

Churches use food trucks to serve hungry neighbors

by [Sarah Angle](#) in the [December 23, 2015](#) issue

Allen Lutes wipes his brow as he prepares another plate of food. The culinary school-trained chef is serving grilled chicken, fresh vegetables, and rice pilaf.

But this isn't a typical restaurant and Lutes isn't a standard chef; he's an associate minister at Arlington Heights United Methodist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, and founder of its new ministry, Five & Two Food Truck. It was named after the biblical story of five loaves and two fishes feeding the multitudes.

Twice a month, the converted 1995 Chevy plumbing truck serves the Presbyterian Night Shelter, a homeless shelter in Fort Worth. Tonight, it's at the nonprofit's shelter for women and children; the majority of the women here are survivors of domestic violence.

Teresa, 42, and her 16-year-old daughter say "thank you" as they grab a plate and head inside the shelter to eat with the rest of the families and church volunteers, who have come not only to serve but to share a meal with these families.

"It's good," said Teresa, as she takes a bite. "The last time we came here we had chicken fingers and they were really hard. But you know, you can't complain, because it's food."

Food is something Lutes, 40, knows well. He owned a restaurant in downtown Fort Worth for six years and was a personal chef to affluent families in Fort Worth before joining the church full time in June and launching the food truck ministry.

"My mind-set is to prepare something healthy and different," said Lutes. "And to make it taste good so that people will remember the meal and hopefully the conversation."

Since hitting the street in April, the food truck has served about 2,500 people—averaging 500 a month. The food is free to families living at the shelter. The goal is to show them that somebody loves them, Lutes said.

Right now, the ministry is funded completely through the church and a few small grants. The church raised \$54,000 to start the ministry and spent \$35,000 buying the truck and getting it up to code.

Faith-based food trucks are popping up in many places. In St. Paul, Minnesota, Lutheran pastor Margaret Kelly's church is actually a food truck, providing free food and prayers to homeless and impoverished people.

In San Antonio, Texas, the Chow Train has been serving homeless residents despite initially being fined \$2,000 for serving food from the back of a private vehicle. (The food is prepared in an up-to-code rolling commercial kitchen and then transported in approved catering equipment and distributed from the back of a pickup truck.) Though the fine was later dropped, said Joan Cheever, Chow Train founder and a trained chef, some city officials see Chow Train as enabling homeless people to stay on the streets.

Cheever, 57, has been serving homeless and hungry residents of her city every Tuesday night for the past six years. The Chow Train isn't affiliated with a specific church, and it operates entirely on donations. But Cheever's faith in God and desire to serve is a big reason why she started it.

"Many of my volunteers have a strong and deep religious faith, as I do," Cheever said, "but I don't think we should require people to pray before they eat or listen to a sermon when they are hungry."

But as Lutes notes, "Food can be the instrument that connects people with God. We don't just go hand out food. We sit down and eat, form relationships and listen to stories; we're a representative of the church."

When Lutes is finished in the kitchen, he sits across the table from Teresa and her teenage daughter as they tell him that they don't have anywhere to go tomorrow; they're still waiting for a permanent bed to open up.

"Breaking bread is one of the most intimate things you can do with somebody," Lutes said. "Why wait for people to come to us when we can go to them?" —Religion News Service

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