125 Years of Soup Kitchen

compassion soup kitchen
te pūaroha

HUPA

August 2026

A WORD FROM SAM

This year we proudly celebrate 125 years of the Compassion Soup Kitchen. To every volunteer, supporter, and donor who has supported and served alongside us - thank you. Since Meri Hōhepa Suzanne Aubert opened the soup kitchen in 1901, we've stood with Wellington through some of its toughest times, from the 1918 influenza pandemic and the Great Depression to more recently, COVID-19, when we continued serving those who needed us the most. Today, demand remains as high as ever, but thanks to your generosity and commitment, Suzanne Aubert's vision of compassion, dignity and hope continues to make a difference every single day.

Sam Johnson
Compassion Soup Kitchen Manager

CAROLYN

For Carolyn, volunteering at Compassion Soup Kitchen is a weekly rhythm of practical service which contributes to her own wellbeing.

A regular volunteer, she spends a couple of hours tidying the clothing room and works breakfast and dinner shifts in the dining room — serving meals, bread, tea and coffee, washing dishes, and setting up for the next day. She first came to the soup kitchen after retiring from full-time work. She says she wanted to give back to a community she already knew through the Sisters at the Home of Compassion via Te Kainga Catholic Community and Māori Miha. What keeps her there is connection. **"Once guests get to know and trust you, you can be a friendly face for them,"** she says. Volunteering has taught her to see dignity and goodness in people, echoing the philospher Tagore's words that service, once acted upon, can become joy. The hardest part is witnessing poverty up close. Carolyn says the soup kitchen reminds Wellingtonians that food insecurity "could happen to any one of us." Her hope for the future? That one day, a soup kitchen won't be needed at all.

BONNIE

Bonnie regularly volunteers on the dinner shift, and her favourite jobs are serving tea and washing dishes. Those moments — handing over a cup, collecting a plate — create a chance to connect: “It fills my bucket,” she says. Before Bonnie took up a role with Fundsorter, she was a chef. When Bonnie visited the Compassion Soup Kitchen for the first time, she immediately felt the warmth and intention behind every task. “I could see the compassion straight away,” she says. She signed up that same day and now volunteers every fortnight on the dinner shift with Chef Nory — who, she notes, has excellent taste in both music and food. One moment early in her volunteer journey has stayed with her. On her first shift, Bonnie learned that Chef Joe remembers whānau food preferences and quietly adjusts meals before they ask. To Bonnie, that small act represents something bigger: respecting people’s needs and offering compassion through food. **“It’s not just about feeding people,”** she says. **“It’s about nourishing them — their dignity, their preferences, a sense of being cared for.”**

ANDREW

When he’s not working in an Emergency Medical Team (EMT) as a nurse with the Red Cross or another humanitarian aid team in the Middle East, Ukraine, or Africa, Andrew can often be found at the soup kitchen in Wellington, getting stuck into whatever needs doing. He helps prepare meals, set tables, wash and dry dishes, and serve breakfast or dinner to whānau with the same dedication he brings to his medical work overseas. Andrew began mahi at the soup kitchen around eight years ago. Even though he travels frequently for humanitarian deployments — and is also writing his PhD at Massey University — Andrew says he will always make time to come in and volunteer at the soup kitchen. He describes the soup kitchen as being **“like a big family, a place with complex dynamics and great teamwork, and where people look out for one another”** For Andrew, volunteer work isn’t simply about giving back; it’s about connection with other volunteers and whānau, and with the sense of purpose and belonging that comes from being part of something bigger than yourself.

TYLER

Tyler's journey with the soup kitchen began soon after he moved from California to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2015. Walking up Tory Street one afternoon, he noticed an understated building with a single word painted on the front: Compassion. Curious, Tyler stepped inside — discovering the soup kitchen. He had always loved cooking and caring for people, long before he learned the te reo Māori word that brings those ideas together: manaakitanga. From that first visit, he knew he wanted to volunteer. The team introduced him to Sister Sosefina, whose practicality and enormous heart shaped Tyler's earliest days at the kitchen. Together they prepared for the 2015 Street Appeal, cleaned forgotten corners, polished collection buckets and spent time alongside staff, volunteers, and whānau. Today Tyler leads a fortnightly Wednesday dinner team and fills in when needed. He knows many whānau by name — how they take their coffee, which desserts they'll skip and which meals they love. Compassion has given him purpose and community. **"Every volunteer, whether for one evening or many years, becomes part of something bigger. Keeping compassion alive takes all of us."**

Feeding hungry Wellingtonians since *1901*.

Together we can beat hunger in Wellington.

Not just the hunger of an empty stomach, but the hunger for human connection. For 125 years, the Compassion Soup Kitchen has stood beside Wellingtonians in their greatest times of need.

That legacy exists because of the compassion of people like you.

The Compassion Soup Kitchen feeds hungry Wellingtonians over 8000 meals monthly and steps in to catch those who fall through the cracks of our stretched social and mental health services.

But the next chapter depends on all of us.

Whether it's the hunger for food, belonging, or hope, your generosity will help ensure that every person who walks through our doors is welcomed with dignity, compassion, and care.

DONATE NOW

Every dollar you give, whether it's $30, $60, $100, or whatever you can afford, helps us get closer to beating hunger in Wellington.
Thank you. Ngā mihi nui.

