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From Basement to Banquet Hall:
One Table, One Church Street, and a Theology of Nourishment

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Abstract

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A theology of Nourishment was cultivated out of an innovation named One Table, a meal-based activity that brought community together over three successive weeks and it refers to a shalom nourishment of the human person in body, mind, and spirit. Those who are experiencing food insecurity and hunger cannot experience the wholeness of a thriving life. In Johnstown, NY, St. John's Episcopal Church is addressing food insecurity and hunger in Fulton County NY under the umbrella program of One Church Street (OCS). OCS is a separate facility adjacent to the church scheduled to open in Spring 2024. OCS is intended to promote a theology of Nourishment by providing necessary food, fellowship and additional resources that will nourish the whole person. Currently in Fulton County, 1 in 4 of our neighbors identifies as food insecure, and together our Pantry and NOAH (Needy Or Alone and Hungry) Sunday meal programs served over 60,000 meals in 2023, and yet the local communities of Johnstown and Gloversville remain largely unaware of the extraordinary work being done at OCS to nourish our neighbors.

We needed to intersect with our local community leaders and residents to teach them about hunger and food injustice in our area, show them the OCS resources, and build a sense of deeper community connection? The answer was One Table, a meal-based innovation that met for three successive weeks to gather, teach, and inspire local community residents and leaders to help us combat hunger in Fulton County and to learn where they might fit in with our OCS programming.

Results from One Table provided evidence that the meals provided connection and education about food injustice and allowed people to envision themselves as part of the solution for hunger in Fulton County. The innovation is easily replicable and additional meals have been held multiple times since the original innovation in Fall of 2023. A theology of Nourishment is an expansive, community-based concept that envisions a thriving existence for all our neighbors, regardless of economic status.

From Basement to Banquet Hall:
One Table, One Church Street, and a Theology of Nourishment

By

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In his book, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, Dr. Norman Wirzba asks: “Why did God create a world in which every living creature must eat?”¹ Wirzba goes on to write about the tension in the question economically, morally and practically. As the Rector of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Johnstown, NY, and the Executive Director of One Church Street (or OCS), a Food and Nutrition resource hub, I feel the tension of this question keenly. OCS is a parachurch organization working to alleviate hunger for people in our local area through three programs: a Food Pantry, a weekly Sunday Dinner program called NOAH (Needy or Alone and Hungry), and a new Food Is Medicine program. For over thirty years, St. John’s has been responding to the food justice challenges faced by our neighbors. Unemployment, chronic illness, disability, and a lack of transportation, among other factors, contribute to high rates of food insecurity and food justice issues in our area. This means not everyone in our community is able to acquire enough food to meet basic nutritional needs. So, while we all must eat, it is not always easy to find the resources so that everyone can eat.

In the context of Fulton County in upstate NY, where St. John’s is located, our church is completing the last third of a \$3.3 million project to house our food and nutrition programming in our OCS building which is currently being renovated. (see Appendix 1). OCS is the physical address of the building on Church Street, and it is the overall name for the food justice programs which will soon be moved into the renovated space. OCS is a former YMCA building that gives us 18,000 square feet of space to house our existing Food Pantry, a commercial kitchen and multi-use dining room where our NOAH Sunday dinner will be served, and our Food is Medicine program. In 2023, these food justice programs provided over 60,000 meals for families and individuals (see Appendix 2). Overall, however, OCS food justice programs provide far

¹ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 40.

more than food to meet physical needs. The current programs that comprise OCS embody a theology of Nourishment that helps us share God's providence through food, relationships, hospitality, welcome and personal agency. The bedrock of these programs is the hope that all people in our community will receive the nutrition they need to thrive, or to live with vigor and purpose, and we also hope to address chronic health problems through healthier eating and food preparation. Our Mission Statement for OCS states that we are "Nourishing our neighbors in body, mind and spirit," and this mission exemplifies a theology of Nourishment, or a whole person understanding of food and nutrition.

The Challenge

Yet, while those of us who serve our neighbors in one of these food and nutrition programs can easily see the need, these programs have been either invisible or largely unknown to our Johnstown community leaders, to the wider community, and to potential partners who might work with us practically and financially.

