

EUCHARISTIC EATING: A MODEL FOR BRIDGING THE DIVIDES OF OUR TIME
THROUGH INTENTIONAL TABLE FELLOWSHIP

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Introduction

A World Divided

This is a project born of and for disparate times. At the dawn of 2017, America is deeply and grotesquely divided: rich and poor, black and white, liberal and conservative, white collar and blue collar, urban and rural. We are isolated and entrenched into tribes so thoroughly that Robert Putnam worries “America is moving toward a caste society, where a lot of your fate in life is being determined just by the one decision that you never did make, which is who your parents are going to be.”¹ Similar patterns of growing economic disparity, increased political polarization, and the consolidation of power into the hands of the rich few are unfolding globally as well.² Is it any wonder, then, that we are experiencing widespread unrest and upheaval, apathy and antagonism? Inequality breeds distance (i.e., social, geographic, and political segregation); distance breeds unfamiliarity; and unfamiliarity breeds prejudice and fear.

Why Christians Should Be Concerned

This divisive state of world affairs should deeply concern the people of Jesus, and spur us to action. Not only is a world so rife with division and conflict not the world we want for ourselves or our children, it is not the world God desires for us or anyone’s children.³ The prophets bluntly chastised Israel’s passivity in the face of economic disparity, and refuted the idea that piety and justice are separate concerns, e.g.:

“Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” (Amos 6:4-6)

¹ Tamsin McMahon, interview with Robert Putnam, *McLean’s*, April 8, 2014, <http://www.macleans.ca/society/america-is-moving-toward-a-caste-society/>

² Oxfam International, “An Economy for the 99%,” 2, https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp-economy-for-99-percent-160117-en.pdf

³ E.g. Isaiah 11:1-11, Isaiah 25:1-9, Isaiah 61:1-4, Ezekiel 34:1-16, Joel 2:28-29, Luke 13:29.

“Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.... Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free...? (Isaiah 58.4, 6-7)

Jesus carries the message of the prophets even further, connecting compassionate mercy for the suffering directly to our worship of Him⁴ and our ultimate eschatological destiny, declaring:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Matthew 25:31-36)

Finally, on a more practical level, the Western world is only going to become more demographically diverse, not less. Whites are projected to become a racial minority in the United States around the middle of the 21st century.⁵ The same trends are at work in Canada.⁶ Europe is facing both an influx of refugees and migrants, and an aging population.⁷ Christians will need to learn to navigate a socio-political landscape in which these demographic shifts will impact the makeup of communities and therefore congregations. Ministry will depend on it.

⁴ Although antiquated, I maintain the practice of capitalizing pronouns referring back to Christ as an act of deference, even worship, as the Word made flesh who came to dwell among us (John 1.1-14).

⁵ The Pew Research Center, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/28/chapter-2-immigrations-impact-on-past-and-future-u-s-population-change/>,

⁶ Statistics Canada, "Recent Changes in Demographic Trends in Canada," accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2015001/article/14240-eng.htm>

⁷ European Parliament, "EU Demographic Indicators: Situation, Trends, and Potential Challenges," March 2015, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/551335/EPRS_BRI\(2015\)_551335_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/551335/EPRS_BRI(2015)_551335_EN.pdf)

Eating Together

How can individual disciples of Jesus stand against the current of this swelling tide of division and inequality day-to-day? I will argue that one of the most powerful and practical things we can do to help shape a more just and egalitarian society is to follow the example of Jesus and eat with “the other,” the stranger who does not normally share the orbits of our lives. Sharing the table in this way is by no means the only thing we can or should do, nor is it a panacea that will cure all of the world’s ills.⁸ But tables make for sturdy and effective bridges for building relationships across our differences, because sharing food creates the kind of intimate space needed to diffuse the causes of conflict and nurture the things that make for peace: creating proximity in place of distance, understanding in place of unfamiliarity, and parity in place of inequality.

Moreover, food has served historically as a vehicle of exclusion as well as inclusion. Down through the centuries in cultures all around the world, what food a person ate, how they ate it, and with whom they ate it served to define that person’s social status. Therefore, when we share food across social boundaries, we actively and intentionally subvert social forces bent on maintaining those boundaries, just as Jesus and His first disciples did while dining with prostitutes and Pharisees, Jews and Gentiles. By intentionally sharing food around the table with “the other,” we bridge a symbolic but significant fissure on our social and political landscape.

In this paper, I will lay out both a theological argument and a practical framework for engaging in table fellowship across social boundaries. An exploration of Jesus’ own “table ministry” will follow a summation of the continued role of food as boundary in the contemporary world. The Eucharist will then be examined as a model for bridging today’s social divides through table fellowship. After establishing *why* table fellowship should become a regular and

⁸ Macro level political and economic reforms must also be sought.

intentional part of lived Christian faith, I will demonstrate *how* individuals and families can learn to share food across social boundaries by showcasing seven groups, both inside and outside of the church, that are challenging social divisions through table fellowship. Their example will allow us to begin developing an effective and transformative table practice in the name of Christ.

Food as Boundary in the 21st Century World

The contours of eating have changed dramatically since Jesus' day through advances in industry and agriculture, but many of the same food-based divisions Jesus encountered still persist. In the advanced economies of the West, food is more abundant than it ever has been. We have so much food we cannot eat it all. The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations estimates that First World countries annually waste 222 million metric tons of food. 40% of that waste (or 88.8 metric tons) is food that retailers and consumers throw away.⁹ And yet, people in First World nations are going hungry. In 2015, an estimated 42 million Americans lived in food insecure households.¹⁰ Another estimated 23.5 million Americans live in "food deserts" where the nearest grocery store that sells fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat is too far away to be readily accessible.¹¹ Food may be overabundant, but economic and

⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "SAVE FOOD: Key Facts on Food and Waste You Should Know," accessed March 14, 2017, <http://www.fao.org/save-food/resources/keyfindings/en/>

¹⁰ Feeding America, "Hunger and Poverty Facts and Statistics," accessed March 14, 2017, <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/hunger-and-poverty/hunger-and-poverty-fact-sheet.html>

¹¹ Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, "Food Desert Statistics," accessed March 18, 2017, <http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/desert%20stats.pdf>. Food deserts contribute to malnutrition because many food desert residents rely on convenience stores and the processed, pre-packaged foods they sell; foods high in calories and chemicals and low in nutrients. The USDA defines a food desert as an urban area where the nearest full service grocery store is more than one mile away, and a rural area in which the nearest full service grocery store is more than ten miles away.

geographic impediments abound, and these boundaries literally cause millions of people to starve¹² while millions of others overindulge to the point of treating food like garbage.

Food boundaries are also drawn along racial lines. *Washington Post* food critic Tom Kliman uncovered this uncomfortable truth while reviewing restaurants in and around Washington D.C. Over time, he began to notice how few people of color he was encountering in the city's burgeoning restaurant scene. It struck him as odd, because Washington D.C is quite racially diverse and has a well-established Black middle class. Prince George's County, Maryland, which borders the District of Columbia on the northeast, is the most affluent African-American majority county in the United States.¹³ Many African-Americans in metro DC could certainly afford to eat in these establishments, yet they were choosing not to. Why?

From interviews with restaurateurs, Kliman discovered something he terms "The 60/40 Line." Restaurant owners observe that whenever the dining room becomes more than 40% black, the white patrons started to leave. The restaurant gains the reputation of being "a black place." To prevent this from happening, menus and décor inside the establishments become "coded" to appeal to white customers and maintain a racial balance well below the 60/40 tipping point. In the predominantly white restaurant world (most owners, chefs, and managers are both white and male), white customers are considered more reliable.¹⁴

A third prevailing food boundary continues to be class: the complex cultural algorithm that calculates social standing through a curious and variable equation of wealth, ethnicity,

¹² Not starvation necessarily due to lack of food, but malnutrition resulting from a heavily processed and unbalanced diet.

¹³ Nathalie Baptiste, "America's Richest Black County Still Crushed by Foreclosure Crisis," AlterNet, October 16, 2014, <http://www.alternet.org/investigations/americas-richest-black-county-still-crushed-foreclosure-crisis>.

