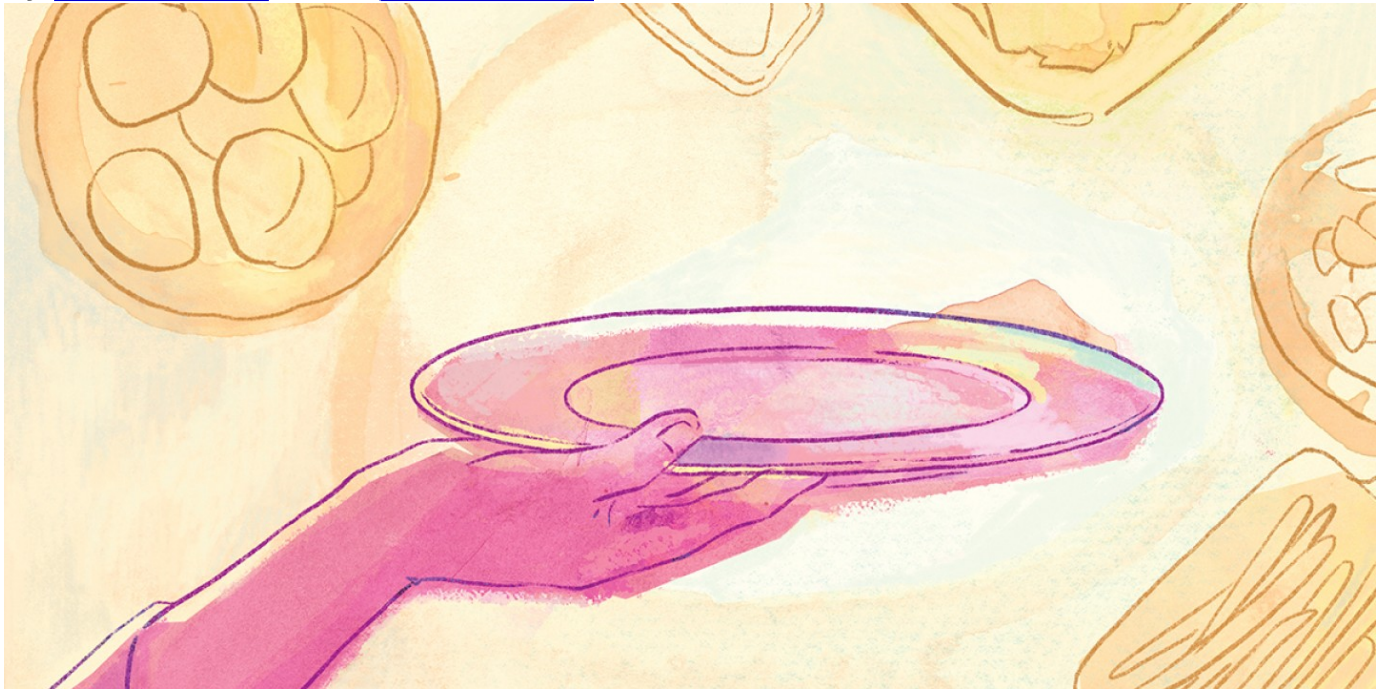


Monday night meal plan

## **My church offered college students weekly fellowship. It turns out they needed the food, too.**

by [Maggie Alsup](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Samia Ahmed)

When I began working as the chaplain at Lyon College, an Arkansas school affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA), I was looking for ways that the local PCUSA congregation could support our students. As I was thinking about this, members of the church approached me. They wanted to set up a group for students centered on food, fellowship, and learning.

A common guideline in campus ministry says that if you feed them, they will come. Our eager leaders recruited families to serve meals, invited students to join us, and launched the Presbyterian Student Association, not knowing what to expect.

A couple of years later, Monday nights are a highlight of the week, not just for our students but for church members as well. One church member, Sarah Jones, loves to host the students in her home. From rushing around making sure there is enough soup for everyone, to finding a quiet corner to make more batches of guacamole during taco night, to laughing with students as they cuddle with Willy Wonka (the family beagle), she seeks to make them feel at home.

“It is such a fun thing to do,” she says. “It is nice having young people around our dining table again. It allows us to connect with the younger generation in a way that we thought we would never be able to do. We learn so much from them and the conversations that take place around our table.” Sarah and other church members are welcoming students into their homes to share a simple meal, and their lives are changing.

“Every time we gather for a meal at our home it makes me feel like this generation is headed in the right direction,” says Sarah. “They are bright, caring, and good, which gives me hope for what they will accomplish in life.” Seeing these young people engage with one another helps strengthen Sarah’s faith. Her interactions with them encourage her to reach out and build relationships with more students and members of the church community.

