

Potlucks with a Purpose: Mealtime Spirituality

Mennonites have a long tradition of combining food and fellowship. Many congregations have regular potluck or carry-in meals. Our extended family gatherings usually include food. These are excellent occasions therefore to increase our intentionality about deepening our communal bonds, nurturing our spiritual development, and extending our table of fellowship to others. Here are a few ideas to consider:

1) **Intergenerational Potluck.** At most potlucks it not unusual to see the youth clustered at one or more tables, small children at another or with their parents, elders seated together at yet other tables, and persons with physical or mental disabilities usually seated with a family member. Why not offer an occasion for people to eat together across generational and ability boundaries? Designate tables by months, placing a sign on each table (January, February, March, etc.). Before going to the food line, each person finds a seat at the table of their birth month. Pre-school children may be seated with someone other than their parents (if the child is comfortable with this). Each table will be responsible to help its members, be they young or physically handicapped to get their food. People go through the food line in table groups. Dinner conversation could begin by having each person talk about a memorable birthday or their family's traditions for celebrating birthdays, or what life is like at the life-stage they are now in.

2) **International Themed Potluck.** Chose a region of the world (Africa, Asia, Europe, South America, or a North American regional area) and invite people to bring foods from that region. This meal might be planned when a returning Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) or Mennonite Mission Network (MMN) worker is present. Or it might be done as a fund-raiser for someone who is planning a service term. Or it might be done to welcome an immigrant person or family who has recently settled in the community. Each table could have small cards with pieces of information, stories of sharing food, or proverbs from the region. A brief program of 10-15 minutes could provide stories about the church, work of MCC or MMN, or an individual's life in that region. *Extending the Table: A World Community Cookbook* (Herald Press 1991) is a useful resource for recipes and stories. Other resources are available online from www.mcc.org, www.mennonitemission.net, and www.mwc-cmm.org.

3) **Soup and Stories Series.** Many churches do some variation of a weekly soup supper and accompanying activities during certain seasons of the year. One theme for after-dinner sharing would be discussions of the intersection of people's work and their faith/spiritual journey. A panel of several people from various occupational/professional areas (healthcare, human services, business, education, the arts, engineering, agriculture, homemaking and child nurture, information technology, etc.) could present on a given evening addressing things such as: a) a description of their work, b) how their faith and spirituality influences their work, c) what the ethical issues are that they face, d) places where they see the hand of God at work in those they work with or serve. Include time for questions from the audience. Including youth in these story times may plant seeds as they consider their vocational futures.

4) **Neighborhood Potluck and Discussion.** What is a concern of your congregation that may be shared by others in your community who may be members of other churches or not involved in church at all? For instance, the responsible production of food and care for the natural environment, global warming and energy consumption, poverty and homelessness, restorative justice, building a peaceful community, etc. Plan and publicize a community potluck followed by a thematic discussion on the topic of choice. Invite members of the community who may have experience or diverse view points to be part of a panel. Tie the discussion to a recently-published popular book such as *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (Michael Pollan). This is a way to raise visibility of your church and to begin forming relationships with people who might not come to worship until they feel some connection to the church.

5) **Simply in Season Potluck.** Use the cookbook *Simply in Season* (Herald Press 2005) to plan a potluck using entirely (or primarily) in-season, locally-grown foods. Include a discussion or presentation about food production in your local community and the value of supporting local agriculture. Also discuss the variety of foods you usually eat and where these come from. What do you know about the lives of those who grow and harvest these foods? How much energy is involved in shipping them? Who benefits most from the amount you pay for food in supermarkets? How do the foods we eat connect us with others around the world? Another resource for this discussion is *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (Barbara Kingsolver).

6) **Family mealttime.** According to William Doherty, professor of family social science and director of the marriage and family therapy program at the University of Minnesota, "One of the core predictors of children's well-being and academic success is how much time they spend eating with adults." This shouldn't surprise followers of Jesus, for whom table fellowship was often the center point of his ministry. Nevertheless, the number of meals that families—including church-going families—eat together has been declining rapidly in recent decades due to our 24-7 life-style and the involvement of children and parents in multiple activities outside the home (sports, music, civic, etc.). Church activities and family meals often take second (or third) place behind a sports calendar or regularly scheduled lessons. While all of these activities are good in and of themselves, the cumulative effect may actually erode our individual and family well-being if they rob us of the sacred time to share food and conversation. Conversations in the car en route to activities are not the same as face-to-face exchanges across the table in which world and community events are discussed and stories of faith and family history are shared in a relaxed way as we nourish our bodies with food. Children of all ages benefit from listening to the conversation of elders, which may happen best when friends and relatives are invited to the table. If your family isn't able to share at least one meal each day, perhaps a family meeting is in order to decide how to adjust your overall work and social activities to make room for what may be the most important way to nurture faith and spiritual development within our families.

Compiled by Joetta Handrich Schlabach, Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, MN, joettahs@comcast.net, for the Congregational Ministries Committee of Central Plains Mennonite Conference. January 2008.