¹⁴ Todd Kliman, "Coding and Decoding Dinner," *Oxford American* (Spring 2015), 106-109.

gender, geography, education, and profession. Certain foods, just like certain brands, become associated with higher social class and others with lower social class. These associations, while not immutable, are pervasive and generally related to price and quality (either real or perceived). Restaurants, grocery chains, and food manufacturers all market themselves along class lines. McDonald's advertisements, for example, often focus on how much food customers can receive for relatively little money, while more upscale eateries tend to emphasize the superiority of their ingredients rather than the price. Terms such as "organic" and "locally sourced" have become synonymous with good health and exceptional quality.

Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs observes that organic food has also acquired a spiritual dimension among certain consumers. Organic, she argues, is America's new term for *pure* or *clean*. America's "new hierarchy is an elitist hierarchy in which more 'educated' people show their class and their spirituality by 'talking' and 'acting' organic."¹⁵ People who eat organic, whole food are whole people. By extension, those who do not are not. This form of class judgment is a new Pharisaism for the consumerist age.

Finally, comfort is one of the more tenacious and enduring food boundaries, in part because it does not look and feel like other boundaries. It is a line drawn by us rather than by others. Still, a line is a line. In fact, comfort is the flipside of the "60/40 Line." Restaurants want their customers to be reliable; diners want their food to be reliable. All of us want to enjoy eating. For that reason, we tend to eat from a tried-and-true menu in the company of tried-and-true friends and family. We gather for meals to feel good, to receive a sense of well being, to be reminded of home. Introducing the unfamiliar, whether it is a new food or a new person, makes us uncomfortable and thus hesitant.

¹⁵ Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muh, "The New Word for Pure is Organic," *Cultural Encounters* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 114.

Food as Boundary in the Greco-Roman World

In Jesus' day, food was integrally and intricately connected to one's social rank. Especially among the upper classes, dinner was expression of power, i.e. who was "in" and who was "out,"¹⁶ and an opportunity to flaunt one's wealth by serving exotic dishes and offering lavish entertainment. These *symposia* followed a set format¹⁷ and observed a particular etiquette.¹⁸

Among the Greeks, *symposia* were all male affairs, while some elite Roman women attended these dinner parties as full participants. Diners reclined¹⁹ on couches arranged in the shape of a "U" around three sides of the dinner table, with up to three people occupying a single couch. The fourth side of the table was left open to allow servants space to bring food and drink, clear dishes, and otherwise attend the guests. Attendance was by invitation only,²⁰ and the place guests occupied at the table indicated the degree to which the host was "honoring" them that

¹⁶ Pat Caplan, "Approaches to the Study of Food, Health, and Identity" in *Food, Health, and Identity*, ed. Pat Caplan (London: Routledge, 1997), 3. Patron-client relationships, specifically, were cultivated through dinner "invitations." In reality, the client had little choice in the matter. One also incurred a social debt when an invitation from a social peer was accepted. Reciprocity was expected.

¹⁷ Over time and geography, the pattern of the *symposium* was modified through contextualization, so there was some variation. This holds true for much of the phenomenon monolithically referred to as "Hellenism." See Soham Al-Suadi, "The Power of an Invitation: Early Christian Meals in Their Cultural Context," in *Decisive Meals: Table Politics in Biblical Literature*, ed. Kathy Ehrensperger, Nathan McDonald, and Luzia Sutter Rehmann (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 145.

¹⁸ Dennis E. Smith, "The Greco-Roman Banquet as a Social Institution," in *Meals in the Early Christian World: Social Formation, Experimentation, and Conflict at the Table*, ed. Dennis E. Smith and Hal E. Taussig (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 30.

¹⁹ The style of reclining at table originated in the Levant and spread across the ancient near east to Greece, where the *symposium* formally developed, and from which it spread throughout the Roman Empire. Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Banquets in the Biblical World," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 22 (2002), 149-150.

²⁰ Party-crashers sometimes snuck in, however, and guests were known to extend invitations to others, even though they were not hosting. The Roman poet Martial in *Ep.* 12.82 writes about one brown-noser who would flatter and fawn over the wealthy at Roman public baths with the aim of securing an invitation to dinner.

night.²¹ Some hosts even served different food to different guests, corresponding to the honor they were being accorded.²² The first half of the evening, the *deipnon*, constituted the meal proper. The second half was the *symposium* itself, dedicated to conversation, drinking, and performance. *Symposia* were known to devolve into orgies at times, and many ended in drunken carousing. There was even a name for a parade of drunk *symposium* guests making their way back home late at night: a *komos*.²³

As the *symposium* infiltrated the social life of Roman-occupied Palestine,²⁴ Jews seem to have either embraced it as a fashionable expression of social sophistication or rejected it as a detrimental social practice of their pagan overlords.²⁵ A number of scholars, led by Dennis E. Smith, argue the two-part format of the *symposium* was so widely adopted that we should read the Gospel accounts of Jesus dining as depictions of *symposia*.²⁶ Be that as it may, what seems certain is that Jesus' table manners challenged and subverted the socially stratified meal sharing

²¹ Smith, "Social Institution," 29. The super wealthy had homes or villas with more than one dining room. Cicero, for example, once hosted a symposium that spanned four dining rooms in his villa, with the most honored guests dining together in one room.

²² Yamauchi, "Banquets," 151.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jan Michael Joncas, "Tasting the Kingdom of God: The Meal Ministry of Jesus and Its Implications for Contemporary Worship and Life," *Worship* 74, no. 4 (July 2000), 340.

²⁵ Yamauchi, "Banquets," 152.

²⁶ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). Craig Blomberg, "Jesus, Sinners, and Table Fellowship," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19, no.1 (2009), 61, counters that the gospel narratives do not offer any details confirming that Jesus attended *symposia*, and the gospel writers easily could have shaped meal scenes as *symposia* if that was their intent. An entire body of literature dedicated to *symposia* survives from the Greco-Roman world and thus literary models (e.g. Plato's *Symposium*) were abundant. Plutarch even admits that his written accounts of dinner parties with family and friends owe more to the literary tradition of *symposia* than the actual events of actual meals. Plutarch *Quaest. Conv.* 612D-E. Smith, "Social Institution," 31.

practices of elite Greco-Roman society as well as the cleanliness codes²⁷ of the Jewish religious establishment.

The Example of Jesus

Against this complex cultural backdrop in which social class, political power, and ethnic-religious identity were reinforced at dinner, Jesus willingly shared the table with virtually anyone.²⁸ He thus garnered a reputation for eating with “tax collectors and sinners.” Yet, He also accepted invitations from high-ranking Pharisees. With Zacchaeus, Jesus was even so bold as to invite Himself over to the chief tax collector’s house. In Greco-Roman parlance, Jesus would have been labeled a “parasite”: a freeloader who lived off of the generosity of others.²⁹ His critics denounced Him as a “glutton and a drunkard.” But beyond the scandal of Jesus blatantly ignoring the social norms for table fellowship in His day and age, especially as a rabbi with a cadre of disciples, three things stand out about how He conducted Himself at table. Jesus subverted and sought to transform an elitist system by casting an alternative vision, modeling that vision, and rebutting the very assumptions that justified cultural patterns of eating.

First, Jesus’ recorded table interactions reveal that He did not seek personal advantage by attending dinner parties. Jesus had another mission that guided His actions, which He announced publically in Luke 4:17-21:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the

²⁷ These first century codes, known as *kashrut*, were particularly nationalist and ethnocentric and went beyond the dietary restrictions of biblical Mosaic Law. Craig Blomberg concludes that the Greco-Roman era witnessed the drawing of “sharper boundaries between pious Jews and unclean outsiders.” Blomberg, “Table Fellowship,” 41-44. See also Tobit 4:17, 2 Maccabees 6:18, and 4 Maccabees 5-18.

²⁸ Joncas, *Tasting the Kingdom*, 350.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 352. In Greek and Roman theatrical comedies, parasites were stock characters depicted as shallow and selfish, and always looking for a free meal.

blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus' conduct around the table, while scandalous when judged against the spoken and unspoken codes of etiquette that governed elitist *symposia* and pious *kashrut*, makes perfect sense within His missional framework. This framework explains why Jesus would have dined "with tax collectors and sinners" outside of the circles of accepted Jewish piety and openly flouted convention, as He does in Luke 11:38 by not washing before dinner. When His host objects, Jesus rebuts the criticism:

"Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.... (Luke 11:39-41)

Not surprisingly, Luke states that after this incident "the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him" (11:53-54). But Jesus is undeterred, and in fact becomes even more subversive in establishing His alternative vision through what John McGuckin terms "provocative feasting."³⁰

While attending a Sabbath meal at the house of a "leader of the Pharisees" in Luke 14, Jesus openly challenges the *social* premises of both the segregated Jewish table and the ostentatious *symposium*. After healing a man afflicted with dropsy (14:1-6),³¹ He next tells a "parable" when He observes how the other guests took their places around the table:

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,'

³⁰ John A. McGuckin, "The Sign of the Prophet: The Significance of Meals in the Doctrine of Jesus," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 64 no. 4 (2013), 7.

