ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Beyond The Red Door



The Food Closet Year in Review

By E. Ray Walker

The Bible is clear regarding feeding the hungry: “And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday” — Isaiah 58:10.

In other words, believers have a moral and spiritual duty to feed the hungry and help the vulnerable. And that is precisely what the Culpeper Food Closet does.

The Food Closet has been an outreach ministry of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church since 1984. It operates as a full community effort through the dedicated work of more than 100 volunteers from across the Culpeper area. Food and monetary donations are received from local businesses, organizations, churches and generous individuals.

2026 has been a time of action, reflection and adjustment for the organization. This article reviews the Food Closet’s year.

Under the dedicated leadership of Faith Dickerson, the Food Closet is serving 600 families each month, representing 2,500 needy men, women and children in the Culpeper community.

“The need to support families facing food insecurity is continuing to rise,” Faith says.

HOLIDAY ASSISTANCE

In 2025, the Food Closet made significant changes to its holiday food efforts and added a Christmas box to its program.



(Two Thursday night Volunteers)

Faith explains the changes. Last year, “Safeway sent gift cards based on their round-up program, and those cards were distributed to Food Closet clients in the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving. This gave families the opportunity to buy exactly what they wanted with their $25 card.”

“This year, Safeway offers a grant-type program where you could submit how you would use more cards if given by the grocery chain. Culpeper Food Closet was very fortunate to be awarded enough cards that the amount of gift cards can be tailored based on the size of the family this year.”

Faith is delighted with the card donations. “Culpeper Food Closet is incredibly grateful to Safeway Culpeper for supporting this program and the increased volume donated.”

Christmas boxes are back again, and clients will receive basically the same items as last year. This is a box, prepacked with shelf-stable foods, done in two service projects by SWIFT employees. For the 18th year, SWIFT (Culpeper-based Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) has been a crucial Food Closet partner.



(Volunteers having fellowship time at Old House Winery)

“SWIFT is one of our largest corporate partners, providing financial and human support (packing boxes). This is a major service project for them,” Faith said.

Volunteers will pack frozen meats and eggs on the days clients come to pick up their regular food package, starting November 30 and ending December 23. These Christmas boxes result directly from conversations between clients and the volunteers who pack their food.

“The holiday break from school is a tough time for many families,” Faith notes. “Trying to juggle Christmas, taxes, winter utilities and children home from school creates enormous stress on families living on tight budgets. These Christmas boxes offer a supplement when it is needed most.”

All Food Closet clients are cleared as “in need” by Sam’s Place, a one-stop hub where individuals and families can access information and referrals to other community partners.

There will be an active fundraising campaign during November to support the cost of these boxes. Due to careful cost/comparison shopping, a $30 donation will cover the cost of a Christmas box and the extra proteins and eggs, valued at more than $60 retail this year. Donations for Christmas boxes may be sent to Culpeper Food Closet P. O. Box 343 Culpeper, VA 22701 or online **here**.



(The Food Closet's "Toy Story" trunk at St. Stephen's Church's Trunk or Treat)

A CONTINUING NEED

The biggest hurdle for the Culpeper Food Closet right now, Faith says, is getting enough food through the door.

“Rusty Booth, the warehouse manager, is doing a stellar job of finding foods, but the Food Closet is now purchasing from even more grocery stores, as well as getting whatever is available in the partnership with Blue Ridge Area Food Bank.”

Billy Green, the organization’s special projects leader, once again did an awesome job of networking with donors at the Culpeper Madison Rappahannock Farm Show in July. Sixteen animals — hogs, sheep and goats — were donated to the Food Closet. “We are grateful to the leadership of the CMR Farm Show for supporting the efforts to educate local businesses on what an impact the donations of these animals can have,” Faith said. “We have just finished giving out all this protein, so those 16 donations lasted 12 weeks because the need for proteins is so high this year.”

LOOKING AHEAD

This year has seen significant growth in the need for more food and for more volunteers to help get the food in the warehouse, on the shelf and then custom-packed for the clients.



(Food Closet Leadership Team members)

In January, the Food Closet added its first paid employee, Rusty Booth, as warehouse manager.

Faith raves about Rusty. “His expertise in product management and eye for detail has meant the shelves are fully stocked at all times. This takes great sleuthing skills to find where products are available and at the best costs.”

This year has also seen an expansion of the number of volunteers. More than 100 volunteers and procurement staff are working to get food from the grocery stores, both Partner Pick Up donations and purchases, as well as pallets of food from the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank in Charlottesville.

A group of repackers take bulk items and repack in family-size containers. The number of food givers has been increased to meet the larger number of clients.

These food givers spend a few minutes with each family and then pack based on the size of the family and the needs they have that week.

The Food Closet Leadership Team is not a board in a boardroom somewhere. Each team member is an active part of the Food Closet, with most working several shifts each week.

ADVOCACY, ETC.

The Culpeper Food Closet was invited to be more active in the advocacy part of food insecurity this year, including a visit from a representative of Rep. Eugene Vindman’s office, and Culpeper Mayor Frank Reaves.

Faith said that “Rep. Vindman is on the Agriculture Committee in Congress, and it is important that he understand why more funding is crucial for farmers in the Farm Bill. Monies from that bill support farmers who grow the produce and raise the protein that is supplied to food banks nationwide. Ever since the cuts to those funds in 2025, the food banks have had less foods to distribute.”

Faith was also invited to join a Zoom call with Rep. Vindman's office and the CEO of Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, where she discussed how these funding decisions affect people in central Virginia.



(Food Closet Volunteers at the annual appreciation lunch at Mountain Run Winery)

Like many nonprofits, Culpeper Food Closet has seen a decrease in donations during 2026. The Leadership Team made decisions years ago that now allow the Food Closet to continue to buy to meet the needs of the community, but the hope is that folks in the Culpeper community will remember their neighbors in need by making a donation to the Christmas box program.

Says Faith, “Flexibility is what has become an overarching goal in nonprofits in the last couple of years.”

The Food Closet anticipates increased need in the coming year(s) but is thankful to have a Leadership Team, the continuing support of St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, and a crew of volunteers who show up every day ready to serve our neighbors.

“This is being the hands and feet of Christ and supports the Food Closet’s core value of ‘Respecting the Dignity of Every Human Being.’”

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