partners, can increase the equitable distribution of resources in food-insecure communities.

This research project seeks to define the difference between food insecurity, food security, and food justice. By contrasting two food pantries and drawing on firsthand accounts from field observations and focus groups regarding how they perceive their service in this work, this research highlights why addressing food insecurity as a goal does not go far enough to achieve food justice.

Justice United Metro-Area Partnership (J.U.M.P.) will serve as a model for a roundtable collaboration that brings together all community entities participating in alleviating food insecurity concerns. The goal is to increase opportunities for Food Justice by mitigating redundancy and increasing efficiency**.**

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Introduction: Setting the Theological Table

Each Thursday at the Columbia Drive Food Pantry, the line forms regardless of the weather conditions. Whether the weather outside is sunny or rainy, hot or cold, windy or calm, people gather at least one hour before the Pantry's opening to ensure that they don't "miss out" on the pantry's offerings, even though there is always enough food distributed to sustain them throughout the week and beyond.

One regular food pantry client often says, "May God bless this church for all that you are doing for the community." Her words convey her gratitude for receiving the box of staples from the food pantry. She can discern hope in the pantry's heavily starchy and carbohydrate-rich offerings because (her) culinary habits reflect her ability to transform disparate staples into a meal that will "make a way out of no way."[1] The Columbia Drive Food Pantry helps clients like those mentioned above combat food insecurity.

Each Thursday, I witnessed renewed vigor and vitality in the faces of the dedicated volunteer staff despite their sometimes gout-ridden steps and arthritic hands. The volunteers feel they are doing God's work as they serve their neighbors along the Columbia Drive corridor. Through their service, they have become the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the community.

The words of an old spiritual aptly describe the ministry setting of many Black churches of yesteryear and today: "I'm going to do all I can, till I can't do no more, I'm going to do all I can for my Lord." The author of this spiritual is unknown, but the ethos of these words is a consistent refrain in many Black churches, and the Columbia Drive United Methodist Church is no exception.

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[1] Christopher Carter, *The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith, and Food Justice* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021), p. 2.

During morning worship at Columbia Drive United Methodist Church, the pulpit asks, what makes this church so special? The congregation's refrain is "A sweet, sweet spirit!" As I survey the sanctuary during worship moments when this question arises, I frequently witness some congregants being more engaged and enthusiastic than others. The example of the sweet, sweet spirit metaphorically represents what occurs in Columbia Drive UMC's various ministries. Some people are excited and engaged to serve, while others are less. The Columbia Drive Food Pantry is the longest-serving ministry at Columbia Drive United Methodist Church. At Columbia Drive, there is a desire to serve those whose plates are sometimes empty due to limited resources.

The Challenge of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is a significant issue for the individuals served at the Columbia Drive Food Pantry and those in the United States who lack the necessary resources to achieve food security. At Columbia Drive United Methodist, the church regularly receives calls and impromptu visits from community members seeking assistance with food insecurity, utility bills, and public transportation. The church often provides answers to questions about other locations offering additional support services. The Columbia Drive United Methodist church is honored with the trust granted by the community because "the people don't trust institutions, but they trust neighbors."[2]

Columbia Drive must also address a secondary problem. The volunteers take pride in knowing they help their community and those in need through their service. Still, there is a need to further deepen these volunteers' faith by connecting them with the theology behind their service. Additionally, the study of the Columbia Drive Food Pantry is significant to Columbia Drive United Methodist Church and other churches because it provides a vital understanding of

[2] Ibid, p.24.

the issues surrounding organizations concerned with mitigating food insecurity and moving them towards food security and, ultimately, food justice.

Three key reasons why this problem must be addressed are:

1. The changing denominational landscape within the United Methodist Church necessitates that Columbia Drive strengthen its ministries to remain effective during periods of schism and uncertainty within the church.
2. Many people's economic situation is troublesome, making food insecurity and food justice necessary for the church to address.
3. The success and longevity of the Columbia Drive Food Pantry can serve as a spiritual model for the successful integration of other ministries at Columbia Drive and churches beyond.

To understand why combatting food injustice is critical for individuals and families to thrive, we must understand the difference between food insecurity and food security. The difference can be as stark as having tables filled with dishes or empty tables at mealtimes.

We must also understand that food security is affected by food availability in a neighborhood. Food must be readily available and financially affordable to the people who need to access it as needed.

This paper will argue that food pantries contributing to food justice should intentionally seek ways to partner with geographically aligned pantries and nonprofits to reduce service redundancy and duplication. A collective focus on this issue will ensure that food justice becomes the standard for every person who volunteers or is served as a client.

What's cooking? Systemic Issues of Food Security and Insecurity

The USDA has prepared definitions that define what it means to be food secure rather than food insecure. According to the USDA, in 2006, a panel of experts determined the severity ranges for food insecurity at the USDA's request. This USDA study posits food security on two levels: high food security and marginal food security. In situations of high food security, people demonstrated "no reported indications of food-access problems or limitations." In contrast, in situations of marginal food security, they showed "one or two reported indications—typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house. Little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake."[3] This definition highlights why people with high food security are typically not regular clients of food pantries. The need for food is not a key factor in a lack of security. On the other hand, people experiencing marginal or low food security may, in times of great need, turn to food pantries for assistance.

The USDA defines food insecurity in two tiers: low food security and very low food security. People experiencing low food security report "reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake, while people experiencing very low food security report "multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake."[4]

[3] https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security
[4] ibid

Key Terminology: Relationship between Food Insecurity and Hunger

There is a direct relationship between food insecurity and instances of hunger among individuals and families. The truth is, as author and theologian Jennifer Ayres states, "In many places, food insecurity is tenuous at best," even when the trappings of food security seem to be in place.[5] Often, when clients came to the church doors on days when the Columbia Drive Food Pantry was closed, they experienced very low food security. People seeking assistance stated they needed food for their family to make it to their next financial allotment or food pantry visit. They could name the fact that they and their families lacked food security. Naming the lack of food is the quintessential expression of food insecurity. For the USDA, food insecurity is defined as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.[6]

When very low food security exists, hunger, rather than food, could be at the table. The USDA states that hunger "is an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity."[7] Furthermore, the panel said in its final report that the word "hunger" should refer to a potential consequence of food insecurity, which, due to a prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that exceeds the usual uneasy sensation.[8]

This situation promulgated by food insecurity often exacerbates other issues, making food insecurity a significant issue in a country with other pressing problems. It is essential to understand that food insecurity exists when people are unable to afford or access sufficient food.

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[5] Ayres, Jennifer R., *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press,2013,19
[6] U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Household Food Security in the United States in 2022," accessed April 11, 2025, https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/ers/household-food-security-2022.
[7] ibid
[8] ibid

According to an article entitled *How We Measure Hunger in America*, Ash Slupski asserts that food insecurity has changed since the pandemic. "In 2020, at least 60 million people in the United States turned to food banks, food pantries, and other community food programs to help feed themselves and their families. That's one in every five people."[9]

People who are food secure struggle to understand how people can be food insecure. Food security is a challenging goal because it encompasses more than just food. "People facing hunger struggle with high living costs, expensive housing, unemployment, and low-wage jobs."[10] As an example, one of the most helpful services we offered at Columbia Drive was a job fair to assist low-wage earners in finding higher-paying careers to make ends meet.