ONE Kitchen
ONE Mission
NO ONE hungry

soupkitchen.org.nz

Something exciting is coming to YOUR kitchen this October...

To mark 125 years of the Compassion Soup Kitchen we are lauching the very first...

OUR KITCHEN TO *YOUR* KITCHEN

This October is your opportunity to bring the soup kitchen to your kitchen.

Gather some friends, enjoy some kai and support Wellingtonians who find themselves facing hardship and hunger. A simple meal. A big impact.

Host a pot luck dinner or office lunch throughout October and raise some dough for the soup kitchen.

We'll give you everything you need to get started including a free 125 years soup kitchen apron!

All funds raised will go directly to the Compassion Soup Kitchen to ensure it stays open for as long as there is need.

Host on your own, or team up with a friend, the more the merrier!

For more information on how to host go to:
www.compassion.org.nz/mission/-soup-kitchen/OKTYK
Or scan the QR code

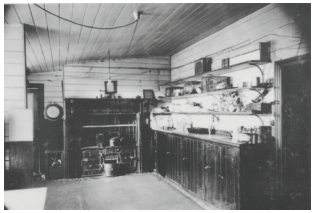
COMPASSION SOUP KITCHEN STORY

Island Bay collection taken on Buckle Street

Sisters Baptist and De Sales ready for food collection

1900s
Foundations

In 1901 Meri Hōhepa Suzanne Aubert founded the Compassion Soup Kitchen at St Joseph's Home for Incurables in Buckle St, Wellington, serving soup to around 80 men each day through a sliding window. These beginnings established the values that came to define the soup kitchen: warmth, dignity, and hope.



Interior of the first Buckle Street kitchen

Sister Sebastion serving a guest

1930s
The Great Depression

Wellington's population and poverty challenges increase, and the Sisters deepen their outreach. During the economic hardship of the 1930s, the soup kitchen provides consistent meals and refuge for people facing unemployment or homelessness. The soup kitchen becomes a reliable source of food and connection.

Reference (PAColl-8602-67) Alexander Turnbull Library

World War II soilders from Wellington arriving home

1940s
Wartime & Post War Relief

The soup kitchen continues serving people affected by wartime strain and post war recovery. The Sisters of Compassion's work expands beyond providing food, to practical and emotional support.

Sister Felix serving the dinner service

1960s
First Step Support

The soup kitchen becomes well known as a first doorway into helping people in crisis. A new partnership with St Vincent de Paul Society helps expand kai offerings.

Sister Brendan serving whānau.

Sister Fidelis Woodward

1970s
Advocacy & Social Justice

Sisters of Compassion begin speaking more publicly for people whose voices are rarely heard. The soup kitchen becomes a hub for advocacy around homelessness, poverty, and mental health.

Sussex Street Building

Sussex Street

1973
A New Space

Through the seventies the need in Wellington only grew. When the council pushed ahead with the new motorway, the old Buckle Street site had to go, so a fresh start was made just around the corner in Sussex Street. The new three storey building, opened and blessed in November 1973, bringing the Sisters of Compassion, the crèche and the soup kitchen under one roof.

Sister Margaret Anne Mills with the manager of Boots

Centenary March

1990s
Community Collaboration

Strong partnerships form with agencies like Downtown Community Ministry, Te Aro Health Centre, and others. The soup kitchen increasingly helps people access housing, health care, budgeting support, and mental health services. Volunteers, donors, and workplaces become central to the soup kitchen's daily operations. The soup kitchen moves to Tory Street in 1999.

Volunteers sorting through a food delivery

2000s
Food Rescue & Professional Kitchens

A large portion of food begins coming into the soup kitchen from rescued sources via Kiwi Community Assistance and Kaibosh, with their focus on reducing waste and sustainability. Professional chefs oversee soup kitchen meals, ensuring nutritious, high quality food, reviewed annually by Regional Public Health.

Volunteers during COVID-19 meal prep

Dessert takeaway meals being prepped.

Chef Nory

Tory Street Building

Meal service rush

Lorraine, Andrew Little and Linda

2019
COVID-19

COVID-19 challenges everyone, but the soup kitchen's doors remain open to support whānau in need. The soup kitchen adapts the way food is prepared and served, introducing takeaway meals to keep people safe. This echos its early beginnings, when food was served through a sliding window, providing food in a simple and practical way during a time of need.

2020s
Kai Community and Advocacy

The Compassion Soup Kitchen serves over 85,000 meals a year and supports around 250+ people weekly. The soup kitchen's strong relationships with kai community partners, services like Orange Sky, volunteers, and donors, keep the mahi thriving.

2026
Matariki New Year

Around 210 meals are shared at a special Matariki lunch. Whānau gather for kai under marquees set up in the Compassion Soup Kitchen carpark, enjoying a hearty winter menu featuring pork hock boil-up with watercress and fry bread, followed by a crowd favourite of trifle topped with fresh cream.

Soup kitchen kaimahi welcome Wellington Mayor Andrew Little to serve kai alongside staff and volunteers. He's pictured above with volunteer Lorraine and kaimanaaki Linda. The Matariki lunch serves as a meaningful 125 year celebration for our soup kitchen whānau, staff, volunteers, and friends, and allows us a moment to acknowledge the remarkable legacy of our founder Venerable Meri Hōhepa Suzanne Aubert, whose values of dignity, compassion and respect guide us everyday.