

A SECOND HELPING

For those of you brave enough to come back for a second helping of potluck stories from St. John and Cedar Crossing, I applaud your courage. Let me refresh your memory on two key points with any church potluck. First, always know which dish is from the pastor's wife, and always make sure there is nothing left over from it. Second, if ever given the opportunity to vote for an increase in the table allotment for desserts (especially pies), always vote for it. Of course, there are many other nuances to learn, but these two will carry you through the bulk of most potlucks.

The original discourse on the many benefits of attending a potluck, both here at St. John and at our daughter church, St. Peter in Jack Valley, surfaced two years back. To say that we've experienced a massive spike in attendance at these occasions since then is a monumental understatement. Speaking for just St. John, I can say with all statistical candor that we've had 8 births and 2 deaths over the last two years. That fact alone accounts for a 400% increase. I could cite several other

conclusive actuarial and dubious mathematical formulas, but I don't want to confuse the issue. Besides, I should defer to Pastor Fred Anderson of St. Peter for more precise numerical analysis, as he is the better mathematician.

Rest assured, though, that despite the additional hungry souls, little else has changed. We've consistently had plenty of Jell-O, casseroles, iced tea, and sliced celery to grace our tables. Buford Douglas continues to tantalize our taste buds with a variety of meat dishes, depending on what hunting season is open. Probably the biggest news is that the proposal to increase the table space for desserts passed the general voters' assembly. It was a close vote, split strictly along gender lines—men ayes “76”, nays “0” and the women ayes “0”, nays “67”. We do still have some diplomacy issues to refine before we implement the change, but we've formed a committee for that task.

One of the advantages to having a few years of potlucks at the same church under your belt is that you can grasp the significance of the many people patterns. Those who bring the most culinary conservative dishes are the most doctrinally or liturgically conservative. Others like Buford

Douglas who supply us with exotic dishes are the most evangelical, as they are not afraid to reach out with new dishes, and they are not afraid to talk to new people and tell it like it is. Ones like Lorraine Johnson, who bring rah-rah to potlucks with green bowls of Jell-O shaped like football fields to support the Crusaders college football team, well, they tend to be the most enthusiastic workers in the church.

There is one man that I've never been quite able to get a handle on, and that's Jeremiah Wilson. Jeremiah has a small farm east of the church and can usually be found in his workshop. He has no family and less liberal minded folks frequently label him as eccentric. He is, without a doubt, the most inventive man I have ever known. Unfortunately, on a percentage basis, 99 out of 100 of the things he invents are just not practical or economically workable. Occasionally, though, he'll hit on something that provides him with the financial means to continue on in what he does. With his often-unkempt appearance and cartoonish blond hair that sticks straight up six inches from his head, he fits within the physical parameters of eccentricity. Jeremiah does not let his wildly inconsistent and

expansive mind get in the way of certain habits which live in stone. For example, at every potluck he would offer a standard complaint of the paper plates being way too small. (There is an unwritten rule of polite society that does not allow for one person to take two plates at a time unless the second one is for a young one or an elderly person. Even eccentric people obey this rule.) He insisted that he had the right to take a small sampling of every dish on the table. But with the standard size paper plates, he could not get everything on the first go-round. Then when he'd go back the second time to get what he couldn't get the first time, there would be some dishes empty. This irritated him to where he complained about it at every potluck and at every midweek service during Lent. His creative mind finally arrived at a solution which came when he started bringing his own plate that was half again as big as the standard paper plate. (Apparently, there is no unwritten rule of polite society regarding larger plates of one's own.)

Another habit of Jeremiah's that he rigidly held to consisted of the fact that he sat midway down the front pew of every service. Although St. John is not an enormous church, as a pastor looking

out from the pulpit every Sunday, you don't always notice when someone is not in attendance. Because of his appearance and his seating habit, I always knew when Jeremiah wasn't there. He had not been at church for two straight Sundays, and he missed the last potluck. I paid him a visit to make sure he was okay.

When I arrived at his farm, I went straight to his workshop. I saw him feverishly working on his latest project.

“Hi, Jeremiah,” I said. “We missed you the last couple of Sundays and I just wanted to stop by and see if you were okay.”

“Oh, hi, Pastor,” replied Jeremiah. “Yeah, everything's all right. I apologize, but I've been working night and day on this project that could have some significant spiritual use.”

“Oh, what would that be?”

“Well, before I get into what it does, I just want to tell you that from a cost standpoint, I can build this unit with salvaged parts from old computers.”

