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 By HELEN ORDNER

"It is my belief," the Rev. Jeanne Wren said firmly, "that empty buildings do not glorify God."

Glorifying God is the aim of the minister of Panthersville Presbyterian Church — for herself and all of its 70 members.

The small church, sitting beside its graveyard, might be excused for lessening its activities — some in similar circumstances have either withered or moved away. Its members are aging; its Sunday School roll of children might fill a half-page.

It's a 90 percent white church in a 90 percent black neighborhood and hasn't been able to add many members to change that ratio.

The congregation at Panthersville Presbyterian, no matter how small, has a big mission. They have set out to feed the hungry.

The YMCA operates a day care center in the educational building; a mental health program has regular dinners there, but the biggest project is a food pantry.

Begun four years ago, it has become one of the three largest in the metro area, according to Mrs. Wren.

"God has blessed this church," she said. "This is what God wants this church to do; we've never had trouble getting money."

In 1987 the church, with its pastor the only salaried person, provided food to more than 9,000 persons.

Families who come to the church referred by the Family and Children Service receive food for four and a half days. Those who come without referral are given food for the day, and instructions on obtaining aid.

But, said Mrs. Wren, "I love

being able to break my rules. I always do."

PANTHERSVILLE workers can recite a litany of stories of the hungry they see, the stories they hear. They witness sickness, the misery of parents with no food for their children. They share the abuse, lost feeling of people who have never been without food before; who have never needed to know where to go for food stamps.

Mrs. Wren recalled two food pantry clients who "charmed" her. There was a deaf man, over 60, raising his five-year-old grandson. The grandfather had a job in Macon, but they had to get there, and needed food. The grandson "translated" the sign language the deaf man used, to the minister.

At the end, Mrs. Wren said she felt such warmth that she told them she would like to have a prayer.

"I closed my eyes, they had theirs open, for the child to sign to his grandfather. I said 'amen' and the little boy looked up at me. He didn't know how to do amen."

She also remembered the family which was trying to get to Florida. The young mother, her watery blue eyes and puffy skin showing the effects of malnourishment, was driving. Six-month-old twins, wearing only diapers in the chilly weather, were in the front seat beside her; others kids filled the back seat. She had the car heater on, to keep the babies warm.

Another client, a magazine-cover model type with two little girls, found herself down and out to the point that they were living in a car and she had to ask for food. She had moved to Atlanta to take advantage of an art scholarship which had been cancelled, leaving her without resources. They were invited to a church

supper which happened to be scheduled at that time and a church member took them into her home.

The woman soon found employment with one of the more prestigious Atlanta department stores.

Volunteers in the food pantry see mothers and children, out of food and about to be put on the street, after the man of the family has walked out. They see families who are victims of a drug abuser.

All kinds of people come to the church — people who burst into tears when sacks of food are bagged for them; they have been so terrified, "to be hungry is a frightening thing."

THE FOOD pantry couldn't operate without H. B. Pat Patterson, an elder in the church and food supply officer, or Brenda Gales the elder in charge of operating the pantry, Mrs. Wren said.

It is Mr. Patterson who makes the trips to round up the fresh vegetables and fruits, canned goods, the baby formula, meat, dried beans, rice, and other items they try to keep in quantity. They also like to give out peanut butter, but "that's very expensive."

There are some donations, some comes from the Food Bank, and from other sources with good prices which he cultivates and carefully shops.

They sometimes see 16 families a day during operating hours. Some centers restrict their giving to certain zip codes but Panthersville follows a motto coined by the pastor's husband, George Wren: "When in doubt, give it out."

Lately, food pantry visitors from a larger area have sought out Panthersville. Money from a federal grant which Panthersville and many other similar sites receive had to be spent by Oct. 31.

This has left some pantries without food, according to workers at agencies which refer the needy. Some church centers have closed and others have consolidated.

Money from Panthersville's small membership is carefully hoarded for periods like this so that they won't have empty shelves when the hungry continue to confront them. During such lean periods, they are forced sometimes to give out less.

They also are aided by PATH, Presbyterian Answer To Hunger. The need is obvious for more food pantries, Mrs. Wren said, and "there is very little red tape."

Mr. Wren has written a paper to aid organizations wanting to establish a food pantry which can be obtained by telephoning the Christian Council of Metropolitan Atlanta, 622-2235. The Wrens are available to talk to groups wanting to aid the hungry.

THE CHURCH'S biggest problem has been obtaining and keeping volunteers to work in the pantry. They usually work two hours a day, once a week. They know the



Pat Patterson, church elder and food supply officer, restocks the pantry.

gratification of helping the hungry, but people burn out after four years. The church is facing the increasing frailness of an aging membership, with members in their 70's and up still serving their turns.

One story of a volunteer pair had a surprising happy ending. An elderly woman in the congregation, Mary, volunteered for pantry duty but she couldn't lift boxes or the bags of food.

A young black man, retarded and unable to read labels or instructions, could easily heft heavy boxes so they were paired and an affection grew between the two as they worked over the years.

Mary's health failed, and she was unable to continue. By that time however, with the personal attention and encouragement Larry had received, he had developed skills that enabled him to get a job for the first time in his life.

"After a while people who work here realize they are getting more than they give," Mrs. Wren said. "It happens to everyone. It makes us so grateful for what we have."

Mrs. Wren said that the Panthersville congregation will continue to welcome other volunteers in the community who take part, and she would like to share even more by having a foreign lan-

guage-speaking congregation use their facilities.

After all, they say, empty buildings are not serving God.

To assist Panthersville Church by volunteering or donating food: 241-3777.

To arrange food for the needy: Telephone Family and Children Services 371-3300.



The Rev. Jeanne Wren relaxes in her study with Sara.



• Mr. Ford's Father.

Pantherville Presbyterian Church -
made 75 years ago
(15th District, L.L. 120 or 121) ?
Corner of Candler Rd. + Flat Shoals Road.

Brought in by:
John G. Ford
6177 Rhythm Circle
Orlando, Fla. 32808

Group called the Farmer's Union.