³¹ It is unclear from the text as to whether this man with dropsy is a guest at the meal. As noted above, "party crashers" were not unheard of, and the fact that Jesus sends this man away after healing him may indicate he was an interloper. If this man was uninvited, then Jesus' compassion toward someone so socially offensive (i.e. rude *and* unclean) would make Jesus' act of healing that much more radical.

and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:7-11).

Jesus then declares that His host actually should have planned his dinner party quite differently:

“When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14).

This is how Jesus articulates His alternative vision for society: by calling for new table sharing practices among God’s faithful – practices that mirror His messianic mission as asserted in Luke 4, rather than the practices of the wider culture.

Second, Jesus did more than verbally spar at fancy dinners and make proclamations about an alternative way of doing things. He modeled the alternative, as exemplified in the Gospel accounts of “The Feeding of the Five Thousand.” As the only miracle of Jesus recounted in all four Gospels (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:33-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-13), these narratives are highly significant for a number of reasons.³² Of special importance here are the social implications of Jesus’ actions. All three synoptic writers emphasize Jesus’ “compassion” (ἐσπλαγγίσθη) for “the crowd” (ὄχλον) as the genesis of the miracle.³³ ὁ ὄχλος is a negative term in any context, connoting a crowd in the sense of “the rabble” or “the unwashed masses.” But this ὁ ὄχλος would have been particularly “unwashed.” Complying with the tenets of *kashrut* would have been impractical if not impossible in such a remote location, even for those

³² The feeding narratives contain clear prophetic and messianic allusions. E.g., the prophet Elisha fed 100 men with 20 barley loaves with plenty to spare (2 Kings 4:42-44). Jesus feeding the people with bread is reminiscent of God fed the Israelites with manna in the wilderness.

³³ Luke uses “welcome” (ἀποδεξάμενος) instead of “compassion,” but the effect is the same. John alone is silent regarding Jesus’ motivations.

who so desired.³⁴ A crowd this size hailing from the northern regions of Israel around the Sea of Galilee also would have been ethnically diverse, since the region's history includes both Assyrian and Tyrian settlement.³⁵ For this reason, some pious Jews viewed Galileans as “unclean,” much like the Samaritans. Yet, despite the unclean nature of their hands, their heritage, and their social standing, Jesus determines to serve them a meal.

Particularly interesting is Mark's account of the “Feeding of the Five Thousand,” in which Jesus instructs the crowd to “recline” (ανακλιναι) in *symposia* on the grass – the only appearance of the word συμπόσια in the New Testament (Mark 6:39). Clearly, Mark does not have a literal *symposium* in mind.³⁶ However, his use of the term is quite suggestive. Those who held and attended *symposia* looked down upon ὁ ὄχλος. The members of this “crowd” were the commoners from whom the elites wished to distinguish themselves. Yet, Mark uses the name of the aristocratic dinner party to describe the impromptu meal Jesus provides for “the rabble.” Jesus (symbolically, at least) hosts a *symposium* for the very people who would never be invited to one. Thus, through this miracle, Jesus turns the social order upside down and demonstrates God's radical hospitality³⁷ toward those so often excluded and relegated to the wilderness of society.

³⁴ Blomberg, “Jesus and Table Fellowship,” 54.

³⁵ The Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, nearly 20 years after the initial invasions. Their armies hauled the inhabitants away into captivity, resettling the area with other peoples of the Assyrian empire. See 2 Kings 15:29 and 17:3-6. 1 Kings 9:11 records that King Solomon gave King Hiram of Tyre 20 cities in Galilee because Hiram supplied him with much cedar and gold for building the Temple and Solomon's palace. Jews only began resettling the area following the Maccabean revolt in the second century BC.

³⁶ Blomberg, “Jesus and Table Fellowship,” 55. Imagining the crowd lugging couches and tables with them through the countryside would be preposterous.

³⁷ Laura M. Hartman, “Consuming Christ: The Role of Jesus in Christian Food Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 30, no. 1 (2010), 47.

Third, the Gospel accounts of Jesus at table depict Him healing and forgiving. Jesus indicates this is part of His purpose in the first meal He shares with His followers at the table of Levi, the tax collector. When the Pharisees and scribes complain that Jesus is eating “with tax collectors and sinners,” Jesus’ responds: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17).³⁸ Later, Jesus forgives the woman who anoints His feet while He dines with Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:48-50) and heals the man with dropsy at the Sabbath meal hosted by a leader of the Pharisees (Luke 14:1-6). The effect of these actions is that Jesus, through His presence and table practice, also undermines the *theological* premises of segregated dining, i.e. the idea that the presence of “unclean” food, vessels, or people will contaminate “the clean.”³⁹ Jesus reverses this rationale. He makes those deemed “unclean” physically, ritually, and spiritually whole and welcome by interacting with them at table.

In fact, Jesus’ public table ministry concludes in Luke’s Gospel with an outrageous parable about God’s reign, prompted by a dinner guest who exclaims, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God” (Luke 14:15). Jesus proceeds to portray the Kingdom as a great feast with a scandalous guest list that eviscerates pious, elitist notions of who is “blessed.”

"Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.'

³⁸ Compare Matthew 9:11-13 and Luke 5:30-32.

³⁹ Blomberg, “Jesus and Table Fellowship,” 44 and 48.

So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner' " (Luke 14:16-24).⁴⁰

The gospel – the good news – that Jesus proclaims is a gospel of the open, inclusive table⁴¹ that defies any hierarchical limitation. Those who miss the party are the ones who are preoccupied with and caught up in the trappings of their own social and spiritual status.

The Eucharist as Model for Christ-Like Table Practice

Thus, through His table practice, Jesus set an example for breaching social barriers by bridging the food boundaries that buttress those barriers. He challenged insiders and reconciled outsiders, and passed this “ministry of reconciliation” on to His disciples (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). That this ministry should include our own dinner tables is evident both from Jesus’ table practice and the fact that Jesus’ table, the Lord’s Table, stands at the center of Christian worship and tradition.⁴² By breaking the bread and sharing in the cup of Communion, we are invited to share in the alternative missional framework that Jesus articulated and lived. However, many present day observances of the Lord’s Supper fall short of offering sustenance for such lived mission. The bread and the cup remain securely within the confines of sanctuary worship, even though they are consumed by disciples who live outside those confines, because Communion has

⁴⁰ Compare these words of Jesus with the words of His mother, Mary, in the “Magnificat” in Luke 1:52-53: “[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

⁴¹ Jason Valeriano Hallig, “The Eating Motif and Luke’s Characterization of Jesus as the Son of Man,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (April – June 2016), 218.

⁴² Jennifer R. Ayres, *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 55.

generally become a solemn as well as a private rite of reflection and introspection.⁴³ A rediscovery of the Lord's Table as a paradigm for a new way of life lived in and through Christ is needed before we can truly grasp the transformative potential of the dinner table.

Rediscovering the significance of the Lord's Table begins with revisiting what Jesus was establishing for the disciples at the Last Supper. In almost all Christian traditions, the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11 are incorporated, in whole or in part, into the Communion ceremony as "the words of institution."

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

George May rightly argues that we have lost sight of the context in which Paul wrote these words. In reminding the Corinthians of what Jesus said, Paul was roundly criticizing their behavior when they gathered for the Lord's Supper, not establishing a rote script for them to recite over a bite of bread and a sip of wine or juice.⁴⁴

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (1 Corinthians 11:20-22)

The compassion and respect absent from the Lord's Table is the overriding issue for Paul here.

The social divisions that lie at the root of the Corinthians' disgraceful conduct have no place at

⁴³ George May, "The Lord's Supper: Ritual or Relationship? Making a Meal of It in Corinth, Part 1: Meals in the Gospels and Acts," *The Reformed Theological Review*, 60 no. 3 (December 2001), 148.

