

# ST. JAMES' OUTREACH MINISTRY

'Serves God by Serving Others'

On September 20, 1777, two weeks before the Revolutionary War's pivotal Battle of Germantown, George Washington's troops held a war council in the study of the three-story plastered stone parsonage—known as a "glebe house"—on the sprawling property of St. James' Episcopal Church in Colledgeville.

Local historians contend that soldiers were quartered there after the battle as well, according to historical documents.

While the 1749 Glebe House is recognized in historical circles for the role it played during the Revolutionary War, in recent decades, it has embodied what Bishop Daniel has called the "revolutionary spirit in this diocese" as home to St. James' outreach ministry.

The ministry, called Outreach House, provides nonperishable food, personal care items, and gently used clothing and household items to local families in need. It has operated out of the Glebe House since 1989, but the ministry—and the need—has outgrown the historic former rectory. With steep, narrow staircases, Glebe House is not handicap accessible. The 1,100-square-foot house has just one bathroom and no air conditioning in summer, and is in need of significant renovations estimated at \$140,000 just to return it to its original use as a residence.

Arising on land adjacent to Glebe House is a new, 2,800-square-foot, modern building that, by fall 2019, will serve not only as the new home for Outreach House, but as a testament to the church's commitment to live into its powerful, yet concise and clear, mission statement: "Knowing and serving God by serving others."

"We're an outward and visible sign of that grace that God gives us because people can see us doing the work Christ has given us to do," says the Rev. Mike Sowards, rector of St. James' since 2013. "They can see how we're feeding the hungry. They can see how we're clothing the naked. One of the reasons I so much wanted this Outreach House to happen is because it's a visible reminder to parishioners here that Christ has called us to do these things." ▶



**TOP, from left:** The Rev. Mike Sowards in historic St. James' Episcopal Church. The parish dates back to 1700, and the current church building was dedicated in 1845. The idea of growing the church's ministry for generations to come brings smiles to the faces of church parishioners

**BOTTOM.** Sowards, middle, is flanked by Carole Exley, director of St. James' Outreach House and architect Mike O'Rourke at the groundbreaking for the new 2,800-square-foot Outreach House.

## A Community Effort

On two days each week, “Client Hours” are held at Glebe House for families referred by parishioners, area clergy, local school districts, and local social service agencies.

Those with access to transportation can “shop” there using a points-based system. The number of points needed to “purchase” an item are generally based on 50 cents a point. Toilet paper, for example, is 2 points. Coffee is 8 points. A family of four accepted into the program gets 80 points a week to “spend.”

For clients who can't physically get to Glebe House, deliveries are available.

The ministry serves 194 registered clients,

made up of single-, foster- and two-parent families, abused women, the disabled and mentally challenged, and the elderly. The number of children varies from none to eight per family. As of March 2019, 46.5 percent of Outreach House's client base are children, out of the total of 667 individuals.

Outreach House is truly a community effort. The church includes money in its budget to purchase some of the nonperishable food and other items that are given out, and parish members also donate food. In addition, dozens of local community organizations and businesses— from scout troops and schools to other churches and businesses both large (such as Vanguard, one

of the world's largest investment companies) and small (such as Sublime Cupcakes in Collegeville)—hold food drives to support the ministry. The U.S. Postal Service in Collegeville also holds a collection each year.

There is no paid staff. Volunteers do everything from organizing and stocking pantry shelves, to packing food and delivering it, to sorting clothes, toys, and household items. They also assist clients and perform office work.

Outreach House, which primarily services Lower Providence Township residents, is designed to supplement services families in need can get through other programs, such

as the Daily Bread Community Food Pantry in Collegeville, which carries perishable products like meat and milk in addition to nonperishable items, and Pennsylvania's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

“A lot of time, if clients have SNAP, I tell them to buy their food with SNAP and then come in here and buy items like paper towels and toilet paper and toothpaste and a toothbrush—all the things you can't get with SNAP,” Sowards says.

A recent innovative addition to Outreach House's ministry goes by the catchy name

of Patty Packs, named for retired school teacher and St. James' member Patty Earhart, who came up with the idea.

Many people do not understand that children in need can get free breakfast and lunch on the five days a week they're in school, Sowards says. “But when they go home for the weekend, they don't eat,” he adds.

Patty Packs are small backpacks that volunteers fill with nutritious, nonperishable food for children to take home at the end of the school week. “We're working with Woodland and Arrowhead Elementary

Schools, and we have 49 students getting Patty Packs now,” Sowards says.

Outreach House also gives out backpacks with new school supplies each August, and holiday gifts from a child's own list through its Mitten Tree program at Christmas. (The requested gifts are written on colorful paper mittens hung on a tree, and people take the mittens, buy the gifts, wrap them, and bring them back for distribution at a holiday party.)



## 'This is Who We Are'



There will be ample space to accommodate—and even expand—all that Outreach House and its dedicated volunteers do. The estimated cost to build the new center and refurbish the Glebe House is \$1 million. Half of that amount is coming from memorials and estate gifts. The other half is being raised from parish members. The goal is to complete construction without encumbering debt.

Due in no small measure to the “outward and visible sign” of God's grace at work in St. James', the church is growing by leaps and bounds. When Sowards arrived in 2013, average Sunday attendance was about 120. Today, it's approaching 200.

The first Saturday evening service Sowards led when he first arrived had three people. He told vestry that he was thinking of canceling the service, but they prevailed on him to give it time and see what happens. It now draws as many as 50 worshippers.

“We're averaging four or five families a month coming in, transferring membership or becoming members of St. James',” Sowards says. “God has just been blessing us like you wouldn't believe. It's wonderful.”

In his preaching and teaching, Sowards emphasizes the need for all Christians to take seriously the vows they make before God in their baptismal covenant. Outreach House, he believes, is a good example of that.

In a recent issue of the parish newsletter, *The Epistle*, Sowards described Outreach House as “a place where those in need get help and a place where we can fulfill our baptismal covenant to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.”

Loving your neighbor. Feeding the hungry. Clothing the naked. These are the things Christ has called on us to do.

And as Sowards concludes a tour of the cramped Glebe House rooms crammed with food and clothing and toys and household items, all destined to help serve Christ in a struggling family, he smiles.

“This is what we do,” Sowards says. “This is who we are.” ■

**LEFT.** Taylor enjoys the groundbreaking celebration  
**TOP.** a wall of the new Outreach House goes up.  
**BOTTOM.** what the new center will look like when completed.