

To Feed the Hungry, Keep the Can, Open a Wallet

By SUSAN DOMINUS

Ann Kansfield, who runs a weekly food pantry at the Greenpoint Reformed Church in Brooklyn, cannot bring herself to tell you this, so I will: She doesn't want your cans. As uncharitable as it sounds, she doesn't want your holiday food drives.

Pastor Ann Kansfield in the food pantry at Greenpoint Reformed Church in Brooklyn. She says money goes further than donated canned goods.

Don't be offended. She knows you are well meaning; just misguided, perhaps misinformed. Cans of food are for eating, or, if past their "best if used by" date, for discarding—but not ideal for donating.

Pastor Kansfield does not want the cans of water chestnuts and mandarin oranges that food drive donors from Park Slope seem keen on leaving. Nor can she use, thank you very much, the bottle of bloody mary mix that someone donated months ago, given that many of her clients have a complicated relationship with alcohol.

Food drives are an annual holiday tradition, as ubiquitous as eggnog but, it turns out, about as welcome in some corners as fruitcake. Pastor Ann, as she prefers to be called, does not want your cans because she, like you, hates waste, and she, like you, wants to feed hungry people.

Maybe you, or your church or synagogue or school or local bar or softball team, think that a can drive is the best way to combat waste: Surely someone should benefit from that coconut milk that is gathering dust on the bottom shelf? But there's a better way.

It's called the Food Bank for New York City, the prime source that Pastor Kansfield relies on for her Thursday afternoon food giveaways, which start at 3, though the line forms at 10 a.m. The Food Bank buys wholesale or fields bulk donations when a brand logo changes or the giving spirit hits some boardroom, and delivers to soup kitchens and food pantries. The Food Bank pays attention to nutrition and knows about needs: No bloody mary mix, for example.

At the Food Bank, \$50 could buy 200 boxes of cereal, Pastor Kansfield explained, as opposed to perhaps the 10 that donors to food drives could get for that much. She is moved by the generosity, the can-do impulse that propels local food drives, but is overwhelmed, as would be most small nonprofits, by the logistics.

"While the good deeds people want to do are heavenly, the inadvertent waste and the wasted money — they're of the devil," she said. Instead of collecting food, she urges those who ask: please collect money, and then give it to her food pantry for things she really needs (like garbage bags and a new sink) or to the Food Bank.

Not everyone is quite so averse to cans. Some in the hunger business point out that for many people, a can is all they can give. It might be something they paid for long ago, or they might be too embarrassed to write a check for the \$2.79 they would spend adding an extra can of soup to their grocery cart.

"I'm never going to say no to a food drive, because every little bit counts," said Mireille Massac, who runs a food pantry in Bedford-Stuyvesant. "But for those communities who can give more, I'd always prefer funds. What can I really do with 300 different kinds of cans?"

The Food Bank's Web site offers all sorts of resources and encouragement on how to organize food drives. But why? "Food drives open the door to many other opportunities to work with us," said Lisa Jakobsberg, the Food Bank's senior director of communications and marketing — opportunities, she said, like an online fund-raising drive so the Food Bank can buy more in bulk.

* Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, also encourages people to give money, not cans — and not just to organizations that distribute food, but to those that do outreach to enroll people who qualify for food stamps, or to those that advocate more aggressively at the policy level to solve the problem of hunger.

"People need to understand just how minimal and humiliating charitable food-giving is as a response to the problem," Mr. Berg said. "Food drives account for less than 10 percent of all the food that's given away."

Yes, there is something satisfying about the "thunk" of a can in a brightly wrapped collection bin, something wonderful about the idea of taking a tin from your pantry that you don't need and bringing it to Pastor Kansfield for someone who does. It's something your kid can see and hold, unlike a donation that seems to evaporate into electronic ether.

But if we read online, flirt online, shop online, surely we could take satisfaction in giving online? So unless you are flat broke or want to be the group that the Food Bank is hoping will start with cans and end up virtual, or the one giving the people who run your local food pantry a headache, kick the can: Click "donate" and organize your friends to do the same.

And as for that old can of beans, make a pot of chili for a friend who has just been laid off or is laid up or just had a baby.