

Shobi's Table History

From the Food Truck Church to a Pay-As-You-Can Cafe

Updated January 2025

Shobi's Table began in 2011 on the East Side of St Paul, MN as a mission development site of the St Paul Area Synod - ELCA. The first leader of Shobi's Table started with the goal of creating a congregation of folks who were unhoused so that they could have a faith community that reflected common life experience. Their meetings often included food, and the meal became a central focus of their church. There was a desire to make the church mobile, and an idea for a food truck was born. A few years later, a new leader was hired, and a food truck was generously donated by Mobile Action Ministries in 2014. On Thursdays, a lunch of calzones were baked and served by volunteers on Payne Ave, followed by a brief church service with word and sacrament. While the heart of the ministry was strong, the logistics were difficult to maintain, and Shobi's Table was put on pause by wider church leadership to reimagine a more sustainable way forward.

In 2018, a new Mission Developer was hired and the idea for a pay-as-you-can cafe was born. We became part of One World Everybody Eats, a national network of pay-what-you-can cafes. They had developed a booklet of how to open such a cafe, as well as a support system between cafe operators. It was and has been an excellent fit for the organization. A new vision and mission statement were developed, and it stepped into its new identity as a ministry of word and service, spreading the good news through a good meal and genuine connection.

Vision: Shobi's Table is a common table where all are fed in body and soul.

Mission: Shobi's Table is a kitchen-based community who works together towards daily and sustainable justice, mercy and love made edible and available to everyone.

The ministry began slowly to adapt to a sustainable model. A new location was chosen (as the old one was close to another meal program). We shared our first lunch in May of 2019 on the corner of Rice and Sherburne by the Capitol/Rice district, following a schedule of the first and third Tuesdays each month. All the meals were made on Monday evenings by volunteers at Community Cooking Nights. The menu was expanded to soups, salads, baked goods and sandwiches - all made from-scratch. When the weather got cold, we put the truck away and welcomed folks to dine inside at Christ on Capitol Hill, the closest Lutheran church. We also did quite a bit of catering to let the wider community know that we were back, show them the new food we made, and create some income to support the revitalized ministry.

Shobi's Table was slated to also be the first tenant of the newly remodeled commercial kitchen at Christ on Capitol Hill, and was planning to move in in March. As soon as the new kitchen was finished, the COVID pandemic set in. At first, like many others, we took time to shut down as we weren't sure how to manage during a pandemic. However, we soon saw the pandemic revealing a deep need for free meals. In a way, the pandemic was a gift to us as it reset our priorities. With all of our catering events canceled, we decided to move to weekly lunches. The corner at Rice and Sherburne was almost vacant with everyone hunkered down, so we sought out a new location. In April of 2020 we started serving every Friday at Bethlehem in the Midway near Snelling and University. This is where Open Hands serves lunch every Monday and Wednesday, so we thought folks would already be familiar with that location to get a free meal. In May of 2020, we also started serving every Thursday in Frogtown at Faith Lutheran. By mid-summer both sites were growing - serving anywhere from 30-75 meals each day.

Throughout that year, we saw more activity coming back to Rice and Sherburne, so we decided to begin serving there again (close by in the parking lot of Christ on Capitol Hill) every Tuesday beginning in June of 2021. In 2020 and 2021, since the pandemic was still making indoor service unpredictable, we decided to stay outside in the winters. While the truck was put away (we do not have indoor storage to keep it out of the snow and ice), we served lunch from a table outside.

In the spring of 2023, we discerned the addition of a fourth site. We asked our community for suggestions of where we should go, and we narrowed down the list to four possible locations. After one day of site visits and another of prayer and discussion, we decided on the corner of Rice and Larpenteur. This was a significant location, especially as many people were doing so much work to reinvigorate the neighborhood. Like our other sites, it is a neighborhood that has known the harsh reality of poverty and violence. It was a relief when the Lamplighter adult club was closed the year before we came. Even amidst these hard realities, the neighborhood that knows the brilliance and bustle of new life and resurrection. It is an immigrant hub - including many apartment buildings, a thrift store, laundromats, and shopping centers. A thriving community garden sits just up the street. In September, we were finally ready to begin, adding Wednesdays to our weekly rotation.

In 2023 we served a total of 6,489 pay-as-you-can meals. In 2024, we nearly doubled that by serving 12,689! This ministry is becoming more and more essential to the ecology of hunger solutions and opportunities for real connection. We have a host of folks we see on a regular basis, and we always see new people. Our community is growing, and we are always excited when someone says they came because someone else recommended us.

Both volunteers and staff have been essential parts to the strength of this ministry. Staff provide dependable kitchen, business and fundraising infrastructure to run a weekly

lunch program. Volunteers fill that infrastructure in with many hours of chopping, portioning, dish washing, cleaning, and hospitality to one another and cafe guests. We couldn't make this pay-as-you-can cafe work without either group.

Our community includes our staff, our volunteers, those who pray for and those who give to Shobi's Table, and especially our beloved cafe guests. Shobi's Table is not just a meal program for poor people - it is a dignified cafe for everyone, and we depend on people from all walks of life coming to share lunch. Our clientele range from folks who live in the neighborhoods where we serve - both those who are housed and those who are unhoused. We see plenty of people who work in the neighborhood come, as well as those who are just passing through and see our truck.

Our cafe community is a diverse group economically, socially and racially, and we seek to genuinely make connections and build relationships among these beautiful people. Our current staff and board of directors are entirely white. We want to do better at reflecting the actual community where we serve. We are aware of the anti-racism work we need to do towards building a more inclusive community that reflects the actual neighborhoods where we serve. We want to do this through building genuine relationships, self-reflection and active learning, avoiding tokenism and empty promises.

We have come far in the last six years of ministry, and are continuing to discern new growth. Any new staff member is welcomed into the process of discernment, working to build any infrastructure that will foster new growth, and prayerfully engage questions of how, when and what growth will occur. In the future, we hope to add a Supper Church meal. Other possible growth opportunities include a satellite kitchen program, more lunch serving days, consider other food-based ministry programs such as frozen meal programs and job-training, and exploring a second food truck or a brick-and-mortar cafe. The pace of this growth will be determined by prayerful discernment and a desire to maintain a joyful, adaptable and sustainable present moment in ministry.