

Wheels of Hope

Mobile Food Ministry

MISSION: "Ultimately, to alleviate childhood hunger, and to show love to children, and to inspire ordinary folks like myself that we can do creative things that make our community a better place". - Allyson Caison



Selma, North Carolina

County	Johnston
Population	6,073
Median Household Income	\$22,798 (45% of the County, and 48% of the State median incomes)*
Individuals below poverty level	42.7%
Children Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	84-87%

Sources: U.S. Census, communitycommons.org

*Median income of Johnston County is \$50,512,
State median income is \$46,868

OVERVIEW

Wheels of Hope is a "mobile food ministry" dreamed up by Edgerton Memorial United Methodist Church member Allyson Caison. Once or twice a month, Allyson and her crew attach their food trailer, lovingly nicknamed "Hope", to a church van and drive it out to a neighborhood in need. There, they give away hot, balanced meals that were prepared by volunteers that afternoon in the Edgerton Memorial church kitchen. In addition to serving free meals to children and their families, Wheels of Hope gives away children's books, school supplies, and various other donated items each time out.

Wheels of Hope rolled out for the first time in March 2016.

Currently Wheels of Hope goes out once or twice a month, but the goal is to take the trailer out at least twice a month. So far in its ministry, Wheels of Hope has been blessed with monetary donations from individuals to purchase food for the meals. Food drives are not effective in getting ingredients for large meal preparation: This would require very intentional requests based on a menu plan, like asking for 10 pounds of spaghetti. Instead, donated money is used at grocery stores or farmers markets to make sure that resources are used wisely, and food is not wasted. Wheels of Hope does not have permanent refrigeration or freezer space, so sometimes the decision of what meal will be cooked is made only a day or two in advance in order to have fresh ingredients.



On the day the meal is to be served, volunteers gather in the Edgerton Memorial United Methodist Church kitchen to cook enough food for around 100 people. When ready, the prepared food is loaded into insulated food transport carriers in the Wheels of Hope trailer. At its destination, the food is then portioned out into individual meals and served through the window of the trailer in true food truck fashion. There is no limit on how many meals one person can take. Some people get four or five trays to take home to family members. Once all the food is distributed, the trailer is packed up and taken back to Edgerton Memorial for clean-up. In addition to a core group of volunteers who do this work, various community groups have volunteered, including realtors, members from a big church nearby, girl scouts, and youth who need to participate in community service.

Why It's Unique

"I think that what makes Wheels of Hope cool is that it's just a different slant on an old way of doing things. Instead of making people come to the soup kitchen, we take it to them. And then that it's coinciding at a time when food trucks are a phenomenon makes it even kind of more intriguing to people. And then that we take books out to children, I really think the possibilities are endless." -Allyson Caison



Wheels of Hope saw people in need and literally took their ministry right to them. Forming a bond between the communities being served and Allyson and her crew has taken some time, as in any new relationship, especially one where the two groups interacting may not seem to have any common ground. However, this is not a reason to avoid building bridges between strangers. As Allyson says: "I don't consider myself or anybody that works with us to be better than any one person, so we try to treat people with dignity and respect... I'd like to try and maintain that level of we're all equal, in God's eyes... I'm just trying to feed hungry kids because I love them".



Why it Works

It's intentional about who it serves: Wheels of Hope worked with a social worker at Selma Elementary School to identify neighborhoods with high concentrations of children who would benefit from meals and school supplies.

It's unique: Nothing like Wheels of Hope exists in the area. Because the food truck brings meals straight to the communities, it eliminates the need for the recipients to have transportation. Lack of transportation can be a barrier for reaching a soup kitchen or food pantry, especially in rural areas.

It provides more than just food: Wheels of Hope employs a part time, bilingual intern from one of the communities Hope serves; the intern helps advance the ministry by preparing promotional and outreach materials. The intern also strengthens relationships with the communities being served by acting as a liaison.

What's Needed for a Ministry Like This

- Food insecure families
 - A connection to schools or social services to pinpoint those most in need is very helpful
- Outreach to engage and build relationships and trust with the communities being served
- Food truck or food trailer and way to tow it
- Someone to develop a menu*
- Someone to secure ingredients
- Access to a large kitchen
- Cook/prep volunteers
- Driver and servers
- **MORE VOLUNTEERS!!!!**

In this ministry, there are many different ways to help: developing a menu, shopping, prepping meals, driving and delivering meals. It's important to divvy up the work. For example, someone can shop and drop the groceries off to be prepared. A group can bake desserts in their own homes then drop the food off the afternoon it will be served. One key ingredient: Assign a coordinator in charge of delegating tasks and making sure that each task is completed.

