

Christians gather together around meals for companionship, for remembrance, for learning, for looking ahead and for building community.

History and Background

The word “companion” comes from the Latin “com” and “panis,” meaning “with bread.” People have company and become companions in the context of a meal. Church members are in good company in a faith pilgrimage that is full of the sharing of food.

Abraham welcomed the visiting angels by feeding them meat, cake and milk (Genesis 18:1-8). The central event of the Jewish holidays, the Passover, is a meal of roasted lamb, unleavened bread and bitter herbs, which are the elements of sustenance and remembrance of the passing of death and the continuing of the covenant of salvation with the people of God (Exodus 12).

Jesus, in his parables and practice, continued the power of the meal to both teach and nourish. His stories are full of feasts and banquets, calling people “from east and west, from north and south” who “will eat in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29). Nor was Jesus’ invitation limited to the rich and righteous. “When you give a banquet,” Jesus instructed, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed ...” (Luke 14 13-14). Jesus ate with tax

collectors and persons of questionable reputation as well as with his faithful disciples. For many, these were times of remarkable learning: “When he was at table with them, . . . their eyes were opened” (Luke 24:30-31).

Not all eating, however, serves to bring a group together with good meaning, purpose and sustenance. As the Apostle Paul learned and later wrote, eating can be divisive and competitive, and doing it in an unworthy manner profanes the act of communing. He said “When you come together to eat, wait for one another” (I Corinthians 11:33). Jesus also had to warn against automatically sitting down at a place of honor at a banquet (Luke 14:7-11).

From the earliest record in the book of Acts, we know that the first Christians came together with clear purpose and practice: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42). The meal was a regular and normal part of the life of the early church. It was surrounded with both memory and purpose: to learn, to take in the food, yet also to grow from it.

Common Practices

Some common church practices involving meals have faded in popularity. Yet the intent of getting together with other church members for growth in ministry remains. Churches are finding today that those once willing to spend days in the church kitchen are no longer willing

or no longer able. Therefore, potluck, takeout and catered foods are increasingly appearing at church meals. Soup and sandwich or soup and salad meals are becoming popular options. Most often, meals at church are evening meals, but some groups have regular breakfasts and other churches have breakfast on Easter morning. Luncheons, wiener roasts, barbecues and luaus have their place in churches. Sometimes churches are well known for their specialty—often an ethnic treat—which people look forward to from year to year. Churches sometime share a meal that reminds the diners of the hungry of the world. In some churches the decision has been made to have all meals be meatless.

The church is not in the business of competing with restaurants in serving the best gourmet feasts. It is charged instead with serving the gospel. The quality of the meal is not as important as the quality of the company—the building of the community. Churches had in the past, and some still have, suppers open to people outside the church to support the church’s ministry. Even then the gathering of the church community is important.

Meals should benefit those in the community or beyond. The purpose can be to learn and grow in mission or to remember someone for faithful service. It should always be to remember the One in whose name and spirit we all come to the table. We come not just to fill our bodies but to embody the gospel.

Responsibilities

The following are things that someone will be responsible for when planning a meal at the church. Sometimes, such as an annual meeting, the purpose and timing are chosen by one group and another plans the meal. At other times a committee determines to have a meal, sets the schedule and then follows through. Determine which responsibilities are yours:

- Determining or understanding the purpose for the meal.
- Setting the date and time for the meal.
- Choosing a committee and meeting with it.
- Choosing a location for the meal that is barrier free, so people with disabilities can attend. (Steps, doorways and restrooms often need attention.)
- Publicizing the meal. You may use the church bulletin, newsletter, posters, letters, announcements during meetings or services, and your community’s newspaper. The purpose of the meal will help determine how it is publicized.
- Determining the type of meal: breakfast, lunch, dinner, specialty meal, potluck, catered or cooked at the church.
- Determining what is to be served.
- Determining how to pay for the meal. There are times when the church budget may pick up the cost. Even a “covered-dish” potluck meal may have costs for

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beverages, table coverings, plates, etc. You may ask people to make a donation for such meals. For a catered meal, the actual costs will be known ahead of time, and that may determine what to charge.

- Selling tickets.
- Taking reservations.
- Making arrangements for the food. When planning a potluck meal, you can just leave the assortment and balance of the menu to chance and ask participants to bring a baked dish, salad or dessert, or you can have people sign up for the type of dish they will bring. You can assign people on a simple basis: main dishes for everyone whose last name begins with A-H, vegetables for L-O, desserts for P-Z. Or the main course, bread, beverages or dessert could be purchased and provided by a committee.
- Seeing that supplies are available, such as eating utensils, coffee urns, table coverings and napkins. If your church has policies about use of these supplies, be familiar with them. Give consideration to environmental issues when making these decisions.
- Finding people to help with the meal and making assignments. You will need people to plan, to set the room up for the meal, to cook, to serve and to clean up.
- Giving many people an opportunity to participate in preparations. Sometimes only men or only women prepare meals. Church

meals can provide an opportunity for young people and new members to participate in activities.

- Preparing the food or seeing that it is prepared. Sometimes food is cooked in quantity at the church. You may prefer to have someone buy food wholesale, but have it distributed to people's homes for cooking
- Setting up and decorating the room.
- Serving the food or setting it up so that people can serve themselves.
- Coordinating serving time with the program that is planned.
- Planning the program.
- Cleaning up the kitchen and serving area.
- Thanking everyone who helped.

Skills and Attributes Needed

- Sensitivity to the purpose of the church and the needs of its people.
- Sensitivity to the purpose of the meal. A program on hunger doesn't require the same meal that a going-away celebration for a pastor does.
- Ability to organize.
- Familiarity with the church's supplies and how they can be used.
- Attention to detail.
- Sensitivity to single people. Be careful about referring to "family night." Have some tables setup with an odd number of chairs.
- Sensitivity to people who want to participate in a pot luck meal but don't feel comfortable cooking.

Can they bring supplies, set up tables, bring potato chips, etc.?

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Talk with people who have planned meals for the church.
- Confer with the pastor and others who know church members well.
- Meet with all people involved in the event.
- Talk to a caterer about amounts of food, costs, etc.

Issues Facing the Church

- Some churches use meals as a time to make money. Other churches don't think that is a good way to have a church meal. What is your church's stance and upon what is it based?
- Since in most families, both adults work outside the home, there are fewer people available to cook for churches than in generations past. How can your church adjust its events to take this into account?
- How can churches plan meals that are not wasteful?
- How can the church more faithfully eat in light of world hunger?

Questions

- What determines the kind of meal you plan?

- What are all the times your church or groups in your church gather for meals? Do all of these contribute to people becoming companions in the church?
- What kinds of problems have been encountered in planning and serving a meal? How can they be overcome?