

Food truck ministry creates sacred space outside church

In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, Abundant Harvest ministry near Houston has increased its efforts to feed people and foster community.

by [David Paulsen](#) in the [January 17, 2018](#) issue



Molly Carr, food truck missionary, and the [Abundant Harvest](#) truck. Photo courtesy of Molly Carr.

St. Isidore Episcopal Church doesn't have walls, but it does have wheels.

The church brings food and faith to several small communities of worshipers north of Houston, Texas. Some meet at a Taco Bell or Panera Bread, others at a Laundromat. Central to the mission is [the Abundant Harvest food truck](#).

"People need to be nourished body, mind, and soul," said Sean Steele, the priest who started [St. Isidore Episcopal](#) in 2015 as a church plant through Trinity Episcopal

Church in The Woodlands, Texas. It now supports eight faith communities totaling about 80 people, as well as its Abundant Harvest ministries. “There’s something to do with how we eat and who we eat with that says something about how we relate to God.”

St. Isidore’s efforts have grown in recent months largely because of the congregation’s relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. Steele estimated his parishioners and volunteers served about 10,000 meals to people who lost their homes in the late August storm.

“It has shown us what we are capable of,” Steele said. And although the need for hurricane relief has decreased, the feeding ministry has maintained its momentum. Donations have increased. Its volunteer list has more than tripled.

The idea behind St. Isidore is to go beyond giving food to the hungry.

“Our idea,” said Molly Carr, the full-time food truck missionary at St. Isidore, “is really about community, about building relationship around the table.”

Carr collects groceries donated by stores in the suburban Houston area to repackage for distribution through the food truck. Volunteers gather twice a week to sort the food while enjoying fellowship, renewal, and the meals that they bring back to their families at home.

In this, as in each of St. Isidore’s communities, Steele said the goal is to create a sacred space that maintains sacramental Christianity without depending on a church building.

“I love churches,” Steele said. “I’m just not entirely sure we need to build many more of them.”

Named for the patron saint of peasant laborers, St. Isidore started with one community of eight adults and five children, which met in a house.

Since then, it has grown to include groups that meet at restaurants, taverns, a boxing gym, and spoken-word poetry events. Its monthly “laundry love” events at a local Laundromat pay for hundreds of loads of laundry. Mass is held inside the Laundromat in English and Spanish, and worshipers are also offered assistance from flu shots to haircuts.

And, of course, food is served. The Laundromat is one of the many regular stops on the Abundant Harvest truck's monthly route.

Not everyone who participates in one of St. Isidore's communities comes to nurture a relationship with God, Steele said. When the food truck stops at the Laundromat, some visitors simply pick up food and go home. That's fine, too.

"We are a church that believes, at the heart, we are called to feed people," Steele said.

At community dinners offered at a low-income apartment complex, another regular stop, there's always an extra seat at the table, Carr said. Volunteers are assigned to engage the residents in conversations and make them feel welcome as they eat their meals.

Steele talks of promoting a church economy that values things differently from American capitalist society. That church economy is on display every Monday and Thursday morning in the kitchen of Trinity Episcopal.

At 6:45 a.m., half a dozen people gather to help unload food deliveries, sort through bruised apples, rotten bananas, and cracked eggs, and repackage unspoiled items suitable for the families that the Abundant Harvest food truck serves.

These volunteers also are some of the food truck's clients, ranging from struggling college students to senior citizens to single parents, and they get to take a portion of the food home with them.

Some volunteers have in the past invited others over for dinner, enjoying the food they have received together and further extending the fellowship.

Dulce Cueva Salas, a 33-year-old native of Costa Rica, is part of the crew that sorts food on Mondays. The food Cueva Salas takes home after volunteering makes a big difference for her family. Her husband is unemployed, and they have a nine-year-old son and a seven-year-old daughter.

Carr also hired Cueva Salas part-time this fall to help with some of the meal distribution, especially in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods.

"The whole idea behind the food truck, behind Abundant Harvest, it just drives me," Cueva Salas said. "I feel like I have a call." —Episcopal News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on January 10, appears in the January 17 print edition under the title "Food truck ministry creates sacred space outside church."