

IMPACT Weekend Worship Testimonies

During worship on February 25, 2024, six folks from the First Presbyterian Church community shared brief testimonies about their experiences of IMPACT with various organizations locally and in Malawi. Shared below, are the written versions of their testimonies.

Diane Stroud – Parkview Community Mission: Food for Families

As many of you recall, just a few years ago I had little to no time to participate in outreach opportunities as I was blessed to be able to care for Gary in his final years. Now, however, I am blessed to have lots of free time. After completing my morning “deliver the grandkids to school” joy, I used to find an empty day ahead of me. I would ponder, “What should I do today?” Jesus tapped me on the shoulder with a quick response: Be my hands and feet. I now participate monthly in three ministries supported by our church, all of which center around food insecurity: Meals on Wheels, Daily Bread, and Parkview’s Food for Families. Food for Families is housed in the basement of Parkview Community Mission on Memorial Avenue, across from the Plaza. It is set up like a small grocery store and receives shipments of dry goods and frozen meat from USDA. Local grocery stores also donate bakery and refrigerated foods that are approaching their sell-by dates. Twice a week, workers restock and organize the shelves to prepare for the next day’s shoppers. On Thursdays and Saturdays, neighbors come into the store to select whatever groceries they would like from fresh produce and dairy, to meats and desserts. There are often whole turkeys or racks of ribs and entire sheet cakes for them to take home and enjoy with their families. There is no cost to the neighbors.

The reason this partnership is my favorite of the ones I participate in is the opportunity to connect with the neighbors and the workers. After making sure that stations are ready within the store, the workers begin each morning in a prayer circle before inviting the shoppers in. We pray for the neighbors who will shop, and for family members of the workers. There are regular workers whom I greet on my Thursdays, but there are also days when a group of young people show up to help out. It’s uplifting and affirming to witness their desire to serve God’s children. The true joy, however, comes from interaction with the neighbors. I now know some of the regulars and get a big smile and an “*I know*” when I give them directions on what they can have from my aisle. “I know, too. Just makin’ sure!” I say as they make their selections. It’s fun when we can highlight something different or special that has come in. “Do you like pistachios? We have ‘em today—that’s a rare treat. Be sure to get yours.” I’ve listened to a young man, who was quite pleased with himself, tell me about the meal he’s going to prepare for a “lady friend.” I laughed out loud at the joke told to me by another neighbor—it’s an original (she says). “When you get to the Pearly Gates, St. Peter will tell you that you don’t have to fill in any pages with your name or other details. There’s no *book* anymore because, you know, all of your information is *in the cloud*.” My favorite experience is when I ask a neighbor “How’re you today?” and the response is “I’m so blessed!” You might be surprised (or not) how many times that is the attitude, if not the actual response. With a rare lull in the steady stream of shoppers, the three and a half hours of my shift pass quickly and I leave with my heart-cart filled to the brim with plenty of joy to sustain my spirit until the next time. Join me. I’d love to share the joy with you!

Bonnie Miles – Malawi Mission Trip

Just a few words about the First Pres mission to Malawi this past summer.

This was my first experience in Malawi. It took 20 hours to get there.

Our main base was the small city of Embangweni, but much of our mission work was done in the small village of Kalikumbi. No missionaries had been there for several years due to COVID. The younger children there had never seen a white person and were wide eyed and afraid at the sight of us. We had numerous projects there. One of the most rewarding was cutting the ribbon to officially open the teacher's house in Kalikumbi. The school there could not attract teachers without a place for them to live. Our church financed the building of a small, modest 3- room cement house with an outdoor kitchen. It was a very exciting ceremony for the community. Bill Perkins cut the ribbon opening the house.

Other projects included:

- Help to farmers with the installation of drip irrigation. Food insecurity is a real problem in Malawi.
- We brought a trunk full of hospital supplies including a state-of-the-art microscope.
- We brought a trunk full of reading glasses and trunks full of school supplies.
- We also provided many treasured soccer balls for the youth.
- We provided paint for a building in Kalikumbi.
- A Days for Girls program was sponsored for adolescent girls in several schools.
- There were numerous slide shows promoting the importance of bats in Africa.
- We bought bibles and hymn books.

