



A guest receives lunch from the Feed My Poor food truck in MacArthur Park, just west of downtown Los Angeles. The truck, started as a ministry of Church of the Good Shepherd in Beverly Hills, serves meals to areas in Venice, Santa Monica, Westwood and Hollywood where many people are experiencing homelessness. (Tom Hoffarth)

by Tom Hoffarth

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

Los Angeles — March 26, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

A line of mostly Latino men and women stood some-30 deep on the sidewalk along a very busy stretch of Wilshire Boulevard when a bright yellow food truck pulled up next to the iconic MacArthur Park, just west of the downtown Los Angeles skyscrapers.

The bold blue letters on all sides of the truck were well known: Feed My Poor. So was the fact it parked at this spot every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at noontime.

This park has been [in the news](#) for its contribution to LA's fentanyl epidemic. Across the street stands an array of makeshift tarps and shelters. A group of men rolls dice on the sidewalk near a white SUV offering community health care. Loud music comes from a parked car.

Fr. Ed Benioff, pastor at [Church of the Good Shepherd](#) eight miles away in Beverly Hills, first greeted the security guard whose car was parked, saving the spot for the food truck. Then came hugs for two women who emerged from the vehicle.

Marisol Ortiz Perez joined her sister-in-law, Araceli Orta, on this trip. As part of a three-woman rotation that includes Perez's sister, Adriana Ortiz, they have staffed the truck full time since the program started in July 2021. Seven days a week, they coordinate food preparation in the mornings, drive to various locations to distribute some 300 hot meals over three hours, then drive back to Sun Valley.

'There are days we cry with them, but I know the mercy of God is coming to these people.'

—Marisol Ortiz Perez

[Tweet this](#)

The women lined up individual Styrofoam containers, scooped up yellow rice and topped it with mole de pollo (chicken in a spicy red sauce) that had been warming on the stove. Then they added salad and a bag of fruit from the refrigerator, and topped it off with a cheese bagel that had been warmed on the grill.

Unlike other food trucks that buzz through the city to service the lunch crowds, this one does not charge its guests.

When Benioff started the nonprofit organization [Feed My Poor](http://www.feedmypoor.com) in 2020 at the start of the pandemic, the idea was to gather a few volunteers to assemble ham and cheese sandwiches that they could give out in the neighborhood.

But it became obvious: Beverly Hills isn't really a prime area where people experiencing homelessness tend to gravitate. A [2022 count](#) tallied only 27 unhoused people in the community, and most neighbors know them by name and know their medication needs.



Fr. Ed Benioff, pastor at Church of the Good Shepherd in Beverly Hills, started Feed My Poor in 2020 at the start of the pandemic. (Tom Hoffarth)

"I just noticed how with everyone locked down and hoarding food and toilet paper, and everyone in shutdown mode, the homeless were being neglected," said Benioff, a Southern California native born in Hollywood who has been at Good Shepherd for nine years. "It may sound gross, but since the restaurants around town weren't operating, they weren't throwing food away that those in need could even access."

Benioff thought back to the time in his early 20s, when he was going through the RCIA program to convert to Catholicism, when he spent a year with the [Missionaries of Charity Brothers](#) serving the poor in downtown LA. The organization, founded by

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, adhered to the spirit of [Matthew 25](#) and the philosophy to go out and meet people where they are.

"We all have the brick-and-mortar places where they can come to you," Benioff said of local church parishes. "We needed to find them."

Making 600 sandwiches a day, seven days a week, the Good Shepherd community networked with neighboring faith communities — All Saints' Episcopal Church, Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church and Sinai Temple Los Angeles — to distribute them.

After nine months, Benioff took the bigger leap of faith.

In March 2021, he observed the growing army of food trucks that navigated city streets during the pandemic to take meals directly to customers. Why not mirror that process and bring healthful options to people experiencing food insecurity?



Marisol Ortiz Perez, right, and Araceli Orta prepare meals Feed My Poor distributes to unhoused people near LA's MacArthur Park. The nonprofit distributes about 300

meals there on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. (Tom Hoffarth)

Benioff's due diligence led him to decide that leasing a food truck for about \$3,000 a month was better than trying to buy one that would adhere to strict LA County requirements regarding food prep on a common lot, in addition to needing workers to degrease, maintain and undergo health inspections.

Factoring in a full-time paid staff, resourcing food in addition to what a local food bank donated, and the rising price of gas, the cost jumped to about \$40,000 a month.

The 2,100 hot meals distributed each week cost about \$5 each.

