

How are dinner churches surviving the pandemic?

## **For some congregations, sitting down together for a meal is the heart of worship.**

by [Kendall Vanderslice](#) in the [April 7, 2021](#) issue



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“Welcome, everyone, to Simple Church!” Pastor Zach Kerzee shouts into the camera, guitar strapped across his chest. Kerzee sits at a dinner table set with steaming mugs of tea, glasses of grape juice, and hunks of home-baked bread. His kids wriggle in their seats, play instruments of their own, and take turns climbing into Kerzee’s partner’s lap. Streaming to the congregation over Facebook Live, Kerzee encourages members to gather around a meal with their own households as well.

Kerzee is the founding pastor of Simple Church, a United Methodist dinner church in central Massachusetts. Modeled after the early church practice of sharing a meal together as Eucharist, dinner churches seek to address social isolation and loneliness through the very structure of their worship. Their practice also mirrors the agape meal or love feast tradition, a tradition adopted by John Wesley and

memorialized in the UMC Book of Worship. Over the last decade, dinner church communities like Simple Church have sprung up across North America, holding their weekly worship over the course of a meal.

When COVID-19 hit, these innovative pastors—like pastors everywhere—were forced to shift their meetings online. With their focus on intimate relationships and participatory worship, virtual dinner services have become a means of nourishing communities both spiritually and physically for the long-term separation necessitated by the pandemic.

In many denominations, the quick shift to online worship led to theological confusion and debate over if and how to celebrate the Eucharist. For dinner churches, which form their core identity around gathering for a communal meal, that question posed a particular sort of challenge. Their approach to it has varied, as has their approach to virtual worship generally.

When coronavirus cases began to rise in New York City, Christian Scharen—interim pastor of St. Lydia’s, a Lutheran dinner church in Brooklyn—began brainstorming how to translate the community’s service online.

“We took the experience we have in person and asked, How can we approximate that kind of experience in this new format without giving up any components?” says Scharen. “We figured out how to do our gathering and Eucharist and sermon and scripture and poetry sharing—the whole unfolding of the liturgy—on Zoom, using the breakout rooms as dinner tables for conversation.”

Over the course of the two-hour service, congregants participate in every aspect of the liturgy. They welcome visitors and catch up with old friends. They sing, eat, and discuss the scripture reading. They pray and share their joys and concerns. The church even sets aside time for mingling, encouraging congregants to utilize breakout rooms in shifting groups of two or three people to approximate the informal conversations that would happen at the start of an in-person gathering.

Dinner churches have a history of experimentation. This built trust as they went online.

“It’s been surprisingly beautiful and successful to translate the experience that we had together in one room to Zoom,” says Scharen. “Some of the technical ways we do church don’t translate—like chanting the liturgy together in unison or

communally cooking and cleaning the space—but our culture and our identity, our hospitality to one another, that translates just fine.”

Anna Woofenden, the Protestant chaplain at Amherst College and pastor of a campus dinner church, made the transition quickly as well. “We had spring break off, then we started right back up. We kept the same time, the same liturgy, we just met on Zoom.”

This consistency from week to week, and from pre-COVID worship to now, has proven invaluable for worshipers and pastors alike.

“Lots of students told us, ‘This is the one consistent thing in my life right now. It’s the one thing I can count on,’” says Woofenden. “In this time where everything feels different, everything feels uncertain, we all find great peace and comfort in the well-worn words and well-worn rhythms and being held by that liturgy.”

Kerzee found that, despite the pressure on pastors to lead well in a strange time, he too was rejuvenated each week by the dinner gathering. “I look forward to our dinner church more than any other point in my week,” he says. “It’s the only adult interaction I’ve had.”

Dinner church pastors brought valuable insight to the question of virtual communion. After all, they already had some experience with people raising concerns about observing the sacrament in an unusual way.

“[The Eucharist] is so integral to our identity, it never occurred to us not to do it,” says Scharen about St. Lydia’s virtual gathering. “In the Lutheran tradition, the consecration is God’s work, not the power of my hands as priest. I’m presiding over something God is doing. And God can do it just as easily over elements in one room or scattered across rooms.”

The campus dinner church at Amherst has approached the issue differently, sharing unconsecrated bread during virtual services. For Woofenden, this has eased the pain of fasting for a time from the sacrament itself.

“We don’t actually take the elements, but we tell the story and chant the prayers of communion,” she says. In her church, the rhythm of the prayers chanted over the context of a dinner brings a sacramental depth to the feast, even when the meal itself is understood to be separate from the mysteries of Holy Communion. “We can

still pray these prayers and tell this story, and that is still powerful on its own. That story has power. Those prayers have power,” she says.

Central to both St. Lydia’s and the Amherst church’s practice is the blessing of every individual by name. At St. Lydia’s, this is simply the virtual iteration of their in-person rhythm of the Eucharist. In person, each member would offer the bread to their neighbor and echo the words of Christ, saying, “This is my body.” Virtually, they build a list of names in the chat box so that each participant can “serve” the bread and blessing to the neighbor next in line.

In Woofenden’s community, the time at which she would typically place the bread in people’s upturned palms has become an opportunity to pray a blessing over each person instead.

“Beloved child of God, you belong to God. We belong to one another, and you are loved,” she proclaims over every person gathered.

“It’s a virtual anointing, if you will,” she says. “I make the sign of the cross on their forehead on Zoom. Sometimes there are 15 to 18 people and it takes a lot of time. But they’ve told me it’s the most powerful part of the service—you are being named as beloved, by name, within gathered community.”