While OCS is located just a half-block from the busiest intersection in our city, few people in our community know about the work being done to nourish our neighbor at either the Pantry or the NOAH program. This became clear to me when promoting Hunger Awareness Month in June of 2022.

The goal was to place spare change collection jars in local businesses with information about OCS. The graphic is evocative—an empty take-out container stands open with this fact as the text: "This is what one in four of your neighbors has to eat today" (see Appendix 3).

When I brought a jar to a local cafe on Main Street, Donna, the owner, looked blankly at me and asked: "What Food Pantry?" She also had no knowledge of the NOAH Sunday meal program. Donna has owned her restaurant for more than 15 years and her storefront is literally

around the corner from both programs. My heart sank when she asked this question. I assumed that most local residents and business owners knew about the food justice work that St. John's has been doing for over 30 years. My conversation with Donna and with other business owners on Main Street that day revealed that one of the core challenges for OCS was not just addressing hunger but addressing the lack of awareness about both hunger and the OCS programs which help alleviate hunger in our city and county. Locally, food justice concerns and OCS nutrition programming needed greater public awareness. As our programs continue to grow and serve more people each year, the mission to nourish our neighbors, and our ambitious \$3.3 million capital project need greater public awareness and commitment. The question became how to accomplish that.

One Table: a Quick Introduction

My innovation, One Table, was designed to directly address this disconnection by creating an experiential bridge between our OCS food programs, specifically our NOAH meal program, and the wider community. One Table was a communal dinner table where community members were invited to eat together to learn about hunger, food injustice and nourishment. Those who came to One Table also toured the construction site at OCS. The One Table innovation provided a catalyst and conduit for community members to gather, eat, learn and in many cases, to later join us in taking up the cause of fighting food injustice.

Yet how did Fulton County get to a place where a \$3 million facility is needed to combat food injustice? The demographics of our area and a brief history of these programs will provide some answers.

Demographic

Historically, St. John's has been engaged in providing food for our neighbors in Fulton County, NY for more than 30 years. Fulton County, or "The Land of 44 Lakes,"² is in the Adirondack Mountains and is classified as a rural area of New York State.³ Data for Fulton County gives a total population figure of 52,669 residents in 2022.⁴ The percentage of those living in poverty in 2022, the most recent data available, is 14.8% with 17.8% of children classified as living in poverty. However, nearly 21% of children, or one in five, currently live in households that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.⁵ Anecdotally, we have learned that approximately 25% of those who benefit from our Pantry are children.⁶

While national poverty figures often include large percentages of people of ethnic diversity, in Fulton County 90.6% of residents are white, while 1.4% are Black or African American. Multiracial, Hispanic, Asian, and other ethnicities make up the additional 5%.⁷ These figures compare to overall New York State figures of 55% white, 19.3% Hispanic or Latino and 17.6% Black or African American. The smallest percentage is comprised of multi-ethnic, Asian, native American or other ethnicities.⁸ In other words while race can often be a predictor of greater poverty, race is not a useful predictor of poverty in Fulton County, NY.

² "Things to Do in Fulton County NY |." Accessed January 28, 2024. <https://www.44lakes.com/>

³ Darrel J. Aubertine, "Rural Areas in New York State", July 29, 2010. <https://www.nysenate.gov/newsroom/articles/darrel-j-aubertine/rural-new-york>.

Perhaps surprising to most people, 86% of New York State is classified as rural.

⁴ "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Fulton County, New York." Accessed March 5, 2024. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fultoncountynewyork/PST045223>.

⁵ "NYS KWIC - Get Data - KWIC County Report." Accessed February 9, 2024. https://www.nyskwic.org/get_data/county_report_detail.cfm?countyID=36035.

⁶ Food Pantry guests are asked about members of their household, and ages for those members.

⁷ "Data USA: Fulton County, NY", *Data Compilation*. DataWheel/Deloitte, 2019. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/fulton-county-ny#demographics>.

⁸ "United States Census: Quick Facts NY", United States Census Bureau, July 2019. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/NY>.

Yet, poverty has deeply affected the sister cities of Johnstown and Gloversville, which is six miles north of Johnstown. These two cities are closely connected by geography, history, and industry and together they are referred to as the Glove Cities or the Twin Cities.⁹ The Glove Cities area has the highest population density in Fulton County with a combined population of approximately 23,000 residents. In 2024, Gloversville had a population of 15,113¹⁰ and Johnstown had a population of 8,216¹¹.

