

POTLUCK AT ST. JOHN

Ah, the venerable potluck. At some churches, it has almost attained the status of liturgical. Here at St. John, we hold to the conservative potluck of tradition, yet we do not feel limited to the mere culinary version. By remaining open-minded, we have expanded the concept into a more philosophical cuisine. With that thought in mind, we are offering a potluck of stories to the collection that a host of characters, who call themselves members here at St. John, have concocted, stewed, baked, boiled, and grilled.

As the spiritual leader of this small country parish, I inherited the task of preparing this cookbook, so to speak. In the process, I tried to assign some spiritual significance to the exaggerated dishes of the storytellers. Naturally, under this kind of arrangement, I felt the need to contribute a few stories of my own. My times of peak inspiration usually came while looking out the church office window at the herd of buffalo grazing in the field across the road. I'm not sure if that point carries any significance for either me or the buffalo.

As a bonus, St. Peter's in Jack Valley has graciously allowed us to include some tales from their members in the big city. St. Peter's is the daughter church of St. John and thus has shared members, funds, and potlucks for a few years. To help you better understand the relationship between these two parishes and why they would collaborate on such a volume, I must divert to the side path of St. Peter's inception.

As a small country parish, St. John had enough members with the wisdom and foresight to see that the church's growth would face limitations. Such wisdom found influence in the foundational mind of Walter Konemeyer, a benevolent yet contrary departed soul. Mr. Konemeyer's paradoxical character led him to vote against every proposal ever made during his thirty-year membership at St. John and then, when his time to leave this earthly life arrived, to leave a tidy sum of money to the parish. When news of his gift came out, there were many who believed it to be a bribe of sorts to get him into heaven, but I maintained that we should exercise Christian charity and give him the benefit of the doubt. In a final gesture of contrariness or outreach, depending on your perspective,

he stipulated in his will that no one in the St. John family could benefit from the gift. It had to be used to start a mission church in a more deserving locale. And thus, the wisdom to reach out to the people of Jack Valley came to the members of St. John, and St. Peter's began as a mission church.

Additionally, Pastor Fred Anderson of St. Peter's is a friend of mine and a forthright fellow. He is no more prone to exaggeration than I am. Although I must concede, with a certain amount of envy, that he is much more competent than I am in rearranging the facts to fit the situation.

I remember the time when Fred and I went to a seminar on church growth in Kansas City. During a recess, we ran into the Reverend Edward Cooper, the founder of a megachurch out west. Rev. Cooper was ... well, let's just say he was one of those individuals who always let his ego get in the way of everything he did. After he had filled our ears to overflowing with all that he had accomplished in building his kingdom, I mean church, he asked us about our parishes. I humbly gave an account of the flock at the small country church where I served. Fred, in his own unique mathematical way, began throwing statistics and numbers about St. Peter's

from all different directions. I remain a witness to the fact that there was not one falsehood in Fred's entire response. Rev. Cooper left our presence all red-faced and puffy. We figured he had allowed his conceit to make certain inferences that were baseless according to the facts.

Well, enough about Fred and St. Peter's. I've got a potluck to go to down in the basement.

"Hi, Gladys. Do we have lots of goodies today?"

"Hi, Pastor. Yes, we do. Do you even need to ask?"

"I apologize for the obvious faux pas, dear lady."

"By the power invested in me as President of the Ladies Auxiliary, I forgive you your sin."

"I like it, Gladys. Do you need any help?"

"No, I think we're fine, but thanks for asking."

"Hold on, Gladys. Here comes Harley. I wonder whose dish he's going to confiscate today?"

I could best describe Harley French, euphemistically, as being the most fiscally conscientious member of our congregation. He has held the title

for some twenty years, according to several members who have known him longer than I have. He earned that status by bringing a paper bag to potlucks that, in appearance, has some culinary delight, but which, in fact, is empty. When no one is looking, he picks up someone else's dish, slips it into the bag, and then, feigning having forgotten something, he steps back out. When he returns, he makes sure as many people as possible see what he has brought to the potluck.

“Okay, there he goes. Whose dish did he grab, Gladys?”

“That's Martha Banks's tuna casserole. That old fool. Everybody knows he does it.”

“Just part of his mystique, Gladys. Just part of his mystique.”

Walking over to the two long tables filled with homemade delicacies, I prepare a mental scouting report that I refrain from reporting to anyone but myself. The first dish that I can reliably identify by sight is a chicken casserole from Granny Sophie out at The Homestead. I hear she's going to be taking a big trip down to some kinfolk in Florida. Maybe she'll share some of her experiences with a letter or two. Next, there is a large

bowl of pretzels, undoubtedly from one of the hale and hearty farm folks. I don't recognize the oval bowl of what appears to be a meat dish, so I point to it as Gladys walks by.

“Buford Douglas's buffalo innards,” said Gladys.

Buford is an interesting case. For a humble equipment mechanic, he has eclectic tastes in cuisine, and his cosmopolitan views on knowledge seem remarkable. But once you've been in Cedar Crossing long enough, you will find the simple pastoral life here has produced several such individuals.

About midway down the table, I find a rectangular dish of green Jell-O that bears a resemblance to a football field. A sign with the words “Go Crusaders” on it accompanies the dish. It must be from Lorraine Johnson, whose son Eric is quarterback of the Crusaders college football team.

The beverage counter has an array of the usual drinks, with a more than ample supply of tea. Last, but not least, the dessert area occupies about a third of the second table. I'm considering a resolution at the next council meeting to bump the table space allotted to dessert by 50%, if I don't run into

too much resistance from the ladies in an unofficial straw poll I'm taking.

Yes, as I look at the tables of a simple potluck from buffalo innards to green Jell-O, I see far more than meets the eye. I wish you bon appétit in your journey through the rest of this potluck of stories.

Pastor Arnold "Arnie" Schmidt