Insecurity Creates Indigestion

Food insecurity is about more than just body hunger. Hunger can involve more than not having adequate food for a family unit; food insecurity can involve overeating or mindless eating, which can lead to adverse health conditions like obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. In *Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating*, L. Shannon Jung observes that " our hunger is natural" and points to several other hungers. Hunger of any kind for food, companionship, cultural stimulation, and so on drives the human animal to search for what we need (or, in the case of misguided drives, at least for what we think we need)."[11] An example is that pantry recipients often visit two or more pantries in a single day. I assert that the threat of food insecurity fuels the fear of insufficient food resources for future use. In this sense, food

[9] www.feedingamerica.org/how/how we measure hunger
[10] Ibid.
[11] Jung, Shannon L. Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004, p. 12.

insecurity can cause physical, spiritual, emotional, financial, and societal indigestion. Anuradha Mittal underscores this thought, writing, “hunger is a social disease linked to poverty, and thus, any discussion of hunger is incomplete without a discussion of economics.”[12] In other words, if we are seeking to address hunger at Columbia Drive, we must closely examine the factors that contribute to its existence.

We must also understand that somebody must address food insecurity if we are to push forward solutions that don't just set the table but also stock the proverbial pantry. One way to measure food insecurity is to determine the number of people who utilize safety-net programs, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). These metrics gauge the level of food insecurity over time. The report indicates that these numbers were collected during the fiscal year of 2022.

These key takeaways from the USDA/ SNAP website are as follows:

- SNAP served 88 percent of all eligible individuals in FY22, the highest rate in nearly 50 years of estimating SNAP participation rates. This fact suggests that people recognized and embraced the safety net designed to assist them.
- In FY 22, individuals with more significant needs, like those with no or very low incomes, participated at higher rates than other eligible individuals.
- Elderly individuals participated at lower rates than other eligible individuals in FY 22.[13]

[12]. Berry, Wendell, Moore, Thomas, Johnson, Elizabeth, Robbins, John, and others. Food & Faith: Justice, Joy, and Daily Bread. 2002. Denver: Living the Good News, p. 206.

[13] https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/snap/trends-fy20and22

These findings suggest that food insecurity remains high among eligible, low-income individuals. The website further states, "On average, around 38 million individuals were eligible for SNAP under Federal rules each month in FY 2022; of this, about 34 million participated in the program. This disparity represents an increase from the estimated 33 million SNAP participants in the pre-pandemic fiscal year 2020.[14] These findings suggest that the pandemic has negatively impacted food security, despite the unavailability of accurate numbers during the pandemic. On the ground, I observed people who reported having personally experienced an economic downturn during the pandemic, and the food pantry was one of the few safety nets they could rely upon.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Food Justice

Like a dish prepared by a chef seeking the right ingredients to create the perfect meal, understanding food security and working to mitigate food insecurity leaves something to be desired when aiming to provide a seat at the table of abundance for all of God's children. The intention is sincere, but a vital ingredient is still missing. The missing ingredient is food justice. In their book, *Food Justice*, Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi state, "First, and most simply, we characterize food justice as ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported, distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly."[15]

Often, sincere people volunteer in food pantries across America. Like many other food pantries, the food pantry at Columbia Drive has no shortage of people willing to volunteer, often

[14] ibid

[15] Gottlieb, Robert and Joshi, Anupama, *Food Justice*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2010, p.6

instinctively, as the United Methodist membership vows require their "time, talents, treasures, gifts, and service." These vows are highlighted as a requirement for active membership in the United Methodist Church. People who serve in ministries such as the food pantry are faithfully living out their understanding of this vow.

When food resources are merely handed out with little thought to the equitable distribution of resources at every level, these problems go hand in hand with the harm perpetrated against these marginalized communities, including persons with disabilities, people of color, persons who identify as LGBQTIA, and immigrants. These issues highlight the systemic harm that perpetuates food insecurity and affects mental and physical health, along with the overall well-being of families, individuals, and entire communities. Inequities such as those mentioned above are multifaceted and require that those who volunteer to provide a measure of food security have as their primary aim the creation of systems and organizations that seek food justice as the goal for all they serve. The Columbia Drive Food Pantry is leaning into food justice as its guiding principle.

A View from The Drive: Columbia Drive United Methodist Church

The Columbia Drive United Methodist Church was constituted on April 10, 1961, when Glenco Methodist Church, located at 509 Thomas Terrace, Decatur, Georgia, merged with McKendree Methodist Church, situated at 1400 Boulevard Drive NE, Atlanta, Georgia. Seven and a half acres of land at 2067 Columbia Drive, Decatur, Georgia, were purchased for the newly formed church. The first unit to be built was the education building, which included Sunday school facilities and a fellowship hall that could seat 300 people. The written agreement was dated June 8, 1962, and ground was broken on June 18, 1962. The members occupied the

building on September 18, 1962, and the building on Columbia Drive was consecrated on October 7, 1962. An agreement for the erection of the sanctuary building was made on May 4, 1964. The style selected for the sanctuary was Greek revival. Individuals purchased pews as memorials. The opening service was January 3, 1965, with the consecration service on February 21, 1965.

Columbia Drive has been served by seven White and seven African American pastors. The first African American pastor started serving in July 1989. I was appointed as the seventh African American pastor from July 1, 2016, through June 2024. Columbia Drive boasts 431 members and has a staff of nine people. Columbia Drive United Methodist Church is a multigenerational church located in the South Dekalb area of Dekalb County, GA.

Members refer affectionately to the church as "The Drive," the church where there's a sweet, sweet spirit infused into the place. Columbia Drive is now predominantly African American, but White and Hispanic members have been added to the community within the last few years. At Columbia Drive, we have two campuses: physical and virtual. The designation of two campus locations is intentional and reflects our intent to minister to as many different contexts as possible.

Columbia Drive is multicultural, boasting members of Black, White, and Latino/a heritage. We are blessed with members from Guyana, Saint Thomas, and Panama. The church is multigenerational, with every age group represented, from babies under one year old to seniors above ninety-five. The largest age demographic is seniors, followed by children and youth, working-age adults, and college students. Many of Columbia Drive's members are middle-class professionals and retirees.

An interesting fact about Columbia Drive is that over thirty-three percent of the members have been at the church for twenty-five years or more. Columbia Drive is a socially conscious, politically active church, with several members holding political office or working in the public sector. The importance of service is emphasized at Columbia Drive, and it was rare in worship that I did not utter the phrase "No one can do everything, but everyone can do something."

According to the archives of Columbia Drive history, the early ministries were attractional in nature, and scouting, sports ministries, and civic organizations thrived at Columbia Drive UMC. These ministries were designed to demonstrate to the rapidly changing community that the church was there for them. The food pantry ministry at Columbia Drive UMC was one of the earliest ministries in the predominantly White, attractional model church, which was a construct of growth that assumed if you build ministry places such as gyms, fellowship halls, and athletic fields and gyms, the buildings will attract the community.

