



EQUIPPING FOR... LEADERSHIP

Joining the Joyful Feast: From Food Ministry to Worship

Jen de Combe, Associate Secretary of Canadian Ministries

The religious landscape in the 21st century shifts at a rapid pace. And the church is always called to discern the movement of God's Spirit in these changing times and faithfully respond. Recently, I had an opportunity to spend time with a church group discovering new and recovering ancient ways of embracing the Christian life and gathering in community.

When I arrived at The Joyful Feast, a dinner church that had recently started in an urban downtown centre, community members were busily setting up the restaurant they had rented for the evening. The tables were beautifully set and people were gathered in the kitchen around potluck dishes and glasses of wine. As each glass was poured, the conversation grew and soon the room was abuzz with talking and laughter. The minister, decked out in an apron and holding BBQ tongs, was flipping chicken steaks. It felt very ordinary and welcoming, and I was immediately treated like a friend rather than stranger.

About half an hour before the meal, a young woman walked in with a guitar and set up in the corner. Soon, the sounds of Christian music filled the room. More and more people showed up and children started to wind their way in and around the adults, stopping to help where they could. After working together to set up the space, we gathered at a common table to worship God and to share our lives.



The service began with a call to worship:

“Friends, this is the joyful feast! We come to eat together in the presence of God. We gather at these tables to do what Jesus did: sharing food, drink, and life with each other and to partner with God in the healing of our fractured world.”

A silent reverence filled the room. It was obvious that this was a sacred meal and sacred time together for those gathered.

Worship had many elements. Over a delicious meal, we prayed, we sang, we passed around bread and grape juice, we spoke about our lives and we reflected on the life of Jesus. After reading a passage from

Mark's gospel, people entered a lively discussion about who the culture says Jesus is and who we say Jesus is for us. Some saw Jesus as the one who calls us into deeper meaning and purpose; others saw him as calling us out of our selfishness and into God's reconciling work. A few were still searching for Christ's meaning in their lives. Our table didn't come to a consensus—that wasn't the goal—but instead we shared



openly about our experiences and struggles with the Christian life. The depth of conversation around the table led to a feeling of profound and unifying togetherness—the type of fellowship only made possible through Christ.

Towards the end of the meal, a couple of young men saw the sign that hung outside the door welcoming all to the feast. They came in, helped themselves to a plate of food and joined the conversation. I had to leave a bit early, but I can just imagine how it all ended. Conversations continuing into the evening, everyone pitching in to clean the dishes and clear the food, and prayers of thanksgiving and praise being lifted to the One who calls us all to the Joyful Feast.

People are hungry for deep conversations and meaningful relationships. The unique gift the church could give to the surrounding culture is that we are called to wrestle with issues of meaning, justice and faith. Jesus commanded us to love our neighbours, and welcoming them to come, eat and join the conversation is one way of showing that love.

Whether a congregation is feeling called to start a dinner church or to strengthen an existing ministry, it is important to prioritize relationship-building and

truly celebrate the loving bonds that Christ makes possible for us to have with each other. In the following section, you will find tools that can be used to foster strong and genuine relationships in your ministry.

Building Stronger Relationships

Many people long to be part of communities where they can enjoy authentic connection with others. It is simpler than we think to begin building these deep relationships. It starts with creating intentional opportunities for people to get to know each other. Below are some easy get-to-know-you activities that can be used at gatherings.

Highs and Lows

Ask each participant to share the best part of their week and the worst part of the week.

Question Jar

In advance of the gathering, prepare several Christian connecting questions (e.g., If you could have dinner with any biblical character, who would it be and why? In King Solomon's place what blessing would you have

asked God for?). Throughout the event, take turns picking a question and entering into conversation.

Psalms

Read a psalm out loud and ask participants to share how the themes and mood of the psalm connects to their lives.

Delving into the Word

One of the key ways to develop Christian community is to engage in conversations about the scriptures. At your next gathering, use verses where Jesus is asking a question and encourage members to explore the question in the context of their lives. These questions are meant to allow for an open discussion about how the stories of the Bible still speak to our lives today.

Theme: Worry

Matthew 6:25–27

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ***And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?***

Theme: Deepest Needs

Mark 10:46–51

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, ***“What do you want me to do for you?”***



Theme: The Kingdom of God

Mark 4:30–33

He also said, ***“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”***

Theme: New Life

John 11:25–26

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. ***Do you believe this?***”



Farmers' Market started by Heritage Green Family Church (Stoney Creek, ON) in partnership with their neighbours.

Theme: Love in Action

John 21:17

He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “**Do you love me?**” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

Does your food ministry include worship and faith exploration?

Many congregations are already engaged in food ministries such as food banks, community gardens, congregational dinners and teas, and outreach meals. There is much to celebrate in these initiatives and their faithful response to Jesus' example of sharing food with neighbours and strangers. Jesus' sharing of food was always coupled with words and actions that glorified God and invited people to discover the life of faith. Does your food ministry do the same?

The next time you are holding a food ministry event experiment with adding elements of worship and faith exploration. Why not try framing your

meal around a simple liturgy or use the tools in this resource to facilitate conversations about faith? When you invite others, whether they be those who are marginalized, your neighbours or members of neighbouring churches, don't miss the opportunity to invite people to worship God and enter more fully into their faith journey.

If you feel like God might be calling you to start a dinner church ministry or another new form of ministry, Canadian Ministries is here to help you. Please contact us to find out about the many ways we can support new initiatives.

Canadian Ministries wants to hear from you!

What parts of this resource are most useful? Share your story of leadership and congregational vitality. Recommend a resource! Make a suggestion or ask a question!

Contact us at canadianministries@presbyterian.ca or call 416-441-1111 or 1-800-619-7301 ext. 271. Find more great ministry ideas through our weekly Facebook post *Take it Up Tuesday*. Follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/pccconnect.