

WHAT IS DINNER CHURCH?

And why is it one of the easiest ways to plant a new faith community these days?

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In the recent book that I co-authored with Beth Estock, *Weird Church*, one of the models of thriving ministry that we noted is something called Dinner Church. It is one of the fastest growing formats for Christian gathering in North America.

Dinner Church is multiplying by one of the most organic methods: people are copying other people. While you might find an occasional network here or there – or intentional planting of new dinner gatherings in a few place – most of the time, Dinner Church begins in a new place because a group heard about it in another place, went and visited, and decided that it would work back in their home towns. This form of gathering is possibly as easy to replicate in our culture as Methodist class meetings were two hundred years ago.

What is a Dinner Church?

It is a gathering of people of good will: weekly, bi-weekly or monthly, where all the most important things happen at the table. There is a meal. But the group does not meet first and then eat. Or eat dinner, and then have church. And you would likely not take the main worship activities into a room away from the eating area. It all happens simultaneously. Think of a good dinner party with a spiritual twist – and then just add art (music, poetry, Scripture), robust conversation and prayerful moments (which may embrace silence, simple liturgy or a single person who vocalizes the prayer on behalf of the group).

Did I mention robust conversation?

One of the many reasons that modern people tend to really dislike church is because it is boring. One of the reasons church is boring is because it encourages a passive role for 90 percent of those gathered.

- We talk. You listen. (You daydream... you doze off).
- We control the agenda. You are held hostage, without even being able to ask a question or push back in the gentlest of ways.
- We sing (which is fine), but then we make *you* stand and sing – which is fine if you are into that – but most Americans don't sing even when they are standing for the National Anthem at the nearby ballpark. Group singing is more common at a karaoke bar after a lot of beer. But otherwise, it's a little off-putting, especially for men and for people uninitiated into church-world.
- We tell you when to stand, sit, bow your head, raise your hand, scratch your nose. We even tell you how to think. What is this: kindergarten?

No it's church, the way many Americans perceive church. And by the millions, they are walking away.

So what if church was like a good party, much as it would have been in the first century? What if there was fresh, hot, baked bread and a there was a plethora of Trader Joe's wine bottles out for the guests? What if fifteen or twenty people sat at tables and enjoyed a meal together, along with lightly guided conversation focused on a life issue of obvious relevance? What if the sermon were not a long monologue but instead a 3-4 minute story and invitation to conversation around a vital topic, followed by intermittent conversation, Q/A, consideration of Scriptural (and other) passages relevant to the conversation and then, perhaps the ability to change tables and to decide ...

- Do I want to be a part of a group that will talk about simple actions that we could take as a group?
- Would I rather just hold the conversation in my heart: and then be quiet and still in a contemplative space (with or without candles, beanbags, yoga mats and soft evocative music)?
- Or would I like to join a small conversation circle at one table for 15 minutes where they are going to dig deeper into understanding one of the Bible passages, with a person who has done some homework on the text?
- Or do I just need more time to finish the organic conversation that has emerged with two or three people at my table?
- Or perhaps, what I have experienced so far was deep enough for me, and I'd like to help with the dishes – or go see what the kids are up to in the next room.
- Or (if the weather is nice), would I like to go play on the congo drums in the back yard as friends create a makeshift drumming circle?
- Or would I just like to grab a cup of coffee and to go sit with a friend on the front porch swing and talk about life in any way we please?

After 15-20 minutes, they call us all back into the main room, back to the tables. There is closing story, either from the leader or from the lives of one or two of the friends gathered.

Holy Communion occurred – in some cases with very traditional liturgy and in other cases, with almost no words other than the subtlety of symbolic act. If there are no words spoken, it isn't technically Communion for the liturgy police at denominational headquarters – and so it's legal in every tradition, with or without clergy. And yet the symbols are so powerful, that once we are in on the meanings, how necessary are words? Who is to keep Communion from happening – or transubstantiation for that matter (if God is into that)?

