

Economy Down, Food Pantries Up

2011 began bleak. With 13 million Americans unemployed, many middle-class families had to turn to an unfamiliar source to put food on the table: the church.

Many ministries such as Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida have recorded a 100 percent increase in the number of soup kitchens and pantries that they start to collect and distribute donated food.

In nearby Palm Bay, Fla., Walter Truss, head of Zion Christian Church's food pantry, says he's seen the local need for food pantries continually expand since he started working as a volunteer 10 years ago.

"I can remember when our church pantry was just a little hole-in-the-wall serving about seven families," he says. "Back then we gave out maybe 12 or 15 boxes of food a month. We stocked mostly peanut butter and cereal—things that people from the church gave us, or we had to buy the food retail."

By 2006, Truss says the pantry distributed about 100 boxes of food per week. Today it serves an estimated 300 families each week and recently started a mobile food delivery program.

"God's mandate is to feed the hungry and care for the needy. ... We take that mandate seriously," says Tom Walker, pastor of Zion Christian Church.