

Living Well

Christian Practices for Everyday Life

5 Eating Well



5 Eating Well

Yearning



Are you eating well? I don't mean having enough food. For most, but not all, Americans the problem is not finding enough food; it is eating well. By eating well we mean the whole experience of eating: purchasing and preparing the healthy, nutritious food, sharing the food and enjoying the relationships around the table, giving thanks for the food, and so on. We all know what eating well entails because we have memories of eating well—gatherings of family and friends at special times of the year, like Thanksgiving and Christmas, or for important occasions like a wedding, a fortieth birthday party, a quinceañera, a twenty-fifth anniversary, a school graduation. Yet when we think about our daily experience of eating, most of us would not say we are “eating well.” What's missing? What are we really hungry for?

Loss: No Time for the Family Dinner

Dinnertime was the centerpiece of the Graham family's life. High-energy conversations, good-natured teasing, everyone pitching in, time to linger before cleanup—and the food wasn't bad either! They had their moments of irritation during dinner, but mostly you could tell that this family really liked being together and sharing a meal. Then the Grahams lost their family dinners, without anyone even noticing.

Let's back-up a bit before describing the decline and fall of the Graham family dinners. The family consisted of two employed parents and their three children, Jon (eleven), Nathan (nine), and Lisa (seven). Dad worked the early shift as a nurse and was there when the children got home from school. He was the main cook in the family. Mom, who was a teacher, did the grocery shopping and menu planning. The three children took turns setting the table and helping with cleanup, and on Sunday mornings Nathan often made pancakes for the family. A high-energy clan, their dinners were a source of pride, a feeling that guests easily picked-up on.

And then came competition swimming. The kids must have received their mother's athletic genes, because they were all terrific athletes for their age. After several years of low-key swim teams their parents moved them up to a more intense level that required three

practices per week, a meet every weekend, and regular travel out of town. And of course their teams practiced on different days and at different times! The family's late-afternoon and early-evening schedule became a whirl of rides, drop-offs, and pickups. Except for Tuesday evening, when everyone was home, dinner became a pit stop. Dad left food in the refrigerator for the kids to pick up and chow down. Sometimes one parent and two children would eat together, but for the most part both parents were not together at dinner, and only on Tuesday (and Sunday) was there the possibility of the whole family being together. Then Tuesday dinners were lost to a special band practice for Lisa, who was the most musical member of the family. Her parents did not want Lisa to miss out on an opportunity available only to a small number of children in the community.

Sunday dinners remained, but even there, something had been lost. High energy had ratcheted up a notch, toward chaos as the children moved to and away from the table, complained more about the food, elicited more reprimands from the parents, and asked to leave the table as soon as they finished their food. The spirit was not the same.

(William J. Doherty and Barbara Carlson, *Putting Family First*)

Recovery: “Kids in the Kitchen”

For Lynn, it started with basil. She was an overworked single mom with two sons, one still in diapers. Supper consisted of her dragging the kids away from the TV in the living room to sit in front of the TV in the kitchen. While she fed them, she picked on her own food, walked around the room, or else talked on the phone. She knew that something was wrong with the way that her family dinnertime had imploded, but she had no idea of how or what to change.

Then, one night, in desperation, she handed her bored one year-old a bunch of basil and told him to rip the leaves off. She explained that he could help her cook. Her son’s competence at the job, coupled with his joy at having completed what was obviously a useful task, made it a lightbulb moment for mom. Maybe supper wouldn’t always be a dead spot in her day. Maybe, instead of pushing the kids away, she could turn this into a time that could bring them closer. To hear her tell it, when she was mired in her post-divorce gloom, the basil was the first step on a path of profound family change.

Instead of focusing on how quickly she could get the meal onto the table because the kids were starving and she had so many things she had to get done, Lynn began to pay attention to the process of putting the meal together, and included her kids. Little by little, she gave them tasks they could accomplish, praising



them profusely for the success. She relaxed her standards of neatness in the kitchen. She made sure the boys had tools that were the right size for them, and she made sure they knew how to use them. Individually and together, they took pride in their work. Most important, she and her kids began enjoying themselves, and each other.

