

# Annual inner city barbecue aims to feed spirit as well as body

For Keith Whitford, the Inner City Pastoral Ministry provides more than just a free meal. It has been a vital source of comfort and guidance through his many struggles.



**Keith Whitford**

“I was on the streets for numerous years. I did a couple years in jail. I was in detox in February and I’ve been on treatments for cancer the past three months,” said Whitford, an Edmonton resident who is currently battling both alcohol addiction and stomach cancer.

“I not only get a meal from coming here, they help me with bus tickets to go to my appointments. I got in touch with my social worker through the ministry, and I hope I can get work through here eventually.”

Every Sunday afternoon the ecumenical [Inner City Pastoral Ministry](#) hosts a worship service and free lunch at the Bissell Centre in downtown Edmonton. The Catholic organization [Society of St. Vincent de Paul](#) brought in 20 volunteers to provide an annual free barbecue for their Aug. 25 lunch. On average, more than 250 people living with poverty, homelessness, addictions and other difficulties are served each week.



**Pastor Rick Chapman**

Anglican Pastor Rick Chapman has been with the Inner City Ministry since 2007. He sees their work is increasingly focused on long-term support, not just short-term help like a weekly meal.

Quoting the Gospel of St. Luke, Chapman says the heart of their ministry is not just to feed the hungry, but to heal the broken-hearted and set people free of their afflictions.

“It’s one thing to feed the body, it’s another thing to feed the soul,” he said. “We try to be here for both spirit and body, and do what we can to help people in their soul-searching and mending. People are coming here with chronic situations – in mental health, addictions and other areas. So we can’t deal with chronic situations with just acute temporary solutions like a free meal.”

Keith Whitford adds: “I see Pastor Rick on a regular basis, and he’s always been helpful. Not just him – there’s so many people I’ve met through the ministry that have been a great source of help.”

The Inner City Pastoral Ministry has been serving the Edmonton area for more than 40 years. It’s sponsored by Anglican, Lutheran, United and Catholic churches of the city. The ministry also organizes retreats and sharing circles and helps people meet with other support groups like the George Spady Society and The Mustard Seed.

Maria Lupul, a vice-president with the Edmonton central council of Society of St. Vincent de Paul, has been volunteering for the Inner City Ministry since 2006. In addition to volunteers, the society provides all the food and materials when they host the barbecue each summer.

“It’s ultimately a way of coming down and saying ‘We care about you and we’re here for you,’” said Lupul. “It’s wonderful to share and do what we can to help others. The highlight for me is just knowing that everyone got to have something to eat and can leave here happy.”

This year’s barbecue was unique for the Inner City Ministry; it concluded with a baptism. Clarence O’Meera had come for a free meal, but he left as a baptized Christian.



Pastor Rick Chapman baptizes Clarence O'Meera with sponsor and social activist Jim Gurnett, the pastoral associate of the Inner City Pastoral Ministry. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

O'Meera had hoped to be baptized in the waters of Lac Ste. Anne during the [pilgrimage](#) held there every July. Having missed that opportunity, O'Meera approached Pastor Chapman and asked to be baptized.

"Finally I can confirm it – I've received the Holy Spirit," O'Meera said. "In case the world ends, at least I got my foot in the door!"

Chapman said his hope for the Inner City Ministry is not only to help those in poverty, but to encourage others to become a part of their efforts.

"The biggest challenge is communicating the needs of the people of the inner city to the wider church community," Chapman said. "There's often an attitude of 'us and them', when the message we offer here is not us and them, but 'we together', as a community.

"This offers a window into that community. When people see how thankful others are to have this support, they realize the people of the inner city are not so different from them."