

U.C.C. WELLNESS MINISTRIES TOOLKIT
Section 3

EXEMPLARS OF WELLNESS MINISTRIES ACTIVITIES

Spiritual Health and Wellness

Title: *A Church Family Thanksgiving Dinner*

Age group served: All ages

Reason for development and implementation:

The most common question in November is, "*Where are you going for Thanksgiving?*" For some people, this is a hard question to answer. A variety of reasons prevent them from participating in a picturesque family gathering.

Sharing the story: Coming together for a family dinner

During a discussion about Thanksgiving, several active congregants said they would just be spending the day at home. Their reasons were varied. Some could not get time off from work or had the money to travel a distance. Others said that their adult child's family was spending it with their spouse's family. Some sadly had no extended family. Others were disabled, limiting their ability to access others' homes.

The Minister of Wellness asked several individuals to work with her to create a Church Family Thanksgiving Dinner in the church hall. This would be a collective event where attendees would collaborate to facilitate it.

An invitation was extended to all within the congregation to gather for Thanksgiving Dinner at noon on Thanksgiving day. The turkey would be provided. Interested attendees were invited to sign-up and identify what they would bring to the celebration and a recipe card that listed the ingredients.

When participants arrived at the church hall, they were met with the aroma of a roasting turkey. The process was started at home by the Minister of Wellness and then completed in the church kitchen. The tentative schedule was:

- 11:00 am Set up for Dinner and munch on simple appetizers.
- 12:00 noon Offer a communal prayer of Thanksgiving
- 12:05 pm Serve the meal buffet style (*With attention to allergy risks, all dishes had a recipe card displayed next to them.*)
- Share stories, laughter, and participation in spontaneous activities
- 2:00 pm Clean up and depart with desired leftovers

The carving of the turkey became an honored task. One individual, Bob, volunteered to do the first year and demonstrated the process as others gathered around. This became an annual tradition, even as Bob became increasingly challenged by ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) and needed assistance. After Bob's death, the turkey carvers continued to honor their teacher.

What is Thanksgiving without the sharing of leftovers? Take-out containers had been saved by some households and were offered for reuse. Most attendees left with more than one container of shared food.

Clean-up was a shared event just as set-up had been. It was accomplished with a communal purpose, and everyone contributed. Attendees left with a filled stomach and the joy of being held and nurtured by a caring community of friends.

Evaluation:

- At the first Thanksgiving Dinner, there were eight adults. As the years went on, the numbers of both individuals and families increased.
- Continued to develop as a communal event by the participants and not as an event prepared for participants, no one was overburdened. Instead, people gathered in community to share and care for each as they each was able.
- Since the church hall, kitchen, and restrooms are handicapped accessible, it was user friendly and all who entered were comfortable within these familiar spaces.
- The occasion was joyful filled with expressions of gratitude, stories and laughter.
- Children and adults had fun doing arts and crafts and decorating the tables.
- The benefit of this event grew naturally beyond the original expectations. Each year different needs and desires were met. For example, a church family had lost a beloved grandfather and sought to start a new tradition with their church friends rather than be at home with an empty chair. Another family wanted to share the joy and love of their congregation with in-laws rather than re-live past holiday difficulties. One year a facetime call was made to a young person serving in the military so all her church "aunts and uncles" could share greetings. We were all enriched by sharing the perspective of this unique holiday with those new to the U.S.

Next steps:

- Continue to offer the opportunity for a Church Family Thanksgiving Dinner and support the process as participants plan and carry out the event.
- Be responsive to evolving ideas and needs.

Resources used:

- [Avoiding Food Allergy Reactions](#) provides the latest information.
- How to keep [Thanksgiving Leftovers: The Gift that Keeps on Giving](#) safely.