

Come, Cook with Us:

Food, Friendship, and Faith in a Community Kitchen

ANNA MARIE GEDDERT¹

It's a feast for the senses: the smell of savory spices; the taste of fresh, healthy food; the sounds of children playing and women chatting; the touch of supportive embrace; the sight of women and children of different cultures, economic statuses, and age; the sense of God's Spirit moving. This is what you will find on a Tuesday afternoon at Jubilee Mennonite Church Community Kitchen in Winnipeg, Canada, and this is how we experience and demonstrate God's presence. One volunteer, Hedy, said, "At a time when I question the relevance of the Church, I am realizing that we have a role to play as Jesus-followers in the lives of our neighbors, and a responsibility to facilitate relationship with them."

It started by accident when, seven years ago, our church basement flooded. The resulting renovation included upgrading the kitchen as well as the basement for the daycare that was renting the space. But when the renovations were complete, the daycare decided to stay at their temporary location. What was God calling us to do with our upgraded kitchen?

The answer came in a phone call from the local Donwood Public School. Some parents were in conflict with each other and no longer thought the school was a safe space in which to work out their differences. A few of the children of these parents attended Jubilee's neighborhood children's club. Might Jubilee be a safe place for parents to develop better relationships? Might cooking together be a community-building activity? Would our kitchen be available?

A partnership was formed. Donwood Public School provided a staff member and a financial contribution, while Jubilee provided the space, staff support, volunteers for watching children, and donations of food. This partnership fit with our commitment to be present in our community. We started in May of 2010.

Jubilee Mennonite Church is a congregation of about 125 worshippers, and situated in a neighborhood that is economically and culturally diverse. Alongside middle-class detached homes, there are three low-income housing

¹ *Anna Marie Geddert is Community Ministry Director at Jubilee Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.*

developments within three blocks. Our neighborhood includes immigrants from many countries, aboriginal people, single moms, and about 700 children. Some of our neighbors contend with issues of poverty, inadequate housing, addictions, poor mental health, and racism. Four years ago, Jubilee decided to support a half-time Community Ministry Director to lead engagement with our neighbors in projects like a children's club, youth activities, soccer and hockey clubs, a community garden, community meals, and of course the community kitchen.

One mom's experience at the first Community Kitchen Day showed the possibilities that might come from this project. She arrived, and after welcoming her, we told her we would make shepherd's pie. She responded by saying, "I can't make that. I have never made a home-cooked meal." We reassured her that it would be okay and that we would make it together. At the end of the afternoon, she held up her shepherd's pie and said, "I did it! I did it!" with a beaming smile. She took her first homemade meal back to feed her family.

We meet each Tuesday with ten to twelve women, cooking together for an hour and then providing a workshop on anything from self-esteem to nutrition to human rights. We eat a nutritious snack and share about our lives. After a ten-week series, we take a break and then resume.

In the community kitchen, women have found a place to belong, find and offer support, love and be loved, weep and laugh. Food is the equalizing force. Relationships can be built and flourish around food, for we all need to eat. The participants talk about being "blessed . . . by learning different ways of preparing meals, and sometimes the culture it comes from." Participants and leaders celebrate meeting and making new friends, and they say the program lets them be more involved with the church. Several of the women have become followers of Jesus, eventually leading to baptisms.

Two volunteers plan the meals and prepare the snacks. Hedy attends Jubilee, and Jody, who had no previous connection with Jubilee, volunteered when she heard about the program. In a recent evaluation, Jody reported that she started volunteering as a way to help others and that she has developed a deep love for women she would otherwise never have met. "Many of the women started off at Community Kitchen very shy and closed off, but most have opened up in ways that are so beautiful. I hear them talking about how they help each other and look out for each other. We all have struggles, but knowing we have the support of other caring woman can make all the difference!"

Kristine, another volunteer, commented, "I have been blessed by witnessing a small church do an amazing thing in a very direct and personal way for these women in the community. These women don't get lost in the crowd, and feel

very comfortable coming for the help and support of others.”

The weekly workshops are led by Doris, a life coach who heard about Community Kitchen through a friend and asked if she could get involved. She has since made Jubilee her church home. “Community kitchen has contributed to my life,” she said. “It’s given me the opportunity to find my voice alongside other strong courageous women. Even though we are a diverse group of women, we share many of the same difficulties and challenges. We have learned how to reach out to one another in those hard times. We are learning how to ask for help and give help.”

Volunteers from the congregation care for the children during Community Kitchen. “The children are so active and excited about the toys, the tricycles, and the other children,” says Hanna, a great-grandmother who helps. “Each child is unique. Some of them can sit and play quietly, while others are constantly running around. But each one is loveable and beautiful. The children are such a gift and inspiration to me.” For many mothers, this is the only time in the week when they are free from minding their children.

Jubilee Community Kitchen continues to evolve. Donwood Public School changed its priorities and is no longer a partner in the community kitchen. But other contributors have come forward, including government grants, community organizations, local businesses and individuals. Without these partners we could not sustain the program.

The initial conflicts that concerned Donwood School have been resolved. New conflicts have come up, but within the relationships we have built, they too can be reconciled. Other initiatives have grown out of identified needs. A multi-week support group for abuse survivors was co-sponsored and led by Mennonite Central Committee staff. A breadmaking workshop included training in home business management and led several women to start a baking business.

Manija is a Muslim woman who recently emigrated from Afghanistan; she teaches us how to make her traditional foods and bakes naan for community meals. Two women make extra meals to deliver to the ill or bereaved. Many Community Kitchen participants volunteer at the church’s annual community Christmas dinner. Some also participate in the community garden, farming thirty plots where neighbors and church members grow organic vegetables to feed their families and to contribute to community meals. Additionally, participants in the program have begun to make their own contributions to the surrounding neighborhood. They organize and run a clothing fair each spring and fall, where neighbors can purchase a garbage bag of donated clothes for only \$1.00.

Jubilee church continues to see God's hand weaving opportunities to be present in our neighborhood. This did not happen because of our strategic plan; this was God already at work in the community bringing together those who live and work here. Through prayer, listening, discerning, and experimenting we are discovering a new way of being the local church. We look at the assets we have received in our church and in our neighborhood, and we look for ways to use those assets to partner with God for the greater good. We don't suggest that every church should have a community kitchen; you need to discover your own opportunities and calling. This is our calling—to bring experiences of healthy eating, dignity, life skills, and improved relationships in our neighborhoods.

Faith, one of the participants, caught the essence in a note to the leaders: "Community Kitchen changed me in ways that made me a better person inside and out of Jubilee Church. It's not just a place you go to cook. It's a place you go to learn, listen, receive the opportunity to build new friendships, and to give and get the support you may need."

God surprises and leads us as we continue to look to Jesus and follow his example—feeding the crowds and eating with all kinds of people—and his teaching to love our neighbors. When we look back and all around us, we see that it is God's grace, the good news of God's love, and the pleasure of sharing food we prepared together that continue to inspire us. So we move forward and take the risk of being present in our community by saying, "Come, cook with us."