

St. Francis of Assisi in Wakefield christens new Kitchen of Hope space, spawns new ministries



Parishioners and volunteers at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Wakefield celebrated a major milestone with the grand opening of their new \$750,000 facility for the Kitchen of Hope ministry. Joined by Bishop Bruce A. Lewandowski, C.Ss.R., the parish marked the official dedication of the state-of-the-art space, which prepares and delivers hundreds of nutritious, low-cost meals each week to local seniors, homebound residents, and individuals facing hardship across South County.

PHOTO: ERIK SCALAVINO



Posted Thursday, August 20, 2026 6:00 am

By Erik Scalavino, Rhode Island Catholic Correspondent

WAKEFIELD — All four Gospels recount in their various ways how, with a mere five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus of Nazareth fed the tired thousands who'd come to him hungry, first for his words, then for a meal. Bushels of leftovers to spare left the Lord's apostles flabbergasted in the immediate aftermath.

Each week, to meet today's ever-growing demand for nourishment both nutritional and spiritual, volunteers from Wakefield's St. Francis of Assisi Church and several neighboring South County parishes feed multitudes as well. While perhaps not rising quite to the biblical level of the miraculous, these local acts of culinary charity nonetheless appear to be influenced by the divine.

"We know this was anointed by the Holy Spirit from the beginning. We all felt it," proclaims Father Albert D. Ranallo, Jr. pastor of St. Francis. "We just knew it was going to be okay." What he and his burgeoning team couldn't possibly have known six years ago at the outset of this increasingly vital ministry is how comprehensive and essential it would become to their community.

As evidence, Bishop of Providence Bruce A. Lewandowski, C.Ss.R., joined Father Ranallo and his congregation to celebrate the 11 a.m. Holy Mass at St. Francis this past Father's Day. Afterward, the bishop served as guest of honor for a ribbon-cutting ceremony marking the official grand opening of the church's new airy, state-of-the-art food service space in a separate building on the premises, which has been operational since April 1. In addition to preparing meals and hosting guests, the location serves as headquarters for St. Francis' Kitchen of Hope ministry.

"Let's get really good at making heaven happen for everybody we meet," the bishop suggested in his homily. "And how do you do that? Well, you're doing it already in your parish. You're feeding hundreds of people, who are experiencing desperation, tremendous fear, anxiety, and stress, because they don't have basic needs—food or clothing or healthcare or the most important things, love and friendship. You're making heaven happen for them right here. Keep doing it. Make heaven real right here. So that everybody who comes here says, "Wow, heaven's here."

Kitchen of Hope's director, St. Francis parishioner Craig Marciniak, learned to cook throughout his 32 years as a Cranston firefighter. "We could make up to a thousand meals a day, if we had to. Hopefully it doesn't come to that, but our numbers," he observes, "are increasing steadily because of the need right now."

Despite its deserved reputation as an affluent part of the state, South County still requires food assistance for a variety of populations, as Marciniak details. "We don't just serve the homeless, but also the disabled, people who may be suffering from mental or physical illnesses, and a lot of elderly who are shut in."

Marciniak adds that many elderly residents, whose Social-Security-based fixed incomes can only be stretched so far amid rising prices, are further being forced from their homes as a result of wealthy out-of-staters descending on the area to purchase properties they then convert into revenue-generating rental opportunities.

To identify other needy people in their midst, the Kitchen of Hope team partners with South County Hospital, the non-profit Tri-County Community Action Agency, and South Kingstown Police Department's Emergency Medical Services (EMS).

"If somebody is being released from the hospital and going home by themselves, they might need a meal for a couple weeks because they're in a wheelchair or a walker. So, we've expanded where we're showing the love," Marciniak noted.

Like Jesus' parable about the mustard seed, Kitchen of Hope's smallest of beginnings—which Rhode Island Catholic newspaper chronicled a year ago—has yielded an enormous tree with branches that continue to spread.

To recap, in 2020, Marciniak and a handful of other St. Francis parishioners started volunteering on Wednesday evenings at a similar ministry—called Dinner Table—at nearby Peace Dale Congregational Church. A few weeks in, with demand far outpacing supply, their Protestant neighbors asked if St. Francis could host another night. Thus began the church's Friday program, with Mondays soon following. Relying initially on financial assistance from St. Vincent de Paul Society, St. Francis' few volunteers managed to handle the additional workload. Yet, the more meals they made, the more they were asked to make, an unrelenting cycle in which they quickly outgrew their insufficient former kitchen space.