The ripples widened. Lynn noticed that if the children were involved in preparing the meal, their hunger pangs ceased; they didn’t have to be fed right away. Once their egos and skills were involved, they stopped rejecting foods out of hand. Broccoli was no longer the only vegetable they would accept. They still didn’t like everything, but they became much more willing to taste different foods. When she let them choose menus and ingredients, she was surprised at their adventurousness and creativity. She began taking them to the supermarket, and to the farmer’s markets—real eye-openers for city kids.



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In time, Lynn shut off the TV, and then moved supper into the dining room. She says that, when she introduced table linens and cloth napkins (each person keeping his napkin for a week), conversation improved. Also important, she says, they began saying a short “blessing” before dinner, with each person saying what he was grateful for that particular day. She writes, “I would not be exaggerating if I stated that this was the last bit of glue that mended our broken family. To my great surprise, the children took this aspect of the blessing very seriously, and they continue to astound me with their offerings. Parents can learn a great deal about their children from their value judgments about what’s important to them on a daily basis.”

When she clicks off the skills her sons learned in the kitchen, she includes math, chemistry, a sense of responsibility, learning to follow directions, and learning to work as a team. For her older son especially, who was seven when the project started, cooking became linked with foreign people and lands. He started to ask, “What culture are we cooking tonight?” And she is sure that the confidence he learned through his cooking helped him through some difficult patches at school.



Years have passed. Lynn’s young son will soon be a teenager, and her elder son is looking at the end of his teenage years. Like any veteran parent, she is realistic: “Spending time in the kitchen with their mother is not where they want to be.” But, she adds, “That’s fine. Meals and mealtimes are still important to them. We still have the connection over the meal.” And having a solid background in cooking has given them many skills, not the least of which is the ability to put a meal together. “They still do things for themselves,” she says, a big plus when you’re living with teenage boys. Cooking together gave them a lot more than food.

(Miriam Weinstein, *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*)

Reflecting

Who has time for supper? Well, you do. Your family does. We all do. Believe me, I would not be making such a big deal about supper if we had other, stronger communal bonds. But we are living in a time when the social fabric is fraying, and supper is one of the few habits that has not yet disappeared from memory.

(Miriam Weinstein, *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*)

The Surprising Power of Family Meals

What if you heard that there was something that would improve the quality of your daily life, your children's chances of success in the world, your family's health, our values as a society? Something that is inexpensive, simple to produce, and within the reach of pretty much everyone?

What is it? It is family dinner. Research has been accumulating from very, very disparate fields. It shows how eating ordinary, average everyday supper with our family is strongly linked to lower incidence of bad outcomes, such as teenage drug and alcohol use, and to good qualities like emotional stability. It correlates with kindergartners being better prepared to learn to read.

Regular family supper helps keep asthmatic kids out of hospitals. It discourages both obesity and eating disorders. It supports your staying more connected to your extended family, ethnic heritage, and community of faith. It will help children and families to be more resilient, reacting positively to those curves and arrows that life throws our way. It will certainly keep you better nourished. The things we are likely to discuss at the supper table anchor our children more firmly in the world.

When families prepare meals together, children and teens learn real life skills. They assume responsibility and become better team members. Sharing meals helps cement family relationships, no matter how you define family.

Consider this:

- Compared to teens who have fewer than three family dinners per week, teens who have five or more are likelier to experience lower levels of tension or stress among family members. They are also likelier to say their parents are very or fairly proud of them, and that they can go to one or both parents with a serious problem.
- Those teens who live in households with these four characteristics—frequent family dinners (five to seven times in a typical week), low levels of tension or stress among family members, parents who are very or fairly proud of their teen, and a parent in whom the teen can confide—are at half the risk of the average teen for substance abuse.
- More than one in five parents and teens say they are “too busy” to have dinner together more often. Given the importance of frequent family dinners and the powerful impact parental engagement has in preventing teen substance abuse, families should identify and work to overcome the barriers to frequent family dining. Late work hours, after school activities, and long commutes all come at the expense of valuable family time.



