

# Breaking bread: Church mixes meal service with ministry

The Bible's New Testament covers a lot of meals: Jesus eating with his disciples, Apostles eating with the early church community. In Acts 2:46, for example, they break bread in each other's homes and share their food with "glad and humble hearts."

So Toledo's Pastor Kirk Schneemann sees a precedent for Dinner Church.

"Historically," he said last month, as members of his congregation cleaned up the slow-cooker leftovers of a chili cook-off in the First Alliance Church Fellowship Hall, "this is more like the early church in the New Testament than what we would call organized religion today."

First Alliance's Dinner Church comes in line with a nationwide movement of church-sponsored community meals, each accompanied by some sort of spiritual reflection or worship. While the homeless and hungry are welcome at the tables, this spiritual dimension differentiates Dinner Church from, say, a hot meal at Cherry Street Mission Ministries.

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The Dinner Church Collective counts more than 300 Dinner Churches in the United States, although that number surely rises with ministries that are inspired but not formally affiliated with the collective. These include First Alliance Church of Toledo, which hosts Dinner Church each month, and Hope Community Church of the Nazarene in East Toledo, which does so weekly.

Pastor Schneemann and the Rev. Jeremy England describe the ministry meals as a way to reach those who might be turned off by traditional church, or simply unable to make it during the usual hours. Importantly, they're also a way to reach out to their communities.

"In a word: Relationships," Pastor Schneemann said. "We want people to connect with one another, we want people to connect with God, we want people to connect with our community."

Robin Riffle can appreciate that. She and her children are regulars at First Alliance's Dinner Church. Some church members she knows through an after-school program first extended an invitation, and they've been coming for food and conversation ever since.

"They all go out of their way to be nice and kind," she said. "The food is really good. And they genuinely really care. I love that. I do love that."

"I'm not a religious person," Ms. Riffle continued, "but I like coming here."

First Alliance Church is at 2201 Monroe St., a downtown address on the edge of the Old West End. But its congregation is more commuter than community, Pastor Schneemann said, describing a relatively shallow reach into the immediate neighborhood.

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So when he and church leaders were initially talking about Dinner Church, they envisioned it as a way for them to meet and engage with their downtown neighbors.

"I actually did something that was kind of controversial within First Alliance Church," the pastor said. "I told people, If you're here on a Sunday, Dinner Church is not for you."

That's not to say they wouldn't be welcome, he clarified quickly. But in an outward-looking ministry, he encouraged those inside the church to either volunteer during it or to

bring a friend, like the church members who invited Ms. Riffle.

To use a meal as a vehicle to engage the community felt comfortable to Pastor Schneemann, not only because of its roots in the history of Christianity. Well before he was called to First Alliance Church, he and his wife had planted a similar and since-evolved ministry in Ann Arbor.

So when he began to hear positive buzz about the model again in recent months, much of it under the Dinner Church Collective, he suggested a three-month trial in Toledo.

Since their first Dinner Church in May, First Alliance has been counting between 80 to 100 diners from both the church and the neighborhood sitting down together each month in the Fellowship Hall, Pastor Schneemann said. Dinner Church is 5 to 7 p.m. on the last Sunday of each month.

Attendees seem to have taken the spirit of the meals to heart, regularly settling into folding chairs beside strangers and striking up conversations. Bill Schenk, for example, was talking chili-voting strategy with a first-time attendee in October. Mr. Schenk is a regular, as well as a church member of 55 years; his new friend had only been plugged into the church for about a month.

At another table, Hayden Bewley, the church's director of

student ministry and music, recalled a memorable conversation with attendees who talked about their experiences coming to the city as refugees.

"I meet new people here every month," Mr. Bewley said. "They're from all walks of life and backgrounds."

That's Pastor Schneemann's favorite part of Dinner Church, too.

"We've got a doctor sitting next to a homeless person sitting next to an attorney sitting next to an ex-con," he said. "It's beautiful."

Hope Community Church describes a similar experience with Dinner Church, which draws both a traditional church crowd and neighborhood children and families, Pastor England said. Theirs is always a spaghetti dinner at 6 p.m. Sunday at the East Toledo Family Center, 1020 Varland Ave., where they meet as a second campus of the main church in Oregon.

They shifted from a more traditional worship model to Dinner Church in January, he said, after realizing that the traditional church model wasn't working for them. They had to shift their service time from morning to evening around that time, anyway, so it seemed natural to add a meal into the mix. Some attendees still attend a worship service in the morning

at Hope Community Church's Oregon Campus; some see Dinner Church as their sole church experience.

Both pastors said a goal is to reach the "unchurched," or those who can't or don't want to attend a more traditional worship service on a Sunday. While Pastor Schneemann said they've seen some diners begin to attend worship services after a positive experience at Dinner Church, that isn't their objective; in fact, they don't even call attention to their service times at Dinner Church.

Often for someone who isn't inclined to step into a traditional service, Dinner Church, with its emphasis on food and conversation rather than structure and ritual, can feel like a more accessible way to experience organized religion.

At First Alliance's Dinner Church in October, as the supply of chili began to dwindle in the line of slow cookers, a "church" element began to come out. Mr. Bewley led worship songs, and Pastor Schneemann stepped up for a reflection on creation, pausing halfway through to distribute modeling clay. To illustrate his point, he asked diners to shape their clay into some sort of sculpture, some of which impressed and some of which drew good-natured laughs.

What the pastor saw from the stage — diverse, informal — reminded him of the early church.

“Jesus hung out with people,” he said. “He was just always eating with people, all sorts of people. I think this is where he would hang out.”