These two cities were once famous around the world for their leather tanning and more specifically for their glove making. This is why the larger of the two cities is named Gloversville.¹² Johnstown and Gloversville were dubbed “the glove-making capital of the world,” as they produced an astonishing 90% of the gloves sold in the United States between 1880 and 1950.¹³ However, in a dramatic change of fortune, the New York Times reported in 1950 that approximately 7000 of the 9000 glove and tanning workers in the Glove Cities, nearly 80%, became unemployed due to tariff cuts which increased the influx of foreign gloves. In addition, 78 of more than 100 glove-related businesses closed in the previous four years.¹⁴

Sources of Poverty

From the 1950’s into the early 1980’s, there were additional increases in both unemployment rates and poverty in the Glove Cities area. An on-line article by the organization

⁹ “City of Johnstown New York: Our History,” City of Johnstown. <http://cityofjohnstown.ny.gov/our-history.html>.

¹⁰ “Census Reporter: Gloversville, NY,” <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US3629443-gloversville-ny/>. Accessed 2019. December 7, 2021.

¹¹ Census Reporter. “Census Profile: Johnstown, NY.” 2019, Accessed February 9, 2024. <http://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US3638781-johnstown-ny/>.

¹² This is one of only two cities in the world named Gloversville. The other is in the state of Virginia.

¹³ Amy Feiereisel, “North Country at Work: Tanning and Glove-Making in Johnstown and Gloversville,” *N CPR*, November 2018. <https://www.northcountrypublicradio.org/news/story/37491/20181128/north-country-at-work-tanning-and-glove-making-in-johnstown-and-gloversville>.

¹⁴ “50,000 Join Fight for Glove Tariff.” *New York Times*, May 27, 1950, Business Section. <https://www.nytimes.com/1950/05/28/archives/50000-join-fight-for-glove-tariff-upstate-county-fears-death-of.html>.

Undark, an independent digest magazine which explores the intersection of science and society, reported the loss of industry in this way:

It was as if a meteor had struck the tanning industry. For more than a century, leather production had been the great engine that powered the regional economy of upstate New York. And then, almost overnight, it seemed, the tanneries were gone, as one shop after another fell in the 1980s to global competition and strict new environmental regulations. Gloversville — once the glove-making capital of the world — sank into a deep depression, perilously close to extinction itself.¹⁵

The need to meet new federal and state environmental standards, coupled with the influx of much less expensive, foreign-made leather gloves, created a vortex of economic loss from which the Glove Cities have never fully recovered. Predictably then, in 1980, with unemployment soaring, one in four of Gloversville's residents were classified as living in poverty.

Consequently, the population of Gloversville dropped from a high of 23,600 residents in 1950 to 14,792 residents in 2024, falling an average of .47% every year.¹⁶ Current rates of poverty in Gloversville today are 20.7%,¹⁷ compared to the overall poverty rate in New York State of 13.6%.¹⁸ Overall, Fulton County ranks ninth out of 62 counties in New York State for the highest levels of food insecurity, Fulton County's self-reported food insecurity among adults stands at 25%¹⁹ which means that 1 in 4 adults identifies as having limited or uncertain access to nutritious food. This is more than double the national food insecurity rate, which is 12.8%.²⁰

¹⁵ "In Upstate New York, Leather's Long Shadow." *Undark Online Journal*, February 22, 2017. <https://undark.org/2017/02/22/leathers-long-shadow-gloversville-new-york/>.

¹⁶ "Gloversville, New York Population 2024." Accessed January 28, 2024. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/gloversville-ny-population>.

¹⁷ "Census Reporter: Gloversville, NY," <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US3629443-gloversville-ny/>. Accessed 2019. December 7, 2021.

¹⁸ Statista. "Poverty Rate New York U.S. 2022." Accessed February 12, 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/205495/poverty-rate-in-new-york/>.

¹⁹ "Self-Reported Food Insecurity Among New York State Adults by County."

²⁰ "USDA ERS - Key Statistics & Graphics." Accessed February 12, 2024. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics/>.

