

LIFESTYLE // RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY

Northwest Houston church cooks up a plan to feed furloughed neighbors

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Rev. Nathan Lonsdale Bledsoe is shown at St. Stephen's United Methodist Church, 2003 W. 43rd St., Thursday, June 18, 2020, in Houston. Furlough Kitchen Houston offers free meals by reservation for curbside pick-up. So far, the church has provided about 1,400 free meals to the community.

Photo: Melissa Phillip, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Chefs are hard at work, the oven is fired up, and pots are bubbling on the stove. Diners, who made reservations, are waiting for their meals. It feels like being at a restaurant

Yet this scene unfolds twice each week in a church kitchen on the northwest side of Houston.

In the midst of the pandemic, St. Stephen's United Methodist Church, 2003 W. 43rd St., transformed into a pop-up restaurant with a mission. The sign out front now reads "Furlough Kitchen Houston — Sign up for a free meal."

Inside, the Rev. Nathan Lonsdale Bledsoe, the senior pastor, can be found manning the stove, stirring recipes and serving hot meals.

Volunteers stand ready to package them in to-go containers and load up cars for neighbors in need of food, no questions asked. Anyone who has been furloughed or laid off during the COVID-19 crisis, and who lives in the Greater Heights or Near Northwest Houston, is welcome.

Furlough Kitchen Houston was the brainchild of Bledsoe's longtime friend Lucas Marr, who was Bledsoe's best man at the pastor's wedding. Friends since college, the pair has cooking in **common**. They tailgate together, go on hunting trips and process the meat.

More Information

Furlough Kitchen Houston

For more information, visit furloughkitchenhouston.org.

To sign up for a box of produce, go to stsumc.churchcenter.com/registrations/events/432410.

"My grandmother liked to have a party, and that meant making food," said Bledsoe, whose mother is from India. "Cooking has always been my creative outlet, something I loved doing."

After a long day, Bledsoe often likes to prepare dinner. "I go into the kitchen and start chopping vegetables."

Marr also loves to cook. In his spare time, he runs Marr BBQ and Catering, a word-of-mouth, drool-inducing enterprise for foodies hosting parties and weddings.

Marr can't place where he discovered the original Furlough Kitchen. He does recall looking

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organizers were encouraging the idea to spread, offering use of the name and concept.

"I thought, 'Here's something we could do,'" Marr said. "Luckily, the church Nathan runs has a commercial-grade kitchen."

And that kitchen is equipped with a pastor who knows how to cook.

"It just fell together," Marr said. "Within two weeks, we served our first meal."

Still, Marr was nervous. "How do we get the word out that we're doing this?" he wondered.

"We just threw this into the atmosphere to see if anyone would show up."

He didn't need to worry: 83 people signed up on the first day.

These days, the church provides 115 meals to neighbors in need, as well as 15 more that go to a local elementary school, which in turn provides them to food-insecure families.

So far, Furlough Kitchen Houston has provided more than 2,000 free meals.

Creating the program was a way to address rising unemployment and the resulting increase in food insecurity, Bledsoe said.

"We've been getting good feedback from the community," the pastor said. "People are glad the church has found a way to continue loving our neighbors."

And everyone knows someone in need these days, Bledsoe added.

He and Marr cook on Thursdays, and Christian Catalan and Alex Snook, who run Morsel & Crumbs catering company, take over the kitchen on Tuesdays.

The church provides the husband-and-wife team a small stipend for the work. Helping out chefs during this trying time is also important, Bledsoe said.

Others in the neighborhood are showing their support as well. Artisana Bread donates about 100 rolls for each meal. The local Hartz Chicken and Rainbow Lodge restaurant have also donated food. J&S Packaging company donated to-go containers, and Texas Methodist Foundation gave the church a loan for operations. And when William Price Distilling Co. pivoted to making hand sanitizer, it donated products to the church as well.

After starting Furlough Kitchen Houston, Bledsoe received a message on social media from the **Common** Market Texas, a mission-driven distributor of sustainable, local farm foods. The nonprofit donates fresh produce to the church, creating a unique fundraising opportunity.

When families purchase **Common** Market Texas produce boxes at St. Stephen's, the sale becomes a donation to help the church continue preparing meals.

"People love the boxes, and they're really pleased with what's in them," Bledsoe said. "It's hard to beat super-fresh produce."

Cooking up tasty dishes is a high priority at Houston Furlough Kitchen.

"The point is to make food you want to make and are proud to share," Bledsoe said. "People right now are missing the places where they used to go. Opening a takeout container with really great food inside, when you're worried about getting a meal at all, that's the kind of blessing I want to bring to the community."

When the chefs are excited about what they are preparing, that translates to a better meal, he added.

"It also helps people know that you actually care about them," Bledsoe said. "Food is not just sustenance."

Feeding the hungry simply makes sense for the church, the pastor added.

“Jesus clearly says to ‘feed my sheep,’” he said. “It’s not an accident that a lot of His stories happen at a dinner table. Good food is a huge part of discipleship.”

Jesus also was willing to sit down and break bread with anyone, the pastor noted.

“That’s a legacy that should continue,” he said.

Bledsoe is available to help other churches interested in replicating the project. “We had the right combination of skills to pilot this,” he said. “But there are other churches with kitchens and equipment.”

Marr is also talking to restaurant owners about scaling up the effort in Houston. Perhaps a certain number of meals could be donated, then cooked by local eateries and provided to those in need, he suggested.

“The next step is to find some restaurants to partner with us,” Marr said. “We could have a network of restaurants on board. That would be a really cool way for us to ramp this up.”

He does not see the need ending anytime soon. “Food insecurity is not a COVID issue by any means,” he said.

Bledsoe agreed and said the economic challenge will provide an even greater call to provide food in Houston.

“People who felt secure before, all the sudden feel lost and need some help,” said Bledsoe, who hopes the name Furlough Kitchen removes the stigma of getting a free meal.

“It eliminates that barrier,” he said. “Giving people peace of mind and food security right now is exactly what the church should be doing.”

Lindsay Peyton is a Houston-based freelance writer.

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