I knew going to Malawi that I would see poverty-no electricity or running water. However, it was the little things that really tore at my heartstrings:

- I had to meet with the principal of the school in Kalikumbi and he wanted me to sign something. He had no pen! He and his assistant shared a pen and she had it. I thought of the hundreds of pens lying around my house. I gave him the pens in my backpack but when they run out of ink there are no replacements.
- And then there was the nurse in the Kalikumbi health clinic. It had no electricity and her blood pressure cuff worked only with batteries. There were no batteries!
- I can't forget the hospital in Embangweni. I had a tour of the hospital-they are proud of their hospital. The pharmacy in the hospital was completely empty! No medications except for the bottle of Tylenol that I had thrown in my trunk. Malaria still kills many children in Africa and AIDS is still a problem.

The most amazing thing occurred there at the church in Kalikumbi. It is the center of the people's lives there. I was amazed by the music-they had 7 choirs. Almost the whole congregation was in a choir. No sheet music or accompaniment, just the most beautiful, joyous, and moving singing I have ever heard. I did not understand the words. It was in this music that I knew the people here loved Jesus and loved God.

They just poured their hearts out singing to His glory. It did not matter what they did not have in their lives. They have God...

Marilyn Hartman – Lynchburg Daily Bread

My life is enriched by my 2 hour 7-9am shift at Daily Bread on Mondays. With the Covid-19 pandemic raging in 2020 along with the deaths, the panic, and despair; I took myself off the sidelines of inactivity and made the phone call to Daily Bread and stated my wish to be of service.

With vague memories of the early days of Daily Bread echoing in my mind, I rang the doorbell for admittance wearing my mask as all were then required to do. Meals were once served to those seated at tables but that practice had been replaced with the necessity of the times. The volume of food required and the logistics of delivery to those in need had caused there to be a change with no inside presence aside from the workers.

Now days, I descend first to the basement to assemble food bags from the emptied storage refrigerators. There working with me are 20-30 year olds. Into plastic bags we gather the short dated food items which have been donated and picked up mostly from grocery stores. If possible we bag one of each: edible bread, dessert, fruits and vegetables. Those individually knotted plastic bags are placed in large hard plastic portable container bins and then the bins are sealed with lids due to the later stacking needs. On Mondays generally we place 120 bagged groceries in 12 bins that are destined for Altavista. There are other locations that receive such but I am speaking of my Mondays.

I then go upstairs to cut bread into serving size pieces for later use and retrieve soft padded bags which will hold 15 individually boxed meals. Then the assembly of food prepared by the kitchen workers commences with filling those containers and bags. This is a teamwork endeavor providing normally 140 meals for Appomattox and 135 for Altavista.

The previously filled container bins with the grocery bags and the soft padded bags containing the individually boxed meals are loaded into 2 Daily Bread vans and taken to the needed locations. I am not present for the later food handouts at the Daily Bread window counter. Those 7 day a week activities are from about 9:30 to 12:30 with the assembling of many more meals. I think as I work my shift assembling the grocery bags and lunches of those individuals that are the recipients and are in need. My heart aches for them. Who knows their stories? In 2023, around 250,000 meals were served. For 2024, that number could be even greater.

The spirit of joy and kindness reigns at Daily Bread. There are smiles (revealed by the no longer mandated masks) and the camaraderie of the workers. There are individuals from churches bringing peanut butter sandwiches made the previous evening by their youth or other groups. There are individuals dropping off donated canned or packaged goods. Amongst the staff, who are always gracious, are the other volunteers who like me feel blessed by our ability to help.

Some younger volunteers are getting required community service hours accomplished. One young man on staff in charge of the kitchen stated that he had long wanted to work in a community kitchen.

My fellow early morning colleague, last year had a serious health issue requiring months of recovery. He returned last month with a smile rejoicing, being grateful for the opportunity to return and help others in this community service.

We are happy to be an extension of Christ's love. I greet the early outdoor assembling customers of Daily Bread as I depart and say a prayer for the day before them.

