

Contested space in church kitchens

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I have a theory that the church kitchen is the most contested domain in many congregations. If you want to understand the politics of a given church, start with the kitchen: who is in control, and what conflicts arise there?

I know one congregation where a longstanding member throws people out of the kitchen, because it is the place she has ruled for decades. I know another that has difficulty finding members to serve on the kitchen committee because the chair is a very controlling person who wants other people to do her bidding. In a third, more refreshing situation, the kitchen is run by several younger couples that host church potlucks together and have a good time doing it.

In a marriage, each person comes from a family that has certain patterns related to food selection, preparation and eating. The couple has to try to blend these family practices; compromises must be made. In a church, many more people come together, from quite different families. And we have a tendency to think that the way we do food-related things is the right way. Church kitchens would be more amiable places if everyone recognized that there's more than one way to do things.

There's another reason that church kitchens have been locations of conflict. In a patriarchal world, the kitchen has often been one place where women can actually be in charge. Likewise in a patriarchal church, where such a dynamic often pits several women with strong personalities against one another.

Take the positive example I mentioned, in which younger couples serve as potluck hosts. The work patterns are egalitarian. Men and women work together as equals, sharing the tasks. The women in this case are successful professionals who don't need the church kitchen as a place to assert their authority. It seems rather a joyful diversion from the expectations of the workplace.

Although we haven't developed a theology for it, the church kitchen and fellowship hall are really an extension of the church sanctuary and the communion table. We don't eat together as the people of God just because we're physically hungry. Eating

together is another way we share our life of discipleship together. Jesus is the unseen guest among us when we break bread together. Our corporate spiritual life is enhanced by table fellowship, so it really matters to us.

And the things we really care about often bring our differences to the surface. We should probably not be surprised that the church kitchen is a source of conflict. Many of the conflict situations in Jesus' life had to do with food.

I'd be glad to see readers challenge my theory. Even more, I'd love to hear your church kitchen stories, negative and positive ones. We especially need stories that point us in a more positive direction of how things might be done in the church kitchen.