The Neighborhood Watch: Columbia Drive's Immediate Context

The zip code in which Columbia Drive UMC is situated presents both opportunities and challenges for growth. Much of the architecture in South DeKalb is emblematic of the social context that defines the Columbia Drive corridor and its residents. For example, in the 1990s, South Dekalb Mall was a destination for those seeking the latest trends. Fashionable big-box stores anchored the mall, while nearby grocery stores built larger superstores. The affluent sought the South DeKalb zip codes to live, work, and play. The South DeKalb Mall struggles to survive today, and the big-box stores have abandoned the mall for more lucrative locations. The big box stores and major grocery stores have become pawn shops, blood plasma donation

centers, rent-to-own stores, laundromats, and other apparent signs of a community facing economic hardship.

The racial demographic has also changed. Initially a predominantly White community of middle-class families, the early 1980s saw the neighborhoods in the area integrate, and Black families, looking to participate in the American dream, moved into South DeKalb. As with many such demographic shifts, the repositioning of the new status quo creates a vacuum of White flight as neighborhoods become more racially diverse. Like their surrounding neighborhoods, many of the predominantly White churches in the area experienced the integration of Black families into their worship spaces, and the Columbia Drive United Methodist Church was no exception.

These changes hastened the shifting economic base that led to the demise of a once-thriving South DeKalb County, where median incomes fell due to the exodus of more affluent families from the area. The mainstream big box stores and upscale retail establishments departed because the economic base could no longer support them. Food pantries, blood plasma donation centers, and title pawn stores became a means of support for many in the once-thriving zip codes that make up South Dekalb. The zip code has become an example of what happens during socioeconomic upheaval.

In his book, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places*, Michael Mather served as the pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. Broadway has similar dynamics to Columbia Drive United Methodist Church in South Dekalb County, Georgia. Both churches serve "a quasi-governmental role, as a

social service agency."[16] Mather's experiences at Broadway serve as a reminder that changing demographics are not without challenges.

Mather describes his experience with Broadway Church. The church was in Indianapolis, Indiana, and when Mather came to Broadway, just one year out of seminary, his parish became the streets. He discovered a community that depended upon a church that was not initially designed for the people it now serves. Mather paints the picture this way: "The rise and fall looked swift from my perspective. But those who remained told stories of years and years when the community room in the church was filled with people eating together at church and community functions, staging plays, talent shows, concerts, madrigals, and festivals that brought joy to their lives."[17]

Mather further details the shift in the community due to White flight and the influx of Black families moving in. Before long, the programs above became ministries designed to help address the rising poverty level in the community. This story is like the shift that occurred at Columbia Drive United Methodist Church. Originally a merger church designed for White people in the suburbs of South DeKalb, the demographic shift was as pronounced at Columbia Drive as it was at Broadway United Methodist Church.

These seismic community shifts are not unique to South Dekalb but occur in large and small cities across the United States. As evidenced by the preponderance of the circumstances mentioned above, these conditions create insecurity in numerous ways.

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[16] Michael Mather, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places*, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company,2018, p.2.
[17] Ibid, 4.

The Storehouse is Full: Columbia Drive's Food Pantry

The Columbia Drive Food Pantry has served five zip codes in Dekalb County, Georgia, for over forty years. It has twenty-five volunteers, many of whom have served for over ten years. The food pantry serves clients each Thursday from 11:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, clients were ushered into a waiting room, and information was taken to fulfill the USDA and SNAP requirements for service. A volunteer would roll the food boxes into the client's car and load them into the trunk.

During the pandemic, Columbia Drive implemented a drive-thru pantry model, enabling clients to complete paperwork while remaining seated in their vehicles. The weekly staples were loaded into the trunks without the clients having to leave their cars. This model requires creating a packaging team, who come in on Wednesdays from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. This team prepares the food boxes for distribution on Thursday. The packing team consists of seven to nine people.

Wednesday and Thursday activities begin with prayer, during which concerns are lifted and Christian music is played. The Sunday sermon or previous week's Bible Study is often discussed, making the volunteer workday an additional small-group worship opportunity. The food pantry believes in wrap-around ministry. It frequently invites senior medical centers to set up health screenings, as well as resources such as nonprofits that provide free phones for low-income citizens. Additionally, community chefs offer healthy cooking demonstrations using pantry ingredients. The Columbia Drive Food Pantry is designed to partner with its community to fulfill the mandate of feeding Jesus by serving the people that Jesus loves.

Sampling a New Dish: An Expanded Ministry Context

In March 2024, I received notice from the North Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church that I was being appointed to Bethany United Methodist Church in Smyrna, Georgia, effective July 1, 2024. I was initially dismayed because all the work for my project innovation revolved around my previous ministry context at Columbia Drive UMC. The uncertainty of my current context made me wonder if I would have to scrap my project and start anew. Still, on the first day of my appointment at Bethany, while I was unpacking boxes of books and arranging my new office to start my first day of work, there was a knock on the church office door. At the door stood a woman who lacked security in many areas of her life. She leaned into the doorway and told me that she needed help for her family. She had lost her job and had no money. Her words were chilling: "I didn't know what to do, so I came here." Her words reminded me that standing before me was a living soul seeking someone to hear her plea. As Gottleib and Joshi state, "Access to food is at the heart of food justice advocacy." [18] To help this woman would be to stand with her in her struggle. At that moment, I realized that not only was my current ministry context compatible with my previous one, but my ministry innovation could also be transferable across various contexts.

A Different Table Setting: Bethany United Methodist Church

Bethany United Methodist Church was founded in 1915 in the Grove Park area of Atlanta, GA. The church initially met in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Coursey. The church initially

[18] *Food Justice*. Gottlieb, Robert and Joshi,2010 Anupama, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.p.176

met in various members' homes during Bethany's early years. Still, it grew and eventually met in a rented community storehouse, becoming Bethany’s first home.

The church began organizing Sunday schools in the new space, with classes comprising 35 members. In 1919, the storehouse was sold, and Bethany again began searching for a home. The members of Fortified Hills allowed Bethany to use the space, and a long-term friendship was formed between the two churches. In 1920, Bethany purchased a small frame church owned by Dr. E.W. Grove as a church for international purposes. The Sunday schools were reorganized, and Bethany moved forward with slow but steady growth. In March 1932, the church was destroyed by fire, but it bounced back by building a more substantial and modern structure. This was during the Great Depression, and despite the financial constraints, the church was built in just four years. In the years the church was without a building, the members met in a local school. In 1936, Bethany had a new building in Grove Park. The Sunday School classes, as well as the women, blessed Bethany then and continue to do so today.

Bethany stayed in that location for almost 30 years. By 1953, Bethany had nearly 850 members. Sunday school enrollment was 579 members, far exceeding the building's capacity. In 1964, Bethany moved again to its current location at the crossroads of Hurt and Hicks roads.