St. John's Food Ministries—How We Became the Food Church

Recounting the decades of failed industry and reviewing current poverty and food insecurity rates in our region helps us understand the need for the food ministry programs established at St. John's Church over 30 years ago. The Reverend William B. Small, Rector of St. John's Episcopal Church at that time, clearly knew the needs of residents in this area, especially in the city of Johnstown. Fr. Bill was a beloved and highly respected figure.²¹ Joan Western, Fr. Bill's daughter, says this about her father's motivation for beginning these two food programs in a locally produced video about OCS:

Fr. Bill saw his ministry as a way to live out the scriptures, to feed the hungry, to welcome the lonely, and to live from our abundance and not our scarcity... his work sprang from his deep and abiding prayer life where he shared his concerns for the world with God and saw the need for hope, connection, and a simple, sustaining meal which reminds me of the parable of the loaves and fishes: from a little comes an abundance.

Joan closed with the familiar biblical reference that Fr. Bill's drive to feed our neighbors was rooted in Jesus' words to his disciples "for whatsoever you do unto the least of your brothers you do unto me," (Matthew 25:40).²² Our current motivation remains the same.

Joan's comments help articulate a theology of Nourishment, which is a way of knowing God and of sharing God's love by meeting people's needs through food and hospitality, through connection and hope. A theology of Nourishment embodies what I sometimes call Shalom Nourishment, or a wholeness of nourishment for the individual and family in body, mind and spirit,²³ which also mirrors our OCS mission statement.

²¹ Fr. Bill Small passed away in 2017.

²² Mustafa, Osama. *OCS Story*. YouTube Video. Johnstown, NY, September 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-vtVljQM0c>.

²³ "Shalom." Shalom's much broader meaning "signifies a state of prosperity, of blessed harmony, on several levels, physical and spiritual." From: Hershey, Doug. "The True Meaning of Shalom." FIRM Israel, January 3, 2020. <https://firmisrael.org/learn/the-meaning-of-shalom/>, "The True Meaning of Shalom."

Fr. Bill started the NOAH Meal Program and the Food Pantry in 1992, and both continue to operate today in expanded forms. The goal of the NOAH program was to allow anyone from the community to come and have a Sunday meal, prepared by volunteer cooking teams from local community organizations and churches.²⁴ Close to the same time that the NOAH meals began, the Food Pantry was started in one of the Church's upstairs Sunday school rooms. The combination of these two programs has led to the nickname of "The Food Church" for St. John's. In 2022, we celebrated 30 years of service for both programs.

Geographically, St. John's Church and OCS are perfectly placed in our community to do the work of nourishing our neighbors in a centrally located, highly visible location. A short historic survey completed by a local architecture firm said this: "Saint John's Church is an imposing Gothic Revival-style stone structure at the prominent location of the intersection of East Main Street and Market Street" which is an accurate way of stating that the church, with its iconic square tower, is situated in the heart of our small city.²⁵ The church building is located at the intersection of three main roads: Main Street, Market Street and Church Street, occupying two of the most prominent corners in the City of Johnstown.

OCS: Community and Nutrition Resource Hub

Huge and exciting changes will occur in the near future for our OCS food ministry programs as we plan the Spring 2024 opening of the building which will house all of our food justice programming. St. John's is two-thirds of the way through a funding drive, having raised \$2.3 million of the \$3.3 million needed to complete the project. The three-story brick building was purchased in 2013 by St. John's because we knew we needed more space for our food

²⁴ We currently have volunteer teams from local restaurants, neighborhoods, teaching and benevolent organizations and other churches. The range is wide. Each team has 4 – 7 volunteers.

²⁵ Lacey, Thaler, Reilly and Wilson Architecture and Preservation, LLP. "St. John's Episcopal Church Historic Structure Report." Historic Structure. Johnstown, New York, December 30, 2019, 6.

ministries, which were all located in the basement of the church building.²⁶ The basement space is inaccessible to those with disabilities and is unsafe for our volunteers. We were actively planning to build a new space, which was proving cost-prohibitive, and which would have provided only 6000 square feet of additional space. After one of our Planning Meetings, a local architect informed us that the adjacent YMCA Building was going up for sale, which proved to be the perfect solution at less cost and with three times the space. Purchased for \$80,000, but now costing over \$3 million for the reconstruction, we continue to raise money as part of our “Space Mission” campaign (named because our programs need more space). The campaign features videos, ads, publicity and speaking engagements (for examples, see Appendix 4).

