GOOD **NEIGHBOR**

The Rev. Kaleo Patterson

It started during the pandemic with 100 eggs and 100 loaves of bread offered out of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church to those in need. Then, it became 300 meals a week, plus packages of food.

"People were coming from all over," says the Rev. Kaleo Patterson, a priest and food distribution coordinator at St. Stephen's. "We just opened the doors and said, 'Hey, we gotta give to everybody.' We can't just give to our zip code, right? So, we just started giving to everybody, and then we just decided that we were going to try to expand our outreach."

Over time, Patterson has increased his food-sharing program to 15 sites islandwide with an additional three Hawai'i Foodbank 'Ohana Produce Plus-designated spots. These foodbank sites host monthly distributions every second Monday at Whitmore Village, every second Wednesday at St. Stephen's and every fourth Wednesday at Wahiawā United Methodist Church.

In an effort to bring the food-sharing program to more Hawaiian churches, Kawaiaha'o Church is the program's newest addition.

"Our Hawaiian churches are very important because they remind us that at one time, Hawai'i was a very self-sufficient place in terms of food," Patterson says. "Although (Hawai'i was) the most isolated place in the world, it had the ability to share food and share love, and be self-sufficient, and have food security."

The food-sharing program serves kūpuna, families and houseless individuals.

"You can have a lot of food, but you need to be able to make that food accessible to people and that's where we come in," Patterson says. "A lot of people who are poor have limited resources — such as seniors. The food that's being made available at the drive-thrus — not everybody can come to that. So you have to do outreach."

Some of their outreach efforts include monthly food drop-offs to families at beaches in Nānākuli and Wai'anae, at farmers' housing in Mahi'ai Hale and even to about 40 kūpuna in Whitmore Village.

Patterson says this feat wouldn't be possible without its two dozen community and church partners, including but not limited to, United Methodist Church, Mililani Presbyterian Church and Wahiawā United Church of Christ.

He also expresses gratitude for the hundreds of volunteers from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mililani and their stake president, Isileli Nau, for always being ready to distribute food at various sites.

"People are coming together from different churches, different religious persuasions, and sharing food and sharing love — and that's what it's all about," Patterson says.

Besides being able to make food more accessible, Patterson also emphasizes the importance of food education.

"A lot of people don't really know how to use food in the right way. We try to promote to all of our clients … that food is life. Food is health," Patterson says. "So, when you get food, you got to eat the good food (and) learn how to cook. A lot of people just need to learn how to cook good food, and they have to learn what good food is. And so we try to do as much education as we can."

Volunteers often hand out brochures on food security to those sitting in the drive-thru lines at the distribution sites.

Patterson says they promote both community and home gardens, encouraging individuals to grow and eat local foods like ulu, taro and mango. They even give out free taro plants.

They also encourage attendees to vote for bills that support food security.

It is a lot of coordination, but Patterson describes himself as a "silent coordinator," allowing the different food distribution sites to still make their own decisions.

"Everybody wants to help. That's the difference. Everybody's really trying to do a good job," he says. "It's not about making money. We're not doing things so that we're going to get rich or make money, but we're actually doing things so that people can be well and healthy and we can build community at the same time.



Photo courtesy Kaleo Patterson

"We're sharing food and we're sharing love," he adds. "Everybody needs to be healthy and have a good life."

For more info on Hawai'i Foodbank's 'Ohana Produce Plus program, visit hawaiifoodbank.org/ohana. To learn more about St. Stephen's food-sharing program, visit stephenaloha.com.

— Allyson Pang

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