Bethany United Methodist Church in Smyrna, Georgia, has adopted the tagline "The Friendly Church at the Crossroads." The church sits at the crossroads connecting Smyrna, Georgia; Marietta, Georgia; Austell, Georgia; and Mableton, Georgia. These areas comprise the key demographic known as South Cobb. The data indicate that within a five-mile radius of the church, 38.7% of the population is White, 38.1% are Black, 11.2% are Hispanic/Latinx, and the remainder are from other ethnic groups.

With a reputation as a revival church, the church held services outside, weather permitting, until 1965. The McGrady building was opened on March 3, 1965, and served as the first sanctuary. The church resumed construction and held its first service in August 1970. Fourteen pastors have served the Church in its current location. In 2020, the church received its first Black pastor, and in July of 2024, I became the pastor.

Bethany has seven Sunday school classes, five United Women in Faith Circles, and an active United Methodist Men group. Bethany United Methodist Church has one senior pastor, one associate pastor, and seven staff members. A vibrant missions and outreach ministry intentionally seeks to reach beyond the church's walls, and Bethany has intentional partnerships with two elementary schools and two high schools.

The church serves weekly meals to the Osborne High School Band, football, and basketball teams. It also sponsors Pebble Brook High School Choir members each second and fourth Sunday. As evidenced by the outreach Bethany is engaged with, food is the church's language of love.

Bethany United Methodist Church has adopted a distinct approach to combatting food insecurity, differing from my previous appointment. At Bethany, food insecurity is being combatted on two fronts: the hospitality team sponsors the Bethany Soup Kitchen, and the missions team leads our food distribution pantry. Both ministries collaborate to serve food-insecure individuals in South Cobb, all for the glory of God. Seven volunteers comprise the staff of the Bethany soup kitchen, which was established in 2013. The primary aim of this ministry is to assist people with mobility issues in finding respite at least once per week. Homebound and community members sign up for a delivery, and a separate group delivers soup to volunteer drivers. The hospitality members use food from the pantry and purchase staples through a budget

allocated for this ministry. The Bethany soup kitchen's delivery list is served with each delivery. Also, the Bethany soup kitchen was previously set up outside on the corners of Hicks and Hurt roads for drive through service because the volunteers of Bethany had a passion for removing barriers for people in need of a meal. Still, this ministry portion was curtailed in 2020 due to frequent inclement weather constraints and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Bethany soup kitchen experienced an increase in the number of people signing up for soup each week. The average age of those served by Bethany soup kitchen is around seventy-five years.

The Bethany food pantry is the church's latest ministry addressing food insecurity. It has been in existence since 2021. The pantry was established in response to the observed Food Insecurity in several apartments surrounding Bethany UMC. The missions committee learned of the need through Bethany's partnership with Russell and Bernie Elementary Schools. The school counselors and principals reported that many of their students were experiencing food insecurity. Bethany identified two nearby apartment complex locations and, in partnership with Must Ministries of Cobb County, began supplying food boxes to these locations twice a week during the summer months. Bethany's desire to spread the love of God through food is similar to what occurs at God's Love We Deliver, a ministry designed to alleviate the suffering of people with AIDS, and the subject of the book *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver*. Author Courtney Bender describes how a simple tagline encapsulated the ministry and the mission. At God's Love We Deliver, those who serve often say, "The meals are the message." [19] At Bethany, volunteers frequently state they are packing love in a cup.

[19] Bender, Courtney, *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver,* 2003, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, p. 25.

The Missions Committee designates a team leader who coordinates a weekly pack day, and food boxes are delivered each Wednesday at the specified locations. A team of 6-8 people loads cars with boxes, popsicles, and books to distribute to everyone with an expressed need. During the summer months, Bethany also operates a drive-through pantry for food insecure community members. The summer-time pantry was so successful in 2024 that the church will extend the food pantry to spring and winter breaks in 2025.

The food distribution ministry and soup kitchen deliveries at Bethany have not diminished since I began conducting observations upon my arrival in July 2024. On each distribution day, I observe new faces at Bethany's food Pantry. The success of the Bethany food pantry has solidified my understanding of the need that exists, despite the income differences between South Dekalb County and South Cobb County. The median Household income in South Cobb County, Georgia, where Bethany United Methodist Church resides, is $88,100.00. However, I quickly learned that food insecurity affects diverse socioeconomic levels.

In South Cobb County, where Bethany United Methodist Church is located, 9.6% of the population lives below the poverty line, compared to over 20% in South Dekalb County. According to https://www.census.gov/quickfacts,[20] The population of South Cobb County is approximately 207,000, which equates to 19,872 persons living below the poverty line. This number demonstrates that the lack is less challenging in areas of abundance but not invisible.

Looks Can Be Deceiving: Contrasts between Columbia Drive and Bethany.

The South Cobb community has a median household income that is 45 percent higher than that of South DeKalb, and it does not appear to be prone to the same food insecurity issues

[20] https://www.census.gov/quickfacts

as South DeKalb. In my observation of the South Cobb community, I have identified seven big box grocery chain stores within a five-mile radius of Bethany United Methodist Church, compared to four grocery stores in the same radius of Columbia Drive United Methodist church. While the title pawn shops and blood plasma donation centers are not as prevalent as in South Dekalb, four food pantries operate within a five-mile radius of Bethany United Methodist church.

In a survey of the communities surrounding Bethany United Methodist Church, title pawn shops and blood plasma donation centers may be absent. Still, social, racial, and economic stratification remains present, albeit more nuanced in its appearance. The differences in the appearance and upkeep of shopping plazas, as well as the inventory offerings in nearby grocery stores, highlight that insecurity of various types lies just beneath a curated outward appearance. At Bethany United Methodist Church, multiple calls for various types of assistance continue to occur, although not as frequently as I observed during my last visit. However, the need for food security remains a tangible necessity that I have observed firsthand.

Justice at the Table: Food as a Commodity or Food in Community

Truly good food offers an opportunity to satisfy the hungry body, spirit, and soul in ways God intended for humanity. The tablescape and the methodology employed may vary depending on the context and applicability of each locale where food insecurity is addressed. Two distinct stories with disparate outcomes compare two locations that address food insecurity and seek food justice in various ways for God's glory and the relief of God’s people. From the initial description of the landscape surrounding Columbia Drive, it becomes clear that the area served by the Columbia Drive Food Pantry does not meet the metrics that would render it secure in most

areas, primarily in terms of food. When food security is not guaranteed, food justice becomes impossible.

These real-time experiences highlight a divine disconnect between food as a commodity and food in the community as God intended food to be. L. Shannon Jung, in his book *Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating,* asserts that food is itself a means of revelation. "Through eating together, we taste the goodness of God."[21] At both Columbia Drive and Bethany United Methodist church, for example, I have witnessed cohesiveness and collaboration among volunteers that extends into other ministry opportunities.

