



IN THE NAME OF CHRIST

THE SOUTH AFRICAN FILL-A-BAG FEED-A-FAMILY FEEDING SCHEME

A Christ-Centered Feeding Scheme

c/o St Martin-In-The-Fields
16 King Street, Irene
PO Box 112
Irene, 0062

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History

What is the Fill-a-Bag Feed-a-Family (FABFAF) project? Where did it all begin? All churchgoers at St Martin-In-The-Fields Anglican Church, Irene, Centurion, Gauteng will be aware of filled bags deposited by certain parishioners at the back of the church near the baptismal font. They may be aware of the occasional appeal made by members of the FABFAF committee for parishioners to contribute to it, or to link their Makro (A South African Retail Group) cards to the scheme. They may even have noticed a list of donors at the back of the church with ticks made by donors, on a monthly basis.

How did it all start?

As part of his sabbatical from the University of South Africa, where he was Professor of Church History, Gerald Pillay and his wife, Nirri, who lectured law to University of Pretoria extramural students, went to the United States about 1992. During their stay they were invited to visit the Mennonite community in Pennsylvania, which derives its name from Simon Menno, leader of a group of Christians at the time of the Reformation who suffered persecution because of their commitment to non-violence. They have a deep and abiding commitment to social justice and reconciliation.

On a practical level their beliefs find expression in the mobilisation of help in any crisis. They gear themselves to react quickly in sending help whenever necessary and have earned a reputation for being among the first to be on the scene to care for casualties in any national disaster. With a typical New Testament attitude, they seek no advertisement or reward – it is a matter of the left hand not knowing what the right hand does.

Gerald and Nirri's attention was in particular piqued by one of the Mennonite projects, which was to have on hand a supply of empty bags which they could send out to be filled with essential food items the moment a crisis broke. So, if there was an earthquake in Latin America, for example, the Mennonites would put out a call to fill 2,000 bags, which would be shipped out at first notice.



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Gerald and Nirri, who were parishioners at St Martin's Church, believed that they could adapt the Mennonite plan for South Africa, and motivate people to fill bags with a list of groceries printed on the outside of the bag. This would have a number of positive spinoffs. Many people in South Africa feel awkward about how to deal with the large number of beggars who confront them daily at traffic lights and road intersections. To simply dole out money may, for example, be aiding drug dependency. They felt that by adopting the scheme they could help to feed the poor, while at the same time not feeling bad in saying no to beggars. It would also have a beneficial spinoff in that, if people made the shopping for the ingredients part of their own shopping programme (a monthly food tithe), they would become more aware of the poor and hungry.

As far as the contents of the bag are concerned, the items chosen to fill the bags were the basic foods that the poorest of the poor would find the most essential in their lives. Dr Dick Brombacher, at the time a resident of Irene, had a nutritionist at his hospital draw up a list of non-perishable items that were nutritionally sound, and which met the needs of the people where they were. The object of the FABFAF scheme is for each bag to provide basic nutrition for ten meals for a family of four.

In 1993 the scheme was presented to a group for parishioners from St Martin's who enthusiastically supported the idea, and together committed themselves to contributing 12 filled bags every month. SAPPI (A South African company listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange producing wood pulp and paper i.e. "South African pulp and paper industries") agreed to donate the paper for the bags and NAMPAK (A South African Company linked to SAPPI which produces paper products) made up the bags and printed the list of ingredients on the cover, all at no cost. More recently, with amalgamations and changes in company ownership, MPACT PAPER provides the paper for the bags while NAMPAK SACKS does the printing on the bags, still at no cost!

The Pillays continued to play a major role in the scheme until Gerald accepted a post in New Zealand. He is at present Rector of Liverpool Hope University in England.



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One of the most important considerations in issuing bags is to make sure that they actually go to the people for whom they are intended, the very poor, and that the system is not abused. The great majority of the bags are channelled through a mission of Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity, which is based in Klipgat, a needy community approximately 60 kilometres North West of Pretoria, and is in close touch with the families in the neighbourhood. It is thus able to identify the most needy, and to ensure that they actually receive the food. The Missionaries of Charity issue little booklets to families they have identified as being the most needy. On a specified day, usually a Monday, those with books are advised that bags will be available. The book of every recipient is signed by one of the Sisters. The Sisters monitor bookholders on a continuous basis. The help given is meant to be temporary, for families who have fallen on hard times and are battling to get back on their feet. Once they are back on their feet, their books are given to others. For example, some time ago the Missionaries of Charity were made aware of two brothers in their area whose parents had died of Aids, and who were looking after their two younger sisters. In another case, the Sisters were made aware of four children who were living with their mother who was dying of Aids. They had absolutely nothing to eat and were destitute.

From the original 12 bags the Missionaries of Charity received, at present they receive and distribute some 240 bags a month to people near their Mission. Cornwall Hill College, based in Centurion, has adopted the Mission as one of their outreach programmes and is a major donor. They transport 100 bags to the mission every month. A further 40 bags are provided by Southdowns College, another Centurion based school. The remaining 100 bags are provided by donors, many of whom are parishioners of St Martin's. Some of these bags are brought to the church and others are filled by the FABFAF Feeding Scheme Committee with money provided by donors.

The pupils of Irene Primary and Little Oak Montessori School donate bags on a regular basis. Until recently, consistent support came from St Stephen's Anglican Church in Lyttelton, Centurion, while the 10 members of the Highveld Presbyterian Church donated 25 bags a month until the task became too burdensome financially and they reluctantly withdrew from the scheme. In 2014, 1257 bags were delivered to the Mission from FABFAF, and a further 1200 bags were delivered by Cornwall Hill College.