In 2006, 58 percent of teens report having dinner with their family at least five times a week.

What Makes a Regular Family Meal so Hard Today?

Researchers say we are losing the family meal and our ability to eat well. The pressures of a lack of time and overscheduled lives are the usual reasons. We are often eating on the run and often in the car, as we move from activity to activity. What is being lost?

In *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*, Miriam Weinstein writes,

As a society, we do not favor supper with preferential treatment; because we schedule everything constantly, all the time, that humble, shared meal is no longer expected. And because it is not expected, it is less likely to happen. And so it is expected even less. We stay late at the office. We stop by the gym, or catch up on our e-mail. We drive one kid to soccer, bring another one along in the car.

We grab fast food, or let the kids open the freezer and fend for themselves. Our supermarket aisles are bulging with single-serving, idiot-proof,

heat-and-eat meal substitutes. And the more of them we buy, the less practice we have in putting meals together. Who even knows what a meal means? How do we learn what constitutes reasonable portions, what tastes good, what our grandmothers cooked, what we should combine with what to make a tasty, nutritionally complete, appealing whole?

We are living in a time of intense individualism, in a culture defined by competition and consumption. It has been an article of faith that a parent's job is to provide every child with every opportunity to find his or her particular talent, interest, or bliss. But somehow, as we drive-thru our lives, we have given up something so modest, so humble, so available that we never realized its worth. Family supper can be a bulwark against the pressures we all face every day.

The family meal—dinner at whatever time works for a family—is one of the few rituals that allow us to act out our concern for each other, our need and desire to be together. The family meal is a time when family comes first; it is a time for establishing, enjoying, and maintaining ties. The goal is to create and reinforce a secure place for your loved ones in a society that can seem awfully uninterested in human needs.



Family Meals: Yesterday and Today

Each of us have a variety of eating experiences; sometimes we eat well, other times not. Our stories of eating shape who we are—from our typical family meals when we were growing up to our family meal today, from the celebrations of holidays and important family events in our childhood to the ones we celebrate in our families today.

Growing Up

What was it like in your family when you were growing up? Think about your family table and place the people around your family table.



Eating Well Yesterday

- What was a typical family dinner like?
- What time did you eat?
- What were your typical meals? Favorites? Worst meal?
- Who prepared it? Who served it? Who cleaned-up?
- How did your meal begin?
- What did you talk about at the family table?
- How did the family meal end?

Eating Well Today

What is your typical family meal like today? A lot has changed over the past twenty-to-thirty years. A typical answer to this question is another question: “What family meal?” So what is your typical family meal like today?

- How many days a week does your family gather for a family meal together?
- What time do you eat?
- Where are your typical meals?
- Who prepares it? Who serves it? Who cleans-up?
- How does your meal begin?
- What do you talk about at the family table?
- How does the family meal end?

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Exploring

Food has always been an important vehicle for sacred learning. The bitter herbs of a Passover Seder teach about the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. The broken bread of communion teaches the crucifixion. Kosher laws, potluck dinners, meals for the grieving or ill, *Shabbat*, and Sunday dinner—these meals teach so much, including what it means to be part of this community, part of this family. Anthropologists pay particular attention to what happens around food in a society because so often the pattern and values of the society come to a head around the meal.

(Brad Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*)

Throughout the Bible, eating a meal together has special significance. Much more happens than physical hunger being satisfied. Intimacy develops between people who share food together. Jesus used his last meal with his disciples to symbolize his continuing relationship with them, even after his death. He fed them after his resurrection, and with the bread and fish came the opportunity to talk together (John 21:9–23). It was only when Jesus fed them that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus finally recognized him: “their eyes were opened” Luke 24:30–31.

(Diana Garland, *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families*)

In the gospels, Jesus teaches us how to eat well. In the Gospel of Luke alone there are ten important meal stories. Much of Jesus’ teaching took place during meals. Indeed, meals appear to have been the privileged place for Jesus’ teaching. Meals provided an excellent setting for surfacing the various problems and issues in the community, as well as for serious conversation. In view of the importance of meals in the life of the community, the meal itself was often the subject of Jesus’ teaching at dinner. Such is the case in the dinner at the

home of a Pharisee (7:36–40), in the hospitality at the home of Martha (10:38–42), and even at the Last Supper (22:14–38).

