

# **An Interview with Dwight Thiemann**

## **Executive Director of Barnabas Community**

By Julie Hestermann, Christian Education Network of the ELCA



### **Community Information**

Barnabas Community is located in the Belmont area of Lincoln, Nebraska. Lincoln has a population of 290,000.

### **How did this mission begin?**

The Lincoln Police Department was searching for a solution to lower petty crimes that were rising in the Belmont area of Lincoln. LPD felt that if basic resources were provided to residents, petty crimes would decline. Through a series of connections, Sheridan Lutheran Church agreed to partner with the People's City Mission to begin a distribution site and in 2008, Barnabas Project was founded. Barnabas Project quickly grew and the need for a community center became evident. A larger location within blocks of the original distribution center became available at the same time as the need which made the decision to move clear. With the move, a new name of Barnabas Community was chosen to reflect the growing mission.



### **Describe the mission of Barnabas Community.**

*Our mission is to live out Christ's compassion and love by sharing with all as a community.*

This mission is lived out through several offerings and services:

Barnabas Community is one of only a few of Lincoln's free stores. The store offers clothing, books, toys, and household items. Shoppers can shop once a week and are limited to the number of items they can shop for.

Meal ministry is a special part of the mission of Barnabas Community. The additional space in the new location provided the ability to start a meal ministry on Thursday nights and Saturday mornings. All meals are free and everyone is welcome.

Worship with Holy Communion is offered weekly and is attended by an average of 45-50 people.

Additional offerings include weekly Bible study, Foodnet distribution, immigration resources and referrals.

### **What has been the response to what you are doing?**

The pandemic has grown this ministry immensely.

- 8,500 guests were served in 2019
- 15,700 guests were served in 2021
- 20,000+ will be served in 2022

As the numbers reflect, the response from guests has been very positive and the need continues to grow.

### **What has been the most positive outcome of this initiative? What was the most unexpected outcome?**

There are times when people make incorrect assumptions about poverty. One of the most positive outcomes of Barnabas Community is that it shines a light on a depressed area of town and brings the stories to the rest of the city.

One of the most unexpected outcomes has been the sense of community and camaraderie between the guests, volunteers, and staff. Another unexpected outcome has been how the line between guests and volunteers has blurred. Many guests have been eager to volunteer and serve.

### **What would you change about this mission and what are your next steps?**

Space constraints are the biggest hindrance to the ministry at Barnabas Community. There is also always a need for more volunteers.

One of the next steps for Barnabas Community might be adding on to the current location or moving to a larger space to keep up with growth and to have space for future needs. Additional paid staff would also be a helpful next step to offer additional programming and services.

### **What advice would you give someone hoping to start something similar in their congregation?**

Don't have a preconceived notion of what it will become. Tunnel vision toward one mission will limit what else is out there and what God has planned for your mission.

For more information about Barnabas Community visit their website at

<https://barnabascommunity.org/>