⁴⁴ George May, "The Lord's Supper: Ritual or Relationship? Making a Meal of It in Corinth, Part 2: Meals at Corinth," *The Reformed Theological Review*, 61 no. 1 (April 2002), 2 and 18. May's overarching contention is that the Lord's Supper should not be enacted as ritual at all.

this meal celebrated “in remembrance” of Christ. Around the Lord’s Table, Paul insists that sharing in this meal should *transform* the disciples’ behavior and their attitudes toward one another. Communion is about just that, *communion*, and the fellowship of the Lord’s Table extends horizontally toward our neighbors as well as vertically toward our God.⁴⁵ If it does not extend in both of these directions, we have missed the point. We have “eaten in an unworthy manner” (1 Corinthians 11:27) the feast Christ has shared with us.

Furthermore, these vertical and horizontal dimensions of divine and human communion convene at the Lord’s Table as well as extend outward from it. The Table is where Christ meets His people, welcomes them, and nourishes them through gifts of sustenance freely given.⁴⁶ It is also where Christ’s people meet Him. The elements through which Christians discern Christ’s presence are not raw offerings simply harvested from nature: they are bread baked by human hands, and wine pressed, fermented, and aged through human ingenuity using creation’s bounty.⁴⁷ The Lord’s Table thus represents a partnership as well as an intersection. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.... Now *you* are the body *of Christ* and individually members of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27, emphasis mine).⁴⁸ Consequently, the Eucharist is something to which Christians must *respond*.⁴⁹ Having glimpsed the deep, holy dimensions of eating at Jesus’

⁴⁵ Ayres, *Good Food*, 56.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 56-61.

⁴⁷ Joncas, *Tasting the Kingdom*, 364.

⁴⁸ L. Shannon Jung, *Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 45; Ayres, *Good Food*, 57-59. Ayres emphasizes it is no accident that Paul discusses spiritual gifts and the nature of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 immediately after decrying the abuses at the Lord’s Table in 1 Corinthians 11.

⁴⁹ Jung, *Food for Life*, 27.

Table⁵⁰ (grace, provision, and connectivity), we are invited to enter into a deeper, holier partnership with God, creation, and one another.⁵¹

The Eucharist thus pushes us beyond the Lord's Table itself and indeed beyond the church. The connection with each other that we discover through breaking the bread and sharing the cup of the Lord's Supper cannot be limited to fellow church members or even to fellow Christians, for at least three reasons. First, Holy Communion takes place in the context of worship, and worship does not end with mere dismissal. We are not simply free to go; we are *sent*.⁵² We are sent back into the world to bear witness to the alternative framework of mission and life – in all of its glorious connectedness – that we have received through meeting Christ at the Table.

Second, our Christian profession is that Christ is Lord *of all*. Jesus is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25), the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), precisely because He is more than a *personal* Savior. Christ is the divine Word made flesh who came to dwell among us (John 1:14). “*All things* came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of *all people*” (John 1:3-4, emphasis mine).⁵³ Thus, what Jesus offers us at the Table, and what we offer Him, is not a private exchange. It is a cosmic encounter with ripple effects that extend from the Table through us to the whole world – not just to all people but, indeed, to all of creation.

⁵⁰ Hartman, “Consuming Christ,” 56.

⁵¹ Ayres, *Good Food*, 59.

⁵² James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 2.

⁵³ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 145.

Third, if we are in Christ, we are newly created. The old has passed away, utterly transformed by Christ's love and grace (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christ gifts each of us with an identity,⁵⁴ and that identity is not simply for Sunday mornings. Christ is not grooming us for membership in His club. He is (re)shaping us from the inside out⁵⁵ to live as disciples. And as disciples, we are intended to live in the world as Christ's ambassadors, as ministers of Jesus' reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).⁵⁶

Eucharistic Eating

This is why the Lord's Table should lead us to share other tables with the same kind of intentional and subversive hospitality Jesus exemplified in His own living and dining. If we are serious about our role as Christ's ambassadors, then we must involve ourselves in the ministry of reconciliation. Seeking reconciliation should lead us toward table fellowship, for there can be no reconciliation apart from the building of intimate relationships⁵⁷ and meals are inherently relational.⁵⁸ Eating together is, in fact, one of the most intimate forms of human interaction. In the words of Nathan Mitchell:

“[Christ and His earliest disciples] understood that to change dining habits was quite literally to change the world. For at table, everything that creates a world is present:

⁵⁴ Ayres, *Good Food*, 58.

⁵⁵ Arthur Vogel, *Is the Last Supper Finished? Secular Light on a Sacred Meal* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 19.

⁵⁶ Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 145.

⁵⁷ Allan Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung argue that biblical reconciliation involves exchanging places with the other, standing in their shoes, and standing in solidarity with them. Reconciliation, therefore, must overcome alienation, restore relationship, and create new frameworks for relating – the very things Jesus did in and through His table practice. See Allan Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 12-18.

⁵⁸ Jung, *Food for Life*, 48-49. Food is relational human-to-human, human-to-earth (the plants and produce we eat), and human-to-species (the animals we eat).

economics, politics, the potential for rivalry and competition, bonds among friends, boundaries against enemies.... Jesus' table ministry was a strategy for rebuilding human community on principles radically different from those of His surrounding social and religious culture – different from the ideology of honor and shame, of patrons, clients, and brokers, of 'us' against 'them.'⁵⁹

Including shared meals in the work of the ministry of reconciliation is a practice Norman Wirzba refers to as “Eucharistic eating” – extending to the world’s tables the same salvific reality of Christ found at the Lord’s Table.⁶⁰ To eat Eucharistically is to no longer eat simply for our own benefit and enjoyment, but to offer ourselves to others around the table “in remembrance” of Christ’s offering of Himself to us.⁶¹

Eating Our Way Forward

To exclude others from our tables (intentionally or unintentionally) is to exclude them from so much more than a meal. Likewise, to include others at our tables is to welcome them to so much more than food and conversation. Our intentional presence at table as disciples of Christ Jesus validates the “other,” can undermine the social and spiritual logic for the divisions between “us” and “them,” and may begin the process for creating a new framework for human relationship rooted in Jesus’ own missional framework.⁶²

Often the most challenging part of engaging any new practice is getting started. The seven examples that follow are offered as representative samples of how contemporary organizations are addressing social divisions through the sharing of food. Two general criteria

⁵⁹ Nathan Mitchell, *Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation*, Forum Essays (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 78-79.

⁶⁰ Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 153.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 153-154.

⁶² Hallig, “Eating Motif,” 211. Jesus’ table practice was part of His strategy for announcing and redefining the in-breaking reign of God.

guided their selection. (1) They are settings in which the focus is on the relationship side of the meal, and in which the people involved are either deliberately crossing a social boundary or otherwise pushing back against social trends that work to keep people isolated. (2) Settings outside the church are included intentionally because churches are not perfect, and Christians should never assume all faithful work in any given arena is occurring exclusively within Christian ranks. After describing these settings, their work, and their contexts, I will extrapolate what we can learn from their efforts, and identify additional steps that need to be taken to transform good intentions into Eucharistic eating.

Restaurants and Cafés

Busboys and Poets (Washington, D.C.)

Busboys and Poets has become a Washington D.C. institution since the first restaurant opened on U Street in 2005. There are now multiple locations throughout the metro Washington D.C. area. The name is a reference to Langston Hughes, who worked as a busboy at Washington's Wardman Park Hotel for a time in the 1920s before he became a world-renowned poet of the Harlem Renaissance.⁶³

Busboys and Poets founder, Andy Shallal, chose U Street because of its significance in the history of Black Washington. The U Street corridor was the heart of African-American business and nightlife during the days of segregation. Then, the area was decimated in the 1968 riots following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. U Street became a hollow shell in the impoverished inner city, and remained so for more than 30 years. With Busboys and Poets, Shallal wanted to evoke the glory days of U Street's past while pointing the way to what the

⁶³ Busboys and Poets, "About," accessed March 17, 2017, <http://www.busboysandpoets.com/about/>.

future might hold. He wanted to create a restaurant that might realize Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of an integrated America.⁶⁴

Shallal was quite familiar with the “60/40 Line” when he began, largely from personal experience. He immigrated to the United States with his family in the 1960s when he was 11 years old. Race was a particularly charged topic in the Civil Rights era, and Shallal found himself in an awkward position in relation to his peers. He was too brown to be considered white, and not brown enough to be considered black. He did not have a place in either racial world, so he learned to maneuver in and out of both.⁶⁵ That experience, along with his work hosting conversations between Jews and Arabs at the Washington D.C. Jewish Community Center, motivated Shallal to try the Busboys and Poets experiment: a bookstore, a coffee shop, and a performance space (the best of old U Street) in addition to being a first rate restaurant.