It was at a meal that Jesus celebrated for the last time with his disciples, asking them to remember him each time they celebrate the breaking of the bread and drinking from the cup. Blessing comes through this meal as Jesus establishes the common meal that has come to mark the communal life of his followers ever since. For two millennia now, Christians



have been breaking bread and blessing it and expecting as they do so to encounter Jesus and feed upon him.

Then he took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in memory of me." In the same way, he gave them the cup after the supper, saying, "This is God's new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you."

—Luke 22:19–20

It was at a meal that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus discover Jesus in their midst. Neither disciple recognizes him as they recount the things that happened to Jesus in Jerusalem, how he was put to death and how they found the tomb empty on the third day. Then Jesus uses the Scriptures to explain why the Messiah had to suffer. As they came near the village of Emmaus, the disciples ask Jesus to stay with them.

"Stay with us, the day is almost over and it is getting dark." So he went in to stay with them. He sat down to eat with them, took the bread and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, "Wasn't it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?"

—Luke 24:29–32; read the whole story in Luke 24:13–35

So many good things can happen when family members gather together to eat. Just as a meal was central in the ministry of Jesus, the family meal can be a central faith experience for family members, and the family as a whole. It is a daily opportunity to discover Jesus' presence in the midst of family life. "The simple act of eating together is perhaps the most fundamental of all the ways in which food can express and foster the community that God desires should exist among people, and between humans and God."

(Margaret Kim Peterson, *Keeping House*)



Read all of the stories of Jesus' meals in the Gospel of Luke.

1. A Great Banquet at the House of Levi (5:27–39)
2. A Great Dinner at the House of Simon the Pharisee (7:36–50)
3. The Breaking of the Bread in the City of Bethsaida (9:10–17)
4. Hospitality at the Home of Martha (10:38–42)
5. A Noon Meal at the Home of a Pharisee (11:37–54)
6. A Sabbath Dinner at the Home of a Leading Pharisee (14:1–24)
7. Hospitality at the House of Zacchaeus (19:1–10)
8. Preparing the Passover (22:7–13)
9. The Passover (22:14–38)
10. The Breaking of the Bread at Emmaus (24:13–35)
11. With the Community in Jerusalem (24:36–53)

Eating Well Involves Giving Thanks to God for the Gift of Food

Jesus' miracle of the feeding of the five thousand teaches us that food is a gift of God. We are called to give God thanks for our food as we share it with others.

When the sun was beginning to set, the twelve disciples came to him and said, "Send the people away so that they can go to the villages and farms around here and find food and lodging, because this is a lonely place." But Jesus said to them, "You yourselves give them something to eat." They answered, "All we have are five loaves and two fish. Do you want us to go and buy food for this whole crowd?" Jesus said to his disciples, "Make the people sit down in groups of about fifty each." After the disciples had done so, Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up to heaven, thanked God for them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. They all ate and had enough, and the disciples took up twelve baskets of what was left over.
—Luke 9:12–17

Eating well is characterized by gratitude. Jesus is recorded in Scripture as giving thanks before meals (John 6:11), as is the apostle Paul (Acts 27:35). Christians in all walks of life have long been in the habit of "saying grace" as one means of expressing thanks to God, who sustains our lives through gifts of food.

Saying grace is a means of setting mealtime apart from the rest of the day, and of acknowledging God as the source of all good gifts, and of this food and fellowship in particular. Table graces may vary from short blessings said or sung from memory to longer or shorter spontaneous prayers said by one or more members of the household.

Try using this simple format for your prayer before a meal.

1. Begin with a salutation, such as Dear Lord, or Almighty God, or Gracious Creator, or another title for God.
2. Give God thanks for the blessings of the day and for the food you are about to eat.
3. Remember the needs of people who need your prayer this day.

Here's an easy-to-use grace before meal that you can easily modify each day.

