

# AGAPE 2023 - NEWSLETTER

At our 20th anniversary event in March, we celebrated that, as Agape, we are always “growing together.” We honored the foundation built over the past 20 years - solid roots of dignity, solidarity, justice, respect, and encounter. And we supported its enduring growth - praying and working for continued fruit to grow from those roots.

This summer was a continuation of celebrating our roots and stepping more fully into fruit. I am reminded again that the core of the mission is so solid, and it is this stability that enables us to expand. So much of what we do and why we do it is the same, now just on a bigger and more flourishing scale.

In all of these beautiful growth opportunities and initiatives, it always comes down to people. Encounter will always be the heart of this work, for the Divine is present in encounter. By reading this newsletter, I hope you are touched by the people and stories that are part of the Agape Family.

Thank you for being part of this family that is both rooted and growing.

- Kelsey Harrington, Director



A few highlights you will see in this newsletter:

- Our food bank was able to respond to the exponential growth in need - serving the most households we have ever served
- Refined services that affirm who we are - supporting families and individuals with initiatives like a kids play section and expanded taco stand at the food bank
- The most participants in our 20 year history - providing faith-in-action experiences for over 300 people
- Offering summer enrichment activities at 2 additional farmworker housing sites, leading to deeper relationships with the farmworker community
- Capacity to hire additional support staff - 2 chefs and 2 language-access specialists
- Ignite - a unique week of formation focused on community organizing through Catholic Social Teaching

## LET'S STAY CONNECTED

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**Website:** [archseattle.org/agape](https://www.archseattle.org/agape)

**YouTube:** [Agape Service Project](https://www.youtube.com/AgapeServiceProject)

## SUMMER 2023 BY THE NUMBERS

- 8 weeks of all wrap-around services, 7 weeks of service-learning programming, 11 weeks of Agape Food Bank
- 5 core staff members, 3 support staff
- 642 families served on average weekly at food bank
- 309 youth & adult Agape participants from 19 parishes/schools
- 40 different food & hygiene items offered at food bank weekly
- 507 backpacks fully stocked with school supplies distributed
- Over 11 hours of formation/prayer & 30 hours of direct service led by Agape staff for groups over the 5-day experience
- 9,050 tacos, 1,640 tamales, 350 burritos served over 11 weeks of the Agape Food Bank taco stand (thank you Chispita de Sabor & La Gloria Market)



**Students from St. Vincent de Paul serve tacos to guests at the food bank**

## ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS

A core of our services is offering activities for children at the farmworker housing sites. Since many children are left alone during the day and carry the responsibility of caring for their younger siblings, we provide lighthearted activities that invite everyone to access their inner child. Our expanded group sizes enabled expanded activity offerings to more housing sites, and there were definitely more kids ready to play. Lasting relationships were formed, as the culture of encounter was lived.

Both the children and the Agape students felt the power of being known throughout the week during our communal BBQ and daily activities including bubble wands, sharks and minnows, and bracelet making. Special activities including Lotería, creating personalized banners for homes & bedrooms, life-size Lincoln Logs, and the prized slime encouraged all into communal joy. Relationships are the core and meaning of our program, and these enrichment activities gave students many names and faces to contribute to their 'why' of encountering this community.



**A joy-filled game with the parachute, and new friends make slime**



**Group members from St. Louise helping distribute food boxes**

## MOBILE FOOD DISTRIBUTION

For 8 weeks, we delivered food to an average of 147 families weekly at 4 different farmworker housing sites around Whatcom County (a total of 1,183 households). A program of Bellingham Food Bank that Agape is blessed to be the hands and feet of, we are able to provide culturally-relevant food, diapers, baby food, and feminine products to their homes. This distribution is provided to help families have easier access to food as many experience challenges such as time, transportation, and lack of nutritious foods.



**Students from Holy Names Academy harvest with Bellingham Food Bank Gleaning**

## FARM WORK

Every week, the Agape staff and groups participate in a day of farm work. We specifically work on organic and justice-oriented farms to support a better version of agriculture and to care for and connect with creation. Throughout the summer, we harvested raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, kale, green beans, potatoes, and eliminated invasive plants (aka picked lots of weeds). Thank you to all the farms who hosted us and taught us so much!