According to Shallal, if diversity is the goal, then everything (the menu, the décor, the place settings, the music playing in the background, the types of performances hosted, et al.) has to be intentional. Nothing can appeal too much to any one particular group. It is a delicate balancing act that requires constant attention – and hard work. However, Shallal says, in a multi-ethnic venture, non-Whites have to be considered first and foremost. “The whites will come, because it’s a white world. If there is something new going on, something that has a buzz about it, they will come and check it out. The blacks, the Latinos, they’re the ones you have to speak to in order to convince them that this is for them.” Take the menu, for example. “No one wants to have trouble pronouncing what they’re ordering. If you’ve got complex names, foreign terminology on your menu, that’s a signal that you’re only interested in people who are educated

⁶⁴ Kliman, “Coding,” 110.

⁶⁵ Andy Shallal, interview with author, March 18, 2016.

and cultured enough to know what those things are and how to say them – which basically means rich white folks.”⁶⁶ So, at Busboys and Poets, even though Shallal serves chorizo on the pizza, the menu lists it as pepperoni.⁶⁷

Now that Busboys and Poets is firmly established and has a reputation for being welcoming and serving high quality food, that equation is changing somewhat. Shallal says he has earned the right to be a little more adventurous and experimental with the menus he plans. People trust him to introduce them to new things and expose them to new experiences. But the balancing act required to keep the dining room diverse is perpetual. Shallal goes to tremendous lengths few others are willing to go to in order to create his multi-ethnic space. And that is the primary reason why Busboys and Poets succeeds as a multicultural hub.

541 Eatery and Exchange (Hamilton, ON, Canada)

Compared to Busboys and Poets, the 541 Eatery and Exchange is brand new. It opened in an economically depressed area of Hamilton in 2014, with a purpose very different from Shallal’s. The team behind 541 has bridging the economic divides of Hamilton as their primary objective, with the aim of welcoming the poor and treating them with dignity. Dignity involves offering them assistance without segregating them from the rest of society, and not serving them food that the affluent would shun. Executive director Sue Carr explained, “I worked in soup kitchens and found them absolutely horrible. It’s completely degrading to line people up and serve them slop and then expect them to be grateful.”⁶⁸ Also unlike Busboys and Poets, 541 Eatery and Exchange operates as a non-profit, staffed overwhelmingly with volunteers (80%).

⁶⁶ Shallal interview.

⁶⁷ Kliman, “Coding,” 110.

⁶⁸ Sue Carr, interview with author, March 2, 2017.

They are also unabashed about the Christian theological motivations behind the enterprise. Their mission statement is “working to address the needs of our neighbourhood in tangible ways with the love of Jesus Christ and great food.”

All of the food is made from scratch on the premises, using healthy, high quality ingredients, but is sold inexpensively. The fresh ground cup of coffee I ordered was \$0.95. I added a scrumptious homemade granola bar for another dollar and change. The most expensive item on the menu board was the “full breakfast”: two eggs, potatoes, toast, and your choice of bacon or sausage for \$6. The largely volunteer staff helps keep prices low. In addition, 541 holds regular fundraisers and accepts donations to augment the proceeds from sales, all of which go back into the business. Still, many people in this section of Hamilton cannot afford even these prices. So, 541 has engineered a way for customers to help each other. Next to the register is a large jar full of buttons salvaged from thrift stores. Each button costs \$1. When you pay for your meal, you can purchase as many buttons as you like. (I bought three). You then drop the buttons you paid for into another jar, which customers who need a little extra can use like currency to help pay for their food. Each button is worth what they cost: \$1. Any customer can use up to six buttons per day to place their orders, which means that anyone can receive one full meal at 541, even if they have no money of their own, each and every day.

Another distinctive feature of the café is a large harvest table that sits in the center of the dining room with other, small tables arranged around it. The table can sit 12 customers, “and people use it. Sometimes it’s a matter of necessity, because it can get very crowded in here, especially at lunch. So sometimes you wind up sitting with people you don’t know, but people make room and start up conversations. It seems to happen rather naturally.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Through the food they provide and the dining space they've created, 541 intentionally seeks to create a healthier community in a place where many residents are economically isolated. "We chose this location deliberately. All of the [health and opportunity] indices were negative, and among the worst of the neighbourhoods around here. Unemployment is high, and it's a bit of a food desert as well. There are basically only bars up and down this road, and no grocery stores to speak of."⁷⁰ So we wanted to not only provide people with a source of food, but we wanted that food to be healthy and nutritious – not processed. Like homemade food." 541's food is helping to transform other aspects of health as well.

"The food we serve is making a difference in peoples lives, but it's also helping to create and strengthen community bonds. Because whether you're paying with cash or paying with buttons, you're eating the same thing. Food is an equalizer in that way. Last year, the Governor General of Canada⁷¹ stopped in for lunch when he was in town for one meeting or another, and to see him eating here, with his Porche parked outside, alongside people who paid for the very same food with buttons was really quite extraordinary."⁷²

Churches and Religious Communities

St. Lydia's (Brooklyn, NY)

St. Lydia's has taken the spirit of the harvest table at 541 Eatery and Exchange and built church around it. Rev. Emily Scott⁷³ founded St. Lydia's in 2008 as a way to recapture the

⁷⁰ A wing shop and a generic subway sandwich place were the only other eateries I saw along Barton Street on my way to 541.

⁷¹ The Governor General is Queen Elizabeth II's official representative in Canada, directly appointed by her to fulfill her constitutional and ceremonial duties when she herself cannot be present.

⁷² Carr interview.

⁷³ Rev. Scott declined my request for an interview for this project.

Eucharistic eating patterns of the earliest disciples. The Lord's Supper was a full meal originally, not a liturgical ceremony added onto a formal, public worship service.

At St. Lydia's, often self-described as a "dinner church," worship orbits the meal. Members of the congregation arrive at the church's storefront location between 5:30 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. on Sundays to prepare a simple but fresh vegetarian dinner (often soup and salad or pasta with vegetables). Worship begins around 7:00 p.m. when the meal is ready. The liturgy opens around a central candle. Worshipers light individual candles from this Christ candle and take the light with them to one of the round tables where dinner will be served, singing as they go. Dinner begins with the breaking of bread, which the congregants pass to each other, saying, "This is My body." The main course then follows. Attendees are encouraged to converse as they eat, and there is no set topic of conversation. Worship continues, once dinner winds down, with the reading of Scripture, a sermon, and an invited response to what the preacher has said. Songs and prayers are then offered, followed by the blessing of the cup.⁷⁴ The cup is then passed among the worshipers. The meal ends as it began, with everyone pitching in to clean up what they made together. A simple dessert, not requiring dishes, is served as announcements are made. Finally, the congregation is sent back into the world with a closing song and the passing of the peace.⁷⁵

But there is much more to St. Lydia's than dinner, and dinner is more than food. The church's "rule of life" describes St. Lydia's not as a "dinner church" but as a "holistic,

⁷⁴ St. Lydia's pattern of sharing Communion thus mirrors in practice the "words of institution" in 1 Corinthians 11.25: "In the same way he took the cup also, *after supper*, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (emphasis mine).

