

A Generous Soul in Chicago

Eddie R. Martin, a 75-year-old pastor with a small congregation and no salary, has fed more than 100 people a week for the last five years.

Collard greens, pinto beans, corn bread, string beans. Soul food. Stick-to-your-ribs cuisine. It's the kind of food the Rev. Eddie R. Martin, pastor of Mount Carmel Ridge Baptist Church in the inner city of Chicago, serves every Wednesday to more than 100 people in desperate need of nourishment.

He knows people need food for the soul, too. That's why before the long line forms and lunch is served, the men and women sit in the church's pews and listen to a Bible study usually taught by the founding pastor's wife, Rosie Harris, 82. After Harris ministers to the guests' spiritual needs, they dig into the food prepared by Martin and his dedicated team of volunteers.

Many of the people who come for lunch are facing hard times caused by unfortunate circumstances or poor choices. Some are homeless; others are drug addicts or prostitutes. Some just can't make ends meet. Attendance is usually higher at the end of the month when food stamps have run out. The predominantly African American neighborhood where the church is located has a high unemployment rate, and the annual income for a family of five averages \$12,000-\$14,000.

In the five years that Martin, 75, has led the feeding ministry, he and his team have not missed serving a weekly meal, despite their limited funding. The local food pantry supplies some of the food, and the 107 church members give what they can to support the outreach. But a good portion of the money for food and supplies comes out of Martin's own

pocket, and he draws no salary from the church.

“It’s not easy, but God is good,” Martin says. “The neighborhood changes, and people come and go, but I enjoy being able to help somebody. I’ve learned how to treat people. I’ve never had to call the police on anyone. All my trust is in the Lord.”

Growing up in Georgia with seven brothers and one sister, Martin developed faith in God at an early age. His whole family was involved in church, and God was an important part of his life as a young boy. After graduating from high school, Martin served in the Army and fought in the Korean War. After settling in Chicago, he worked in the construction industry as a labor superintendent until his retirement 20 years ago.

Martin sensed God calling him into full-time ministry more than five years ago, though he lacked formal ministry training or a seminary degree. He believes “God makes the ministers, not schools.” The schooling he does receive week after week as pastor of an urban church is a lesson in trust and total dependence on God, knowing that He is the only one who can help people in desperate need.

As a participant in the African American Fellowship, a network of 108 Chicago pastors who support one another and receive ministry training, Martin is highly esteemed by other ministers.

“Rev. Martin has done a magnificent job with the feeding ministry,” says pastor Edward Clark of Good Hope Baptist Church and president of the fellowship. “He has made a difference in his community. People who don’t have food and

might be tempted to steal food to live now have a ministry to go to.”

In addition to the outreach on Wednesdays, Martin cares for 10 senior citizens in the church’s neighborhood. He delivers meals to them and helps in any way he can. He also feeds two families in need of assistance every Sunday after church. He collects clothing donations for them, too, and offers help with housing needs.

“Rev. Martin is a lighthouse in the neighborhood,” says Tom Kleinfeldt, church development director of the Chicago Metropolitan Baptist Association. “Others may see the people around his church as subhuman due to their rough lifestyle, but Rev. Martin shows kindness to the people he serves. He is an oasis and light for people living in darkness.”

Helping him to be a light are the faithful volunteers, including his wife of 15 years, Frances, and Alice Randle, who show up week after week to prepare and serve the food. Despite being diagnosed with bone cancer eight years ago and receiving chemotherapy treatments twice a week, Randle says her deep love for Jesus Christ motivates her to minister to the poor, no matter what.

“It’s a blessing to be a blessing,” she says. “The people we serve just need to be loved, and they need Jesus. The Lord has placed me here. I’m thankful I can be a part of it. It’s so fulfilling to make a difference in someone’s life. This church is in a strategic location for church work.”

And there’s plenty of work to do. In addition to the feeding ministry, Martin preaches every Sunday to a congregation that

has grown from just three members five years ago to more than 100 today.

“Anything you like to do, you don’t mind doing it,” says Martin, who has 16 children and is a grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather. “I can’t sit around. When I wake up, I have to move. I’m usually up at 3 a.m. with my coffee, studying the Bible and getting my message ready for Sunday.”

Martin’s first message at Mount Carmel came from James 2, focusing on verse 26: “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (NIV). The message came alive when the feeding ministry started soon after.

Not allowing his age, limited resources or a challenging environment to deter him from making a difference in people’s lives, Martin offers his community a tangible expression of his faith in Christ. Using the resources he has, Martin has seen lives turn around. Each year he baptizes more than a dozen men and women who not only had their physical needs met, but also their hunger for a relationship with God.

The way Martin sees it, that’s real food for the soul.

Kim R. Anderson is a freelance writer and author of several books. She and her husband, Eric, have two daughters and live in Algonquin, Illinois.

For more information about Eddie R. Martin’s feeding ministry, write to Mount Carmel Ridge Baptist Church 7326 S. Halsted St., Chicago, IL 60621; or call (773) 483-5067. Send tax-deductible contributions to Christian Life Missions, P.O. Box

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