## ADVOCACY

Agriculture is the only industry with labor laws that allow children as young as 12 to work with virtually no restrictions on the number of hours they spend in the fields outside of school. And after spending multiple days encountering and getting to know the farmworker families, our groups stepped into advocacy to try to change this. This balance of direct services and social justice is a critical component of Catholic Social Teaching. This year, students and adults used the power of their voice by writing letters to their representatives to bring awareness to H.R. 4046 - Children's Act for Responsible Employment and Farm Safety Act. This bill would bring age and work hour standards for children in agriculture up to the standards for children working in all other industries. We are grateful to and proud of our participants for engaging in advocacy and working for the dignity of our global family.



**Ignite was blessed to learn about solidarity from panelists Jose Ortiz (CCS), Maya Cruz (United Farm Worker), & Rosalinda Guillen (Community to Community)**

## IGNITE - AN AGAPE FIRST!

In a beautiful partnership with Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center and Catholic Community Services of Western Washington, the first ever in-person Ignite was hosted in Whatcom County! Ignite is a week-long, immersive, faith-based community organizing experience focused on service, leadership development, and spirituality. Catholic high school students from Los Angeles and Portland traveled to Bellingham to encounter the farmworker community of Whatcom County, participate in community organizing workshops and practices, build intentional faithful community among the group, enjoy the beauty of Bellingham, and commit to a year of community organizing around a social justice issue affecting their communities!

## STAFF TRAINING SESSIONS

The formation and empowerment of our young adult staff is a critical aspect of our mission. In the 2 months leading up to the summer start of Agape, our young adult staff met via Zoom weekly to receive training and formation in focus areas of Agape Service Project. From learning about community organizing to gaining a better understanding of what serving others does and does not mean, we are so thankful for our guest speakers who shared their time and wisdom with us: Terri Stewart (Head of Chaplaincy - Echo Glen), Will Rutt (Executive Director - Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center), Chris Koehler (Director - Missions and Immigrant Affairs, Archdiocese of Seattle), Susan Haarman (Associate Director for the Center for Engaged Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship - Loyola University Chicago), Ray Almanza (Young Adult Empowerment Team - Maryknoll Fathers & Brothers), Megan Kush (Campus Minister for Pastoral Care - Seattle University).

## 2023 AGAPE YOUNG ADULT STAFF

### **ROSA, 3rd Year**

I did not expect to return for a 3rd summer, but I am grateful I did. This summer I grew leadership skills - I led a whole food distribution process and helped youth meet other children weekly. This grace has helped bring communities together and relationships to flourish. Additionally, I was gifted with beautiful relationships. This year, I was able to prosper in my relationships with the migrant families. Through them I experienced immense Agape love. Many families knew my position during food bank days, which was check in. Check in is usually where I register them and ask them questions, but many always made sure to check in with me. I also received love from the children I played with weekly. They always made sure to give me hugs and laughter as we played. This love and growth I have experienced this year has been immense. I wish it was easier to transition out, but it's not, as I remember all the names and faces that brought me joy this summer. I am grateful to God for helping me return and experience His love from so many of His children this summer.

### **KATERI, 2nd Year**

Growth has taken root in the surrender for me. This summer I was able to plant seeds of selflessness in the practice of surrender, learning how to trust in the Creator's abundance. The fruit of that abundance was sown in the complete childlike joy of the migrant camps. Within these moments of encounter, I got to accompany many students in using their gifts to eagerly serve others. One of the most sacred moments was watching a student use her ASL skills to sign out animals during Lotería with Aldair, a joyful 10 year old who often needs more support and care due to his hearing aids. From the door steps of migrant housing during food distribution to the entire food supply at the food bank, students were empowered to be architects of change. Access points lead to action points, and I am beyond grateful to be a part of students' stories in understanding how to live a life for others. These moments of greater purpose will continue to resonate with me and inspire me far beyond this summer.