⁷⁵ Ansley Roan, "Dinner – and the Gospel – Is Served, at St. Lydia's," *Faith and Leadership*, October 8, 2012, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/dinner-and-gospel-served-st-lydias>. Also St. Lydia's "Dinner Script," accessed March 18, 2017, <http://stlydias.org/wp-content/themes/stlydias/img/scripts.pdf>

neighborhood church that dispels isolation, reconnects neighbors, and subverts the status quo.”⁷⁶ Emily Scott sees the practice of sharing these congregational meals each and every week as counter cultural in 21st century Brooklyn. Young, single urbanites do not enjoy many home-cooked meals, and most people in Brooklyn live in spaces too small to host dinner parties. Everything at St. Lydia’s is intentionally designed to challenge the anonymous, frantic, crowded, and cramped experience of life in the big city.⁷⁷

The community thus shaped around the table is life giving, but it can also be awkward. Visitors are frequent. There are some regulars who are homeless. Sharing the table with people you do not know, talking about life and faith, can be uncomfortable – and there is no “back pew” to withdraw to in St. Lydia’s model. In this way, St. Lydia’s creates the same type of “experimental” space Hal Taussig argues early Christian gatherings (modeled after *symposia*, in his view) created: space in which relational patterns and social structures could be tested in a setting removed from society at large. The tension created by such testing in such a space can, over time, become a catalyst for social change in the wider world.⁷⁸ That is certainly what St. Lydia’s aims to do through Eucharistic eating around the dinner table.

Broadway United Methodist Church (Indianapolis, IN)

Broadway is a more traditional church than St. Lydia’s. The congregation meets in a grand sanctuary built in 1927, lined with pews and tinted with stained glass windows. However, much of what takes place within this traditional façade is anything but traditional. Under the

⁷⁶ St. Lydia’s “Rule of Life,” accessed March 18, 2017, <http://stlydias.org/wp-content/themes/stlydias/img/rule-of-life.pdf>

⁷⁷ Emma Green, “The Secret Christians of Brooklyn,” *The Atlantic*, September 8, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/st-lydias-microchurch-brooklyn-secret-christians/404119/>

⁷⁸ Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 68-71.

leadership of Rev. Mike Mather, Broadway has turned the accepted model of urban church ministry on its ear.

In 1927, Broadway was on the northern outskirts of the city, in the heart of affluent Indianapolis. At one point in the 1930s, it was the largest church in Indiana: a paragon of White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. Then, the city moved away from Broadway – expanding outward. The affluent families relocated out to the newly developed suburbs. The neighborhood changed, and the congregation declined. In little more than a generation, Broadway had become an inner city church.

The few congregants that remained responded to the community the way many urban churches do – with programs. They started a food pantry, a clothing ministry, and after-school tutoring for neighborhood children. The summer camp Rev. Mather developed in the 1980s, during his first stint as Broadway’s pastor, drew as many as 250 kids per year. Broadway thought it was faithfully serving its community, confronting its problems. Then, in a nine-month span, nine youth within a four-block radius of the church died of gun violence. Some of them had attended the summer camp. The camp was popular, but it became clear to Mather that the ministry was not changing outcomes in the neighborhood.⁷⁹

After spending a decade at another urban church exploring alternative philosophies of urban ministry, the bishop re-appointed Mather to Broadway UMC in 2003. He returned with a new vision for what urban ministry could be – and should be. Rather than trying to put a band-aid on the community’s gaping wounds, he now believed the church should look for life in the midst of the neighborhood, and treat the residents as capable people created fully in the image of

⁷⁹ Rev. Mike Mather, interview with author, January 19, 2017; Robert King, “Death and Resurrection of an Urban Church,” *Faith and Leadership*, March 24, 2015, <https://www.faithand leadership.com/death-and-resurrection-urban-church>.

God rather than as problems to fix. As a result, they closed the food pantry, the clothing closet, and discontinued the summer camp. Then they started listening and observing.

The results have been revolutionary. Rather than a place to go for help, neighborhood residents now see Broadway as a place to go to make connections. The church has incubated small businesses, helped neighbors with common interests find each other, fostered mentoring relationships between teenage mothers and older women, and helped church members and non-church members see the glory of God in unexpected people and places. Broadway has helped to create a new paradigm for urban ministry that *does* affect outcomes.⁸⁰

Meals are not front-and-center at Broadway the way they are at St. Lydia's, but Mike Mather says they have played an integral role in the church's transformation. They are essential to how the congregation operates and helps people make connections. Ironically, every photo in the *Faith and Leadership* feature on Broadway not taken inside the sanctuary shows a group gathering around or near a dinner table – but the article does not mention food once!⁸¹

“The presence of food causes people to behave in ways that are different than when it's not present. Your body is literally more engaged in what's taking place when you're eating. You're sharing goodies with others, and they're sharing goodies with you. Meals become the settings for people seeing other people as they are.”

“That's one reason we hardly have meetings anymore. Instead of meetings, we have meals. When you have a meeting, everyone attending has to add something extra to their schedule. But everyone has to eat, so when you're sharing a meal you're doing something everyone around the table would be doing anyway. But more than anything, meals create the

⁸⁰ King, “Death and Resurrection.”

⁸¹ Ibid.

kind of intimacy you can build relationships on. Food changes the nature of the conversation. You can be talking about the same topic, the same problem, but that conversation will sound different around the dinner table than it will around a boardroom table. A full meal is an unconscious sign of abundance. So, when you're meeting over food – a meal, not just a snack – you're starting with a reference point of plenty, not scarcity, which influences what you think is possible.”⁸²

Ryan Cook's Intentional Community (Liverpool, United Kingdom)

Ryan Cook is a Canadian living and working in Liverpool, England. He is a chaplain, a student, and a candidate for ordination within the Church of England. In addition, he, his wife, and their children share a large brick house in the heart of the city with four friends. Their purpose for moving in together was to create a shared, quasi-monastic community who would pray together regularly and engage in hospitality. It is a deliberate but not a grand or detailed arrangement. The inspiration came from a book Ryan read almost a decade ago called *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*.⁸³ It explores the welcoming communities that Saint Patrick established outside all the major Irish settlements in late antiquity. The hospitality offered by these communities contributed significantly to the Christianization of Ireland. As a minister, Ryan was looking for a way to reconnect with the wider community. “I served on staff at a large evangelical church in Alberta for ten years. I developed all kinds of wonderful and creative and engaging programs in that role. The church was growing. It was wonderful in many ways. Then one day I realized there was something missing: the outside. For all of our evangelical language and identity, we were living exclusively inside the church. I realized I did not have any

⁸² Mather interview.

⁸³ George Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010).

significant relationships with anyone who didn't share my faith. I wanted to find a path back out into the world.”⁸⁴

Ryan, his family, and their housemates decided that they would make a commitment to eat together once a week, on Monday nights at 6:30. And they would invite others from the community to join them. They started with their neighbors, and branched out from there: people they worked with, people they struck up conversations with at the coffee shop. And those people started showing up. At one point, they had 40-50 people crammed into their house for dinner on Monday evenings.

Ryan wrote a blog about the experience entitled, “What I Learned Over 2.5 Years of Opening Our Home on Monday Evenings” to celebrate all that happened.⁸⁵ The Monday evening meals are on hiatus for the moment because the size of the meal was starting to defeat the purpose for having it. “It’s hard to talk when you can hardly move.” So, Ryan and his household have decided to call it off until they can figure out how to reorganize and manage it more effectively. But, clearly, these Monday evening meals have struck a chord within the community.

“We live in such a transactional society, our entire way of being revolves around time management and the costs of things and how what we do will be ‘productive.’ We’re very results oriented. At the same time, we’ve also bought into this sort of hyper individualism. Inviting strangers over to your house for dinner without any agenda other than getting to know them better flies in the face of all that. So I think some people responded for the sheer novelty of it, if nothing else, or just to patronize me. But the invitations we extended also happened

⁸⁴ Ryan Cook, interview with author, March 19, 2017.

⁸⁵ Ryan Cook, “Things I’ve Learned from 2.5 Years of Opening Our Home on Monday Evenings,” *Fit Yourself Club* (blog), February 21, 2017, <https://fityourself.club/things-ive-learned-from-2-5-years-of-opening-our-home-on-monday-evenings-6565e8adbbf9#.czvawpmye>

naturally out of conversations that we struck up. There was nothing forced or coercive about it. We didn't walk into the coffee shop with a quota for inviting X number of people before we left. I think people sensed that. We were very clear and up front, and with ourselves first of all, that this was 'no strings attached' hospitality. Prayer happened around the table, we've even seen people start to attend church – even request baptism – because of this experience. But all of that happened either because it's what just naturally happens in our house, or it fit with where the conversation was at that particular time. We weren't looking for openings to sneak it in.”