When alleviating food insecurity is foremost on a pantry volunteer's mind, the good gift of food that God intended becomes a chore. The people who seek to be the hands and feet of God can develop a false embodiment of self; after all, they pack the food for the clients, unload the deliveries when they arrive, and load the food boxes into cars for the people. The pantry volunteers must remember to see God's hand at work in the provision of food, much as Jesus did with the feeding of the multitudes in Matthew 14:13-21. Volunteers should never view food as a commodity. They must see each box as a faithful offering of God's gift available to all people in equal and abundant measure.

In Leah Penniman's *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farms Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land,* Penniman asserts that food apartheid "makes it clear that we have a human-created system of segregation that relegates certain groups to food opulence and prevents others from accessing life-giving nourishment."[22]

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[21] Ibid, Jung,43.

[22] Penniman, Leah, *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farms Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land,*2018, White River Junction, VT, Chelsea Green Publishing, p.17

In his book, *The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith, and Food Justice,* Carter pushes forward his assertion that although the common term for the lack of accessible Food in urban communities of poverty is called a food desert, and "are found in the most impoverished communities in America," [23]more apt term should target the systemic mismanagement of food resources and should be called "food apartheid." When food is commodified, food intended to be a good gift from God becomes a commodity to be bartered, and grocery stores impersonally assess if a grocery store will make a profit rather than serve people. Carter further argues that unlike a desert, which is a naturally occurring ecosystem that occurs in nature," there is nothing natural about the strategic displacement of goods Black and other people of color's access to food."[24] Leah Penniman names the human cost to communities that suffer under this injustice. She states, "As a result of these food apartheid conditions, incidences of diabetes, obesity, and heart disease are highest for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people. Black Americans are three times more likely to go hungry than White Americans.[25] The outcropping evidence buttresses Penniman's assertion; there are, for instance, eight dialysis clinics within an eight-mile radius of Columbia Drive United Methodist Church. It is essential to understand the harm perpetrated by food deserts or food apartheid. Penniman "makes it clear that we have a human-created system of segregation that regulates certain groups to food opulence and prevents others from accessing life-giving nourishment."[26]

Earlier, we glanced at a snapshot of the Columbia Drive corridor and flipped through the pages of a once proud and bustling South Dekalb community as it faced demographic shifts that

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[23] Carter, Christopher. The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith, and Food Justice. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021, p. 80.
[24] ibid,80.
[25] Ibid, Penniman, p.272.
[26] Ibid, p.17

pushed it from a penchant for thriving to a push to survive. When food becomes a commodity, volunteers are often too focused on filling a temporary need rather than eradicating the poverty and hunger that precipitate the need in the first place—God's intended purpose for food. Still, when food becomes a catalyst for community, it becomes the good gift God desires food to be, unhindered by humanity's misuse of God's gift. The reality of our situation is that because hunger and poverty are intimately related, how the United States has dealt with poverty affects our ability to eliminate hunger.[27] For example, if access to food becomes the norm, the need for food pantries is significantly diminished. The "business" of food pantries ceases to be a commodity; instead, food pantries become centers of compassion.

The sobering statistics of food insecurity highlight our plight. I will never forget the lady who was a regular at the Columbia Drive food pantry. She was always thrilled to receive a food box from the pantry, not only because we helped her weekly but because the volunteers became God's instruments of redemption by helping to provide equity and justice through their service. In field observations and interviews at Columbia Drive United Methodist Church, the food pantry volunteers seemed to 'serve with' the food pantry clients, recognizing themselves as a bridge between food insecurity and food security for the people they served. For example, food pantry volunteers at Columbia Drive often sent an extra allotment of an elderly client's favorite to ensure they ate enough calories to sustain them. At Bethany United Methodist Church, the volunteers serve to uplift those who do not share the same advantages they may have. While Bethany's volunteers serve cheerfully, the personal touch is secondary because most volunteers are not in the same socioeconomic condition as the people they serve.

[27] Ibid, 81.

Two different churches can operate effectively within their respective contexts because they embody the same mission statement: to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the World,"[28] Employing different operative ecclesiologies while having identical missional thrusts. I am excited to witness the fruitful collaboration that can lead both congregations to become more committed to transforming the world through combating food insecurity and working towards systemic food justice.

The United Methodist Church's Policy on the Rights of All Persons emphasizes the importance of ensuring the human rights of all individuals, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation. The stated goal of the United Methodist Church is for every United Methodist to work towards preserving these rights for every individual. Moreover, the United Nations states in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* that "Everyone has the right to be free from hunger and to have an adequate standard of living, including food. Recognizing the right to food upholds the dignity of every person and ensures they can live free from discrimination. The right to food is an entitlement, something we have the right to demand. Governments and organizations have ethical and legal responsibilities to respect, protect, and fulfill this right. Continuous efforts by state and non-state actors are crucial for the full realization of the right to adequate food."[29]. This statement highlights the importance of churches such as Columbia Drive and Bethany, which participate in food justice ministry, having a clear understanding of the sacred importance of their ministries.

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[28] *The Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, Nashville, TN, Cokesbury, 2016, Section One, ¶120.
[29] United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," Article 25, accessed April 5, 2025, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

The Universal Declaration considers the right to food an obligation for all individuals. Like the United Methodist Church's stance on the human rights of all individuals, the United Nations believes that equality is not for the few but for every individual.

At Columbia Drive United Methodist Church and Bethany United Methodist Church, the volunteers, though not bound by international law, believe in the Law of God, to "do to others what you would have them do to you" Matthew 7:12(NRSV)[30] In each box of food or hot meal served, the potential exists to gain a deeper understanding of the nuanced relationship between personal and public piety through the eyes of two congregations. This 'both/and" proposition of two congregations with different views around the table has led to the critical question of how to fulfill the best mission and service in United Methodism that is faithful to each church's unique context." [31]

The United Methodist Church's Stance on mission and service is found in the United Methodist Book of Discipline: "We insist that personal salvation always involves Christian mission and service to the world. By joining heart and hand, we assert that personal religion, evangelical witness, and Christian social action are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing."[32] This stance highlights the church's understanding that "scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; because the love of God is linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world."[33]

The ecclesiological underpinnings of Methodism emphasize the importance of a holy heart and a life of purity. Considering this stance, the fact that the Columbia Drive food pantry is

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[31] ibid

[32] Ibid, ¶102

[33] Ibid ¶102

the longest-serving and largest-staffed ministry makes sense. Thomas Edward Frank highlights this development in *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church*: "The flourishing of a more hands-on ministry style in congregations is an outgrowth of decades of teaching about the ministry of the laity in each place."[34] A comparison of Columbia Drive UMC and Bethany UMC highlights this fact in the laity's dedication to addressing food insecurity and commitment to achieving food justice.

A Menu of Change: Research Methodology and Findings

Observing the respective food security ministries of Columbia Drive United Methodist Church and Bethany United Methodist Church, along with the community partners with whom the churches work, is instructive in evaluating the current methodology for addressing food insecurity. I organized a small collective of volunteers to understand how volunteers served clients.