“That sounds like a good approach to start,” I said. “What exactly does this device do?”

“I call this my ‘Sin-O-Meter’.”

“I see ... uh, how does it work?” I asked.

“We install this in the front of the church and turn it on just before Communion. When people come up to partake of the Lord’s Supper, they have to pass by the meter, and if they are impenitent or they’ve offended their neighbor and have not corrected it, then the meter detects it and the red light above the meter goes on letting you know, so you can come down to determine if they’re worthy to come up for Communion or not.”

“I see ... well ... I can see where we would probably have some savings in expenses for Communion supplies, but ... while Luther cited Paul when he said, ‘He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself ...’, I don’t really think he meant for the examination to be of such a ... public nature. You know, Jeremiah, I certainly think your ‘Sin-O-Meter’ has some merit, but I think you’re looking at an extremely narrow market. It could be fifty years before a decision passes through all the district and

synod committees. I think you need to look at some other markets instead.”

“I appreciate your forthright advice, Pastor. As it happens, I have a couple of alternate plans that merely require some slight tweaking of the software program. Version 2 is what I call ‘Sense-O-Meter’. I would have to go to Washington, D.C. to market it, though.”

“I see ... uh, what exactly would it do?” I asked.

“We install master ‘Sense-O-Meters’ at the entrances to the Senate, House of Representatives, White House, and Supreme Court. We would also install secondary ones at all administrative offices. To get into those buildings, everyone would have to pass by the meters. If they have too much ‘Common Sense’, then the meter detects it and the red light above the meter goes on and a camera would take their picture, so all the voters would know who they are.”

“I see ... well ... I absolutely think that is something that is ... needed, but ... I just don’t think you’d have the demand to make it pay; in fact, I’m almost sure there wouldn’t be enough to

detect to make it worthwhile for them to buy it ... besides, you'd probably be in the grave before it got through all the advisors, subcommittees, committees, and chambers. What is your third plan?"

"Version 3 is what I call 'Dish-O-Meter'. Its primary use would be at potluck dinners, but I don't have all the bugs worked out of the program for it yet."

"And how would it work?"

"We put sensors under each dish, and we enter data into the computer such as the number of people in attendance, the number of dishes, weight of each dish, and so on. If someone takes a helping that exceeds the allotted portion, then the 'Dish-O-Meter' detects it and the red light above the meter goes on and an elder makes them put a little back."

"I see ... so, let me make sure I understand this. If, for example, I had finished my first plate, and I wanted to go back to get some dessert and there were 4 or 5 people ahead of me and if one of them took too much pie, then that would activate the red light and they'd have to put some back?"

"Yes, that's correct," said Jeremiah. "And if there was plenty of pie left after everyone had a

share, then you could get a second helping by swiping your second-helping card, and if you hadn't abused the second-helping privilege, then you could get some more pie without it activating the sensor. Of course, it wouldn't apply just to pie."

"Oh, of course. Of course. You know, Jeremiah, you might just have something there. But I just don't think there's ..."

"Enough of a market," said Jeremiah.

"That's right. Now I don't make even the slightest claim to understanding the technology of your device, Jeremiah, but if it will really detect some things you say it will, then I think you might have something extraordinary. Maybe you should shoot for something small, something more readily achievable. I was talking to Milt Coward the other day. You know Milt, don't you? Milt's a very progressive dairy farmer, and he's got all kinds of computerized production records. He was telling me that he wished he had a way of detecting when a cow's milk output was going to decline just a little earlier in time to increase efficiency. If you could come up with a way of detecting that with

your meter, well, I'm sure he'd work with you on it to test it out."

"Thank you, Pastor. I'll get with him if I can get it worked out."

"Oh, and while I think your device has possibilities, I don't think there is enough of an urgency about it to miss Sunday services. Right?"

"Right. See you Sunday, Pastor."

As I drove back to the church, I thoughtfully considered all the benefits of Jeremiah's invention—the third version, of course. "Second-helping card, 'Dish-O-Meter', less stress about missing out on something," I said aloud. "What's so eccentric about those?" But that's so hard to read with Jeremiah. There is no real pattern with what he brings to potlucks either. When will his next folly turn out to be something revolutionary? I don't know. Garages and little workshops have produced some amazing things in this world.

Pastor Arnold Schmidt

At any rate, feast on a second helping of the potluck dishes that follow. Lest I forget, Pastor Fred Anderson has also forwarded some dishes from St. Peter in Jack Valley. On a personal note, I've noticed that one can see much deeper within these stories while consuming a piece of pie.