Benioff's simple requests for financial support from his parishioners, as well as many around town who see the yellow truck and contact them for more information, has allowed the program to remain uninterrupted for four years.

"I admit, if I'm not in Beverly Hills, this may not happen," said Benioff. "For a food truck, relying on volunteers is too demanding, and you need accountability and responsibility to make this work. We also go to some very tough places and we don't want to put anyone in harm's way."

The outreach has evolved into two phases: A sandwich making crew still produces about 400 a day and delivers them by van to regular stops in Venice, Santa Monica, Westwood and Hollywood, areas with many people experiencing [homelessness](#). That happens Monday through Saturday.

In addition to its three days at MacArthur Park, the food truck spends four days between two spots on LA's Skid Row, both very close to the [Los Angeles Catholic Worker Hospitality Kitchen](#). Feed The Poor outreach essentially fills in the days that LACW's hot meal kitchen is closed.



LA Auxiliary Bishop Matthew Elshoff talks with guests waiting for Feed My Poor's meals. Elshoff, a Capuchin friar, said the ministry provides people "a sense of dignity, a moment of hope." (Tom Hoffarth)

Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Matthew Elshoff, a Capuchin friar appointed as episcopal vicar to the Our Lady of the Angels Region of the archdiocese in July 2023, saw how various organizations ran successful food outreach programs in the neighborhood near the Watts-based St. Lawrence of Brindisi Catholic Church, where he was the pastor for five years.

As Elshoff went up and down the line at MacArthur Park greeting people headed to the food truck, he said he had an even more profound appreciation of just being present.

"People here might be seeking political asylum, or they're displaced from their homes in another city nearby," said Elshoff. "The complexity and challenges they

have in their lives gives me a sense of why we should be here with them — take this outreach to them. Talking and listening gives them a sense of dignity, a moment of hope, not feel loneliness."

Elsoff noted an "urgency" to such programs. "What Father Ed is doing may connect with other outreach programs we have at other parishes," he said. "We can network because we are stronger when we're working together."



Makeshift tarps and shelters line the street near MacArthur Park, where Feed My Poor's food truck parks three days a week. The park has been described as contributing to LA's fentanyl epidemic. (Tom Hoffarth)

Marisol Ortiz Perez's connection to this program became personal. She and her four children experienced homelessness, and it wasn't until her youngest was one week old that she finally found permanent shelter, she said. She and her children, now ages 21, 16, 12 and 8, live in Sylmar and attend St. Didacus Catholic Church.

"I was just a street seller of tamales when Fr. Ed brought me into this," said Ortiz Perez. "It's my turn to serve my brothers and sisters. God works in mysterious ways and I feel we are like this one little piece of rice that can provide. I've seen miracles happen."

Ortiz Perez says she is touched when a guest affectionately refers to her as *mija* ("my daughter").

"I feel like a mother to them, and they inspire me," said Ortiz Perez, who focuses on cooking and planning meals like chicken soup, pasta dishes or Lenten beans. "There are days we cry with them, but I know the mercy of God is coming to these people. We are just the instruments."

Sister-in-law Araceli Orta, who loads the truck and hands out the meals at the window, will see a familiar face and exclaim: "Good morning, papa!"

"I think I get most emotional when I see people with little children here," said Orta, who also has four children of her own. "That's really when it gets hard. Otherwise, I never tire of doing this. I love it."

Advertisement

Benioff marvels at how his Good Shepherd Catholic community, with about 1,300 parishioners, makes an impact in a neighborhood with a largely Jewish demographic. Good Shepherd was once known as the "Hollywood Catholic" church, where actors such as Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor and Rudolph Valentino frequented. Actor Mark Wahlberg is one of the Feed My Poor program's current supporters.

"They've been the saints for this," Benioff said. "They've answered a lot of prayers."

Benioff understands this food truck program isn't for everyone, but it's part of what he called "a Christian challenge not to be desensitized to this." He recommends that pastors can build an outreach ministry to the unhoused start with collecting donations for bread, cold cuts and bottled water. If they lack volunteers, they can donate money to Feed My Poor.

"I feel like I'm a surfer on a wave and will just keep riding this," Benioff said. "I'm just the loudmouth for it. It's God's thing, not mine."

[This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.]

This story appears in the **Catholic Responses to Homelessness** feature series.

[View the full series.](#)

A version of this story appeared in the **April 12-25, 2024** print issue under the headline: In LA, Catholic-run 'Feed My Poor' food truck serves meals, hope.