The researchers surveyed the food pantry locations along Columbia Drive, within a five-mile radius of the pantries, to determine the frequency of food service to food-insecure members in their area. Within a five-mile radius of the food pantry, there were five food pantries and one nonprofit organization, the Decatur Cooperative Ministry (DCM). One Food pantry, Green Forest Baptist Church, was open four days a week, while the others were open once a week. Three of the food pantries in the area opened on Thursday of each week, and each offered morning hours for clients, with the Columbia Drive Pantry staying open the latest hour of the day. The New Life Christian Church Pantry opened twice a week, while another small Baptist

[34] Frank, Thomas E. Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church (2006 ed.). Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

church had no set hours and offered Food sporadically as resources became available at the church.

Our focus group also gathered information concerning the intake process for obtaining service at each food pantry. Before the pandemic, residents at the Columbia Drive Food Pantry came inside. A waiting room provides information required by the Atlanta Community Food Bank, while food pantry volunteers gather their Food and then roll it to their cars. During the years preceding the pandemic, recipients could access the Columbia Drive pantry once every ninety days. Our focus group determined that Green Forest Baptist Church had a similar paperwork process. After the paperwork, the recipient was allowed to "shop" each section of the pantry area, with quantity limits in place. After the pandemic, Columbia Drive removed the ninety-day restriction, allowing clients to come in weekly, and food was loaded into each car in a drive-through line. Other pantries followed suit during and after the pandemic.

The third data point our research group sought to address was which food pantry stops offered additional services beyond their food pantries. For Instance, Columbia Drive offered a COVID-19 vaccine clinic for eighteen sessions in conjunction with CORE (Community Organizing Relief Effort), a community partner during the pandemic. In addition to Food, we offered a one-hundred-dollar gift card for every vaccine recipient. We provided clients with opportunities to access free government cell phones and resources for seniors in need of healthcare support. No other church pantry offered any wrap-around service; however, Decatur Cooperative ministries provided a wide range of services in addition to helping food-insecure people and families.

The research group observed a concerning pattern. Despite the additional services we offered and the limited number of times a person could access the pantry each month, we

observed the same individuals consistently visiting the pantry every week. In addition to this phenomenon, we also observed an increase in the number of people accessing the Columbia Drive food pantry.

Moreover, we noticed that clients would stop at every available food pantry in the area before arriving at the Columbia Drive Food Pantry, and we would load food into trunks that were already laden with supplies. Is the current paradigm an effective strategy for achieving food justice, or would a different, more innovative approach be necessary? This observation sparked a conversation about revising the menu of pantry policies to reduce resource duplication and maximize food security for the clients we serve.

Research Findings: A New Recipe for Food Pantries

Food pantries have been a lifeline for people dealing with food insecurity. The food pantry model is present in multiple locations because it is effective in providing food to those who are food insecure. What is troublesome is the cycle of dependence that food pantries create as an unintended consequence. Gideon S.S. Paulraj states, "Some sociologists propose that food and food insecurity are political questions. Hawkes and Webster argue that food charity and food redistribution do not address the underlying causes of food inaccessibility."[35]

Christopher Carter states, "Human beings live and make meaning within social structures and the biases, attitudes, and prejudices that they hold influence how the structures operate."[36] One thing that is important for leaders at Columbia Drive's food pantry to remind the volunteers

[35] Paulraj, Gideon S.S., *Food Justice and Hospitality in Luke-Acts: A Historical and Contemporary Interpretation.* 2023, Eugene, Pickwick, Wipf and Stock, p.203.
[36] Ibid, Carter, p.17.

of is to greet clients with a smile and to be aware of circumstances that may require a more personal touch because their attitudes matter.

This research's intersectionality considers the systemic shortcomings of community churches and organizations committed to eliminating food insecurity and fostering food justice. The study area is within a five-mile radius of Columbia Drive United Methodist Church. This research also examined a five-mile radius of the South Cobb area where Bethany UMC is located. The goal was to draw comparisons between the two churches to observe patterns of affinity concerning acts of piety and the role of grace at work in the community, identify opportunities for minimizing mission creep, reducing redundancies among organizations that have the same goal, and enhancing collaborative customization so that these ministries are faithful over limited resources. The following table summarizes the unique attributes, level of service, and understanding of the problem among volunteers.

Ministry Demographics and Awareness			
Church Membership		Service Years	Are You Familiar with the Term Food Insecurity?
BM	Columbia Drive	31 Years	Very Familiar
TS	Columbia Drive	2 Years	Not Familiar
HD	Bethany UMC	5 Months	Somewhat Familiar
ER	Columbia Drive	14 Years	Not Familiar
AR	Columbia Drive	29 Years	Very Familiar
MB	Bethany UMC	7 years	Somewhat Familiar
CP	Bethany UMC	3 Years	Very Familiar
PR	Columbia Drive	8 years	Not Familiar
DA	Columbia Drive	2 Months	Not Familiar

The following table summarizes the various perspectives on why people choose to serve in this type of ministry instead of participating in other ministry opportunities.

Name/Church		**Does God require us to serve others?**	**Why Do You Serve in this ministry?**	**Have you ever been food insecure?**	**How can we improve our systems to help others?**
BM	Columbia Drive	Yes	I love God's People.	Yes	We need more people to help with the packing.
TS	Columbia Drive	Yes	It's my way of giving back to God.	Yes	We need more people to help.
HD	Bethany UMC	Yes	People need help.	Yes	We need to extend our hours.
ER	Columbia Drive	Yes	Because God has been good to me	No	We could use some more helping hands
AR	Columbia Drive	Yes	God tells us to feed the hungry	No	I wish the food bank would have what we need
MB	Bethany UMC	Yes	It's scriptural	No	We need to make sure we always serve with a smile!
CP	Bethany UMC	Yes	Because God has blessed me to serve	No	We need more people to step up and help in the Food Pantry.
PR	Columbia Drive	Yes	I love helping people	Yes	We need more people to help with the crowds.
DA	Columbia Drive	Yes	Mrs. AR asked me to	Sometimes	I don't know.

At Bethany United Methodist Church, one key takeaway centered on" why" the volunteers served in the soup kitchen and Food Pantry. Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez, in *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities,* assert, "We have numerous narratives in scripture and our own lives concerning how God's grace becomes visible and available through those around us." [37]At Columbia Drive and Bethany, people who access the food pantry and soup kitchen become tangible lessons for the volunteers. Each person becomes an example of God's grace among us.

[37] Branson, Mark L., and Martinez, Juan F. Churches, Culture, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities. Illinois: IVP, 60.

During the initial stages of our research, the two chairs of our mission's team and I conducted two sets of interviews to gauge what motivated Bethany volunteers to serve. A key observation was that the volunteers often served out of a sense of privilege rather than genuine solidarity with the people they were serving. One volunteer, for example, referenced the changing racial demographics of the surrounding community, and stated" we must help those who are less fortunate than we are" Responses such as this comment, mentioned during focus groups often revealed that the volunteers saw themselves blessed with resources and a duty to share God's blessings with others. This perspective differed slightly from that of Columbia Drive volunteers, who saw themselves as blessed to share resources God's hand had provided them to steward.

