

Dr. Vastine Watson was searching for a way that his church Norris Chapel in Houston could help more during COVID-19. Still, with a small congregation, and mostly elderly members, he felt like he hit a wall. Then, he discovered a unique way to make a significant impact, the Houston Eats Restaurant Support (H.E.R.S.) program. Now church volunteers are serving hot meals to vulnerable neighbors once a week. “I was so broken-hearted,” Watson said. “But this is like an answer to my prayers.”

The H.E.R.S. program is managed by Merinda Watkins-Martin and her husband Reginald Martin, who co-own Lemond Catering and Events. They knew firsthand how damaging the coronavirus has been to mom-and-pop restaurants. “Our last event was in February, and then everyone started canceling,” Watkins-Martin said. “We were panicking. We weren’t sure that we could go on.” Then the couple learned that there was a request for proposal (RFP) for Mayor Sylvester Turner’s Health Equity Response (H.E.R.) Task Force to provide relief to local restaurants.

Those the restaurants assisted all had to be located within certain zip codes -- and the people served by the restaurants live in the same area. The 30 zip codes represented low-income and minority neighborhoods -- communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Recipients of the meals not only had to live in the zip code but also needed to be low income or unemployed. In addition, they had to be senior citizens, high-risk, homebound, disabled or have children under the age of 18. “Reggie and I thought we could maybe do 12,000 to 15,000 meals a week, but we weren’t sure how to deliver the meals,” Watkins-Martin said. “I think that’s where everyone was getting held up.”



Watson heard about the H.E.R.S. program through an email from the Rev. Dr. Elijah Stansell, District Superintendent for the Central South District of the TAC. “I got the email and I called Merinda on the same day,” Watson recalled. “I wanted to get it going.” Norris Chapel identified 42 individuals in the area, some church members and others who are not. Each receives two meals per serving -- lunch and dinner. Norris Chapel provided 106 meals. Watson said that individuals either came in to receive the food or stayed in their cars, and volunteers placed the pre-packaged meals in their trunks. “Everybody on our list showed up,” Watson said. “You could see that they were there, because they really needed it.” Watson tried one of the meals – smothered chicken with rice and green beans. “I mean it was so good,” he said. “They put a lot of love into it.”

That is exactly Watkins-Martin’s goal. “This may be the only positive touch some people get in their day,” she said. “I want it to be like a hug, the food that they get. I want them to feel like they are our best and only customer.” “When you’re raised to believe in God and are blessed, we have a duty to help others,” Watkins-Martin said.

Pastor Watson explained that one of Jesus’ most important commandments comes in Matthew 25: “For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick, and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

“Jesus says that what you do for the least of his brothers and sisters you did for Him,” Watson added. Providing meals for the hungry falls in line with his vision for the church. “We’re not only serving the community. We’re doing God’s will,” he said. “We’re ministering to the people who are in a time of lack in their life. We get to be a part of the puzzle.” Church members were gratified to serve others during this time. “They’re thankful for the opportunity,” Watson said.



He hopes that this is simply the beginning of discovering new ways the church can serve its neighbors. “We have crossed the line and opened a new door, taken a step forward that was really needed in our church,” he said. “Sometimes, during this pandemic, we focus on all the negative. But with the H.E.R.S. program, we will be able look back and say, maybe this is the thing that took us to another level, that opened our eyes.”

To learn more or sign up as a volunteer, visit lemondkitchen.com/hers-program. To find out about the Lemond Foundation, visit lemondfoundation.org