

CommonCall: Take away the labels

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Making sure families in West Fort Worth have food in their stomachs is the driving passion of William Pherigo, executive director of WestAid in Fort Worth.

He has served the ministry 23 years, and while other facets of the ministry have come and gone, the need for food never has wavered.

Pherigo came to the Fort Worth ministry from First Baptist Church in Brownwood, where he was community minister.

While many of the duties he performs could be done by anyone with a heart for those less fortunate, his background as a minister also is important.

“There are times when people come in, and they really want to talk to a pastor, but they don’t want to talk to a pastor in a church,” Pherigo explained. “There also have been opportunities for me to be a pastor to some of our volunteers.”

During the more than two decades he has led the ministry, WestAid has relocated twice, and he has worked behind the scenes on logistics that allowed the ministry to continue to grow.

In the next couple of years, the growth of the ministry may necessitate the need for another move.

‘The next thing’

Pherigo’s expertise as an administrator has been just what has been

needed to fulfill the calling God gave him as the provider for those who have trouble providing for themselves. God continues to challenge him with the next thing that needs to be done.

“Sometimes the way God works is just providing the next thing to do,” Pherigo said. “That sounds a little nonspiritual, but at times his calling just seems to be the thing to do. This continues to be the thing God has put before me to do.”

In the last two years, WestAid has begun Project: Passages.

“It is fairly simple, but it is mentoring and trying to do some short-term case management with some folks,” he said. “It has been a slow process, because we still need to keep food on the shelves. Some feel like we need to be ‘fixing’ these people so that they wouldn’t need to come back, but our primary purpose is to serve this area of Southwest Tarrant County with food.

“There are just a lot of people who are not going to be in a much better economic situation, and each month or every-other month are going to need some help.”

Not fond of labels

Pherigo doesn’t like labels—particularly ones that are hard to overcome, like “poor.”

“I don’t like the word ‘poverty,’ and I don’t like the word ‘poor,’ and yet those are the buzzwords that help contributions to organizations like ours,” he said. “I like more and more to say ‘There is a food-insecure household.’ A food-insecure household can be at a number of economic levels.

“I sometimes get weary when we talk about eradicating poverty, because I see some households who increase and do better, but it is hard to get above

that mark. I like to see families are trying to improve their situation and access all the resources and all the things that can potentially help them.”

People can receive help at WestAid once a month. In the first five months of this year, WestAid provided food to 4,400 families.

‘Little things can mean a lot’

Some students from a nearby university interviewed patrons and compiled data. They confirmed very few people abused the program, and most have legitimate needs.



Dan Carson helps stock the shelves of the food pantry at WestAid in Fort Worth. (Photo / Katie Kassler)

They also found many of the people they helped with food had additional needs that were not being met. They were able to help point them to other organizations to get that additional help.

“A lot of people need a ‘somebody.’ There is another organization in the area that can help with a lot of different things, but you need a referral to go there,” Pherigo said. “You need a slip of paper with the right words on it to get their help. We decided we could start gathering a little more information, and we could be their ‘somebody’ who could help with that.

“There are a lot of people who just need encouragement and need someone who is in their corner and is willing to make a phone call. Little things can mean a lot.”

One of those things is providing homeless people a sack lunch three times a week.

“That doesn’t sound like much, but we also try to hook them up with programs to help the homeless find a better living situation,” he said.

An opportunity to serve

One of the most important things WestAid does is provide an opportunity for members of church and civic groups to volunteer. Not only do the volunteers get a better sense of the needs, but they also come to realize there are things they can do to help, Pherigo said.



Denise McWilliams, volunteer coordinator at WestAid in Fort Worth, helps a client register. (Photo / Katie Kassler)

It also allows the ministry’s long-term volunteers a place to serve.

“Part of our ministry is to give others a place to minister in a way they

might not otherwise,” he said.

Pherigo would like to see a Bible study or prayer group started.

“It would never be a prerequisite of assistance, but just one more way we could help them,” he said.

However, the ministry needs someone who would not just start it but be consistent in leadership.

“To me, the worst thing would be to begin something and then have it stop in a month or so,” he said.

‘Level the playing field’

Pherigo looks for ways to reduce the stigma some associate with receiving assistance.

“I don’t like to term ‘in need’; I prefer ‘needing.’ There are a lot of people who are needing something in their lives or their household—well, we all are. When we speak of people needing, we level the playing field and take some of the labels away,” he said.

He offers the example of a first-year teacher with two or three children. That teacher probably would qualify for reduced-rate school lunches, which also would qualify them for assistance at WestAid.

Parents think of their child’s teacher as a person of elevated status, but when they begin to think of them as someone who might need food assistance, it takes away some of the stigma they place on those labeled “poor.”

“Yes, we serve people who are in probably five or six levels of need, but that helps them see things a bit differently,” Pherigo said. “More and more

people are a paycheck away from needing assistance.”

This is part of an ongoing series about how Christians respond to hunger and poverty. Substantive coverage of significant issues facing Texas Baptists is made possible in part by a grant from the Prichard Family Foundation.

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