I attended a Dinner Church once where dinner started with the breaking of loaves of bread at each table, and the pastor said something like this: "As we begin our meal, we break bread, and we remember that though we are many, we are all connected – we are one body, one human family – all of us: friends of Jesus, who

gave himself fully to human beings.” At the end, we poured a little more wine, and we toasted, “To Jesus, who is alive, in us... luring us to take the way less travelled and to love our neighbors this week.” And, naturally, other toasts arose in the room. With these simple rituals of bread and wine, book-ending the dinner and all that happened at the dinner, we had church that night. My, did we have church!

How many people does it take?

You can start a Dinner Church with a half a dozen, but for it to work well, you probably need at least a dozen. I have rarely seen these communities grow beyond an attendance level of forty. (Better to just start another one.) In some settings, a group of the community members prepare the meal – in other cases, someone is hired to do most of the cooking, so that volunteer energy can focus on other aspects of the gathering and on paying attention to the people in the room.

I work with one church that has 22-25 persons in their Sunday worship, but they started a bi-weekly ministry called Sunday Dinner – and 30 attended last week, with more than half being people new to church gatherings. They are just starting Sunday Dinner, and while they want to weave spiritual sensitivity in and around the meal, they also want to keep the religiosity in and around dinner to a bare minimum. Story-telling and soulful conversation are more the emphasis. This group is thinking, given their affluent community demographic, that they will focus volunteer energy outside the kitchen. If this small church can find 30 attendees within just a few weeks, it shows the promise of Dinner Church for congregations of all sizes.

Who would attend?

Anybody. All ages. Religious or non-religious! Ideally, get some non-religious people in the room – perhaps half the room. Invite people who are allies in mission projects with your church, or just neighbors that you would like to share a great experience with, especially if you sense they would probably not be easy invites to the existing worship service. As you and your friends design the tone and pace of the evening, the non-religious will help you keep it from getting weird or awkward for your cultural context. They will be an ongoing witness for keeping it simple, and for keeping the conversation focused outward on loving neighbor as self. You want the experience to be comfortable for anyone who enters, especially for first timers! And of course, no gathering is the right people mix for everybody.

Early in my ministry, I was starting a new service and on the fourth week, I spontaneously asked people to hold hands and sing *Amazing Grace*. My non-religious team member confronted me lovingly about this at the next team meeting – telling us that it just felt really weird when we held hands and started singing a *kum bay ya* kind of song. We took notice, and did not do that again.

If there are kids, be attentive to them in the main gathering, and also, work with someone who knows about children's attention spans and ways of learning, so that the kids can have some time away from the adults after they've eaten. Some Dinner Churches have the kids sit with parents for the first part of the gathering. Many offer a kids' table as an option.

If you have a team of five or six dreamers ready to talk and pray about this, give each of them an index card and have them write down the names of five people that they would like to give this new gathering to as a gift in the first two or three months. Invite each to pray regularly for the five people. Have them read the names off their cards quietly before any planning related to the Dinner Church gathering. Think of the talents and passions of these five prospects, and imagine how they might be invited to share a talent or interest.

How do we invite people?

This experience must be fun, and thus easy to invite folks to! If no one invites anyone, this is probably not worth the trouble. This brings to mind the question that was once posed to the small youth group at the church in the Chicago burbs: "What would it take to make this ministry something you would just have to invite your friends to?" When the sponsors did exactly what the young people said, the kids invited their friends. The thing grew out of control, and ultimately led to the birth of Willow Creek Community Church.