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Over the years, the pattern of beneficiaries has changed as new needy groups have been identified and the other groups have fallen away for various reasons. For example, the recipients of bags in 2014 over and about the Klipgat community were as follows:

- **The Aganang Research Project: (113 bags)** This project was situated at the Kalafong Hospital, Atteridgeville, Pretoria. Aganang means “Let’s work together”. The objective of the research project was to identify ways to improve the services that are offered to women who are HIV positive and pregnant, with the purpose of reducing the risk of transmission of HIV to the unborn infant. The bags were given to the poorest families involved in the project to help them to fight off hunger. This project finalised its research objectives during 2014 and was closed down. As a result this avenue to supply bags to needy families was unfortunately closed.
- **The Municipal TB Clinic in Olievenhoutbosch (132 bags) (20 kilometres south of Pretoria)**
Tuberculosis and poverty are closely linked. Many of the patients with TB are under-nourished and there are always patients who need a nutritional boost from a FABFAF grocery-filled bag.
- **Tumelong (132 bags)**
Tumelong is the official outreach project for the Anglican Diocese of Pretoria. St Martin’s supports the project by supplying more than 5 bags a month to each of five families living in Phonelong, an informal settlement forming part of Klipgat. These bags, and often additional ones, are supplied via FABFAF.
- **Siyanqoba Feeding Foundation (91 bags)**
Siyanqoba (meaning “We are the conquerors”) organisation was founded in 2009 in Olivienhoutbosch. It operates a training bakery, and a clothes-making business with a view to raising funds to buy food for needy families. It is also registered as a NPO with the Department of Social Development.



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Mrs Pam Smith and Mrs Patty Pitman, the Chairman and Vice-Chairperson in 2014 visited the Siyanqoba Feeding Foundation during the year and determined that it was responsibly and capably managed. It was then decided to donate bags to Siyanqoba as the closure of the Aganang Research Project had created an opening for a steady supply of bags. Siyanqoba have commented as follows:

“The full packets have helped families tremendously and they are very appreciative of it. Because we have so many different families in need, we rotate the donations to get them to help as many families as possible. Lizzy, the Founder of Siyanqoba, is a community Leader within Olievenhoutbosch and knows which families need the parcels the most.”

In 2015, Help Seniors has been added to the list of beneficiaries. Help Seniors originated because there are thousands of Older Persons in South Africa who have to fend for themselves in facing challenges on a daily basis i.e. poverty, health needs etc. Help Seniors operates in the inner city of Pretoria; it is also registered as a non-profit organisation with the Department of Social Development.

From its humble beginnings here at St Martin’s in 1993, with 12 parishioners collecting bags every month, Fill-a-Bag has truly been blessed by God and it has grown by leaps and bounds. An increasing and continually growing number of organisations countrywide have adopted this method to alleviate poverty, and all of them have identified their targets in their own particular areas of concern. It is even possible nowadays to buy a completely filled bag at a supermarket. There are a great variety of ways in which projects are organized. In one of the projects, for example, bags are given out on Saturday mornings, after a Church service, and only those who have attended the service are eligible for bags, although of course this is not the only qualification needed to obtain a bag!

The lifeblood of the FABFAF scheme is the wonderful support it enjoys from a wide variety of concerned individuals and organisations. So many people have given it their time and love. What would FABFAF have done had St Martin’s Church not given it space to store empty bags, sometimes up to 30,000 of them, or provided space to erect our “cages” in the storeroom at the back of the hall for the filled bags awaiting delivery?



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Although originally all bags for the whole of South Africa were distributed from Irene, as the scheme mushroomed it became impossible to do this. Since the bags are manufactured in Durban, it was thought best to obtain an overall co-ordinator there. He is Kim Elgie, a retired optometrist, who keeps a close watch on the bag situation! Every year co-ordinators in the various provinces consult with the main co-ordinator who places an order for bags with MPACT PAPER and NAMPACK SACKS. FABFAF, based on the previous year's filling of bags, orders bags on behalf of the various groups who participate in Gauteng, Limpopo and Mpumalanga. In total about 30,000 bags are delivered annually and distributed by FABFAF to participating groups in these areas.

Since its beginnings in 1993 the scheme has undergone numerous changes. In the early days of the Fill-a-Bag Feed-a-Family scheme, donors were encouraged to fill the bags themselves. Today many people contribute cash towards the purchase of the ingredients and members of the FABFAF committee buy the items and fill the bags on their behalf. All financial contributions are very welcome, as even modest inputs add up. The price of filling a bag varies from time to time and from supermarket chain to supermarket chain. Over the long run it has been found that Makro gives the best prices, particularly with the discounts they now pass on for purchases made on Makro cards that are endorsed in favour of Fill-a-Bag. Makro periodically passes a credit note to FABFAF, based on **all** Makro purchases on FABFAF-linked Makro cards.

In the past we have been able, with money donated to the scheme, to buy the required items for the bags, to make good a temporary shortfall if donors fail to hand their bags in at St Martin's timeously, that is, by the specified date.

FABFAF was registered by the Department of Social Development as a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) in terms of the Nonprofit Organisation Act, 1997 in 2013. It was also registered by the South African Revenue Service (SARS) as a Public Benefit Organisation (PBO) in terms of section 30 (3) of the Income Tax Act No 58 of 1962 in 2014. This development will enable donors to claim a tax deduction on donations made to FABFAF.



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The Pillays used to say that the feeding scheme was ongoing evidence that the “feeding of the five thousand” really did take place – innumerable small bits given so generously become miracles in the hands of the Master, and so we give thanks for all that has taken place.

Ken Smith

June 2015