

Golden Rule guides soup kitchen in silver anniversary

It was a half-hour before St. John's soup kitchen opened its doors in Westminster, but Larry Finchan was already in line.

A familiar face to the more than 20 parish volunteers who staff the "Loaves and Fishes" outreach ministry, the 47-year-old disabled Westminster native smiled and nodded his head politely as volunteers later opened the noon food line May 13.

A white-haired woman filled Finchan's plate with hot dogs and beans, a fresh-made salad, potato chips and apple sauce.

"This place gives me a warm feeling," said Finchan, wearing a Ravens cap, T-shirt and a pair of jeans. "It feels like home. It's my family and they treat me wonderfully – and the food is great."

More than 60 other hungry guests of all ages followed behind him – some relied on canes to make their way into the hall.

Even with a bustling line, volunteers called it a slow day. They normally see more than 100 people looking for a free meal.

St. John has offered the outreach ministry every Wednesday for 25 years at Church of the Ascension, an Episcopal church that allows the Catholic community to use its facilities.

The parish is part of an inter-denominational group called the Westminster Ministerium, which offers soup kitchens each day of the week so those in need can enjoy a healthy hot lunch.

Before the meals are served, volunteers always lead guests in praying the "Our Father."

Pat Rafferty, president of St. John's St. Vincent de Paul Society, said St. John's program is funded through donations to her group. Parish volunteers arrive at 8 a.m.

to chop salad, cook the food, make iced tea, organize desserts and prepare the hall, she said. They form a well-oiled assembly line to dish out the food and keep the line moving.

“We’re preparing more and more food each week,” Rafferty said, noting that the bad economy is driving more people to the soup kitchen than at any time in its history. “The numbers keep going up.”

Nina Price, a parish volunteer who sported a green apron inscribed with “St. John’s Loaves and Fishes,” said a variety of people visit the soup kitchen. Some are sick, elderly or homeless, others are drug addicts and a good number are troubled youths.

Formerly successful business people are joining in the kitchen lines.

“We’re getting a little bit better dressed people – people who are out of work for the first time,” Price said. “In 25 years, it’s changed completely.”

The ministry has the support of area businesses like Panera Bread, Giant and Safeway, which donate bread, doughnuts, coffee and pastries. Chick-Fil-A provides free meals once a month complete with sandwiches, chicken tenders, coleslaw and dessert.

A different food combination is offered each week. Other weeks feature pasta and “pot-luck” dinners.

“It’s so uplifting to be a part of this,” Rafferty said as guests lined up for food. “You feel like you are really serving people. It gives you such a positive feeling.”