Through these weekly meals, the church members and students learn about one another and build community. During her own college years, Sarah spent a lot of her time with a built-in support system that became a family to her. She remembers how grateful she was that she did not have to do college life alone, that there were people willing to feed and care for her. She gives back to this generation because of the love and support she received when she was their age. “It is a great thing that the church does this. It allows students the opportunity to stay engaged in the church,” she says—and “not in a traditional sense.” Sarah pauses. “That’s the key.”

She’s right. The Presbyterian Student Association is becoming a new faith community, one that does not look like a traditional church community and yet is building relationships within the church. In our time together, students have become church members, worked as part-time church employees, and served on a church governing committee. Some have flipped pancakes at the church’s Shrove Tuesday dinner; others have served as liturgists or sung in the choir. We celebrate birthdays together, enjoy holiday parties, and hold family-style cookouts. There is a church member teaching a student how to drive so they can get their driver’s license.

These outcomes surpass the expectations we had when we started the group. The church members thought they would provide a meal and support for the students. They never imagined the transformation that would take place in these new relationships.

“The best part of the Presbyterian Student Association,” says a student named Emma, “is the fact that there are church people out there who care for me. It makes me feel good knowing that I have a new church family here at school while I am away from my home.”

“I feel special knowing that there are church people out there interested in who I am and my well-being, who want to take the time and energy to care for me,” says Allison. It does not matter that the students and church members come from different backgrounds or have different approaches to technology. The important thing is that when they are together, they learn—about each other and about life in community. “There is never a dull moment,” says Allison. The key for this group is doing life together.

As we did life together around a table, a greater community need emerged. I began to notice that some of the students craved not just the fellowship and community but also the food itself: they were hungry.

This problem is not unique to Lyon students. Across the country, the number of college students suffering from food insecurity is on the rise. Higher education institutions have taken notice, marking this trend as a threat to students’ overall health and success in college. A 2018 report from Temple University and the Wisconsin HOPE Lab claims that 36 percent of college and university students suffer from food insecurity. That means more than a third of college students are struggling with food concerns on top of all other concerns they face in college.

While the national food insecurity rate is 10.2 percent, in Arkansas the rate is 15.0 percent—second only to its neighbor Mississippi. Meanwhile, 98 percent of our student body receives some sort of financial aid to attend college. Thirty-five percent of them are Pell Grant recipients, 22 percent are first-generation college students, and 36 percent have jobs to help cover their expenses. A 2019 student survey found that 27 percent of our students fear that they will go hungry at least one day a month. Up to 23 percent find themselves without food during the month, and 14 percent report that they are without food up to 15 times a month. These are

staggering numbers for our community.

The college has a food pantry and a meal program, but there is a deeper crisis that needs to be addressed. In the Bible, again and again God provides food for the people's physical needs. The combination of these faith stories of food and the food insecurity I see each day has led me to reexamine the purpose of my work with the church and students. "I always know I can count on the Presbyterian Student Association on Monday nights. I know they are my Monday meal plan," says Zach. "They are always there to make sure we have food."

When we set out to provide a meal and fellowship opportunities for college students, we did not understand the impact this simple act would have. Through this group, we are not only building a new community of faith but also working to address our students' physical needs. Through the actions of these church members, students are experiencing physical and emotional transformation.

"I worried a lot about food during my sophomore year," says Emma, "which was the first year of the Presbyterian Student Association. I worried I would not have enough food or money to pay for food, that I would run out of it. It was hard to balance food costs and other life costs." Living paycheck to paycheck was a struggle for Emma, as it is for many other students. It usually gets worse toward the end of the month, when money gets tight—and students sometimes skip meals. "The Presbyterian Student Association has eased my food concerns, because I know that I will always have a meal on Monday nights," says Emma.

For other students, the concern is not food insecurity but simply being too busy to enjoy a meal. "I do not really struggle in the way that most students do with food," says Allison. "I do not often wonder where my next meal is coming from or if I have anything to eat. I worry that I will not have enough time to eat." The association gives her a reason "to stop in the chaos of college life for a meal. It is a forced break in my schedule, a time to share a meal with others."

Whatever their particular concerns, students know that Monday nights are for food and fellowship. There is always a meal, a time to slow down and be in community. "This group gives us sabbath," says Allison. "I will give up other parts of my schedule before I even think about missing out on a Monday night gathering."

Each time we gather for a meal, we go around the table and say one thing we are grateful for that day. The students' answers vary: passing exams, not having to

work, winning a game, having a meal that evening. For me, the answer is always the same. I am grateful that church members reached out to host meals for students, for in doing so they built a new community—one that addresses students' real concerns and needs.