



# Messiah Lutheran Church

## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

### Project Proposal: The Bread of Life Community Center

In 2020, the town of Rotterdam, New York will turn 200 years old. However, it's been in the last fifty years that the town, whose motto is "A Nice Place to Live," has seen its time of greatest challenge. Due to the macroeconomic challenges of globalization, automation and deindustrialization that have challenged many Upstate New York cities and towns, Rotterdam's job market and population steeply declined in the 1980s and 1990s and, despite strong local leadership, has struggled to rebound.

In large part due to the rapid redevelopment of the city of Schenectady, Rotterdam/Bellevue (adjacent ward, city of Schenectady) is serving as a displacement zone for those who can no longer afford to reside in the city. This socioeconomic reality, we believe, is one of the negative effects of gentrification and has created a culture of need in our community.

#### There is Great Need

The United Way's Asset Limited, Income Constrained Employed (ALICE) measurement demonstrates this. ALICE is a new way of defining and understanding the struggles of households that earn above the federal poverty level, but not enough to afford a bare-bones household budget.

For example, 7.5 percent of Rotterdam residents were below the poverty line<sup>1</sup>, but 50 percent are below the ALICE threshold.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, 38.4 percent of all school children in Rotterdam/Bellevue (Mohonasen and Schalmont districts, and Van Corlear Elementary) are eligible for free/reduced lunch, one of the widely used proxies to examine food insecurity within a community.<sup>3</sup> While data shows that Rotterdam/Bellevue is not an area of abject poverty, it is becoming a community of the working poor.



#### Messiah's Role in the Community

Messiah Lutheran Church has been part of the community for 92 years. A congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it sits at a central crossroads in Rotterdam, on a major bus route. Bucking national trends, Messiah has seen growth in attendance (79 percent increase) and membership (57 percent increase) in the past five years. We believe we are a radically welcoming, increasingly diverse and socially conscious congregation with deep roots in our community.

#### Our Response to the Issues

Alarmed by the growing rate of food insecurity in our nearby schools (Mohonasen district {middle and high school two miles away}; Schalmont district {middle and high school three miles away}; Van

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/rotterdamtownschenectadycountynewyork>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unitedforalice.org/new-york>

<sup>3</sup> <https://data.nysed.gov/>

Corlear Elementary, 0.5 miles), three years ago, we launched the Bread of Life Food Pantry. In 2018, we served 211 families a total of 6075 meals through a twice-a-month distribution program. This was an increase of 64 percent of families and 75 percent of meals over 2017.

Additionally, we have also increased service capacity by strengthening relationships with a wide variety of local nonprofits including Schenectady Community Ministries, the City Mission of Schenectady, Schenectady Concerned for the Hungry, Cornell Cooperative Extension, the New York State Council of Churches, the Labor-Religion Coalition of New York State, Schenectady Clergy Against Hate and the local Boys and Girls Club.

Our arts and culture programming, especially for youth and seniors is largely volunteer driven but rapidly growing. We have increasingly served as "safe space to have difficult conversations" for members and neighbors alike around a wide variety of local, regional and national social justice issues including immigration, racism, LGBTQIA rights, climate change, income inequality and more.

Our goals are to build on our successes and increase the services we can offer those in our community, as we continue to respond to growing need.

### **Helping Us Reach Our Goal**

There are two major hurdles that we must overcome to achieve our goals.

At the micro level, while the Messiah congregation, friends, and partner organizations, such as the Regional Food Bank, U.S. Postal Carriers, and Concerned for the Hungry have been incredibly generous donors, we must find new collaborators in order to meet the growing requests to our food pantry. This is especially true as we look to expand our offerings to include fresh produce, meats and dairy products - items that are critical to a healthy lifestyle.

At the macro level, space is increasingly becoming an issue. Our current food pantry space is less than 100 square feet in size. The pantry, along with our kitchen, community space, and restrooms are all in a portion of the building that is largely inaccessible to those with mobility limitations. This creates issues for our clients and our volunteers, of whom many are seniors, who are forced to carry heavy loads up and down stairs.

As part of a long-term strategy to increase our ability to serve the community, plans exist to address these issues, including a renovation of space and a relocation of the food pantry and kitchen and the development of a community meeting area and restrooms all on the building's main (ground) level.

### **Our Vision for the Future**

We believe we have great opportunities to develop a sustainable neighborhood in Rotterdam and nourish the hungry in body, mind and soul in three ways: 1) beginning a weekly food pantry distribution center; 2) leveraging partnerships to decrease the stigma surrounding food insecurity by providing a wide variety of self-improvement classes including cooking classes, self-advocacy training, gardening classes, arts and culture programming, senior exercise classes, yoga/ meditation classes and more; and 3) becoming a center of community where discussions and meetings can occur as, together, we bridge divides surrounding difficult issues of social concern together.

We look forward to discussing with you opportunities where we can work together to make this vision a reality. Together, we can work with the people of our community and help them build a better life for themselves and their families.