**Interview with Ethel Fowler, Food Pantry Director at Hope Lutheran Food Pantry**

**July 29, 2025**

**“My name is Ethel Fowler—F-O-W-L-E-R—and I’m the Food Pantry Director at Hope Lutheran Food Pantry.”**

We’re located at **1115 N. Highland Avenue**, right at **35th and Highland**, in the basement of Hope Lutheran Church. We serve the community—**anyone who walks in needing food, we serve them.** We don’t turn anyone away.

**Our pantry is inside the church**, and many of our volunteers are also church members. The church helps guide our mission, and **our work really ties into the values of faith and love.** A lot of people out here are hurting, and they need more than just food—we try to provide that extra care.

**We offer more than just food.** In the winter, we hand out coats and gloves, and all summer long, we give out clothing for different family members. During back-to-school time, we provide supplies and clothing for kids. We also invite people to come worship with us on Sundays, and every third Sunday, we host a community dinner. **People come for the food and stay for the fellowship.**

**On Her Role**

**“I’ve been the Food Pantry Director since 2017,”** Ethel said. “The woman before me, Claudia Remy, ran it for 16 years. So I’m now in my 8th year.”

Before this, Ethel worked in **childcare at the church’s daycare** for five years. “I love children—I had a ball with those little ones,” she smiled.

That childcare background also gave her a strong understanding of how nutrition affects young minds. **“A child can’t think when they’re hungry,”** she said. “At daycare, the moment those kids got off the bus, they headed straight to the kitchen. That was their first meal of the day.”

**The Growing Need**

In the summer, Ethel sees a definite increase in families needing help. **“Kids are out of school and not getting their breakfast and lunch from MPS anymore. It puts a real strain on families.”**

To help, the pantry tries to give **extra food to single parents and families**, including toiletries like toothbrushes, toothpaste, deodorant, socks and shoes. “We get a lot of clothing donations through our pastor’s wife, too—she knows a lot of people,” Ethel added.

She also pointed out that **many households aren’t just parents and kids**—they include grandparents, cousins, aunts, or other guardians. “We’ve got a lot of grandparents raising kids,” she said. “It’s a heavy burden when something tragic happens.”

She shared a personal story: **“My nephew was killed on February 14. He left behind four children, and now his girlfriend and our family are stepping in to care for them. It’s like that for so many families. When income is limited and people are on fixed budgets, it’s tough.”**

**Economic Pressures**

When asked about what’s making it hard for people to afford groceries, Ethel responded:
**“A lot of it is lack of education, low-income jobs, and rising costs. Rent and utilities are going up. Families are borrowing from other family members or leaning more heavily on pantries like ours to get by.”**

Despite the challenges, Ethel and her team remain committed. **She’s the only paid staff member**, and she works alongside about a dozen **core volunteers**, most of whom are seniors. “We joke that we’re all in the ‘70s Club,’” she laughed. “It’s hard to get young people involved, but I’ve got my daughter and grandson helping—he can’t say no to Grandma!”

**Food Access & Support**

The pantry serves around **130–140 households each month**. “In June 2025, we served 104 because we were off a week for Juneteenth,” she noted. “But in May, we served 134.” That’s a jump from the previous year, when **food was more available through citywide giveaways.**

**“Now that more pantries are closing due to budget cuts or lack of food, we’re seeing new faces—more single men, more families. A lot of folks are coming to us for the first time.”**

About **55% of Hope Lutheran Food Pantry’s inventory comes from Hunger Task Force**, with some items from Feeding America, and the rest purchased using donations from the community. “We’re blessed,” Ethel said. “We’ve built strong relationships, and people are generous. One family who moved away still sends us checks—they gave $3,500 recently.”

**Thoughtful, Personalized Care**

The pantry is **open Thursdays from 9:30–11:00 a.m.**, but Ethel adds, **“We stay until everyone gets served. If someone has an emergency, we’ll open for them too.”**

All bags are pre-packed, but the team does their best to honor **special dietary requests**. “Some families don’t eat pork, so we swap in chicken. Some don’t eat meat at all—we’ve got veggie burgers set aside for them. I’ve got my regulars and I know what they need.”

Ethel also estimates that **most of the guests are repeat visitors**, underscoring the ongoing nature of food insecurity. “I might not remember your name,” she said, “but I’ll remember your face.”

**Final Words**

**“We’re here to help. Everyone is welcome. We don’t turn anyone away,”** Ethel said. “We get walk-ins. We get people coming all the way from the South Side. I always say, ‘There are a lot of pantries between here and there, but we’ll serve you with a smile today—and help you find the next one tomorrow if you need it.’”

While the exact date Hope Lutheran Food Pantry joined the Hunger Task Force network isn’t clear, **it’s likely been over 30 years**, with Claudia Remy leading the pantry for 16 years before Ethel took the reins.

**“This is my calling,” Ethel said. “I love what I do.”**