

Church meal programs 'getting back to basics'

Several London congregations are helping fill hungry stomachs and maybe meet some spiritual needs as well.

By Burt Dowsett *Free Press Reporter*

They're offering more than food for the soul at London churches these days.

In an era-of cuts in welfare payments and high unemployment, you have to satisfy the stomach before you can save the soul. Free meals for the homeless, those on welfare, or people who are simply hungry, have grown in popularity at city churches over the last year.

"A lot of people seem to have negative feelings about churches," says Jane Moffat, coordinator of the community breakfast at Christ Anglican Church at Wellington and Hill streets. "Maybe they'll start to realize the whole purpose of the church is to do positive things. I guess it's not what you say, it's what you do that gives people the idea of what you're all about." Moffat knew she wanted to do something for the community, but didn't know what until she read a story in *The Free Press* about a year ago, dealing with a monthly breakfast program at Rowntree Memorial United Church on Elliott Street in North East London.

DETERMINED: "By the time I spoke to our rector about it, I was determined to do this," she recalls. "He assured me there would be a lot of support."

The once-a-month breakfasts (on Saturday mornings at Christ Church) were launched in January and 10 people showed up; Now 60 to 70 people are attending. Moffat knew the project was "do-able" and didn't require "infinite amounts of time and

money."

In the first six months, the breakfasts were financed exclusively by the congregation, but since then corporate donations have helped. Moffat would like to see more churches get involved in community projects, and to that end her church has been: talking with people from other churches and schools in their area to assess needs.

CO-ORDINATE: "we are, hoping for a coordinated approach," she says.

Christ Church's next breakfast is Nov. 23, the same day as Rowntree. The two churches aren't competing, but serve different areas of the city. Patti Francis, who started the free breakfast program at Rowntree a year ago, says she tries to schedule the breakfast for the Saturday before monthly social assistance cheques are received - the time she has found the need appears to be greatest. The breakfast started out attracting "fewer than 10 people, but soon it was averaging 30.

The idea was spawned in October 1995, around the time the Conservative government of Mike Harris started cutting back on welfare.

Francis was on an outreach committee at Rowntree, and another woman she knew was with a United Church outreach committee in east London.

"She was bringing us the concerns of the impact (of the Harris cuts) and we decided we really needed to do something," Francis recalls. "It (the idea) was hatched in my little old kitchen."

EASY: The logistics are easy for Francis. She's in the church on Friday nights, supervising a teen dance. While she's there, she precooks some of the food for the next morning and has the teens set up the chairs and tables after their dance. Two other United churches, First St. Andrews downtown and Robinson

Memorial in Old North, are offering free meals, with the addition of overnight accommodation and breakfast the following morning in a program known as Out of the Cold. They offer the service weekly, with First St. Andrews on Monday nights and Robinson on Tuesdays.

Barbara Plante, who coordinates the program at First St. Andrews, hopes it will expand to other churches so every night of the week will be covered.

Plante says the impetus for the program came from First St. Andrew's Minister Frank Meadows

"I think he was seeing people on the street and wondered what was happening to them at night. Toronto has about 20 churches in the program and several are open each night."

In London, Plante has found, the main need seems to be food. When the program kicked off last week, 12 people came to dinner and only 2 stayed over.

By contrast, in Toronto, each of the churches is taking in 50 to 75 people overnight.

Scott Woolford, who coordinates the program at Robinson Memorial, along with Beth Stewart and Joanne Hamilton, says the church just started to offer overnight accommodation after the Tuesday meal last week. The meal itself was introduced in March.

"A busy night when we started was 20 people, but now it's 35 or 45 people," Woolford says. Francis, who has offered to advise other churches how to set up a program, similar to that at Rowntree (they can leave a message for her at the church at 432-8075), thinks churches are headed in the right direction. "The church is getting back to basics."