St. Francis' new facility is both expansive and expensive. Costing three-quarters-of-a-million dollars to build, its annual food and utility costs will run well above \$100,000 just to maintain the Monday and Friday programs, with more services to come. Ninety-five percent of its meals are currently delivered to needy individuals and other church-based food programs across Rhode Island, but Marciniak says plans include implementing an in-person, bistro-style experience on Thursdays at St. Francis.

To find the funding, Kitchen of Hope first contacted interested philanthropists, but those external would-be benefactors attached a deal-breaking string, that the enterprise not be branded "faith based." Confident they're doing God's work in the kitchen, the St. Francis team ultimately raised the money themselves. "We had fundraisers, golf tournament, memorial bricks. Money started coming in," Father Ranallo explains. "Two particular churches, Christ the King and Saint Thomas More, gave us substantial amounts of money for this kitchen. Unprecedented. But it all came to fruition."

At the ribbon-cutting, the bishop revealed that the Catholic Foundation of Rhode Island would be contributing \$3,000 to Kitchen of Hope to help sustain its ongoing fundraising efforts. Yet, more works needs to be done. "It's one thing to raise all the money to build the kitchen," Marciniak notes, "but once it's built, you have to be able to get food for it. This is a quality meal, a full protein meal with starch and vegetable, dessert, and bread. Our average meal cost is under \$2 per person."

That's in part thanks to three local gardens that provide fresh produce to supplement the food supply, including one on the St. Francis grounds which has been dubbed Garden of Hope. The church's garden gets tended by volunteer parishioners and, during the summer months, children from the local Boys & Girls Club. Students from The Prout School also come to volunteer once a month as dessert bakers and in a third St. Francis ministry known as Light of Hope.

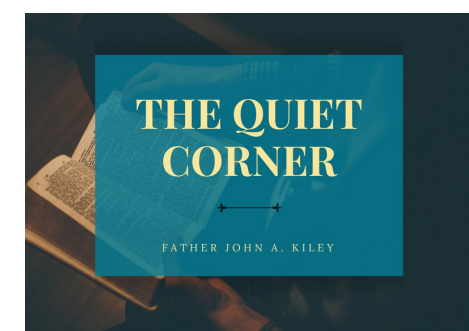
According to Marciniak and Father Ranallo, Light of Hope emerged when the meal delivery drivers frequently reported back about homes they'd visited that needed general maintenance, renovations, or simple yard cleanups. "Light of Hope worked out nice," Marciniak continues, "because a lot of people want to help, but they don't know what to do and they really don't want to cook. For people that worked with their hands their whole lives, this gives them a great opportunity."

Kitchen of Hope and its sister ministries are now approaching 250 volunteers, predominantly from St. Francis of Assisi, Narragansett's St. Thomas More and St. Mary Star of the Sea churches, and Christ the King Church in Kingston. Like Jesus' apostles, the Kitchen of Hope team first questioned how they would ever cater to so many with so little. "They don't need to go away," Jesus told his followers. "You give them something to eat." The Twelve did as commanded, a call now being heeded by Kitchen of Hope.

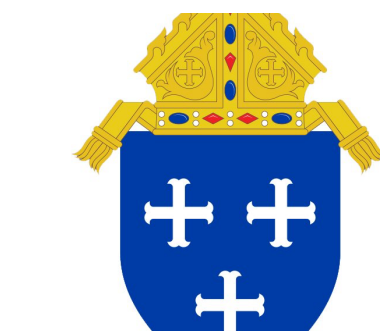
"It's funny," Marciniak observes, "because when we initially started this in the Congregational Church, we couldn't figure out how to cook for just 70 people, but we managed. We heard a lot of people say, 'I can't believe you guys are Catholics. Really. I've never seen Catholics do this type of stuff before.' I was taken a little aback by that. To me, it's what we're supposed to do, to show the love of Christ to everybody, however we do it."



OTHER ITEMS THAT MAY INTEREST YOU



From Fisherman to First Bishop



Assignments 08.20.26



Around the Diocese: Weekly Event Guide



St. Francis of Assisi in Wakefield christens new ...