Dear God,
thank you for this day,
for one another, for the food before us,
and for all who helped to grow and cook this food.
We remember our world
and all those who need our prayers today,
especially___ (add the names of people you are praying for)
Please help this meal
to nourish our hearts and souls
as well as our bodies
Amen!
(Kathy Finley, Amen!)

The practice of saying grace is important. If nothing else, it preserves the form of asking God's blessing. The expression of gratitude is spiritually formative. Such rituals and traditions shape us.

Eating Well Involves Storytelling

Family meals are the central daily ritual opportunity in family life. At best, they are an oasis in a hectic day, a time to reconnect, relax, discuss, debate, support one another, and laugh together. Family dinners in particular are apt to be the only time during the day when the whole family has the chance to be together, face-to-face, doing the same activity and sharing in conversation.

Family meal rituals involve:

- *being-around talk*, as we prepare meals, set up, eat our food, and clean up
- *logistics talk*, as we use the meal to catch up with what is happening on everyone's schedule
- *connecting talk*, as we use the meal (at the best of times, anyway) to tell stories, share opinions and feelings, and generally get caught up in one another's lives.

Family meals provide time for face-to-face interaction. This is a time to look at your family members. Who looks happy? Who looks healthy? It's a time to discuss everyone's day.

Family meals enhance communication skills. Children learn how to hold a conversation by listening and participating in conversation at the dinner table. They learn how to initiate conversation, take turns, maintain and change topics, and request clarification.

The family meal provides a great setting for sharing stories. It's a time to:

- talk about the highs and lows of the day
- talk about upcoming and past events
- tell stories about the family, such as where grandparents grew up, how they met, what their parents did for a living.

With children and teens, ask specific questions to avoid the one-word answer (this also works for adults). For example: "What was something new you learned today?" "What was one interesting thing that happened today?" "How did you see God at work today?" "What made you feel happy today?" "How did you care for someone else today?" "Who needs our prayers tonight?"



Eating Well Involves Sharing Food and Serving Others

When Jesus was at a meal in the home of a prominent religious leader of his day, he taught the guests that their meal was not only for themselves but that they were called to serve the poor in their community as well.

The Jesus said to his host, "When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors—for they will invite you back, and in this way you will be paid for what you did. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind; and you will be blessed, because they are not able to pay you back. God will repay you on the day the good people rise from death."

—Luke 14:12–14; read the whole story in Luke 14:1–24

Sharing food with those in need is central to the Christian way of life and to the practice of eating well. In Matthew 25 Jesus identifies himself with the hungry and tells us that when we share our food with the hungry, we are sharing our faith with him. Here is the story of one woman's experience.

Each Tuesday Linda prepares a meal for the women and children at the local homeless shelter. She makes a special point to cook a healthy, homemade meal, something that the homeless rarely have. It is her Tuesday evening ritual: arriving home a little early from work, cooking the meal, carrying it to the shelter, serving the food, talking with the ladies, playing with the children while their mothers eat. Her Tuesday meal is shared with those who are hungry and homeless.

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Her food and presence show her respect for the dignity and value of each person at the shelter. Over a shared meal, she listens to their stories and carries them with her all week long.

One family decided to simplify its food purchases by reducing meat consumption and eliminating some foods altogether (unhealthy snacks, candy). They took the \$20-a-week savings in their food bill—about \$1000 per year—and invested the money into providing food for the local food bank, and sponsoring a child with an international relief agency.

There are many ways to share food with those in need:

- Many churches gather regularly to prepare and serve a meal at a homeless shelter or soup kitchen. Look for opportunities to participate with your church in serving the hungry in your community and in the world.
- Work with local organizations who feed people at homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and food banks.
- Support the international work of organizations that help people become food sufficient, such as Heifer (www.heifer.org), World Vision (www.worldvision.org), Church World Service (www.churchworldservice.org), and Catholic Relief Services (www.crs.org).
- Support organizations that advocate for policies that will feed the hungry in our country and world, such as Bread for the World (www.bread.org).
- Support the poor economically by purchasing fair trade products, such as coffee, whenever possible. Find fair trade products online at sites such as Equal Exchange (www.equalexchange.com) and Ten Thousand Villages (www.tenthousandvillages.com).