Another difference was that the volunteers at Bethany seemed more intentional about the nutritional quality of the food served by the soup kitchen; low sodium and low fat were goals, rather than concerns about the quantity and size of the boxes Columbia Drive aimed for during its Food Pantry distribution days.

The work of entities such as The Black Church Food Security Network has also highlighted an example of these differences. Heber Brown III is the creator of The Black Church Food Security Network. Rev. Dr. Brown was the pastor of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, and witnessed the shortcomings of food access models that provide little more than charity and fail to mitigate food insecurity. The Black Church Security Network provides a framework for churches, such as Columbia Drive United Methodist Church, to explore various models that promote food justice. The Black Church Security Network model uses "an asset-based community development approach" to address the issues beyond food insecurity and help communities move towards food justice: "(T)he BCFSN supports churches in

establishing gardens on their land, hosting miniature farmer's markets, and buying wholesale from Black farmers, all while using their existing assets and the skills of their members."[38] For a church like Columbia Drive, and also applicable to Bethany, such an approach could provide fresh fruits and vegetables to supplement the nutritional quality of the food distributed each week. An additional bonus would be an increase in collaborative community endeavors.

Many persons who volunteer for ministry opportunities involving food insecurity seek to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Conversations with these individuals suggest they see God's grace at work through their service. The focus group conversations suggest that each organization is focused on alleviating the immediate needs of food insecurity, even though the various approaches they use may differ. This observation holds promise for organizations to collaborate in serving a broader cross-section of people. The volunteers could become a community committed to alleviating food insecurity while embracing a food justice model.

This issue is highlighted by Jennifer R. Ayres *in Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology*, as she describes the repercussions of dependance on various "safety -net" programs: "The problem with reliance on these programs is twofold: one cannot assume that these sources of food will be regularly available, and reliance on supplemental food assistance can have the effect of eroding the dignity associated with providing for one's family."[39] Additionally, while necessary, I contend that food pantries tend to obscure the "multiple factors that shape our food system: race, income, transportation, location, and access to land, among others."[40]These drawbacks hinder the necessary impetus for making food justice a reality. To highlight this issue, Gottlieb and Joshi contend, "If the food justice groups become a food justice movement and

[38] ibid
[39] Ayres,102.
[40] Carter,81

allies itself with other social justice movements, change becomes both possible and imperative."[41]

Now we thank God: Food as Blessing and Fulfillment.

I recall the prayer I learned before kindergarten:

God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food.

By God's hand, we are fed; give us, Lord, our daily bread!

Giving intentional attention to food justice is one primary way the church can fulfill God's mandate. God intended food to sustain the body, providing nourishment and energy; food is also a reminder that only God can genuinely satiate the soul. By God's hand we are fed; give us, Lord, our daily bread!

Our understanding and handling (or mishandling) of food has ecclesiological implications. Through the Eucharist, for example, we are reminded of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, which are "given for us." We depend upon God's good gift, and no amount of genetic manipulation of soil or seed can give us more than God intended. In Genesis 1:29, God establishes a system of sustenance by "giving you every herb that yields seed, which is on the face of the whole earth, and every tree that bears fruit with seed in it."

In Exodus chapter 16, when God desires that Israel taste the sweetness of freedom, God intervenes in the first food desert by sending mana from heaven and quail from the earth. Not only does the scripture begin with food, but Revelation 19:7-10 ends with food. This passage highlights the marriage supper of the Lamb. The eschaton symbolizes God's original plan fulfilled for eternity.

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[41] Gottlieb and Joshi, 231.

L. Shannon Jung encapsulates much of our discussion on the theologically interwoven thread of Scriptural examples as they relate to humanity's understanding of God's good gift of food. In *Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating*, she states, "Christians, of course, confess Jesus to be the bread of life for the whole world. This is true not in an individual-by-individual sense but in the sense that Jesus created a community that follows his example of being concerned for the well-being of others."[42] For Columbia Drive and Bethany's food ministry volunteers, participants are required not to serve their respective communities from a point of privilege or even passion. We are called to serve from a position in proximity to Jesus because whether we give or receive food, we are participants in Jesus' plan of concern for our neighbor.

Jung further asserts, "Specifically, Jesus is the bread of life in the concrete and physical sense that the early Christian community, alive in Jesus, was concerned for the needs of others. Those who had received new life felt secure enough not to horde, not to possess more than others, and not to chase substitute satisfactions such as power, status, privilege, or overconsumption."[43] In essence, Jung underscores an ethic of volunteerism for those who serve others. By serving others, they serve Jesus and are served simultaneously.

[42] Ibid, Jung,122.
[43] Ibid, Jung, 122.

A Recipe for the Multitude: Theological Morsels and Reflection

The Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25:35-46, provides the backdrop for this project's attempt to address the questions that arise when there seem to be insufficient resources to meet the needs of all people. The question often becomes, who is responsible? Pastoral leaders must understand that today's church must be led and staffed by leaders who understand that "Leadership is about shaping an environment in which the people of God participate in the action-reflection cycle as they gain new capacities to discern what God is doing among and around them."[44]

This text highlights how the disciples in the parable understand acts of piety as the embodiment of their Christian service. In the story, Jesus says that the King commends those people in the text who, through their actions, have given relief to the King by offering food to "the least of these." When the food pantry volunteers at the Columbia Drive food pantry and Bethany United Methodist Church engage in ministry, their acts of piety directly impact the kingdom of God. Theologically, stewardship of God's resources, concern for the widow, orphan, and the alien, and the Christian ethic of love and justice are centered in this text. This passage states:

35 For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger, and you invited me in, **36** I needed clothes, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you came to visit me.'
37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? **38** When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? **39** When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

[44] Branson, Mark L., and Martinez, Juan F. *Churches, Culture, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities*. Illinois: IVP, 55

40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' **42** For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, **43** I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45 "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

(NIV)[45]

This Project was conceived during the pandemic's darkest days. When other ministry volunteers sheltered in place, the food pantry volunteers at Columbia Drive remembered Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40: "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (NIV).[46]

In this way, the theological implications of working to mitigate food insecurity and striving for Food Justice align with God's command to the disciples in Matthew 14:16, "They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat."[47] Jesus teaches his disciples radical

[45] NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, 2220.
[46]. Ibid
[47] ibid

hospitality and love of neighbor through the equitable distribution of food. God's good gift is available to all. God's abundance has no limits. This text highlights an ecclesiology of abundance. When we view the arc of God's care for humanity, we see God's care unfolding systematically, from Creation to Redemption, culminating in the restoration of all things. Providing food in the garden of Eden as subsistence for Adam's work, feeding the multitudes, and setting the feast at the marriage supper of the Lamb speak of God's provision. When humanity shares resources, we are ensuring that all share in God's bounty, which is humanity's reception of God's gift of provision.

When humanity abuses God's good gift of food through poor stewardship of resources or greed, or when making a profit in the food industry supersedes the prophetic understanding of God's care of and provision for God's creation, food justice cannot become a reality. In response to the need for churches and non-profits with a vested interest in food justice to regularly address food insecurity, a collaborative approach is necessary to move the church toward a holistic understanding and practice of food justice.