There is also the necessity to get to know the community being served to ensure that the ministry is meeting needs in the best way possible. This engagement is important even before the ministry begins, and is important to continue during the implementation of the ministry as well.

Meal Planning

*Here are some resources for inexpensive, healthy meals. The recipes are not for crowds per se, but could be adapted:

- <https://www.leannebrown.com/cookbooks/> *Good and Cheap - Eat Well on \$4 a Day* is a cookbook that can be purchased, or downloaded as a PDF for free in English, or Spanish.
- <https://spendsmart.extension.iastate.edu/> This website has educational materials on budgeting and shopping smart, as well as a large selection of recipes.
- <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/recipes-menus> This website has educational materials tailored for SNAP recipients, but is a good resource for anyone who wants to eat healthy on a budget. There are recipe cards in English and Spanish, and links to other sites with cheap, healthy meal plans.
- <https://www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org/main-recipes?catrec=15#postpageshow> This page has all sorts of quick, healthy, recipes.
- <https://www.amazon.com/Wildly-Affordable-Organic-Fabulous-Planet-All/dp/073821468X> *Wildly Affordable Organic: Eat Fabulous Food, Get Healthy, and Save the Planet--All on \$5 a Day or Less* is a cookbook that has recipes for easy, tasty meals, as well as tips for finding the most affordable, fresh foods which is great for someone trying to eat healthy on a budget.
- <https://esmmweighless.com/recipes/> This website has good, healthy recipes.
- <http://www.eatingwell.com/recipes/17918/mealtimes/dinner/budget/> This website has all healthy recipes that are low cost, and can be searched for by type of meal, or by cost of meal per serving.

These three PDFs have favorite African American recipes but with healthier ingredients than traditionally used:

- <http://cachampionsforchange.cdph.ca.gov/Documents/Soulful%20Recipes%20AA%20Cookbook.pdf>
- <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/healthdisp/pdf/recipes/Recipes-African-American.pdf>
- <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/files/docs/public/heart/cooking.pdf>

These two links have recipes for large crowds, but have not been evaluated for cost or healthfulness:

- <http://www.angelfire.com/bc/incredible/indexhundred.html>
- <http://recipesforacrowd.com/>



Inspiration and Visions for the Future

When asked about the inspiration for Wheels of Hope and plans for the future, Allyson stated: "I'm a person who has for many, many years wanted to do Peace Corps work. I've got the underlying desire of working with refugee children... and I have a background in food service so I love cooking, and I started working at a soup kitchen, and I saw the children who came to the soup kitchen, and at that same time I used to see this pickup truck drive by with an Icee machine on the back... and I can remember saying wouldn't it be cool to have an ice cream truck that fed kids the freshest, most nutritious meals we can make... Once we got the grant money [for Wheels of Hope] it occurred to me that this is my Peace Corps. And I don't have to leave my town, I can serve the children of Selma".

In the future, Allyson would like to see Wheels of Hope taken out more frequently by Edgerton Memorial UMC, but also by other churches or civic groups like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and church youth groups. There's also a desire to inspire other groups to take the trailer out for their own ministries, whatever they might be. Allyson says: "I like to dream big, I'd like to see one of these in every couple of towns. They're simple, it's easy, it's flexible, so I would like to see Hope spreading. *The idea that you can do good, serve God, and have fun at the same time for not that much effort*".

Currently Hope has a few paintings on its walls by local artists, with the intention of having the whole trailer covered in art. Allyson would like to hold an art contest to engage the kids at local elementary, middle, and high schools to let them submit their own artwork that they would like to see on the side of Hope.

Wheels of Hope would also like to partner more with local farmers to serve local produce as part of their meals.

Theological Motivation

When asked about her theological motivation for Wheels of Hope, Allyson shared that it is serving the "least" of the community.

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'" (Matthew 25:40)

Reflection:

1. What is the theological motivation for the work that you do?
2. Who in your community can you serve?
3. Is there a way to get to know the people you are serving right now better? How can you get to know those that you would like to serve?