

28. The congregation at the table

Conversations just turn into faith conversations

Mealtimes have always been times for hospitality, where encounters and conversation are at the core. In the past few years meals have been ‘rediscovered’ in the church. In many congregations people meet for meals ever more frequently, often before a theme or course evening or as a meeting place. Can people from outside the church join in?

The Alpha Course and the course 7 + 1 - Encounters with God, introduction courses for the Christian faith, always consist of a series of evenings that are preceded by a meal. Without the meal it is not a ‘real’ course. During the meal people talk about anything and everything, daily events are exchanged and people get to know each other in an unforced atmosphere. It often happens that people who never come to church take part in these courses. This is a way to get them to cross the threshold. One participant said: ‘Conversations just turn into faith conversations.’

The seven meetings start with a joint meal. That was also the habit of the first Christian congregations. After a hard day’s work it is good to have a meal together. After that there is an introduction about one of the main themes of faith. Preferably it should not be too complicated, but it should be authentic. The speaker reveals something about him/herself as member of the local faith community in an interesting and stimulating way. Then the participants go into small groups to discuss what they have heard. At the end all the participants come together again to close the meeting by singing a hymn, interrupted by silence and joint prayer. This makes the meetings into a sort of celebration. (website www.7plus1.nl)

We held the Alpha Course in the morning with fourteen women attending. We started at 9:00 hours with a tasty breakfast, because an Alpha Course without a meal is something that is unheard of! The purpose of the meal was to have a cosy chat and to get to know each other a bit, or a bit better. The group consisted of young women who, after they had taken their children to school, sat down to eat together, women with children who were students and women whose children had left home a while ago.

We were all very different, not only in terms of age but also with regard to background. Some of us came from Christian homes, who go to church every Sunday whilst others did not have any Christian background at all. And then there were those who only go to church occasionally, or perhaps only at Christmas. In brief, a mixed company!
(website of the protestant congregation at Monster)

The Marriage Course, the course for couples, is also preceded by a meal. This time not in groups but at tables for two. This is to relax together before the meeting begins.

A number of suggestions

- Many congregations have groups that eat together. Groups consisting of single people, families that spend time together or meals for elderly people.
- Church councils and commissions often conclude their season with a meal together.
- A Christmas meal before the midnight service on Christmas Eve, or an Easter breakfast or Easter brunch for the whole district or the whole village under the motto: ‘ the church celebrates’.

Possible approach for the church council

- If it is your intention to concentrate on (missionary) meals you must think carefully about the target group. Whom do you invite and with what in mind? Not everybody will just come and join you at the table - there must be ‘something in it’ for them: getting to know people of the same age or people with the same question or needs, to give an example. When the participants are mainly older people you should not be surprised when young families hesitate before joining in and vice versa. What is the target group and how do you think you will reach them?