Ryan has not yet had time to thoroughly process and reflect on all that transpired, but he is convinced that the fact they were inviting people over for dinner – to eat – played a significant role in what did transpire. “I don't think we would have had this same response or seen the relationships develop that we have seen if we were inviting folks to a book club or something like that. Food is universal. It's a universal need, a universal pleasure. Everyone is connected to food.

“Food also gives you something to do with your hands and with your mouth when you don't know what to do. Because let's be honest, when you meet new people there are these awkward moments that are unavoidable. So the food can be a distraction, if you need it to be. It can also become part of the conversation, if you need it to be. It certainly becomes part of the shared experience that helps bring people together really like nothing else can.”⁸⁶

In these two and a half years, Ryan has witnessed scores of people come together around these Monday night dinners, people “who would never connect in a hierarchical world spoke to

⁸⁶ Cook interview.

each other, came to appreciate each other, and often became friends.”⁸⁷ In many ways, he has learned precisely what Jesus modeled for His disciples through His own table practice:

“I’ve learned that the table is a powerful symbol of a world put right. At the table you look people in the eyes. The surface of the table is level. It creates an environment whereby you reach your hands into the same pot, take from the same food, to sustain your lives in the same way. It’s a levelling [sic] act. You have come in need of the same thing, and you get that need met by performing the same actions at the same time. All while facing each other, in the flesh; skin and bones – real humans on real journeys.”⁸⁸

Volunteer Organizations

Food Not Bombs (Kitchener, ON, Canada, and worldwide)

Food Not Bombs is a movement of loose-knit, independent groups that operate under the same name all over the world. There is no centralized organization, only a shared philosophy of giving away vegetarian food made from reclaimed produce⁸⁹ to anyone who needs it in protest of the wasteful nature of consumer capitalism and the growing militarization of the American economy. The first food giveaway occurred on March 26, 1981, in front of the Federal Reserve Building at South Station in Boston.⁹⁰

On that date, a group of activists (Jo Swanson, Mira Brown, Susan Eaton, Brian Feigenbaum, C.T. Lawrence Butler, Jessie Constable, Amy Rothstien and Keith McHenry) gathered to protest the construction of a nuclear power station. As part of their protest, they

⁸⁷ Cook, “2.5 Years.”

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Food Not Bombs is committed to the non-exploitation of animals as well as humans. That is the central commitment behind the vegetarian philosophy. However, there is a practical dimension as well. Recovered food is often at or past its expiration date. Recovered meat thus poses a greater health risk than recovered vegetables simply because it is more susceptible to contamination.

⁹⁰ Food Not Bombs, “Frequently Asked Questions,” accessed March 19, 2017, http://www.foodnotbombs.net/new_site/faq.php

planned to dress as hobos and stage a Depression era soup kitchen. They let a nearby homeless shelter know about the free soup, and on the day of the protest many homeless showed up to eat. Then something amazing happened. Businessmen and -women passing by, who were also offered soup, began striking up conversations with the homeless people.⁹¹ The Food Not Bombs venture and philosophy was born out of this experience.

The Kitchener chapter of Food Not Bombs gives away food every Saturday in front of the city hall: a central location in the heart of the community, easily accessible by foot and public transportation. The volunteers set up under a covered area, in case of precipitation, but they serve outdoors so anyone can approach the tables. Dominic Aquilina is the chapter's "leader" in as much as he posts event announcements and reminders on the group's Facebook page, and manages the volunteer sign up list. But true to the movement's philosophy, he has no official role or title, and does not like to be thought of as the leader.

Each week, they make three soups and a dessert from scratch. The only thing they do not cook is bread donated from a local bakery. The preparations take place in a borrowed commercial community kitchen using ingredients donated from a series of local stores: food that otherwise would be discarded. Volunteers take what they need to make the soup and the dessert for the day, and they give the rest away along with the prepared soup. Any leftover soup and/or produce is donated to a local men's hostel.

The food was set up on two rectangular folding tables. People who stopped by were given a plastic bowl and their choice of soup, bread, and dessert. Most of the people who asked for food looked homeless or to be experiencing economic distress. A few of the folks from a nearby skating rink wandered over, but not many. Some of the guests returned for seconds or thirds. A

⁹¹ Food Not Bombs, "FAQ."

handful brought take-away containers with them, and asked the servers if they would fill those in addition to giving them a bowl. The servers complied, as long as there was soup to give.

Once they received their food, the guests mainly found a spot off by themselves to eat. Those who came in groups ate as groups. There was not a lot of intermingling, either among the guests or among the guests and the volunteers. Dominic says this is something they prefer not to see. When there is a lull, volunteers are encouraged to take a bowl of soup and visit with those whom they have served; however, that does not happen as often as Dominic would like to see.

Amongst the volunteers themselves, however, there did seem to be a strong camaraderie. I asked Dominic if cooking together helped foster relationships within the chapter. “There’s something about sharing the same space with somebody – and not just sharing the space, but sharing it with a purpose – that creates a bond. We have to work together to get things done, and you talk while you work. I’ve made a lot of friends through Food Not Bombs, people I probably would not have met otherwise. I believe in the work, but that’s one reason I stay involved.”⁹²

Mixed In the Six (Toronto, ON, Canada)

Mixed in the Six is a “pop-up” dining experience co-created by Haan Palcu-Chang (a chef) and Gina Oades (an occupational therapist) to help people of mixed ethnic heritage find one another and create community. Haan is Chinese-Romanian, and Gina is Filipino-Canadian. Gina had previous experience organizing social events as president of the Mixed Students Association at York University in Toronto, where she studied. Haan had a vision for bringing people of mixed racial heritage together over food. The two met on a Tinder date, and while

⁹² Dominic Aquilia, interview with author, February 18, 2017.

their relationship did not blossom romantically, they created Mixed in the Six out of what Gina calls “the perfect platonic marriage”⁹³ of skills and interests.

So far there have been three Mixed in the Six events, each one larger than the last. Attendees have to buy a ticket to cover the cost of the food, the space rental, and other logistical expenses. Haan donates his time and expertise planning and preparing the meals. Dinner is served as a family style buffet. The goal is to create space for people to meet each other, talk, and share experiences. There is no set agenda for the evening. For Haan, the shared experience begins with the meal. “For me, the food element is more than just feeding people. It’s a symbol for what we are trying to do with Mixed in the Six: generosity, community, family, nourishment.”⁹⁴

Attendees appear to be discovering all four of these dynamic through Haan’s cooking. When photos from the first Mixed in the Six began circulating on social media, one attendee commented, “These are my first family photos where the family all looks like me.” Haan believes the food is essential to creating this experience. “When you’re bringing people together who don’t necessarily know each other, the food is crucial. They can talk about the food if they struggle to start conversations around other things – so you want it to be really good.

“Food creates intimacy in so many ways. Food is something we all need. It’s multisensory; it engages all five senses, actually. It can recall memories from the past; give you a sense of home. So it really brings everyone’s humanity to the fore. I don’t think Mixed in the

⁹³ Erin Kobayashi, “Mixed in the Six Pop-Up Events Created to Support Multiracial Torontonians,” *Toronto Star*, January 3, 2017, <https://www.thestar.com/life/2017/01/03/mixed-in-the-six-pop-up-events-created-to-support-multiracial-torontonians.html>

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Six would work without the food. If we all showed up to just drink and listen to music, we wouldn't be drawn together in the same way – even if we were in the same space.”⁹⁵

Effective Take-Aways

Each of these endeavors is impressive in its own right, positively impacting a local community and effectively bringing people together in defiance of social, political, and economic forces that work centrifugally to keep races, classes, and faiths apart. Several lessons emerge from what these groups are accomplishing that can inform the development of an effective and faithful Christ-like table practice.

First, Andy Shallal exposes the fact that meals are coded. There are any number of subtle, unspoken, yet clear signals sent through how a meal is served, what is served, and in what environment it is served. These signals speak, “Welcome,” to some ethnic and economic groups, and scream, “Keep out,” to others.⁹⁶ Cultivating an awareness of these “codes” is vital, so that hospitality can be communicated clearly. When genuine welcome is extended, people respond.

Second, the efforts of 541 Eatery and Exchange and Broadway UMC reveal that treating “the other” with dignity and respect is crucial if reconciliation is to be made possible. Empathy is not reconciliation. Charity is not reconciliation. Reconciliation involves solidarity, which grows out of relationships, which develop out of shared experience, which evolves from a realized equality of personhood.⁹⁷ Broadway actively seeks to create connections and partnerships. 541 does not give away food; it enables the general public of economically

⁹⁵ Haan interview.

