

# A place to call home: community meal

Every Wednesday night, St Peter's Anglican Church, Maroochydore hosts a free weekly Community Meal for people who are homeless, isolated, lonely and in need of love and care, provision and social inclusion. The Rev'd Tania Eichler outlines below how the Community Meal works.

Our doors open around 4 pm, when we greet our guests and sit down with them for a chat in our Church Hall, providing pies, sausage rolls and pastries that have been collected from local bakeries, along with a space for people to charge their phones. At 5 pm, before the main meal is served, there is a combined interactive grace and 'Think Spot'. It starts with the question, "What are you thankful for?"; and is followed by a shared Gospel message of love, hope, peace and joy. This is tied in with visual motifs from sidewalk chalk art provided by a talented parishioner. We also celebrate good news and birthdays! This is a space where all are welcome. It is more than a meal — it is an extension of the family table with conversations and connections for all who need a hearty meal and some TLC.

One of our regular friends who comes to the Community Meal, Pat, said that the weekly gathering provides a home and family for him and others who come along: "The Community Meal gives me, and us, hope. It helps me to stay connected and keeps me sane. I can connect and communicate and meet other people, my peers. This stops the isolation and segregation of being on the street. The good old-fashioned home cooked meals bring back good memories of family meals and gatherings. I value the community meal so much, as it gives me the family connection that I lack. It is like coming home for a Christmas or special occasion and having dinner, catching up with what has been happening, telling stories, and laughing and crying together. The Community Meal is my family."

As part of our Mission Plan, in the Community Meal we aim to be an active and loving faith community of people who seek to live and be like Jesus. As such, focusing on outreach and service to the wider community. We seek to be welcoming and inclusive of all irrespective of age, race, gender, or ability, recognising that all people are created in the image of God. We aim to relate with respect and compassion to people who are in need, isolated or disadvantaged in the community.

Our Mission Plan also embraces our Diocesan Mission (The Mission of the Church is the Mission of Christ) of these two Marks of Mission: "To respond to human need by loving service" (through the practical presence and provision at the Community Meal); and "To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation" (through advocacy on behalf of people who struggle accessing government and not-for profit agency mental health, and other, support: eg via the NDIS or QCAT (public trustee)).

## COMMUNITY BUILDING

Projects that intentionally bring people together to simply get to know one another. This community engagement approach is typically less strategic and more organic than other approaches.



Our parishioner volunteers share with me that they see the Community Meal as a ministry that they feel blessed to be a part of, including Jenny: "I enjoy it! I love our guests; the team and it is being with friends. I see it as a way of life, a ministry, not a job. I feel so blessed that I am able to do it and see and hear the love from all friends whom we welcome at the Community Meal."

Our caring and loving presence through the Community Meal is often mentioned and personal thanks is given to the team. We have had many opportunities to grow relationships and spend time discussing pastoral and faith issues and requests for prayer. The impact of this has seen more people engaging with the Think Spot, sharing their life's journey and taking steps in faith journey. The Pastoral Care team prays regularly for the Community Meal.

Through the Community Meal our parishioners disciple people, as they listen, engage and share stories; and we also have five Community Meal friends who have become regulars in our worship services and have begun to take up service to, with and for others. For example, Rob, is on a roster that helps care for our gardens. Another, Greg, coordinates the packing up and clearing of tables. Thank you to the many people who minister God's love in this way.

## Top 11 tips for starting and coordinating regular Community Meals

1. First, do enough research to identify whether a Community Meal (or another initiative) will meet the needs of your surrounding community, and discuss the idea of hosting a regular Community Meal with parishioners and other stakeholders to ensure there is enough support for the idea (e.g. local Anglicare services and Anglican School).
2. Make the Community Meal a regular day/time so parishioner volunteers can more easily commit to assisting and so guests have a regular event to look forward to.
3. Ensure each guest is warmly welcomed as soon as they enter the door.
4. Choose menu items that are healthy and easy to prepare in bulk, sourcing local fresh produce for regular donations.
5. Say grace and share the Gospel message in an accessible way that is free of jargon and centred on Jesus' love for each person.
6. To help create a 'home-like' welcome, celebrate people's birthdays and good news.
7. Actively find ways for parishioners to participate and contribute their unique talents (such as cooking, serving and hospitality skills) and gifts (such as warmth, ability to listen and enthusiasm).
8. Give regular guests appropriate opportunities to participate, so they also feel some ownership over the initiative.
9. Use a variety of media to get word out about your Community Meal: flyers, social media (e.g. Facebook photos), church signage and your church's website (ensuring privacy requirements).
10. Thank your parishioner volunteers for their specific contributions.
11. Engage external networks for a coordinated approach (e.g., in the area there is one community meal available every day from Monday to Saturday).

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How important do you think tip 1 in the list above is for a community meal project or for other forms of community building?
- What other important learnings from the tips list above could be transferable to your setting?

### MORE INFORMATION

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