While OCS straddles the boundary between the bustle of Main Street and Church Street, the north side of OCS also sits at the beginning of a lower income neighborhood in Johnstown. Working with a family in this nearby neighborhood proved to be eye-opening for one of our volunteers.

Daniel, a Pantry volunteer, came to me to ask me if I had seen the home where one of our families lived. He was horrified to see that there was no workable front door, that broken appliances and trash were scattered around the yard. Daniel was especially concerned about the baby the couple were trying to raise in very difficult circumstances.

He has often stopped in to talk to me about his experiences. “Boy, this Food Pantry is a wake-up call,” he said, and went on to explain that in all the decades that he has lived and taught here, he was “insulated from that side of Johnstown.” He said that his volunteer work at the Pantry is the single most valuable activity he has done in his life, an activity that has given him a clear picture of poverty and hunger in our community. However, it wasn’t just alleviating hunger

²⁶ Our NOAH program remains in the basement until it can move to OCS. The Food Pantry currently rents a space across the street from OCS.

that kept Daniel connected to his volunteer work at the Pantry. The most surprising and heart-opening knowledge that Daniel has received is relational: “What I like is that we connect with *these people* [italics mine]. They know our names and ask us how we are. This Pantry is not just a dispenser of food.” After being asked what he meant by that, Daniel elaborated by saying that “People come to socialize with us and while they are waiting, they connect with each other as well.”

In fact, when Daniel returned from a trip to Europe, he told me about a friend that he was going to deeply miss who had died while Daniel was away. Daniel told me that this friend had been very interested to hear about his travels to France, and Daniel had been saving up stories with which to regale his friend when he returned. I was surprised to learn that the friend to whom Daniel was referring was one of our Food Pantry guests. Without realizing it, Daniel was articulating the fuller concept of a theology of Nourishment, which is not just the easing of hunger, but the crossing of economic boundaries and the establishment of relationships.

The root sources of hunger and food insecurity mystify Daniel, who has never had to suffer from these things in his own life. “I don't understand how people get this way,” Daniel said. Like Daniel, we can be present to the injustices of food insecurity and hunger, and yet have no true comprehension of what it means to suffer from them ourselves.

Statistically, our Pantry numbers have exploded. In the month of January of 2020, prior to the pandemic, our Pantry served 98 people in a total of 63 households.²⁷ In January of 2024, we served the highest number of people: 644 people in 242 households, an increase of 557%, and a 284% percent increase in households served (see Appendices 5a and 5b).

²⁷ When a person comes in the Pantry, they are asked how many people live in their household. Food is distributed according to the number of people being fed in one house, or household.

With these statistics we recognize that the OCS mission to nourish our neighbors continues to grow, as does the need to educate and engage our community leaders and residents about food injustice and how they can help us overcome it.

The Innovation—One Table

Looking both at the format of our NOAH meal, which serves a restaurant-style Sunday dinner, and the ways in which people generally congregate and share conversation at restaurants, coffee shops, in their own homes, and at potlucks suppers, I gleaned that the best innovation would model similar experiences of unity and community. Bringing people around a common table, specifically a dinner table, was both theological and literal in creating connectedness, even if the people around that table did not know one another. In fact, it seemed even more important to bring people together who *didn't* know one another to create new relationships. Anthropologist E.N. Anderson believes that “Food is second only to language as a social communication system.”²⁸ One Table created a space where food and conversation were shared, a space which felt familiar and appropriate, and which would help raise awareness through experience.

This goal was not idealized. Challenges could arise such as differences of opinion, different viewpoints, pushback against the problem of hunger, or even the possibility of people blaming the victims rather than the system. Kendall Vanderslice, a writer and baker who studies and writes about the intersection of food and theology devotes a section in her book “We Will Feast” to this idea: “the table can also be a powerful force to establish division...This tendency to divide means that table dynamics must be understood in order to intentionally develop

²⁸ Kendall Vanderslice. *We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship, and the Community of God*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019),19.

community.”²⁹ Erica Meijers, a journalist and theologian, agrees: “Our daily bread can be a source of both separation and solidarity.”³⁰

Consequently, the innovation was named One Table for several reasons. The name One Table was derived from OCS, and One Table meals were meant to mirror the work and mission of OCS, specifically the NOAH meal. One Table is also reminiscent of the meals where Jesus sat at tables, broke bread and was made known, including the Last Supper and the walk to Emmaus. Regardless of status, all participants would eat around One Table.