I teach a course on planting new faith communities at a seminary near my home. One of my students, Pamela Kipps, who completed the course a semester ago, has planted three home gatherings of about two dozen persons each in the time since; each one with a slightly different format based on the audience she was appealing to. One group has a sit-down dinner, one group has no meal but instead has expanded spiritual instruction (Bible 101), and one group will use football as the uniting element. She did this while still a full-time student. While two of her three gatherings are not Dinner Church per se, there are a lot of similar elements. I asked her how she invites people and she gave me an example:

"Marcia! So glad to see you! You always put a smile on my face" (Affirming comment). "What's going on in your life?" (Followed by listening). "Hey, listen, I started a new group called.... and I would love to have you join. It's low commitment level... part of a new faith community I'm building that emphasizes loving friendship and faith exploration. We have a blast together, work on spiritual discovery, and we pray together. With your kind heart and generous spirit, I think you would really love it." (If Marcia is interested, she would continue.) "This is a low stress, no pressure experience. You don't have to know anything about the Bible or answer questions or pray out loud."

Pamela specifically avoids calling this a church or promoting it as an offshoot of a church, Obviously, this is a contextual choice. You could take her invitation above

and substitute the words “dinner party a couple times a month” for the word “group.” Whether or not you use the words “church” or “worship,” it is always best to be clear and upfront about what can be expected. Pamela tells folks there will be prayer and faith exploration. She just chooses not to brand it as church to appeal to those who have hurt, disenchantment, or skepticism about the authenticity of ‘church.’

What kind of food should be served?

Fresh, local-source, very healthy, hearty, simple food! Always have vegetarian options or just go vegetarian period, and you will exclude fewer people around food issues. Soups and creative salads are great. Hot, home baked bread is preferable; if not home baked, at least get the bread bought from a quality bakery. If you wish to supplement the main dishes with a few potluck appetizers or deserts, this is fine. But keep the food relatively simple.

If you desire to invite people to make a donation, put out a basket or a box. You can put a sign on the box, “The suggested donation is \$15, but we invite you to give what you can, or to give extra for another who may be short on cash in their life.” (If I read such a sign, I’d personally drop two or three 20s in the box. I’m not alone in this.)

Where should we meet?

Meet somewhere that’s free. Don’t rent an expensive hall for a Dinner Church. Borrow a living room and use card tables. Or borrow a room at your church or at a partner church. Tell them it’s a mission to the community. If it’s a partner church, offer to pay back by joining them in a mission offering or a special project at some point in the year. I have seen Dinner Church in some pretty ratty spaces – a dilapidated church fellowship hall one time – an unfinished basement another time – and it still worked both times! If a restaurant gives you free banquet room space in exchange for purchase of food, you simply need to ask about whether or not they can provide the kind of food that you want at a price point your people can afford.

Things to ponder as you plan a Dinner Church

- Is it necessary to meet weekly in order to maintain a sense of community and continuity? Maybe once every other week will suffice.
- Is the format designed so that men can stay engaged? If the conversation time is not closely monitored, it can become therapy sessions for troubled souls, and many American males will disappear within a few weeks. Keep it appropriately light. And create more intimate gatherings where people can talk about those things that would be TMI at Dinner Church.

- Do you have a means for greeting people as they arrive and helping them to mix with the others? Retention is all about relationship – granted this format is easier in terms of relationship building, but there still must be intentionality.
- What kind of monthly planning is needed with a small team so that the gatherings stay fresh, creative and stimulating?
- What is the stated relationship between this gathering and other gatherings of the church? Is the church the sponsor or simply a partner/ally/provider of space? Is this a ministry of the church or of the team?
- What will the cost be for a year? How could you raise money up front to start? How can you keep costs so low that you are sustainable by the time you have 30 people attached?

Why does this work in so many varied contexts?

- People naturally gather around tables with food and drink, in all cultures, in all times.
- The format is customizable to almost any cultural context.
- You do not have to have a clergy-person. (Though you need a couple of people with some spiritual maturity and reasonable Biblical/theological competency.)
- It doesn't take a lot of work.
- It doesn't take a lot of money.

For more on this and eighteen other promising models of twenty-first century church, please see the book *Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century!* by Paul Nixon and Beth Ann Estock.