

Jennifer's Closet, with Bethany Presbyterian

2022 Mission Collaboration Grant Report

An important part of our grant process includes reviewing the impact of the projects and highlighting our grant recipients through our communication networks. We are eager to encourage and support ways for our churches to build relationships, explore new ways of being church, serve the community, and live as a sign of hope for the world. Receiving and sharing this good news within the Presbytery also helps inform our decision-making regarding grant distribution.

What were you hoping to accomplish?

Bethany Presbyterian Church attendance decreased sharply after COVID. The 40- to 60- year-old age group of members, that had been very active in mission projects, was watching the service primarily on BoxCast or Facebook. With reduced contributions the Finance Committee was considering reducing program funding again. We suggested that the church would grow again once members became re-engaged. Jennifer's Closet was introduced at Worship in the Park in September as an opportunity to re-engage with our members through service to the community with Jennifer's Closet. The Clothing Closet is a way for members to give back to a struggling neighborhood around the church in the Dewey/Stone area of Rochester.

Who was touched by your project or program?

The church was a sleeping giant that woke a whole village. It is action that breeds motivation and once members started to see each other in small groups, they started to return to worship. Once members started to return to worship, they started to focus on how they could help out around the church, and that led to Jennifer's Closet, a new ministry to the neighborhood.

Small group gatherings included:

A member and her husband hosted game night at their home, it was well attended by 20 adults most of whom had not been to worship in many months. There was energy in seeing each other again. We have seen a steady increase in the number of people coming to worship, and some middle age couples have started to come back.

More foot traffic in the church

Episcopal Community Services approached Bethany to host a lunch and learn series once a month. The program is open to the congregation and has been well attended with 20-25 members. Also monthly is an evening meal prepared by the same chef. The first two meals were attended by 20-30 members. More small groups are forming.

Last week our Congregational Life Committee hosted a potluck. Reservations for 18 people, and 41 showed up and stayed to play board games. Four new upcoming events were announced. People enjoyed themselves, reconnected with friends.

The Clothing Closet was given a fresh coat of paint by a volunteer from the church, and Jennifer is recruiting volunteers from those that expressed interest. It took longer than expected for all the racks and furnishings to arrive with weather and shipping delays. Donations, however started coming in

from congregation members immediately. Two volunteers are helping to set up the shop, and next week Jennifer will engage the 5 volunteers interested in sorting. We hope to have the shop open in mid-April. Jennifer also engaged the help of the head of the property committee at the church to help us find a receptacle for donated clothing to be drop-off in.

How did this grant energize or transform your congregation or community?

- People are positive, cheerful and are having a good worship experience.
- Attendance is rising as members find their way back to worship
- A deacon started baking special desserts every week for coffee hour and it attracted a greater number of members to remain after the service and fellowship.
- The church coffee hour presented a great opportunity for Jennifer to mingle with congregation members to talk about Jennifer's Closet.
- Some sporadic members have started coming more regularly. This increase in attendance has created some excitement among members. Worship attendance has grown from 45 to nearly 100 people per week.

What did you learn from this project and what are your next steps?

- We learned that once people were asked or invited to attend something social they were more likely to attend. This interaction then sparked renewed interest in the church.
- The project would have moved more quickly with a half time person to keep it moving. Ordering and set up took more time than expected and delayed the opening.
- If the course remains the same at Bethany and increased engagement brings people back to the church, there will be a strong foundation for the Clothing Closet and other ministries to come.
- Next steps – Complete the assembly and stocking of the Clothing Closet, work on Social Marketing, a web page for the Bethany Presbyterian Church site, develop flyers for the neighborhood. Establish a designated phone line for visitors to call to get hours of operation and clothing drop off.
- Create signage inside and outside Bethany Presbyterian Church.
- Send a letter to neighborhood schools, congregations and service clubs introducing the services at the Clothing Closet.
- Assemble a committee in the Church that will help the Clothing Closet build a Board of Directors and other documents to establish themselves as a 501©3.

Please share a story of where you saw God in this project.

A recent widow came to the clothing closet, to drop off her husband's suits and shoes. As she unpacked them the volunteer shared memories of the times the two couples had been together before her husband's death. In just a few minutes the volunteer had brightened this widow's day, she had been given an opportunity to talk about some of the joy her husband had brought all of them. As she walked out, she smiled, thanked the volunteer and promised to return to help another day. Here was the face of God. Ministry in the oddest places, in a clothing closet. We all need connection and Bethany is a welcoming community, we are engaging.