There are diverse approaches to addressing food justice. Still, the primary strategy to move beyond food insecurity presupposes that lasting change can be achieved not through competition but through collaboration. This research has revealed systemic shortcomings in the quality of service provided to individuals who utilize food pantries, mainly when multiple pantries are situated near one another. When food pantries and nonprofits concerned with establishing food justice fail to collaborate, service redundancy occurs, and people fall into a pattern of feasting today because they fear famine tomorrow. Furthermore, I have witnessed competition among pantries that seek to overorder from food banks, making it difficult for every pantry to obtain the items they need.

The innovation in this research involves retooling a system that has produced results that support a semblance of security but does not address the deeper goal of food justice. This approach is rooted in the idea that God has bestowed the gift of good food on humanity. The question that arose during this research was how the current system could increase efficiency, reduce redundancy, and more faithfully reflect God's intent for food than the system currently employed by most churches. The current structure used by most churches is autonomous. Most churches and other entities seeking to mitigate the effects of food insecurity typically focus on providing a temporary solution for a pressing need. In a sense, fulfilling needs keeps these organizations busy but leaves little time to focus on food justice.

One of the early goals of this research was to prevent the system's redundancy. In *Food and Faith: Justice, Joy, and Daily Bread*, the authors quote politician George McGovern, who states, "Hunger is a political condition."[48] As people of faith, we know that hunger is also a spiritual condition. This research aimed to create a replicable microsystem in the Columbia Drive community, in partnership with other food pantries in the area.

As previously stated in this work, I was appointed to Bethany United Methodist Church during the midpoint of this project. I realized the potential of expanding the research by creating a partnership to address food justice on multiple fronts. This project is in the active phase of completion. Plans to convene Project J.U.M.P. are underway for August 2025. The intent of convening this roundtable in August is to discuss how communities can address food justice through the involvement of schools and the wider community.

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[48] Berry, Wendell, Moore, Thomas, Johnson, Elizabeth, Robbins, John. *Food and Faith: Justice, Joy, and Daily Bread.* Denver, CO: Living the Good News Press, 2002, p. 217.

Ministry Innovation: Justice United Metro-Area Partnership (J.U.M.P.)

Justice United Metro-Area Partnership (J.U.M.P.) will take a collaborative approach to moving communities and individuals toward food justice while minimizing food insecurity. J.U.M.P. will provide food security in collaboration with other partners that strengthen individual, family, and community security through additional footholds or wrap-around services and school partnerships. Using community mapping, J.U.M.P. will serve as a convening roundtable to encourage cooperation between community partners and the wider community they are all called to serve.

J.U.M.P. will accomplish its mission by identifying the key resources and organizations necessary to move closer to food justice. The questions raised throughout this research aim to ensure that the unprofitable methodologies currently in practice are insufficient to move people towards food justice.

I sought to answer numerous questions concerning moving people from food insecurity to food justice, but three questions will be essential for the success of this innovation. First, what relationship will each agency, whose stated goal is to alleviate food insecurity, have with the agencies closest to them that also share the same goal? This research discovered that many agencies in the area were encumbered by a spirit of competition, causing people being served to compare each pantry's services and to pit the agencies against one another. As sad as it sounds, during field observations for this research, I witnessed a volunteer allowing surplus food to spoil rather than sharing it with a nearby pantry. The second question involved the standardization of service practices. What would it look like to collaborate with other pantries to standardize some parts of food pantry distribution? If this were to occur, pantries who found themselves short-handed could potentially solicit help from volunteers from neighboring pantries with minimal

training needed. Third, what steps could be taken to alleviate redundancy in food offerings where pantries are geographically close? This small effort could provide greater nutritional diversity in the distributed food.

As I considered the systemic shortcomings of all the community organizations and churches committed to alleviating food insecurity within a five-mile radius, I realized that each of us has a noble goal: to provide food security to people living in food-insecure situations. However, stopping there would unintentionally perpetuate food injustice.

Justice United Metro Area Partnership (J.U.M.P.) will strengthen the partnership between community providers to reduce redundancy and increase effectiveness. My innovation involves bringing all invested and interested parties together at a quarterly roundtable to think critically about how a collective of providers, as exists in most communities, can collaborate rather than compete. In a community, every entity and individual has much to contribute, even if they are unaware of their contributions.

While I agree with Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi's definition of "food justice as ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten,"[49] I assert that Columbia Drive Food Pantry and Bethany United Methodist must stretch this definition at the distribution and access points. I have personally witnessed the stress in the system at these two points.

I envision community shareholders sitting collaboratively at a roundtable forum, discussing key barriers to food justice: the redundancy of services, revisionist relationships that hinder true community, and relational apathy that makes innovation impossible. We could also share best practices to enhance efficiency as we remember that a community's most excellent

[49] Ibid,

resource is its people. The requirements for such a collaborative effort are not burdensome; at the entry level, meeting space is needed. Organizations could share the staffing required to undertake comprehensive community mapping in preparation for asset-based community development efforts. Printing costs can be minimal, as we are committed to operating lean and sustainably. The final investment required is time and a commitment to the well-being of the communities we intend to serve. I envision this model as applicable in urban, suburban, and rural areas where a need exists.

The stated outcomes of the roundtable are: 1. identifying all available resources for community partners, 2. reallocating resources and service times to fill better gaps where services are unavailable, and 3. committing to quarterly or biannual meetings to reassess progress toward achieving true food justice.4. Ensuring that representative food pantry clients or food pantry volunteers participate in roundtable discussions. This demonstrates equity and promotes justice.

Just Desserts: Additional Observations

This Project started long before I realized I was passionate about food justice. After conducting research, making field observations, convening forums, and holding focus groups, I realized that I was drawn to the stories of faith and the smiles of hope that I witnessed during my eight years as pastor of the Columbia Drive United Methodist Church, and that I now see at Bethany United Methodist Church. The Words of Matthew 25:40 continue to be the scriptural reference that drives this work: "And the King shall answer them, truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me" (NRSV).

People who combat food insecurity and strive for food justice are often rewarded with heartfelt smiles and words of gratitude from those they serve. They also receive an unintended

bonus in their work. The ability to empathize with others draws us closer to God's kingdom, whether we serve in solidarity or out of an abundance of privilege. We learn that each of us, no matter what side of the food box we stand on, are loved by the God who gave us good food to share!

During my field observations, I gained a deeper understanding of God's grace through the actions of the food pantry volunteers and the clients we served, which I could never hope to convey by quoting scripture and offering morning devotionals. I hope that people who engage in ministries addressing food insecurity and seek to move the needle toward food justice will work toward a day when there will be good food, and to quote the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:17, "and enough to spare."

I commend this work to pastors, church leaders, and nonprofit organizations that desire a ministry to captivate volunteers for lasting and meaningful service while cultivating a community that becomes its very best self, to "make the J.U.M.P." through collaborative efforts and community partnerships. Food Justice can become a reality. Food pantries strive to ensure that equitable resource distribution exists in every community, as each community possesses the resources to promote justice when working together for the people of God's kingdom in every city and zip code.

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