One Table was also inspired by a model called ‘the Long Table’ that I experienced at a Food Justice Summit in 2023. A Long Table allows participants to join in a facilitated table conversation, structured almost like an informal panel, which was held on a stage at the end of the event so the audience could both participate and observe. Participants could opt to occupy one of the Long Table seats when it was empty, share insights or conversation, and would then rotate off to provide space for others to join the conversation.³¹

One Table somewhat mirrored the Long Table with its open forum but was also modelled after the NOAH free meals served every Sunday afternoon. One Table was designed to bring eight community members, plus me and an additional tech helper, around a dinner table to share a meal and conversation, and to learn about the vision of OCS and our community-based mission to combat food injustice. By staging One Table in the same space where our NOAH guests have their meal, community members were able to ‘eat in the place setting’ of our Sunday meal guests, to see the outdated basement facilities and poorly laid out kitchen, and to experience the difficulty of navigating the steep stairways that prevent people with mobility issues from

²⁹ Vanderslice, *We Will Feast*, 30.

³⁰ Erica Meijers, “Come and Eat: Table Fellowship as a Fundamental Form of Diakonia.” *Diaconia* 10, no. 1 (December 2019): 85.

³¹ Eva Yaa Asantewaa and EYA Projects. “What Is a Long Table and How Does It Work?,” n.d. <https://www.dance.nyc/uploads/LongTableDescription.pdf>.

attending our NOAH meals. The main course, served with the same cutlery and dishware that our Sunday guests used, was served in the dining room area of the basement, under fluorescent lighting. We traveled for dessert, which was served next door on the second floor of OCS. By bringing our guests into both spaces, the aging basement dining room and the construction site next door, we would be able to highlight both the need and the desire to move our facility from its original home to a new, refurbished and fully accessible facility. This experience would actively translate our OCS project from charity to necessity, from vision to reality, from basement to banquet hall in a much more realistic manner.

An invitation with a simple graphic was created for One Table. The invitation card was clear: “One conversation. One meal. One community.” This emphasized the focus of the event, and the invitation went on to explain that the goal of One Table was “to explore the intersection of community, church, and OCS.” On the back of the invitation a theology of Nourishment is implied, and our mission statement for our programs is clear:

“One Table is, first of all, a meal.... [We] will share a meal and conversation about our OCS programs including NOAH and the Food Pantry, how we are fighting food insecurity, what it means to feed our neighbors in body, mind and spirit, and where you might fit in. Most of all-- we will welcome your questions, ideas, and enthusiasm! Come to the feast!!” (see Appendix 6).

The invitation was structured to be both personal and global: come and be fed (personal), come and be part of something bigger (global). Vanderslice, on her website, suggests this:

“When our basic needs for food and community are met at the table, we open up to conversations we would otherwise avoid.”³²

³² Edible Theology. “Edible Theology.” Accessed January 28, 2024. <https://www.edibletheology.com>.

One Table: The Meals

Three dinner meals were held on successive Thursday nights in September/October of 2023. Sixty e-mail and personal invitations were sent out to fill a total of 24 open spaces around the tables. People signed up online using Sign Up Genius and each week had a randomized group. We ended up with a total of 22 individuals who attended the meals.³³

One of our One Table guests summarized his experience of the gathered guests at One Table in this way:

“The guests included a local politician, the mayor, a nutritionist, graphic designer, three educators (two retired), an organic farmer, and a local businessman. One guest is a current food pantry volunteer and another the retired food pantry coordinator. I can’t imagine a better group to represent our community. In addition, nearly every food item was locally sourced in our greater community.³⁴

The schedule for each gathering was as follows:

- Open with personal introductions and literally breaking bread, with shared stories of memorable meals around the table.
- Enjoy dinner and conversation as well as conveying basic information and statistics about the thirty-plus year history of NOAH, of the Food Pantry and of our newest vision for those programs which is the umbrella project of OCS that will house all our food-relating programming,
- Immerse One Table guests in the environment where the NOAH meal is currently being held—no accessibility, outdated facilities, lack of natural light, with a small kitchen and clearly aging infrastructure.