Scharen believes that this ability to feel known and acknowledged, to express fears and hear the concerns of others, is precisely what worshipers need from church right now. “If we believe we are the body of Christ together, that requires us to love each other in our liturgy,” he says. “It’s very incarnational, making space to connect with one another in real ways.”

Like other churches, dinner churches have taken varied approaches to communion.

While Scharen has found that this model of individual blessing functions best with a group of 15 to 40 people, virtual dinner services are possible for larger churches as well. My own small bakery in North Carolina has provided loaves of bread for churches to hold virtual agape meals with as many as 60 households, all gathered on a Zoom call. Such groups might be too large for personal blessings, but the bread itself creates a sense of intimacy and unity: just a day before the gathering, each individual loaf is part of the same batch of dough, which is then divided and distributed to each member of the church.

Because each dinner church has a history of experimentation, the congregants trusted their pastors throughout the early transition to online worship. “Some things we tried just bombed,” says Kerzee. “People were so patient with letting us try things that ultimately didn’t work, and I think it’s because they’re so used to it. They weren’t weirded out by it.”

For Simple Church, this experimentation has led to the development of three separate services, meeting a range of needs. One service is streamed from Kerzee’s home over Facebook Live, where participants interject with their greetings, thoughts, and prayers via the comment feature. This service engages nonlocal financial supporters of Simple Church who might not be able to visit the community in person, as well as curious visitors and former congregants who have since moved away. A second service—held, like the St. Lydia’s and Amherst services, in a private Zoom room—engages the immediate community on a more intimate level. Finally, Kerzee hosts a third gathering specifically for church youth.

“The kids said, ‘If one more person asks me how I’m doing or how I’m holding up, I’ll go crazy,’” says Kerzee. So instead of attempting to create a virtual version of Pizza Church—Simple Church’s youth group—Kerzee began hosting virtual trivia nights, a time for the teens to hang out with one another and connect from afar.

Kerzee notes that the younger children have been the most difficult to engage. “They were super excited at first,” he says. “But within the first few weeks the shine wore off.” Rather than create more programming to suit children’s needs, Kerzee simply checks in with families over the phone. After full days of online school, very few have the bandwidth for more technology—even technology with food involved.

Whether or not a virtual dinner service incorporates the Eucharist, it is enlivened by the central role a meal has long played in Christian worship. The Eucharist is an ongoing reminder to the church that something in creation has gone awry, as well as a continual promise that God is in the process of making all things new. The meal offers a tangible foretaste of the Supper of the Lamb, filling our spiritual hunger while teaching us to hunger for something more.

In focusing on the ways God operates at a mystical level in a virtual rendition of the Eucharist, it is easy to overlook the more tangible realities inherent in Jesus’ choice to offer a meal. By partaking together in the intimate process of bringing food into the body, we expose one another to our creaturely vulnerability. To share this

sensual process with others is to share time, resources, taste preferences, table manners, cooking skills, and more. Anyone who has nervously pondered which fork to pick up first understands that a table can both establish a sense of belonging and disintegrate it. Jesus' choice to offer his followers the gift of a meal was in keeping with this dual power. In reversing the meal of the Fall in Genesis—a meal that brought death and thus disintegrated community and belonging—he set a table to mark the death that brings unending life.

Some features of a meal cannot translate to a virtual setting, such as the bonding that takes place in cooking together or for one another. Yet the intimacy and slight awkwardness of watching others eat still unifies a group in a time of limited in-person gatherings. These virtual dinner services show that whether or not a church can celebrate the Eucharist at this time, its people can still eat and drink together in a worshipful way.

This is precisely the role the agape meal has historically served: as an alternative to the Eucharist when no ordained person is present to bless the elements. The community gathers to worship and eat, pointing to Christ's command that we eat and drink in his remembrance while also acknowledging the difference between this meal and consecrated bread and wine. In these odd days, most congregants are wanting not for access to a priest but rather for access to one another. The agape meal or dinner church service, in its ritual practice that muddies the space between sacramental and mundane, addresses the real spiritual and communal needs we feel in our long-term separation.

Several weeks into the pandemic, Woofenden, who also serves as an interim pastor at a Lutheran church near Amherst, found that her traditional congregation was newly open to the dinner church idea, too. Other than Sunday morning services, their existing programming was not easily transferable online. But the community craved connection in small groups. Woofenden suggested a midweek virtual dinner service, in addition to Sunday worship, and the community responded eagerly.

"I've been coming to this church for several years, and I would never stay for coffee hour," remarks one self-proclaimed "very, very shy" woman. But through the dinner service, she says, she is more engaged than ever before.

Scharen attributes this level of engagement to the integration of food and worship, in contrast to the separation between a service and subsequent coffee hour.

“Somehow this liturgy holds a container for a deeper, realer, theologically informed way of sharing who we are and how we’re doing right now,” he says. “When you’re actually praying with a community together, the very fact that you’re in prayer together opens up depths of experience and concern and joy.”

As the coronavirus precautions stretch on, churches of all sizes and traditions find themselves increasingly hungry for more embodied forms of connection. The virtual agape meal or dinner church service provides that. Although it cannot fully address the human need for physical relationships, it serves as a helpful tool until the longing to worship together as a body can be filled. This tactile reminder of a future in which we will gather once again to break bread, shake hands, and embrace one another offers something to carry us through to that future, as the Eucharist carries us on toward the new creation.

“Even though we’re on Zoom, we can breathe together and feel the presence of God touching us and speaking to us as a community,” Scharen says. “That’s the work of the Holy Spirit blowing, even through this weird Zoom format that we have.”

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