



Feeding our faith

Food helps us to create community and meaning

by Julia Largent

Growing up at Union Grove Church of the Brethren (Muncie, Ind.), carry-in Sundays were among my favorites. Not only did it mean that I got to hang out with my friends for a few more hours, but it meant delicious food.

Union Grove is a small congregation—one of those where you know everyone, and everyone brings the same items to carry-ins. My mom brings cheesy hash brown casserole. Cindy brings BBQ sausages. Linda brings homemade apple dumplings. Joan brings fruit slush. Sharon brings pan cookies. It was a day of delicious smells wafting up to the sanctuary from the fellowship hall below as lunch cooked. You hoped the sermon would be short so you could rush down for the delicious food about to be piled high on your plate. Or at least that's how it was where I grew up.

When I moved to McPherson, Kan., I was excited to join McPherson Church of the Brethren. I was anxious, but enthusiastic, about joining such a large congregation. I'm an outgoing person, but only when I have someone else with whom to be outgoing. I was nervous to attend my first potluck, as I didn't know whom to sit with or how it worked. In

fact, I think I skipped the first one or two during my first year living in McPherson. But I worked up the courage and sat down at a table by myself. Others joined, conversations were held, and connections were made, all over food.

As I have ventured out more on my own to cook, bake, and experience the fun of the kitchen, I find myself frequently turning to different editions of the *Inglenook Cookbook*. The Church of the Brethren is not unique in having a denomination-wide cookbook, but its longevity and many editions make it a valuable artifact of our church culture. The short anecdotes throughout the book add personal stories and connections to the recipes. It connects us denominationally, not just congregationally or at the district level. I get to read about traditions of Brethren families in other places and connect with individuals whom I've never met but now know through their recipes and my taste buds.

Food is used to create community—either by ourselves in our kitchens, with friends around tables, or in large gatherings at church. However, COVID-19 has not allowed my congregation to gather in person to share a meal in over a year. Our weekly Wednesday evening meals and fellowship haven't happened

since March 2020. I feel disconnected from the congregation in a way that I never thought would happen.

At a recent McPherson College faculty meeting, professor Jd. Bowman shared the opening reflection. It was right before the official one-year mark of the pandemic. He reflected on the year and how he has had his ups and downs, as many of us have had. He briefly reflected on the inability to share and connect over food with students. Many of us bring in goodies to class, and we've not been able to do this since the start of the pandemic. Faculty and staff aren't supposed to eat in the cafeteria—something many of us miss dearly as it's a place to connect with both our colleagues and students. Over the past year, I've realized that food isn't for just physical survival but for social sustenance too. I connect with people over coffee, lunch, and dinner.

Ironically, amid all of this, I co-edited an anthology titled *Eating Fandom: Intersections of Fan and Food Cultures*, published in October. It was a project two colleagues and I started well before COVID-19 existed, but its arrival was a bitter reminder of how much we use food—both in the church and in our lives—to connect.

The book covers a myriad of foodie fans: fans of celebrity chefs, of theme park food, of media that have adapted food recipes (e.g., *Harry Potter*-themed foods), and of cultures around food and beverages. For some, food is one way they connect to a text. By making butterbeer (a butterscotch beverage in *Harry Potter*), for example, fans can taste what their favorite characters are tasting—creating a connection to the text through their taste buds. The crux of their activities is to connect with other fans and with the media texts they love and devour through food—literally and figuratively.

But fandom is not the only way we use food to connect to a text. For many Brethren, participating in love feast—which features a simple meal at many congregations—connects us to the last supper and the last days of Jesus. Year-round, and in most Christian denominations, we use bread and wine or grape juice to symbolize the body and blood of Christ during communion. In these instances, food is not just something we consume while connecting with each other, but it is used to demonstrate our faith and connect to God.

The Brethren Encyclopedia describes the agape meal this way: “Christianity started as a fellowship of love. That fellow-

ship turned a band of Galileans in an upstairs room in Jerusalem into a body which soon was ‘turning the world upside down!’ The shift from stranger to family (kinship) occurred in the agape meal, at which persons were known as brothers and sisters. In their love feast Brethren have wished to express that fellowship of love.” There's a simple reason why food is so central to church and our faith: The community formed over breaking bread is a community that helps propel us forward in love and in faith.


But how can we share this community with our neighbors, especially as many congregations are re-evaluating themselves post-COVID-19? How, in a time when our nation—and our own denomination—has many disagreements, do we invite everyone to the metaphorical, and literal, table? Much like the classic joke of eating an elephant one bite at a time, we can start forming this community one bite, one meal, one friendship at a time. Slowly, that community will build, and bridges will be made.

As Rachel Held Evans said in *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*: “But the gospel doesn't need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting,

‘Welcome! There's bread and wine. Come eat with us and talk.’ This isn't a kingdom for the worthy; it's a kingdom for the hungry.”

COVID-19 forced many of us to miss love feast in person last spring and again this year. Last year, I took a stab at making communion bread and sop in my own kitchen (pulling out those *Inglenuok Cookbooks* for guidance) and celebrating with my roommate while having both McPherson's

love feast service and the denominational service streaming on my laptop. As we journey through another spring, it appears we are rounding a corner. It remains unclear, however, when we may be able to gather to eat in large groups inside.

I will be thankful when I can connect with others over food, breaking bread, and catching each other up on our lives from the past year. I encourage all of us to savor these future moments: to savor the taste of friendship, our connection to God and to each other, and, of course, that delicious food. 

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FOOD IS USED TO CREATE COMMUNITY—EITHER BY OURSELVES IN OUR KITCHENS, WITH FRIENDS AROUND TABLES, OR IN LARGE GATHERINGS AT CHURCH.