Eating Well Involves Celebrating

So many important holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, and family events, such as birthdays, anniversaries, and accomplishments, are celebrated at a meal. These are times of grace when we can experience God's presence through celebration. Celebration is at the heart of Christ's way; the story of the wedding feast in Cana (John 2:1–11) is but one example of the importance Jesus placed on celebrating life events.

Celebration brings joy into our lives, and joy—especially shared joy—gives us strength. Here is one person's experience of a birthday milestone:

It happens once in a lifetime. This particular birthday, my children were coming home for my sixtieth birthday, and we decided to play golf that afternoon. That was very nice, and I was looking forward to it.

When we got home I was pretty oblivious. As I was going up the stairs in my sweat-soaked T-shirt, I heard a loud scream, "Happy Birthday!" and saw a huge crowd. Friends and family from near and far had gathered at our house for a surprise birthday party.

Yes, I was surprised. But that was just the beginning. My wife had the event catered, and the food was terrific—hors d'oeuvres, champagne and wine, and a really fine meal. Too much.

A feast, a celebration—not something one deserves. It only happens once in a lifetime. It was great, a blessing beyond anything I could imagine.

Good family celebrations don't happen; they are planned. Look ahead on the calendar and schedule your Advent or Lent activities, or your first-day-of-school ritual. Sit down together as a family and decide what rituals you would like to try this year. Perhaps you will want only three or four. Think of possible feast days, holidays, and special occasions that you can celebrate as a family: Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, a Seder dinner, Easter, Pentecost, birthdays, a wedding anniversary, Mother's Day, Father's Day, back-to-school, Thanksgiving, Advent and Christmas. Give each family member a particular responsibility for planning and carrying out the celebration.

Eating Well Involves Listening to God's Word

Reading the Bible and applying it to our lives is one of the most powerful ways to grow in faith as a family. Mealtime is an excellent opportunity to read a Scripture verse, whether daily or a few times a week. You may also want to discuss a Bible passage at one meal each week, perhaps using one of the readings for the upcoming Sunday. Here is the story of one family's experience.

A friend of mine from church told me how her family (including two teenagers) has begun having breakfast together. Instead of each person grabbing something on the run, as they always had, the whole family actually sits down together on work days and school days, in one place at the same time; as the sun rises, they read from the first chapter of Genesis. Each day, they read about one day of creation and how God saw it was good. I asked about this, and the friend told me, "Everything around us tries to tell us to be cynical and dissatisfied, so taking even five minutes, including our time to teach, to know goodness, to look at each other face-to-face, has got to be worth something." Over and over again, daily, they read of the goodness of God's creative work and welcome the day with appreciation. "Breakfast itself has become meaningful to us now, in ways it never had been." This family, maybe intuitively, discovered at least a partial antidote to the perpetual dissatisfaction, cynicism, distraction, and danger always knocking at the door. The story of God's good creation feeds the soul of this family with meaning, as food feeds their body.

(Brad Wigger, The Power of God at Home)



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Living

We understand the powerful forces that keep many families from breaking bread together. But we believe deeply that for most families, the first beachhead in the battle to reclaim family life is their meal rituals. Make your stand here if you can. Be committed and flexible, accept where you are starting from, develop your skills in family conversation, realize that there will be dry times, and have some creative fun along the journey. In this way, you will pass along an important family tradition to your children that will carry on when they have families.

(William J. Doherty and Barbara Carlson, *Putting Family First*)

Ten years from now, what will have been most important in building lifelong family relationships: adding an extracurricular activity, or having meals together? How can you more fully live the Christian practice of eating well everyday? To get you started here is a story to inspire you, and a simple guide for using the ideas in this chapter.

“They Think We’re Crazy”

David and Darlene have been married for ten years and have lived all of those years in a southern town where David is a medical doctor and Darlene is a social worker. They each brought a son and a different religious tradition to their marriage. David has continued to be involved in the Catholic Church with his son, Pete, age fourteen. Darlene is a member of the session (the governing body) of her Presbyterian congregation. Darlene’s son Paul, age eleven, is involved with her in the Presbyterian Church.