⁹⁶ Kliman, “Coding,” 110.

⁹⁷ Boesak and DeYoung, *Reconciliation*, 17-21.

depressed Hamilton and the Governor General of Canada to share the same food in the same space at the same time around the same table.

Third, 541 Eatery and Exchange and Food Not Bombs both demonstrate that efforts to bridge divides have to be taken to “the other.” We cannot expect those who live on the other side of the boundaries we are trying to cross to come to us. 541 Eatery and Exchange would not be what it is if the leadership team had set up shop on the gentrified side of town. The people who need 541’s buttons do not live and travel over there. Likewise, Food Not Bombs outdoors set up on the grounds of city hall ensures that those who need their free food the most can reach it – by whatever means they have. No one has to enter a building. No one is going to ask them to leave because of their appearance or their hygiene, and there are no stairs to climb. If we are going to build the bridge, we have to level the ground and be the first ones to cross over.

Fourth, Food Not Bombs and St. Lydia’s prove that cooking food together can build community as well as eating food together. In St. Lydia’s case, the shared effort of preparing what will be eaten results in a meal that truly is “ours” in a way that dissolves the distinctions between who the guests are and who the host is. This shared effort creates an extra dimension of togetherness. In Food Not Bomb’s case, the cooking has become the center of the relationship making, at least in Kitchener.

Fifth, St. Lydia’s, Ryan Cook, and Mixed in the Six showcase the fertility of uncoerced and unimpeded conversation around the table. There is no agenda for the meal itself. At Mixed in the Six, the music and any other ancillary activities come to a halt when it is time to eat. There is no liturgy or structured conversation at St. Lydia’s during dinner at the “dinner church.” Likewise, free flowing conversation is a key element of Ryan Cook’s “no strings attached”

hospitality. The conversation develops organically and, like the Spirit, goes where it goes. Relationships are cultivated in the wake of the conversation, not the other way around.

Finally, for all seven of these endeavors, the food is essential, not incidental. None of the leaders I spoke to could identify anything else that brings people together the way food does. For that reason, the food needs special care and attention. It cannot be an afterthought. It needs to look good. It needs to smell good. Above all it needs to taste good – and be plentiful. Homemade food is not necessary, but it is worth noting that homemade food is present in almost every context considered here. Haan Palcu-Chang perhaps phrases it best: “The quality of the food you serve reflects your investment in the relationship you’re trying to cultivate. If you invest in the food – put your heart and soul, and time and effort into it, that’s going to send a message. If you serve whatever is most convenient and least expensive for you, that’s going to send a message, too.”⁹⁸

Pushing Further

Several model limitations also emerge from this study. Andy Shallal’s approach to bridging racial divides reveals the limits of simply getting people of different backgrounds into the same space. For all its success in desegregating the dining room, Busboys and Poets is still (primarily) a restaurant, and restaurants themselves can do little to foster multicultural community beyond creating proximity. To sit and observe the crowd at Busboys and Poets, as I have done many times, is to marvel at the diversity in the place, especially if Todd Kliman’s insights have alerted you to just how homogenous most restaurant dining rooms are. There is conversation, energy, and togetherness; but like all restaurants, that energy is focused inward, toward the center of each individual table. A white family and a black family may be sitting at

⁹⁸ Haan interview.

adjacent to each other, but both families keep to themselves while they eat. An extra step of personal effort and initiative is required to begin nudging desegregation toward integration.

Second, the space where people gather will influence the relationships that develop in that space, no matter how intentional we are about other things. Peter Block asserts that “if you want to change the culture, you have to change the room.”⁹⁹ How a space is configured affects how it is used, and how people in that space will relate to one another. The harvest table in the center of the café at 541 Eatery and Exchange is a prime example. People use it because it is there. The customers sitting around it welcome others, including those they do not know, because the table encourages them to do that – and a crowded lunch hour sometimes forces them to do that. Once people are seated together, facing one another, eating the same fare, conversations begin naturally because the arrangement is conducive. Likewise, the Food Not Bombs serving arrangement encourages, however subconsciously, the very lack of interaction Dominic Aquilia regrets. The serving tables create a division between the servers and the served, and that distinction is what characterizes their relationship, no matter how often he encourages the volunteers “to mingle.”

Third, we should not underestimate the sustained effort and intentionality that building bridges out of tables demands. It involves commitment, and a willingness on the part of the bridge-builders to experience discomfort. Ryan Cook’s community has proven bridge building is joyful work, fruitful work, and uncomplicated work. But it is work nonetheless, and it must be deliberate. Adjustments have to be made along the way, lessons learned from trial and error. Just as we respond to the Communion Table, we must respond to what develops around the dinner tables we share in the spirit of reconciliation. There is a natural tendency to want to slide back into customary habits and patterns, which can result in the re-formation of the old divisions

⁹⁹ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2008), 152.

that we think we have traversed by eating together. Ongoing care and attention is needed to keep the momentum going. For example, Mike Mather notes the tensions that often arise when people of different economic classes enter each other's homes for shared meals "Inviting someone into your house is similar to inviting them to your table. It makes you vulnerable. It's something that happens as relationships form and grow – and it needs to happen. But you need to be aware of and appreciate the anxiety that the poorer people, especially, feel. They're afraid of being judged. So, you have to identify the right host, who can put everyone at ease, and sense when the timing is right to take that next step."¹⁰⁰

Towards a Practice of Eucharistic Eating

Jesus promised His disciples that they could and would do "the same works" He did, and even greater works than those (John 14:12). These seven organizations have proven, in various ways and to varying degrees, that what Jesus modeled and accomplished through His own table practice *is* possible for us to accomplish through ours. Shared tables *can* bridge the divides that scar our world and disrupt our humanity. Shared tables *can* reframe the ways we see and are seen. Thus, the bridges we fashion out of our open tables do nothing less than lead us – and our communities – toward Jesus' alternative missional model of living.

Moving from the examples presented here toward a personal practice of Eucharistic eating mainly involves the willingness to act. The key to Eucharistic eating is not adherence to any specific plan or strategy. There is no single blueprint for turning a table into a bridge. Eucharistic eating is primarily an attitude, an orientation toward food and fellowship that begins worshipfully and prayerfully at the Lord's Table: a willingness to give ourselves to others as

¹⁰⁰ Mather interview.

Christ has given Himself to us. That said, in addition to the takeaways and limitations mentioned above, there are certain principles to keep in mind when moving from attitude to action.

First, Eucharistic eating is more than becoming acquainted with someone we do not know. A personal Eucharistic table practice seeks to accomplish what Jesus' own table practice accomplished: embracing an alternative missional vision for life, and subverting both the social and spiritual premises of the food boundaries that subdivide our communities. To effectively challenge those boundaries, we need to name what they are and identify where they are. Not all boundaries are present in all communities, and not all present boundaries exist to the same degree. Determining which boundaries we have to bridge is essential for determining how to set our tables.

Second, once we identify the boundaries present in our communities, we need to name which of those food boundaries constrains us. Prospective bridge-builders should reflect on questions such as: *With whom do I eat – and not eat? If I have never shared a meal with an African-American or a Muslim, why is that? What makes me uncomfortable?* Eucharistic eating is about helping us climb out of our own boundary confinement, not just helping others climb out of theirs.

Third, we do not have to bridge every social divide, nor do we have to bridge them all at once. Determine which primary boundary you want to dedicate yourself to subverting, then plan a menu and invite guests accordingly.

Finally, just do it. Extend an invitation. Be willing to make yourself a little uncomfortable, and have your established routines and expectations altered through the giving and receiving of hospitality. Learn from what works well and what does not. There is no guarantee an offer of table fellowship will be accepted. Jesus' Parable of the Great Banquet

anticipates this reality. But we should be prepared to be surprised. If the invitation is genuine, it will illicit a response.

Jesus has set the example for us. Contemporary pioneers, like the ones featured above, have demonstrated the transformative power of the shared meal, and have shown us ways to open our tables wide. What remains is for us step out into the streets and lanes of our communities, like the servant in the Great Banquet parable, to seek out our guests. Eucharistic eating is simple work. It is sacrificial work. But it is blessed work, and its fruit is life and light discovered around the open table.

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