

The Giving Griddle is a community outreach ministry of First Presbyterian Church of Cookeville, serving free breakfasts every other Saturday to anyone in need. It brings together volunteers, churches, and local organizations to fight hunger, foster connection, and show God's love in action.

The Giving Griddle by Ron Ledbetter and Erica Scott

When Rev. Michael McLaughlin of First Presbyterian Church partnered with Pastors Tim Conder and Dan Rhodes of the Black Mountain School of Theology through a Lilly Endowment grant, the journey began as an exploration of how his congregation could grow—deepening their relationship with God, strengthening their bonds with one another and becoming more community connected. Through that season of reflection, one calling clear: to address hunger and homelessness in their own backyard.

That calling soon found hands and feet through Deacon Stacey Trent, who transformed the church's vision into action. Her idea was simple but full of heart — to serve hearty, homemade meals for anyone in need. From that spark, The Giving Griddle was born.

What began as a few Saturday breakfasts quickly grew into a beloved tradition. A dedicated team — including Dee Tompkins, Kelly Appleton, Sam and Diane Glasgow, Ron Ledbetter, Chris and Annabelle McCormick, Alex Bates, Alexis Alcorn, Dina Smith, Robert and Gail Brady, and Ben and Jill Marsee (to name a few)— joined Stacey to help turn that vision into reality. Together, they created more than just a meal; they built a gathering place filled with food, laughter, and friendship.

Volunteers plan menus and activities, cook, clean, and make sure no one leaves hungry. But The Giving Griddle is about far more than pancakes or omelets — it's about connection. Church members and guests sit side by side, sharing stories, music, and moments of hope that nourish the soul as much as the body.

More Than a Meal

On Saturday mornings, The Giving Griddle comes alive with the sounds of sizzling griddles, laughter, and music filling the air in the heart of downtown Cookeville. Between bites of breakfast, guests and volunteers play friendly games of cornhole or join in on arts and crafts, while others simply sit together, sharing stories over a beautiful meal. People strolling down the street often stop to offer kind words or donations. Before everyone leaves, take-home meals are available — a small way to ensure the warmth of the morning lingers a little longer.

At a recent gathering, members of UAW Local 1407 Community Service Committee (Atmus) helped assemble more than 120 sandwiches in record time. Even more inspiring, members of the homeless or temporarily unhoused community have stepped into leadership roles — setting up, serving, and cleaning alongside volunteers. Many volunteers now join Stacey on Fridays to help fill Blessing Backpacks for hungry children, building relationships and extending the spirit of The Giving Griddle throughout the week.

Partnerships with Purpose

The Giving Griddle is just one part of a larger web of compassion woven throughout Cookeville. First Presbyterian Church works hand in hand with Simon Flatt of the United Church of Cookeville and Cookeville Community Cares to connect friends with vital resources and support. Attorney John Nisbet, founder of The Rogers Project, helps individuals regain driver's licenses and IDs as a stepping-stone to obtain employment and housing. He recruited Attorney Donna Simpson and Erica Scott to assist those navigating the challenges of Social Security Disability. Legal Aid, Tennessee Department of Health and UCHRA also play key roles, offering ongoing help with medical, legal and housing concerns. And thanks to UCARTS, The Giving Griddle has even been added as a regular stop — making it easier for friends without transportation to join in.

Behind the scenes, Diane Glasgow keeps the Blessing Box and community refrigerator stocked. She works tirelessly and teams up with Tamika Parker at First United Methodist Church, Collegeside Church of Christ, and other congregations and organizations like Recovery Kitchen to coordinate food schedules and share resources. Meanwhile, Kelly Appleton and Dee Tompkins bring fresh eggs from their farm — a small, thoughtful gesture that makes every breakfast feel like home.

Be the Change

For Jill Marsee, moments like these are unforgettable. She recalls one guest leaving The Giving Griddle, saying, "When I'm feeling down over the next few days, I'll remember tonight — and that someone cares about me. Whether you need a meal or simply some company, everyone is welcome at The Giving Griddle," Jill adds, capturing the spirit of the mission. Come to as you are. Come to give. Come to be loved and served.

A heartfelt thank-you goes out to all who make this mission possible — especially Leman Marsee, who donated a new griddle when the need arose, and chefs Nick Trent, Josh Malone, and Ben Marsee, whose skill and generosity keep the griddles hot and the hearts warm.

Together, they embody the simple but powerful message that fuels it all: "Love God. Love people. Do something about it."

For more information or to volunteer, contact:

First Presbyterian Church of Cookeville

20 N Dixie Avenue, Cookeville, TN 38501

Email: ericascott0130@gmail.com or office@firstprescookeville.org

Phone: (931) 526-4424