

# Small church and its partners provide mobile food pantry

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LAKE WORTH—On a typical pre-pandemic Sunday, First Baptist Church in Lake Worth attracted about 40 worshippers—most of them senior adults. But by working with community partners, the church is helping to feed hundreds of Northwest Tarrant County families.



First Baptist Church in Lake Worth—a congregation that typically has attracted about 40 worshippers on Sunday, most of them senior adults—worked with multiple community partners to sponsor drive-through mobile food pantries in the church’s parking lot. (Photo courtesy of First Baptist Church in Lake Worth)

An 80-year-old member of First Baptist in Lake Worth, Gay Perry, spearheaded the effort to provide food for her neighbors in need. A news report from another part of the state that showed people standing in long lines to receive groceries prompted her concern.

The Lake Worth Independent School District participates in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service’s Community Eligibility Provision that provides breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge. With schools closed due to COVID-19, the district offered “grab and go” meals for students, but Perry wondered about their families.

She began to make calls—to the school district, the Tarrant Area Food Bank, the City of Lake Worth and the North Lake Worth Neighborhood Association.

She recognized the north parking lot of First Baptist in Lake Worth could be an ideal location for a drive-through mobile food pantry—an accessible site where the local food bank could provide fresh produce and other groceries for distribution.

To qualify as a partner agency, a distribution site must be a tax-exempt nonprofit organization, be located within the food bank’s 13-county service area and have at least a six-month record of providing for the needy.



Gay Perry, a member of First Baptist Church in Lake Worth, and Pastor Charlie McLaughlin spearheaded the drive-through mobile food pantries. (Photo courtesy of First Baptist Church in Lake Worth)

“For 29 years, we’ve had a small food pantry at our church,” Perry said. “We met every requirement.”

Perry gained plenty of information from the contacts she made, but she felt certain she knew the answer ahead of time when she made one phone call. She contacted her pastor, Charlie McLaughlin, to ask if their church property could be used as a mobile food pantry site.

“I knew Charlie’s heart,” she said. “So, I called him, told him what I knew, and he said, ‘Go for it.’”

McLaughlin, the president of a commercial construction company, has served First Baptist in Lake Worth bivocationally since 2014.

## **‘God opened one door after another’**

Perry had both the vision and the determination to bring together all the partners necessary to make the mobile food pantry possible, he noted.

She continued to make calls and make plans, soliciting volunteer assistance throughout the community and beyond.

“And every step she took opened the door for more community involvement with our church as the host,” McLaughlin said.

The school district distributed fliers about the mobile food pantry to the families of students participating in the “grab and go” meal program.



Personnel from the Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base help at a drive-through mobile food pantry at First Baptist Church in Lake Worth. (Photo courtesy of First Baptist Church in Lake Worth)

The schools also allowed the mobile food pantry to borrow 300 tables and provided volunteers to set them up.

Officers from the Lake Worth Police Department directed traffic into the church's parking lot. Personnel from the Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base in Fort Worth assisted.

"God opened one door after another door, and it all worked beautifully," Perry said.

At the first mobile food pantry event, more than 400 families—about 1,700 people— received 24,000 lbs. of fresh produce, dairy and protein from the Tarrant Area Food Bank.

It proved so successful, the church hosted a second event May 13 that drew even more recipients—1,924 individuals representing 472 households.

## **‘Greater than what we can do alone’**

“We can’t limit our vision to what we can do ourselves. This shows what we can do when we work in cooperation with others. It’s always greater than what we can do alone,” McLaughlin said.

Volunteers loaded all the groceries into the car trunks of those who arrived to receive the food, limiting direct contact and striving to maintain social distancing protocols.

Since the food bank had provided enough food for 500 families, volunteers delivered the leftovers to the doorsteps of individuals who had not been able to come to the mobile food pantry.

The volunteers included 100 percent of the membership of First Baptist in Lake Worth who were physically able to help and are not in high-risk groups—plus a couple who probably were pushing the limits, Perry noted. But she quickly added the mobile food pantry could not have become a reality without the cooperation of multiple partners.

“It was like the story of the boy who brought the loaves and fishes to Jesus,” she said. “God multiplied our efforts. God provided and took care of the needs.”