

A Story Series by Angie Thompson

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For Such a Time as This

Sherri Smith's 25-Year Journey of Faith, Food, and Fierce Compassion

When a small west-side mission in Bartlesville closed in 1999, most people moved on. But Sherri K. Smith stood still—rooted in purpose, not circumstance. She didn't see an ending—she heard a calling. One planted long before in the quiet, unseen space of prayer. In the mid-1980s, before she ever imagined leading a nonprofit, Sherri entered a three-year season of intercession—just her Bible, a notebook, and a stirring she couldn't yet name. “It wasn't time yet,” she said. “But God was preparing me.”

He was preparing her through raising three children, navigating careers in mortgage banking and commodities, a stint at Phillips Petroleum—and through countless hours volunteering at the very mission that would one day close. It was there she learned food service, saw suffering up close, and tuned her spirit to respond with compassion.

So when the doors closed and the need still stood, Sherri didn't hesitate. “We had nothing,” she remembers. “But God had everything.”

From Scraps to Stewardship

That October, over lunch with her pastor, Sherri shared a bold idea. Days later, she stood before the board at First Assembly of God (now Spirit Church). Then by the end of that year, Agapé Mission was born—not out of strategy, but surrender.

Start-up supplies came from a closing restaurant: a stove, folding tables, chairs, silverware. The building? The same one from the shuttered mission—cleaned, scrubbed, and redeemed by a handful of church volunteers. On day one, there were no systems, no teams—just Sherri and one assistant. They removed the seats from a church van to haul donated food from Tulsa. She cooked. She cleaned. She fundraised. She kept hand-written records. And she showed up again the next day.

“We served ten people that first day,” she recalls. By year's end, they had served more than 32,000 meals. In 2024 alone, nearly 65,000 meals were served. Over 25 years, that number exceeds two million. From the start, Sherri insisted on transparency. First Assembly



Sherri Smith

became Agapé's sole supporter until the mission earned its own 501(c)(3) status—on the first application. A board of directors was formed. “I've never signed a check,” she says. “We needed this organization to be transparent and honest in our financial dealings.”

Faith Forward, Values Anchored

In 2018, Agapé Mission moved into a modern, debt-free facility—paid off just months after completion. Today, Agapé serves 250–350 people daily, five days each week, delivers senior meals, and provides weekend food for more than 600

children through their Backpack ministry. It operates without government funding, supported instead by local families, churches, United Way, and businesses like Arvest Foundation.

Still, the mission has never been about food alone. “We never wanted to just hand people a plate,” Sherri says. “We wanted to build relationships. To offer love with no strings attached.”

Her leadership has grown from hands-on service to mentorship. Sherri now helps shape citywide responses to housing instability and mental health as a member of the Bartlesville Homeless Task Force and a partner with the Be the Light. “Mental illness mixed with drug or alcohol use—it’s a nightmare,” she says. “But we stay open. We stay kind. And we stay grounded in Christ.”

She’s had to fire people she cared about. Call the police during mental health crises. Quiet a room when safety was on the line. But she’s also watched lives change—stories of transformation that keep her coming back.

The One He Told Her to Help

“Agapé has helped many, many people over the last 25 years,” Sherri shares, “but I’ve never had the Lord tell me directly to help a specific person—until 2023.”

That February, a 53-year-old man walked into the mission. Fresh out of jail, grieving the loss of his wife and mother, severely diabetic, and

“It’s a privilege to work alongside Sherri and the Agapé team. They don’t just feed bellies—they feed the soul.

Sherri’s leadership is evident in every warm, genuine interaction that happens at Agapé. I’ve had the honor of volunteering there myself, and it’s clear they meet people with compassion and love, even on their hardest days.”

— Lisa Cary, Bartlesville Regional United Way

weighing nearly 375 pounds, he came for a hot meal. Immediately, Sherri’s team noticed him. “At the end of the day, I got into my car to run errands, and the Lord spoke to me—clear as day—‘Help him.’” “I said, ‘Lord, he’s a man, I’m a woman. That’s not how we do things.’ And He said, ‘Just do it.’ So I did.”

