

PASIFIKA YOUTH TAKE HOME MADE MEALS TO THE STREETS

Onehunga Co-operating Parish youth group have found that service to the needy, gifted by young people in a heartfelt and non-judgmental way, has the power to transform both parties.

Last year, 36 members of the parish's youth group took part in a community initiative that saw 100 plates of food distributed to those in need.

Youth group members purchased food with their own money, cooked and transported the food themselves to homeless people living rough in both Auckland city centre and South Auckland. The idea was theirs and the input all theirs – not a cent had to be raised.

Last year was the initiative's third year. It was also the first time the youth group took hospitality to South Auckland, and while the 100 plates of food were gratefully received by those living on the streets, it was nowhere near enough.

Youth group leader Robert Harris says the need is increasing all the time, most noticeably among those communities served by the parish.

"Generally, there has always been a need to help the homeless in central Auckland, but it's now becoming more obvious in our own communities around South Auckland. It's closer to home. It strikes a real chord with our members.

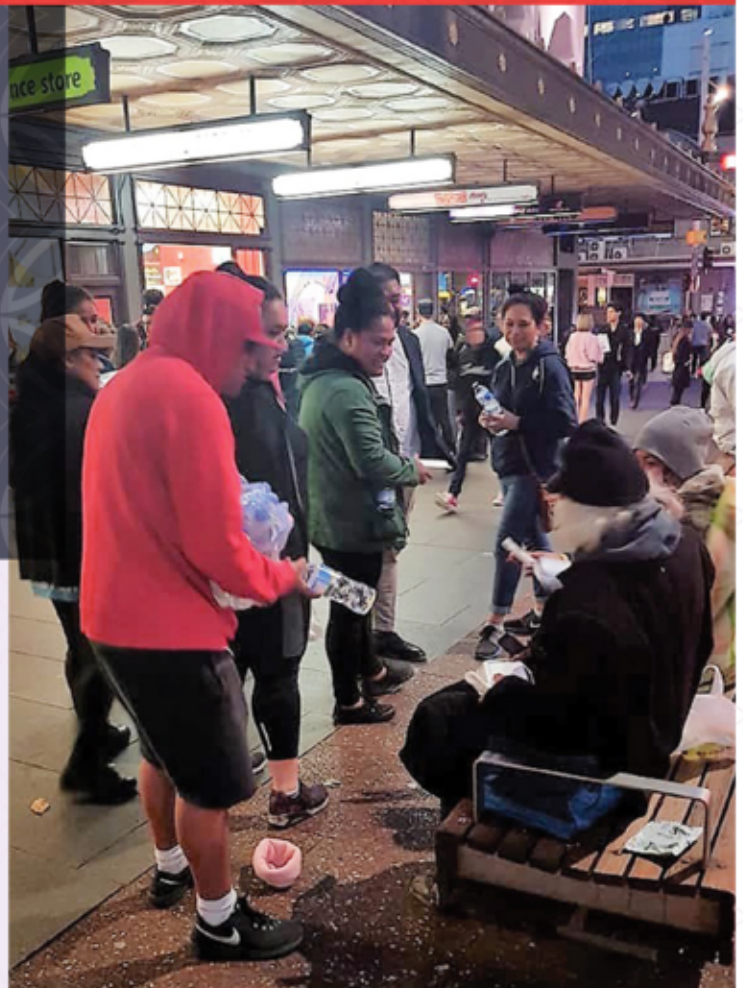
"Many of our youth come from large families; they understand hardship more than many other communities."

The youth group came up with the idea when looking for a faith-based community project that would bind them together in a practical form of service to those in need. It has since grown in leaps and bounds, so much so that when Robert announces the date on which the next food initiative is to be held, he says his numbers "skyrocket".

"They are that supportive," he says with pride, "and most often, it's those who have the least to give, who give the most. I just say we're doing it on such and such a day and they all rush to be involved. Our youth group members prepare the food at home and bring it to the church. We sort it there and then distribute it.

"I'm lucky in that I work for a transport company, so I can get the use of a couple of vans. Last year, we split into two groups of around 15 to 20 each. I try to make sure that each of our members gets a chance to personally hand over the food to someone in need – it's good for them to have that one-on-one contact with people they are helping."

In 2017, one group went into Auckland central while another distributed to areas in South Auckland, including Onehunga, Mangere East, Otahuhu and Manurewa.



Onehunga Co-operating Church's youth group offered food they bought and prepared, and drinks, to the homeless on Auckland's Queen Street.

Those on the receiving end are deeply grateful, Robert says. "Some do volunteer information on why they are there, others choose to say very little, often out of embarrassment, but they're all glad of the help."

Supporting the youth group initiative all the way is Onehunga Co-operating Parish minister, Rev Fakaofu Kaio. His heart swells with pride at the fact that the idea came from his parish's youth themselves, and that they turned down his offer to finance it through church funds.

"They wanted to give their own money, to make it their own. Ours is a multicultural community made up of several denominations, but at its heart is worship," he says. "Most of the youth group are Cook Islanders. I said to them from the start that there is no need for them to evangelise or preach through this initiative – it should simply be an initiative of love and care, and it is.

"It is wonderful to see our youth doing this, without judging those they are helping. You should see them afterwards, they are on a natural high."

Information from the communities themselves, and the world of social media, identifies areas of need each year, and measures are taken to ensure the safety of youth group members as they distribute the food.

Fakaofu sees the initiative as a "blossoming" within his church. "You can preach the word as much as you like. That is just part of it. But when I see something like this coming from the youth, it warms my heart."

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