At church cafe, eat what you want, pay what you can

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HIGHLAND PARK, N.J. (RNS)—At A Better World Cafe, it's not exactly "all you can eat." It's more like whatever you can pay.

The church-affiliated restaurant offers customers an innovative new dining option—choose the size of your portion, then pay what you want. People who can afford to pay extra help subsidize those who are less fortunate.

> Volunteer Jacquelyn Juricic works the cash register at A Better World Cafe in Highland Park, N.J. The cafe, housed at a church, allows patrons to pay what they can afford for food, and donate extra to cover meals for the poor.)RNS PHOTO/Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger)

[A Better World Cafe](), housed at the Reformed Church of Highland Park, is the fifth restaurant of its kind in the nation, which some are nicknaming "Robin Hood restaurants." The original socially conscious eatery was opened in Salt Lake City in 2003 by a former acupuncturist; now, advocates of the concept hope it will revolutionize eating out.

"It's about how we're going to need to change our systems if we're going to survive as a planet," said Tina Weishaus, a board member of the community group [Who is My Neighbor](), which co-owns the nonprofit cafe with Elijah's Promise, a soup kitchen and culinary school based in nearby New Brunswick.

Besides the lack of official prices—only suggested fares—the eatery uses mostly food from local farms and no plastic or Styrofoam. It composts all food scraps and acts as a community forum by hosting talks and live performances by local artists.

The "Robin Hood" model aims to end hunger and waste and help bind local communities, said Denise Cerreta, 48, founder of One World Everybody Eats in downtown Salt Lake City. The entrepreneur has been living in Highland Park to launch the new restaurant and is in talks with "50 or 60" East Coast groups interested in copying the model.

The idea has become a movement that's gained so much steam, Ceretta moved out of her Utah home in August and now is on tour teaching people what she knows.

"I'm down to a suitcase and a cat," she said.

The Highland Park restaurant opened its doors inside the historic brick church in October. The simple dining room, with communal tables and metal chairs, has attracted roughly 50 to 125 customers a day, head chef Rachel Weston said. Three paid staff and volunteers serve food from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. weekdays, and organizers are hoping to expand to dinner and weekend service. Advertising has been minimal. There's no sign for the cafe in the front of the church.

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Listed each day on a dry-erase board is a menu of roughly a dozen items that change every week or so, with suggested prices. One item, the "complimentary community entree," is free to everyone.

A person who can't pay anything is allowed to eat only the "community entree" but can volunteer at the cafe for an hour to get a bigger meal with more choices. Weston said all patrons are encouraged to volunteer—to

consider, for example, "What if I came back and baked bread, or played the piano?"

Customer Kathleen Logue, 49, has been unemployed two years. But she still paid $6, more than the suggested combined price of $1.50 for a cup of Moroccan tomato consomme and $3 for a medium slice of roasted-tomato and Swiss cheese quiche.

"There are people worse off than me," she said.

Highland Park is an ideal town to host the novel restaurant, said Weishaus, with a mixed-income population that includes residents of housing projects as well as Rutgers University professors. The borough also boasts of progressive policies such as promoting fair-trade products at local stores.

The seed of the idea for A Better World Cafe was planted a year ago, said Lisanne Finston, executive director of [Elijah's Promise](). She was giving a talk at the church—commenting that the richest nation in the world should not have to have soup kitchens—when someone in the audience mentioned the new dining venture in Salt Lake City.

"It's an idea whose time has come," Finston said.