

## In hard times, soup kitchen struggles to meet the need

By Hilke Schellmann

At around noon last Monday, 13 tables in the nave of Chelsea's Church of the Holy Apostles were packed with men eating lunch at one of the city's largest public soup kitchens.

One visitor sat fully wrapped in a white cloth at the far side of the room, next to a golden microphone stand shaped like an eagle. He held a white napkin in front of his face while slowly eating his pasta. He didn't touch the cauliflower or the carrots.

Next to him sat an older, African-African man with a white beard, collapsed cheeks and a wrinkled face that spoke of years of hard work.

At another table in front of the altar sat Craig Ryan. He stood out in a black blazer and didn't mind taking the time to talk as he ate. Ryan had worked as a security guard for a subcontracting company at Bergdorf Goodman until four weeks ago, when he got laid off. He lost his apartment and has been sleeping outside or in a flophouse in Williamsburg. He depends on the Holy Apostles soup kitchen on Ninth Ave. for meals, he said, otherwise he couldn't pay the \$30 the hotel charges per night.

But Ryan is not the only person recently in need of a free meal, and Holy Apostles is not the only soup kitchen to see a rise in visitors during the economic downturn.

In a comprehensive survey on the subject released last week, the New York City Coalition Against Hunger found that across the five boroughs, emergency food programs are serving an average of 28 percent more people than a year ago. In November 2007, for instance, the volunteers at Holy Apostles served about 1,150 meals daily—a record number. That figure has risen by about 100 in November of this year.

"We are really worried," said Reverend Liz Maxwell, Holy Apostles' pastor, noting that operating the soup kitchen costs \$10,000 a day. "Our numbers go up in a time when our donors have to cut back," she said. "The foundations that help us have taken a hit."

Assemblymember Richard Gottfried recently proposed an increase in welfare benefits and state funding for emergency food programs, with the demand at soup kitchens and food pantries on the rise. Even with



A view of the soup kitchen inside Chelsea's Church of the Holy Apostles, which operates one of the largest free meal programs in the city.

*Chelsea Now photos by Jefferson Siegel*

significant cuts looming as the state budget deficit grows, Gottfried supports taxing the state's wealthiest residents to fund programs for its poorest citizens. He held a press conference at the church on Mon., Nov. 24, to call attention to the issue, noting that welfare benefits in the state have not been increased in 18 years and have fallen below 50 percent of the federal poverty level. The Assembly had included a 30 percent increase in welfare benefits in this year's budget, but it did not make it into the final budget resolution.

On another recent day, soup kitchen chef Chris O'Neill was serving pasta with kidney beans and ground beef, tuna, potato salad, cauliflower, green beans and carrots. For the entrée, he cooked 100 pounds of pasta and 180 pounds of beef in a pair of 40-gallon pots. For dessert the guests had a choice of applesauce and fried apples with cinammon. A man named Carlos was eating at Holy Apostles for the first time but declined to give his full name, because he is an illegal immigrant from Peru. He sat enjoying the pasta dish, allowing simply, "The food is good. The pasta—mmm."

By 12:30 p.m. the soup kitchen had closed for the day. The chef put the leftover food on a long table, and the 40 volunteers ate lunch together. Raymond Hernandez started volunteering four weeks ago and comes in twice a week. He heard about Holy Apostles' soup kitchen six weeks ago, when he needed help.

"I started coming as a person who needed food," Hernandez said, "and then I wanted to give back." This summer he lost his apartment, and he depends on the food given out by the soup kitchen to survive. But the community of volunteers gives him hope: This year, Holy Apostles had to turn away 800 people who wanted to volunteer on Thanksgiving—a record number.