



BILL TAMMEUS
COMMENTARY

We wither without sustenance

By BILL TAMMEUS
Special to The Star

Well before the doors of the Kansas City Community Kitchen opened at noon on a recent Wednesday, more than 50 people already were lined up outside for a free meal.

Some carried backpacks with their only belongings. And because chilly fall breezes were blowing, a lot of them — mostly men — wore layers of shirts and sweat shirts and sweaters. There were old black men with gray beards, young white men with shaved heads, and a mix of Hispanics and others.

It's like that every weekday in the lower level of Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral at 13th and Broadway as 500 or more people come for lunch. Some are homeless, but most are simply unemployed or underemployed and trying to stretch dollars with a meal they don't have to pay for.

A woman who works in the kitchen told me that when she started there 12 years ago, only about 140 folks showed up each day. Now it's four times that. (This kitchen started 26 years ago.)

Allen Ohlstein, an Episcopal deacon who is director of the Episcopal Anti-Hunger Network, of which this kitchen is a major part, says the kitchen provides at least 135,000 meals a year on a budget of well under \$200,000. That's possible because of all the donated food and the 400 volunteers who supplement the work of four full-time staffers.

A visit to this facility is an opportunity to think about how people of faith live out their convictions in ways that benefit all of us. Yes, there are tax deduction incentives for donating. But in my experience that's not primarily what drives religious people to undertake this kind of ministry.

Rather, they are motivated by the central teachings of their faith communities.

They learn that at a fundamental level, we're all brothers and sisters and, thus, must watch out for each other.

They learn that giving is an activity that blesses both the giver and the receiver.

Some religions even suggest that God has a preference for the poor, for people who have needs they cannot meet on their own.

And perhaps nothing is quite so basic as the need for food. That's what operations like the Kansas City Community Kitchen — now a 501(c)3 charitable organization separate from the cathedral — provide.

What would happen if people and businesses didn't donate money, food and time to this kind of entity? What would happen if volunteers didn't show up to peel potatoes and cook rice and venison donated by hunting clubs? What would happen if faith communities didn't provide space for such feeding places?

When I asked that of one of the men who came for lunch, this is what he said: "A lot of people would just wither."

Imagine that. Some people are just a meal or two away from giving up.

Holy writ in many traditions says a lot about food. The Qur'an even devotes a whole chapter to the subject.

In the Hebrew Scriptures' remarks about hunger and food, the point — later repeated by Jesus — is made that we don't live by bread alone.

True, but without the basics of food, shelter and clothing, we can't live at all. We would just wither.

At the Kansas City Community Kitchen, I talked to a man eating lunch whose name I learned but will not use here. He told me he's 73 and just comes here to do what he called psychological research and observation.

He also told me that although he doesn't have a college degree, he has figured out how to cure both cancer and AIDS and is anxious to find the right people to whom to offer his secrets.

As we parted, I was glad he has a place to come each day to get a hot meal. I was glad that people of faith care about hungry 73-year-olds who carry grand secrets. I was glad that someone invited him into this house of the Lord.

Reprinted by permission of the author.