Catherine Adams – Malawi Mission Trip

Good morning! If you know me or have spent even a little time around me, you probably know that I'm not the world's greatest adventurer. If I go out to eat, I'm probably not straying too far from something I know or I'll get the same thing I always get. Driving from one place to another, I don't often take the roundabout/scenic route; I take the one I know. I'm definitely not the friend you call to do the wild or crazy thing. Even coming up with those ideas of adventure was a challenge. However, there is one corner of my life where it seems "adventurer" should be my middle name: that's the mission trip corner. Since 2008, I've been to Africa on at least 10 occasions and to El Salvador at least twice to serve on mission trips. That count includes two, yup, two trips to Africa last summer all within 6 weeks of each other.

A trusted friend invited me to travel to Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda in 2008 on a trip with a sports ministry called Sports Outreach based here in Lynchburg, but with international and domestic mission sites. As an avid soccer player and fan and as an avid follower of Jesus joining forces with an organization that uses sports, specifically soccer, to tell people about Jesus and to share His love was pretty much a no brainer. I went on that first trip out of a desire and passion to serve others; I returned for many years after that because of a unique bond and rich love for the people of Uganda and Kenya experienced on that initial 20-day journey and because of a firm belief in the mission and ministry of the organization. Though my friends and people I met over there live in very challenging conditions in 10 X 10 tin homes that flood during the rains or thatched roof huts with concrete floors or with limited resources for food and everyday supplies or with trauma and strife, they are rich - rich in relationship with God and in relationship with one another. They live each day with complete dependence on God, a true joy in all things (including their sufferings), and praising God for it all no matter the circumstance. They showed me how to live each day with humility towards one another to help, support, and encourage. I like to call this "live life on mission" for and with God; they live their lives with strong faith and a passion to share that faith with others. This is one of the biggest things I learned and took away from my experiences serving with Sports Outreach. I have been inspired to live life on mission to love God and love others just as we are called to do.

When I was in high school, this non adventurer always thought I would take a trip to Africa and it would be a mission trip with FPCLY to Malawi where we have mission partners in the communities of Embangweni and Kalikumbi. Around the time I was in high school was when the late Harold Riley began

making trips to Malawi and began to tell the great stories of the medical care provided, the clean water made accessible, and the freedom and joy with which the Malawians worshipped God among many other stories. What Harold also brought back, were the stories of bonds formed and relationships made with John and Florence Gondwe and many other men and women! What Harold brought back in his stories and experiences were all things I saw and experiences myself in Uganda and Kenya and all things still had hope about experiencing myself in Malawi. So if we fast forward 20ish years from high school I finally made the journey over the Atlantic to the southern part of Africa last summer.

Immediately my spirits were lifted and encouraged by a similar warmth, joy, and deep expression of faith. These strangers, who quickly became friends, welcomed us with such joyous hearts and open arms like they had known me forever. I expected this instant, joyous response for those on the team returning for the umpteenth time, but not for me, a complete newbie to the region. But what I quickly learned is that joyous, hospitable, and humble spirit was for everyone, and I believe what has earned Malawi the nickname of “the warm heart of Africa.” What our brothers and sisters in Malawi reminded me in those initial moments was that we are ALL God’s people no matter where we live, what we do, what language we speak, or what cultural norms we follow, no matter what our differences may be, we are ALL a part of God’s family. And in that, we should treat one another with love, joy, grace, and humility whether we’re meeting for the first time or whether we’ve known each other forever.

