

New Bedford Spotlight: Reverend Russ Chamberlain



by Edward
C. Dugan

The New Bedford Crawler Series: New Bedford as seen by the people who live and work there.

If you step up to the entrance to the *Mercy Meals and More* free community breakfast between 6:50 – 7:30am, it is likely that Reverend Russ Chamberlain will ask you, “Are you here to eat or here to work?”

When asked that question, I got the sense that regardless of how I answered, I would be a valued participant.

The meals at the Pilgrim Church Home are purposefully served restaurant-style that includes table service to show respect for those who come to eat.

Reverend Russ (or Reverend Bread as some call him) says that he can't take his Greek sailor's cap off when he goes out because people wouldn't recognize him without it. He was happy to sit down with me for an interview, but insisted that I also talked to the people who had come to eat and with those who came to serve the meals. He seemed quite proud of both, noting that many of the participants who had originally only planned a one-time visit for a meal had found the “more” in *Mercy Meals and More* and continued their involvement as a volunteer.

“That is Martin having breakfast over there. He originally came to the breakfasts looking for his estranged son. He didn’t find his son here, but now he feels that he has found a family.”



Rev Russ Chamberlain

After the breakfast was over, Martin led the chore of putting the chairs up on the tables. Martin explained that he usually came early to set up the chairs, but right now he had a back injury. He felt the importance of his contribution and did not want to completely miss doing his part.

Devon Burns, the owner of Destination Soups at 141 Union Street in New Bedford, volunteers his time one day per week. He comes in at 6am to help prepare the *Mercy Meals*, bringing his total work week up to sixty hours.

“It makes for a long day,” claims Burns, “but it is a small price to pay.”

When Reverend Russ approached Burns with a request for help with his “Super Bowl Supper” fundraiser, Devon was happy to help. Destination Soup donated the soups for people to sample for a small donation of \$5 to *Mercy Meals*.

Reverend Russ didn’t start life with reverence and devotion. His early life was filled with major challenges. Russ’s mother died when he was twelve and his father was an alcoholic who wasn’t home much. Russ’s anger took hold after his dad caused

the death of Russ's fiancé while driving drunk. Six months later Russ's father died. Russ rebelled. His anger and his hurt propelled him through some misguided years.



Mercy Meals Volunteers

Reverend Russ feels that God had an eye on him and consistently pulled people into his life to rescue him during hard times. His grandmother and Aunt Rose were positive influences during his youthful years. Reverend Meyers of a local church, finding a young "Rusty" sleeping in his congregation's church pews one night, made Russ a junior sextant so that Russ would have a key when he needed to sleep there.

David Wright, a local sea captain, saw potential in Russ and arranged for him to go to Alma College in Michigan. Russ's father refused to sign the papers, so Russ had to wait until his father died to continue his education. Russ also got some needed attention and advice from the "Freedom Farm," an outreach and fellowship organization in Bolton, MA where Russ had learned to play guitar.

After College Russ found work in social services. Russ likes to stress cooperation, not competition, amongst the agencies in service to the community.

"We have to be a good steward of what God gave us," declares Reverend Russ. "Hunger is a symptom of poverty, but we need not wait for an end of poverty to find innovative ways to end

hunger.”



Mercy Meals Kitchen

Sitting on my left at the *Mercy Meals* breakfast that morning was Karen, who had been coming to the breakfasts since she had been out of work due to heart trouble. Her demeanor suggested that she was not accustomed to being out of work. She had worked at St. Lukes hospital, and at one time worked for her uncle cleaning and grinding quahogs on the New Bedford docks. She was planning to visit city hall soon to find some interim work until she got better.

As I was talking with Karen, I was suddenly cautioned to be quiet. Reverend Russ had started his morning blessing. Suddenly the room went silent and all ears were on his words.

“We just ask you to be with us today lord to Bless the people who bless the lord. Amen.”

The reverend then announced some coming events and services available to those at the breakfast.

Mercy Meals and More is looking into becoming a non-profit organization so that they can apply for grants. Reverend Russ is cautious, though, about this step, for fear that the organizations that provide grants may have restrictions on the charities they can donate to.

“There would probably be some people who would take offense to what I did this morning, which was ask for a blessing. But

these people look to that blessing every day. And even though I say the same thing every day, if I don't do it, someone will ask the kitchen crew, 'Where is Grace?' The kitchen crew will respond with, 'I don't know. Ask Reverend Russ where Grace is.'"

Mercy Meals and More community breakfast runs Monday through Saturday from 7-7:30am at 634 Purchase St. in New Bedford. Volunteers include members of the Pilgrim United Church of Christ, Clear Vision and the New Bedford Cape Verdean Seventh-day Adventist Church, all housed in the Pilgrim Church building. The holidays are always a great time to add one more volunteer to the *Mercy Meals* help roster.

The Pilgrim United Church building is a historical structure originally built to service the families of sea captains. Reverend (Pastor Dave) David Hammett of the Pilgrim UCC and Rev. David Soto of the Clear Vision Christian Congregation are instrumental in the administration of *Mercy Meals and More*.

Over 1,800 people pass through the doors of the Pilgrim Church Home each week for a variety of services including *Mercy Meals*. More details can be found on the *Mercy Meals and More* website.