### **LIZVETH, 1st Year**

This summer, I learned that my Spanish is a gift and to be proud of it, even if it's not perfect. It allows me to communicate and get to know the families we are serving while making them feel comfortable and seen. I am constantly in awe of how much love is shown for one another. A youth named Kurt was pulling carts and helping families bring their food to their cars which is a very demanding job. He expressed that he was tired but kept working because he knew the families coming to our food bank were probably more tired and had been working longer than he had. I experienced love and grace when I was cleaning up lunch one day and Mr. Lopez (a chaperone) asked if I needed help and I said no and kept cleaning. When I looked up he was still there and rephrased his question to "May I help you?" This allowed me to be vulnerable and know that someone cares about me and wants to help me not because I needed help, but simply to not do it alone. I am so thankful for everyone I met this summer and am excited to return next year.

### **JOSEPH, 1st Year**

The openness and joy that I experienced from many of the migrant children proved to be infectious. It definitely helped open my own mind and heart to them further as the summer progressed, instead of merely forming a task-based relationship with them and their families. It amazes me that these children, despite their poverty and lack of stability in life from moving often - thus being 'transplanted' into a new environment away from the people they previously knew - are still not only open but eager to forming news bonds with our groups, despite knowing it will only be for the summer, or just a single week. From a small boy feeling comfortable enough to push me playfully (numerous times!) into the ball pit at our food bank, to a girl named Allison bestowing upon me the honorable title of "bestie". Surely the persistent joy of these, God's own children, proves to us our loving God's fidelity to our life circumstances, namely, that God gives even more grace to those whose lives are harder.

*Agape is honored to now be an official summer placement for seminarians of the Archdiocese of Seattle. We were blessed to have Joseph join us in the pilot year. In this mutually beneficial partnership, seminarians gain experience in youth ministry, encountering the farmworker community, & social services while greatly benefiting the Agape staff team & groups.*



## FOOD BANK UPDATE

Agape Food Bank has significantly moved from a project of Agape to a priority. This year, demand for food banks everywhere has escalated due to inflation and cuts to federal SNAP benefits. And as awareness of Agape Food Bank continues to expand among the Spanish-speaking community of Whatcom County, we no longer just see guests who are migratory nor only those who work in agriculture. We are the 2nd largest food bank in Whatcom when we are open for our 11-week season in the summer. Although we planned to serve 350 households weekly, we ended up serving an average of 642 households weekly - a total of 7,067 households and 24,245 people over 11 weeks. We are humbled to encounter this many people.

Food banks should not have to exist, but it is the current reality, so we will always strive to create the most dignified and joy-filled food access point possible. Because ultimately it is not about numbers, it is always about people. This year we leaned into refining what we do to make it better. The new kids play section was consistently full - providing parents the freedom to send their kiddos to burn energy or create art while they “shopped”. The music playing led to dance breaks and sing-alongs - by guests and volunteers. We offered unique items like spices and coffee for the first time - organic and fair trade from local roaster Tony’s Coffee.

There is a deep level of comfort that exists at our food bank. Agape students feel comfortable trying to speak Spanish to participate in building a spirit of hospitality. The kids who visit the food bank feel comfortable running up to the Agape students they’ve come to know during the week and asking them to play. Older kids who visit the food bank feel comfortable volunteering - distributing diapers and taking carts to cars - while their parents wait or “shop”. We work hard to build a spirit of familiarity, known-ness, and joy, and we deeply believe this is what happens when we authentically live our faith.

Providing the quality and quantity of culturally-relevant food items, diapers, feminine hygiene, etc. requires us to purchase almost everything we offer. This is our commitment to dignified food access so that those who harvest the food in our community can achieve their own nutrition security. We are grateful to the many foundations, grants, and group and individual donors who join us in this work and make it possible. Know that you play a critical role.



*Students from Christ the King & St. Joe's serve at the taco stand*



*The busy kids in the play & craft area*



*Some students with their new backpacks & school supplies*



*The littlest guests are always welcome*



*Spice section*

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Expansion of Operations: Our food bank ran for an additional 4 weeks this summer, critical especially knowing we are serving more year-round residents (vs. migratory).
- Clothing, Books, Toys Provided: Thank you to everyone who donated. These are highly requested & important resources to offer.
- Resource Hub: We strive for our food bank to be a “one-stop shop” for access to various social services. We were grateful to host 11 different organizations multiple times (see list on last page).
- Taco Stand: This has become a staple at our food bank, we have become known as “the food bank that gives you tacos”. Thanks to a grant from Food Lifeline we were able to purchase tables, chairs, and canopies to make the taco stand more of a space of rest and hospitality. This adds to the dignity and culture of joy we strive for. We are grateful to Chispita de Sabor for their delicious catering - visit their taco truck in Ferndale!
- 507 Backpacks: We have never been able to provide so many fully-stocked backpacks before - thank you donors!

## PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

### EMILY, ST. LOUISE (BELLEVUE)

“Again!!” is the golden word for the Agape Service Project. This summer, I had the opportunity to participate in the Agape Service Project where my youth group and I had the opportunity to meet and play with the kids at the farmworkers’ residence. On one of the service days, I got to meet Ashley. She was just 4 years old, but we quickly became friends as we built blocks as tall as we could. As we knocked them down, she would yell, “Again!” After she got bored of the blocks, which only lasted a total of 5 minutes, we moved on to the next thing, the swings. Just as we were about to slow down, she would yell, “Again!” So, I am officially convinced, “Again” is the golden word. Small interactions like the ones I had with Ashley brought so much joy and showed me the true meaning of Agape, to show God’s love.



Throughout the week, Agape provided other opportunities to show God’s love to others. We provided childcare, showed solidarity through farm work, and set up a food bank for the field workers’ families. Through these, I got the opportunity to meet the families that provide the fruits and vegetables that we often see in our grocery stores and on our tables. It was heartbreaking to see that these same people providing food for us could not enjoy the fruits of their own labor. Often, families are overworked, ignored, and underpaid. Agape Service Project educated our group on the systematic and social barriers that farmworkers face and how us, as teens, can work to combat it. This trip especially taught me that service and activism work together to provide farmworkers and their families the dignity that they deserve. It is up to us to recognize injustice and to educate others. As a community, we have the responsibility to reach out to corporations and government officials to provide a safe and equitable work environment. Most importantly, it is crucial to remember that both service and activism should be done with God’s love.

### EVAMARIA, OUR LADY OF THE LAKE & BISHOP BLANCHET HS (SEATTLE)

This summer I participated in the Agape Service Project for two weeks. I really enjoyed being able to meet new people through acts of service. I made many new friends within my group and also with the farmworker community. Everyone was patient and kind with each other in a way that I don’t always see in my day-to-day life. Although many people were total strangers, I was able to bond with them so easily because of the Agape Love we share.



There was one particular moment that highlighted this Agape Love. One Wednesday, when we were serving at the food bank, there was a moment that was so special, many people reflected on it during our group discussion that evening. We had already set up the food bank and served families for a few hours. With lots of people still coming in, we were on a roll. People were dancing to music, children were playing, and there was a smile on everyone's face. The sunlight filtered through the windows and cast the whole room in a warm glow. This moment of pure joy felt like heaven on earth. It was one of the few moments that I sensed God’s presence with me. Although it only lasted a few minutes, it will always be how I remember that day. Service work is complicated, and sometimes it’s overwhelming. You can get caught up in all of the problems people have. But when you stay in the moment and only think about connecting with others, that’s when you tune into Agape Love. I find great comfort in knowing that even on a hard day, I can choose to focus on connecting with the people around me and experience that little slice of heaven.

## ANGEL, VERBUM DEI JESUIT HS (LOS ANGELES)

Throughout the week, my group and I harvested kale and blueberries, prepared items for the food bank, we organized coffee and diapers, and drove to farmworker housing and invited families to visit the food bank. When Wednesday came, we woke up early to set up and run the food bank which was open 10am-6pm. Thursday, we had a barbeque with the kids we visited on Tuesday and invited kids out to play sports or decorate fridge animals and eat. I met 2 young kids who were fun to be around and brought laughter and a smile to all our faces. The first kid was named Edgar. He walked up to my group and joined us playing basketball. The other kid was Luis. One of my friends, Miguel, talked to him first and we learned he likes basketball. Miguel told him that he liked basketball too, so he started to teach Luis techniques on better shooting and other skills.