One of the other things that I really just enjoyed on the trip to Malawi was serving alongside of the people I was with. I had only really had more than a handful of conversations with a couple of members of the team before we left 1215 VES Road in late June. However, when you spend 36 hours traveling via planes, cars, and vans just to get there and then some days travel between locations involved at least an hour in a van, you learn a few things about the people you are with. You swap stories about growing up, meeting spouses, the loss of family members, favorite movies, and even the experiences you are having in the moment. You encourage one another. You tell jokes. You pick on one another. You form inside jokes. You lift each other up when you’re missing home or having a rough day because of something you’ve seen or experienced. Sometimes, you have disagreements or things that need to be worked out. Don’t let me paint a picture of utter perfection because we are all human and when you spend every waking moment together with folks (even your family) things can get a little messy. But isn’t that life? There were many moments on this trip where perched in my seat in the back corner of the van because I was the smallest and most nimble, I would just stop and listen to the conversations milling about and how we were all connecting with one another and just smile. There is a special place in my heart that fills up in those moments. This experience reminded me that it’s the moments you least expect, the moments you are waiting for something to do, the moments that seem so simple, to moments that are quiet that make the most lasting impressions on you. They make such an impression because of the people you are with, the love you are sharing, the relationships you are building.

After all of these trips, the greatest part about all this ministry stuff on mission trips (and really any ministry or service experience) is the power of presence (the power of just being there) – you, me, whomever showing up and stepping into the lives of others saying you matter, you are important, I care. Because getting on a plane and traveling over 36 hours makes a statement; because giving up time at home makes a statement; because using limited vacation days makes a statement; because as Christian from Food for Thought put it yesterday, we could all have somewhere else that we could be. But instead of choosing to be there, we chose/choose to be with others who may speak another language, or live in a

different culture, or struggle with things that are unfamiliar to us. We are choosing to love strangers and people we may never meet. In making this choice, we are extending the right hand of fellowship, or maybe a hug or a kind word, we are serving as Christ's hands and feet and sharing His love! And that is powerful!

Tracy Baker – Rivermont Area Emergency Food Pantry and Red Cross Blood Drives

When I was a child, my dad's job had us moving every couple of years. Then I married Albert Baker, and we moved every 3 years as he made his way through his training. I've seen a lot of the world, experienced interesting cultures, and met a lot of people. I consider myself lucky to have had these experiences. But, ...some places you go, the people are warm and welcoming, while some... not so much. It can be hard to find a real sense of community and belonging when you're off on a new adventure right about the time you've just settled into the last place you lived.

In 1995 Albert and I landed in Lynchburg. This is the only church we visited when we settled here; we never looked anywhere else. That's not just because it's been an easy walk on Sunday mornings. From the very first, this was a comfortable, welcoming church home for us. That's remained true as we raised our family, and it has strengthened our ties to this community until we can't imagine living anywhere else.

These are the reasons I did not hesitate to say yes when Marilyn Hartman and Lou Mekanik asked me to take over as the liaison between the church and the Rivermont Area Churches Blood Drive rotation 18 years ago. And that's why I did not hesitate to say yes when Ashley Scholar asked me to replace her as the liaison between this church and the Rivermont Area Emergency Food Pantry however many years ago that was. The enthusiastic support of our congregation for these projects inspires me to continue with both of these community outreach projects.

While I appreciate the importance of an adequate blood supply in any community and while I understand hunger is a real problem facing some members of our society, the blood drives and the bags of food could be anything. I'd still be equally committed to the projects on behalf of First Presbyterian Church because it's meant so much to me to be a part of this church family.

So that's the why for me. Let me tell you a little bit about these 2 important projects:

Our annual Red Cross blood drive is in September. Donors can give whole blood every 56 days; so, we, and 5 other nearby churches, host a blood drive every 2 months in rotation. The locations are convenient, and donors are cared for by volunteers they know from church. The snacks are also a lot better than you get at the Red Cross facility.

Likewise, the Rivermont Area Emergency Food Pantry, is a cooperative effort supported through funding and volunteers from 8 area congregations. Housed at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, the pantry serves residents of Lynchburg and the surrounding counties referred by social services or by pastoral referral. Every 9 weeks First Pres. takes a week-long turn filling grocery bags for the day's referrals. Each recipient family is provided with enough food to feed their family, whatever its size, 3 meals per day for 3 days.

While I am generally the liaison recruiting volunteers, Marcia Milam and I are co-liaisons to the food pantry. In fact, since about mid-way through the pandemic and except during our FPC Impact Weeks, Marcia and Rick Milam are the incomparable duo making the starter bags used every day at the food pantry.

