



Lessons From Around the Dinner Church Table

by Andrea Perrett

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:20-21

When I started seminary, a wise friend encouraged me to be content in my decision to answer God's call to begin school, but to not worry too much about what would lie on the other side of my degree. I was told it was my job to get through the seminary classes, while God was the one working on plans that would come after graduation.

These were wise, and necessary, words of encouragement. Coming from a career as a registered dietitian, I had been given a vision of combining the worlds of physical and spiritual health through the intersection of food and theology. I was conflicted, as I felt called into ministry, but I was not feeling called into traditional congregational ministry. I was not sure if there was a place for me in either the faith or health care worlds when I

finished my degree.

However, I listened to my friend's advice and attempted to faithfully follow the path God had laid out for me.

Then, during my final year of seminary, I was given the opportunity to help create and lead a dinner church. For two years, I spent nearly every Sunday night gathered with a group of people for dinner and worship. St. Andy's Community Table, as it became known, was born out of the Centre for Missional Leadership at St Andrew's Hall. As a way to help equip missional leaders, this experiment in church planting was an unexpected and welcomed addition to my seminary experience.

Starting during the Fall of 2016, through dark rainy nights and warm autumn evenings, I was part

of a small, but faithful group who gathered together to share a meal and worship God. Our initial location was the basement of West Point Grey Presbyterian Church, a small congregation located just off of the University of British Columbia (UBC) campus. This congregation was most generous in giving free reign to our leadership group of two staff from St. Andrew's Hall and two students, and allowing us to grow into a new expression of worship on our own.

The format for our evenings was simple, based around our three priorities of Faith–Food–Friends. Each Sunday, at around 4:30 p.m., people would start to gather. A variety of decaf coffee and tea was offered as people caught up with one another. Shortly before five, a homemade meal, kept warm in insulated casserole-carrying bags, was brought into the hall. Always prepared with love, our rotating schedule of volunteers would bring a hot meal to feed the 20–30 people who had gathered. Pasta, soups, and chili were some of our favourite meals, always with an added veggie tray or salad to bulk up the meal, and to satisfy my dietitian heart.

After the food had been blessed and the children had been served first, we all sat around tables in small clusters and discussed questions related to the weekly theme. We took turns drawing questions from the gold jar that had been placed on the

centre of the table. Some were light-hearted, get-to-know-you questions that would be answered immediately, while others which required some deeper thought were left for later on during the meal. As the children finished their meals, they would filter into the next room to go run off some steam, as the adults continued their discussion as a larger group, sharing what had been talked about around their own table.

When the plates were cleared off the tables, and the children were back in the room, we would start our time of singing. Reading the lyrics off of the placements we had made ahead of time, the music was kept simple, a combination of a couple of guitars or the piano, based on which of the musicians from our community were present that evening. Scripture was also read off of the placemats, as long as too much food had not been spilled on them. As we welcomed our guest preaching for the evening to give their best seven-minute sermon, popsicles were handed out to the eagerly awaiting children. We had sermon series, such as *Sins We Love*, *The Virtues We Need*, and *God's Odd Jobs*. After a time of prayer, we would wrap up with one more song before sending the group back out into the world.

We had set out to create a new worshipping community that had a low barrier to enter, but one that demanded a high commitment from participants. We put a priority on

hospitality and being a welcoming community. Our numbers never swelled above 40, but some weeks over half our participants were children. We maintained a core group of 25 people, and over time had over 100 participants cycle through our dinner church. Yet, over time we struggled to attract new Christians and we were never able to integrate those with the existing congregation whose building we were using.

God had led our group into new territory and with the help of the Spirit we were able to accomplish more than we ever set out to do. However, after two years of weekly dinner gatherings, we made the decision to wrap up our time at St. Andy's Community Table.

I feel very privileged to have been part of this experiment. Looking back, I am amazed how this experience has continued to send me in a direction that I never could have imagined. At the beginning of seminary, I never thought that God would be using me to start new worshipping communities. I was not prepared to hear that I would be a church planter. However, since St. Andy's has wrapped up, God has continued to guide me down a path of starting food-centered new worshipping communities, including a dinner hosting networking and a bread baking circle. The Holy Spirit is on the move in our denomination helping to sprout up new churches of all

shapes and sizes. I am honoured that I am able to join in with this work and I cannot wait to see where things will be in another few years.

Andrea Perrett is the Centre for Missional Leadership Associate in New Witnessing Communities at St. Andrew's Hall. She is passionate about seeing new worshipping communities flourish and thrive. As an Associate in New Witnessing Communities, she is currently curating the Breaking Bread Network, a dinner hosting collective for the Lower Mainland. She is also the Assistant Director of Cyclical Cascadia, a church planting support initiative (in partnership with the Northwest Coast Presbytery in Washington state). Andrea has previously created and led a dinner church, St. Andy's Community Table, and has served at West Point Grey Presbyterian Church in Vancouver. Also a practicing Registered Dietitian, Andrea loves exploring the connection between physical health and spiritual health and what that can mean for Christian witnessing communities. Andrea has a MDiv from Vancouver School of Theology where she is currently working on a ThM in Missional Theology. Although a prairie girl at heart, after six years in Vancouver, Andrea and her husband have embraced the West coast life and enjoy road biking and taking their goofy black lab on canoe trips.