



A Community's Story

One year ago, we introduced you to Debbie Wall Ross. After Debbie's husband passed away, she cried out to God in her loneliness, saying, "I don't want to live anymore". But a life-changing experience with Grief Share (a grief recovery support group) equipped her for her new chapter in life and empowered her to act as a lifeline to other widowed women.

Debbie's pastor, Harold Ware of First Baptist Church in Ada, Oklahoma, introduced Debbie to the Stand in the Gap for Widows ministry. She began by observing another Stand in the Gap for Widows partner, Beautiful Day ministry in Duncan, OK in action. Using the Stand in the Gap for Widows social events model and what she'd learned from Beautiful Day, Debbie has acted as event coordinator for monthly gatherings of hundreds of widows in the Ada community since 2015.

Through Pastor Ware's connections, Debbie partnered with other churches to share the hosting responsibilities. Today 16 churches (nearly every church

in town) have joined to support the widows of Pontotoc County, Oklahoma. Judy Quaid, a widow and banquet volunteer, says, "Each church has so many widows. It doesn't make any difference if it's a Catholic church or a Church of Christ church, as long as they want to get involved [they join the banquet team]." After the first several months, Debbie says, "We had churches come to us asking to host a banquet because their widows were attending and asking their churches, 'Why aren't we participating in this?'"

Pastor Ware is proud of the way his fellow ministers responded to the call to defend the widows. "There's been a community-wide effort to work together," he says, "and no competition between churches."

For one widow, the monthly social events are so significant that she is moving from Oklahoma City to Ada to be nearer her newfound community of widows. Ann Holman, a regular banquet attendee, has been widowed for three years. Widows "have a void now," she explains. "I live alone and my family doesn't live here. All I have is my church family and [the banquets]." At the banquets, "You don't feel like a stranger. You feel important," she says. "It's been





"It's been something that's been needed for a long time."

something that has been needed for a long time. We just didn't know it until we got started."

Based on statements like Ann's and her own experiences, Debbie is passionate about a widow's need for safe, engaging, social activities, but she is also passionate about the other programs offered through Stand in the Gap for Widows' "Toolkit". After nearly two years of coordinating the monthly banquets, Debbie is ready to expand her reach. She invited Stand in the Gap for Widows Program Manager, Buddy Stone, to Ada to introduce the toolkit to each church that participates in the widow banquets.

"Each church is taking the toolkit and implementing what they feel is appropriate for their church," Debbie says. She believes that once toolkit programs are operational, many participating churches will offer their services to any widow in the community.

Phil Dickinson was invited to learn about Stand in the Gap for Widows by his pastor at Crosspointe Church. Learning about the toolkit "brought the need of caring for widows to my attention" Phil says. "The more I got involved, the more I saw how great it is for our community."

Phil plans to implement two programs from the toolkit within his congregation.

First, Phil wants to open the church kitchen to widows (because cooking interesting food for one has its challenges). With their groceries purchased and meals planned ahead of time, widows will come to-

gether to cook seven or eight very large meals, then divide the food between everyone present. Each woman should end up with not only a week's worth of dinners to take home, but also a weekly social activity with other widows in her church family.

Based on another Stand in the Gap toolkit program, Phil also wants to rally the men's ministry to offer practical home maintenance support to widows. "I see maybe once every six months, finding out about widows who need a room painted or a tree cut down" and "getting a bunch of men together" to address those needs.

Ann Lane, a regular banquet attendee and member of First Methodist Church of Ada, attended the informational meeting to learn about the Stand in the Gap for Widows' Toolkit. Home maintenance "is such a problem," Ann says, "because I just hate to ask anybody for help and so I do all by myself. I'm 78-years-old. I don't need to be up on a ladder."

Phil is working with his pastor to implement these ministries this fall.

Because of the need Debbie saw in her own darkest moments, she has become passionate about serving widows through Stand in the Gap for Widows. And because of her pastor's willingness to share his vision with other pastors and church leaders, hundreds of widows in this small community are facing each day with a little more hope and a little less loneliness.

Debbie, Pastor Harold and the church community of Pontotoc County invite other churches to attend a monthly banquet to see first hand what a blessing this is to the widows of their community.