So, as we wrap up another Impact Week, I thank you all for your continued support of all our community outreach projects and for enfoldng me in this caring community.

Dickie Stowers – Lynchburg Daily Bread

Good Morning! I hope you don't mind hearing from me again, but this is an opportunity to share with you the reward I feel volunteering at Lynchburg Daily Bread. My first experience occurred when I signed up during IMPACT week July 2022. There was a group of us including Bill and Becky Semones and Marsha Milam among others. My first assignment was working the window distributing meals and available groceries. 3 hours passed in no time. The guests were delightful and so grateful. I truly felt Daily Bread was making a difference. How could you not be called to return? So, Bill, Becky, Marsha and I continue the first Thursday of each month. Marsha, I think, is there weekly. Rick comes on occasion. I'm usually there as a substitute 2 or 3 additional days a month. Many others from First Pres volunteer, Marilyn Hartman, Yndo Jones, Cathy Oakes, Alex Collier and others. Work can include helping to prepare meals, serving in the line or distributing at the window. Your team includes folks from across the area, young and old, working and retired. Everyone is supportive and feels the mission to serve.

I was familiar with Daily Bread and knew it had been around since 1982 and originally a mission from First Presbyterian. Over the years the agency has moved from Nichols Tavern to a Park Street Salvation Army building to it's current location in the former Knights of Columbus Building on Clay Street in 1989 and along the way became an independent 501(c)(3). For many years Daily Bread served seated meals but with rising needs and the pandemic, renovations and expansions were completed in 2021 with meals being prepared and distributed from a walkup window in addition to outlying locations. You may ask who is eligible?

From Daily Bread's website I share, "No matter who you are or why you've come, you are invited. Since we began in 1982, the Lynchburg Daily Bread has lived out our calling to feed people, and to do so with respect and without condition. We are about nutritious, delicious meals, not eligibility. We serve people from all walks of life. Our guests include workers who are recently unemployed or those with temporary or part-time jobs who can't make ends meet. We serve the elderly and the disabled on fixed incomes, families with small children/babies, single parents, and persons with mental health challenges. Approximately 40% of our guests are over the age of 50. We are seeing an increase in the number of families coming to Daily Bread and are thankful to be part of making sure no child goes hungry. We serve, no questions asked."

And you ask how many meals are served?

2019 78,689

2020 115,479

2021 133,259

2022 164,276

2023 246,177

And this is considering marginal change in Lynchburg City population 79,500 over these years and around 260,000 for the city, Bedford, Amherst, Appomattox, and Campbell Counties. Doesn't this drive you to ask why with our comfort level is there such food insecurity despite the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, Rivermont Area Emergency Food Pantry, Meals on Wheels, Park View Food For Thought and Food For Families and what impact is this on our community?

The answer is not clear. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supports research by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute which produces a website, "County Health Rankings and Roadmaps" which objectively evaluates the "health" of a region and offers strategies to improve health outcomes. Lynchburg ranks in the 25th-50th quartile for health outcome due to years of potential life lost before age 75 which is 40% higher than the Virginia average. If you are Black, your risk is 98% higher than the Virginia average. 12% of residents face food insecurity meaning the availability of a constant food supply over the last year and having the ability to provide balanced meals, including fruits and vegetables. 22% of children live in families below poverty income levels of \$20,000 for family of 2 and \$30,000 for family of 4. 36% of children live in single parent households.

Across the scope of health behaviors, clinical care, social & economic factors and physical environment, the research outlines 167 scientifically supported evidenced informed strategies where everyone thrives. These include healthy school lunch initiatives, school fruit & vegetable gardens, fruit & vegetable incentive programs, school breakfast programs in addition to functional family therapy, adult vocational training, expanded child care programs, school based health centers and so on. Spending hundreds of millions of dollars duplicating health services, building more buildings, adding more Devinci surgical robots and MRI machines and so on are not evidence informed strategies to improve health outcomes.

So, I ask you to join the call to volunteer for Daily Bread or another of our partner agencies reaching out to those children of God, our brothers and sisters, without our comfort level supporting our community where everyone thrives.