Sherri and her team rallied. They welcomed him in, provided transportation to drug testing three times a week, covered costs when needed, and helped him secure disability benefits. He gave his life to Christ at GraceFest 2023 and graduated from drug court in October 2024.

But it wasn’t just about court orders and clean tests. It was about community—meals that nourished him, conversations that grounded him, accountability that shaped him. Agapé became more than a soup kitchen; it became family.

Today, he volunteers weekly at Agapé and continues to be encouraged through its spiritual guidance, sense of purpose, and community of care. Together, they are now working on building a

permanent home for him on a family-owned lot along Rogers Street—the very land where he was raised and near the Agapé Mission. It’s more than a roof. It’s a return to belonging. A symbol that he will never be homeless again. And there will always be room at Agapé’s table—to share a meal, serve others, and fellowship in Christ.



Faith in the Fire

Perhaps her greatest tests have come not from running the mission—but from heartbreak at home.

In 2021, her husband—once an active part of Agapé—was diagnosed with a debilitating illness

that now leaves him wheelchair-bound. Though no longer beside her in the mission day-to-day, he remains a quiet source of strength. In 2024, Sherri lost her oldest grandson in a tragic automobile accident.

Through grief, exhaustion, and years of faithful service, she has never wavered. “There’s no way to do what I do without being anchored in God,” she says. “Some days, all I can do is listen—and obey.”

Her own moments of rest are humble: sewing, listening to worship music, hunting for flea market treasures, or playing piano in her She Shed. But her mission? That’s legacy work.

A Life Poured Out, A Future Being Shaped

Agapé Mission is now a cornerstone of Bartlesville. Its impact reaches across the county, powered by nearly 1,000 volunteers and eight staff members. It is, in every way, a story of faith multiplied.

Looking ahead, the mission is refreshing its dining room, expanding services, and preparing

the next generation of leaders. For Sherri, it’s about passing on not just a structure, but a spiritual torch.

“This work can’t be built on good ideas,” she says. “It has to be a God idea. When the hard days come—and they will—you need to know He called you.”

The impact of Agapé Mission is felt far beyond the dining room. For those who’ve volunteered, supported, or simply walked through its doors, the spirit of the place leaves a mark.

Still Faithful. Still Listening. Still Showing Up.

Ask anyone in Bartlesville who Sherri Smith is, and they’ll tell you she’s a leader. A founder. A mentor. But those titles fall short. Sherri Smith is a modern-day Esther—a woman prepared long before the crown was visible. A servant-leader positioned not for power, but for purpose.

Still faithful.

Still listening.

Still showing up—

For such a time as this.

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- 84% of Agape clients earn less than \$1,000 per month and are either homeless or underemployed.

- 72% have no food at home and no money to buy it.

- 56% say they would not eat if Agape didn’t exist.

- Agape serves 6,000+ meals per month through its on-site meal program.

- For just \$3 per snack pack, Agape provides weekend food to 600+ children through the Food 4 Kids program.

- Agape fills the most basic need every human deserves—food.

Learn more about Agapé Mission at www.agapebartlesville.com.

Author’s Note:

The narrative presented in this story is based on the personal experiences and reflections of Sherri Smith, Executive Director of Agape Mission. The views and opinions expressed are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of Agape Mission’s board, staff, volunteers, donors, or any affiliated organizations. This feature is intended to share one individual’s perspective on a life of service and community impact.

About the Writer and Permissions

Angie Thompson is a fundraising strategist, published writer, and brand storyteller who helps mission-driven people move from generic messaging to powerful communication that inspires action. Her work has appeared in *The Office Professional Magazine* and regional publications. She believes every good mission deserves to be seen—and remembered. Learn more at AngieThompsonConsulting.com.

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