A moment that really impacted me the most was during the barbeque. I met a group of kids around my age and younger. It was a group of 5 or 6 kids and each one of them had a berry harvest job and would work early morning to afternoon or evening. This group of kids made me realize something - how hard life can be for other families and how many people take for granted what they have currently. Sometimes I am one of those people who take it for granted, but this trip has opened my eyes completely and has shown me that even though I believe I have a hard life, there are a lot of people who have it harder than me. But I also realized that no matter how hard of a life you have or how down you might be, if you have those close friends, like how they were, you can always have fun, no matter if it's at work or even at home. There's always joy if you are around those you trust.

## JULIAN, ADULT CHAPERONE, ST. VINCENT DE PAUL (FEDERAL WAY)

Agape - unconditional love, a greater form of love that is indescribable and can only truly be understood through a Christ-centered encounter. I, alongside the youth of my parish, had the privilege of encountering a higher form of love during our week serving with and for Agape Service Project this summer.

It was my first time serving with Agape, and for all of our youth, it was their first mission trek. We were all stepping into the unknown. However, after the first day's community BBQ at the migrant camp and our evening reflection, we knew this week would be full of intention, humanity, and encountering Christ.

A powerful moment I witnessed was with one of our youth - a 7th grader who was new to missions at our church. He's a phenomenal soccer player and had an ear-to-ear smile as he played with the kids at the camp. However, at that same time, his peripheral gaze was focused on people acquiring food boxes and navigating the little Spanish he knew from his parents speaking at home to communicate with community members. He did it all. Just like Jesus did it all. He bestowed a God-like love to the people he encountered - AGAPE.

It is a blessing every summer volunteering with the youth of my church to be the hands and feet of Christ, and being able to encounter my faith through service and solidarity with an unfamiliar community. I look forward to returning to Whatcom County with Agape in future summers, and I pray that everyone gets to experience both Agape and agape.



## THANK YOU!

**This work cannot happen without collaboration, and we are so grateful to our amazing partners and generous supporters! #BetterTogether**

- Food Bank and Distribution: Bellingham Food Bank, Lynden School District, Food Lifeline, Chispita de Sabor, CHS NW Lynden, Catholic Community Services' PREPARES & Hope House, American Heart Association, La Gloria Market, Project Hope Food Bank, SeaMar Community Health Centers - Farmworker Promotores Program, Builder Boards, Sustainable Whatcom Fund of the Whatcom Community Foundation, Albertsons Foundation Nourishing Neighbors, Puget Sound Energy Foundation, Eleanor and Henry Jansen Foundation
- Additional Agencies Present at Food Bank: Inspire Development Center, Opportunity Council, Department of Labor & Industries, Church of the Assumption, NWESD 189 Migrant Education, Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC) of Washington, USDOL-Wage and Hour Division, Skagit Legal Aid, Whatcom Center for Early Learning, National Alliance on Mental Illness Whatcom, Bellingham Food Bank
- Farms: Bellingham Country Gardens, Bellingham Food Bank Gleaning, Breckenridge Blueberries, Common Threads School Gardens, Christ the King Farm
- Operations: Church of the Assumption, Bellingham Public Schools, Sacred Heart Church, CYO Camps, WWU Newman Center, Camp Firwood, Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center, Burlington Automotive
- Agape Participant Communities: Holy Names Academy (Seattle), Kennedy Catholic HS (Burien), O'dea HS (Seattle), St. Vincent de Paul (Federal Way), Our Lady of the Lake (Seattle), Seton Catholic HS (Vancouver), Bishop Blanchet HS (Seattle), Christ the King (Seattle), St. Joseph (Seattle), Jesuit HS (Portland), Verbum Dei Jesuit HS (LA), Loyola HS (LA), Dolores Mission (LA), St. Joseph (Vancouver), Holy Family (Kirkland), St. Teresa of Calcutta (Woodinville), Sacred Heart (Bellingham), Church of the Assumption (Bellingham), Holy Cross (Lake Stevens), St. Louise (Bellevue), St. Madeleine Sophie (Bellevue)
- **All of our generous donors, volunteers, and supporters who carry us year-round**

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### With Immense Gratitude, The 2023 Staff

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