When I asked them to relate to me a picture of their family doing something together that really says who they are as a family, David began, “Having dinner together is important to us. We might not plan on it or talk about the fact that it is important, but it is, and we make it happen.”

“Sometimes, it’s impossible with Pete’s basketball,” his wife added. “The games start at 6:00 PM. But generally we really try to eat together. We have so much fun when we eat at night; their friends come over and just sit there going....”

Paul interrupted his mother, “They think we’re crazy. The TV is off....”

Peter interrupted Paul, “The family is more entertaining than the TV, anyway.”

Outside activities pull these family members away from the family dinner. But they work at making their dinner table a place to gather, where friends are welcome. The very telling of this story illustrates that this is not just significant to parents but to teenagers as well, as Paul interrupts his mother, helping to build the story of how their friends see their family as “crazy,” and Pete in turn interrupts his stepbrother and builds on his words. The boys have a sense of pride in their family; they are quite willing to invite friends in and expose them to their “crazy” family that actually turns the television off during dinner. Mealtime is often the only time the whole family is gathered in one place. As a teenager in another family said, “The dinner table is the place where you find out what’s going on.”

(Diana Garland, *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families*)





Getting Ready

- *Find time for family meals.* Decide to be together for a meal certain days and times each week, and then do it. Find good places to eat together—think of where you can eat meals together at home and away. Develop a family meal calendar each week. Consider the following questions in preparing your calendar:
 - Who will be there?
 - Where will we eat?
 - When will we eat?
 - What is going to be served?
 - How will the meal be prepared?
 - Who is doing what to get ready for the dinner?
- *Prepare meals together as a family.* Create the menu. Shop for the food. Clean up together. Make mealtimes special with candles, good dishes, and a tablecloth. Eat in the dining room. Have special meal nights that celebrate a particular ethnic tradition or family recipe, or a special accomplishment of a family member.
- *Tune out distractions.* Turn off the TV and radio. Take the phone off the hook or plug in the answering machine. Put away the newspaper or magazines. Put all the things that could distract you from eating well— cell phones, pagers, iPods, magazines, work projects, and so on—into a box during dinner time. You can get them back when dinner is over for everyone!

Enriching the Meal

- *Give thanks to God before eating.* Pray real prayers that reflect gratitude, warmth, hospitality, and a genuine awareness of those who live without enough food each day. Use the simple format for grace that was presented earlier in this chapter.

- *Make conversation and storytelling central at your meals.*
 - Talk about the highs and lows of the day.
 - Talk about decisions that need to be made as a family or by individual members.
 - Talk about one interesting thing you learned today or one thing that happened today, or something that made you feel happy/sad today.
 - Talk about how you saw God at work in your life today.
- *Share food with those in need.* Find ways to serve the hungry and needy in your community by working together as a family or with your church. Consider adjusting your diet and food expense so that you can find ways to financially support those who are hungry around the world.
- *Celebrate church seasons and family events.* Incorporate the celebration of important rituals—in the life of the church and in your family—into your meal tradition. Find ways to include Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter traditions as part of your meal, such as a daily table prayer, an Advent wreath prayer, and so on. Find special ways to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and accomplishments with a simple prayer, Bible reading, decorations, special foods, and so on.
- *Read the Bible as part of your mealtime.* Begin your meal with a Bible verse or devotion each day. Select one meal to read and discuss the Scripture reading from a past or upcoming Sunday worship service.

Resources for Living the Christian Practice of Eating Well

Go to our project web site
www.lifelongfaith.com
 for exciting ideas, practical resources, and recommended books and web sites to help you live the Christian practice of eating well.

Praying

A Rich Feast

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips.

Psalm 63:5

O God, our help, bless you.

When we are thirsty,
you pour water
When we are hungry,
you offer good food to eat.
When we are tired,
you hold us up.
When we are hurting,
you care.

Feast with us today, God of love,
so our lips can celebrate your glory.

Bless you.
(Brad Wigger, *Together We Pray*)