³³ This number did not include me and my husband, Alistair, who helped me with the logistics of the meal and our walk-through of OCS.

³⁴ One Table October 5, 2023. Zoom Meeting recording. St. John’s Church/OCS, 2023.

- Use conversation prompts including queries for One Table guests to discern their familiarity with the terms “food injustice” and “food insecurity”, as well as to help define the word ‘nourish’, which is a central aspect of our programming and a key word in our Mission Statement for OCS.
- At the conclusion of the main course, the groups move from the basement dining room and walk over to the new facility, OCS, which was (and is) under construction. We give a general tour of the facility with the goal of ending our evening upstairs in the new Dining Room (not yet completed) for coffee and dessert.

On each occasion, as we entered this space, audible sounds of surprise, joy, awe, and delight could be heard and were captured on the voice recording. Even though construction work is not complete at OCS, the two dining rooms—the original in the church basement and the other one under construction on the second floor of OCS—stand in stark contrast to one another. The second floor of OCS is lined with windows that bring in natural light, and the facilities, even uncompleted, are rich with detail—an original tin ceiling, chandeliers that still work, and a clear entrance for the elevator that will allow access to all people, regardless of ability. The evenings concluded in that space.

The final aspect of the One Table experience was an email survey sent to all attendees which invited them to first: choose a word (or words) from a provided list that best described their impression of the dinner; and second: reflect on why they chose that word, or included other words that were not on the list. 100% of those in attendance completed the survey (see Appendix 7).

In terms of demographics, those gathered around One Table ranged in age from their 20's to 70's. While the greatest number of people attending were in their 30's or 60's, the average age was 58 years. In terms of gender, we had 14 women and 8 men in attendance (see Appendix 8).

The foundation for connection was created as we began each One Table event, by literally breaking bread and sharing personal stories of a memorable meal. Thad's story was decades old and still full of regret as he remembered rejecting his grandmother's offer of food prepared just for him. "Grandma, I already had lunch," he told her, looking at a full spread of food on her kitchen table. The echo of a much younger person was still audible in his voice although he is now in his late 60's.³⁵ Most people shared memories of Thanksgiving meals that were treasured because of gathered family and friends. One young woman remembered a Thanksgiving where she began to eat meat again after being a vegetarian for several years and she laughed as she told us the turkey tasted especially good that year.³⁶

CJ, an organic farmer and farm activist from the Netherlands, who now operates a successful Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm in our area, spoke about loving the tradition of Thanksgiving, which is relatively new to him. "We usually share [Thanksgiving], or actually invite anyone who doesn't have a home to come to our house. Then we have a lot of people over and sometimes people don't even know each other. And do you know-- they get to know each other. ... Food is a great way of sharing."³⁷

During this storytelling or ice breaker phase, several people spoke about bringing the traditions of Thanksgiving overseas, or of bringing overseas family customs into their own Thanksgiving meals in the United States. Molly, the current Food Pantry Director, spoke about

³⁵ One Table September 28, 2023. Zoom Meeting recording. St. John's Church/OCS, 2023.

³⁶ One Table September 21, 2023. Zoom Meeting recording. St. John's Church/OCS, 2023

³⁷ Ibid.

her family's Ukrainian traditions that are still being carried on even after the death of her parents. And Sharon, a retired Colonel who served in the military for four deployments to the Middle East, spoke about a meal she was invited to in Iraq by the locally hired security guards at the base during her first deployment. Traditional foods were served, and Sharon felt connected to the people who had invited her and called it "a good bonding experience" that occurred in a heavily militarized zone.

Following our stories, we shared a simple grace. This stemmed from our first meal when a guest, who was also a parishioner, asked if we would be saying grace before the meal. This stopped all of us and prompted a discussion about prayer and gratitude which culminated in CJ, our organic farmer, suggesting a prayer from the Waldorf school tradition that his children used to say at the dinner table. I did not want to 'force' faith on our guests, most of whom were not active members of local churches, but CJ's suggestion of grace fit the bill perfectly:

Earth who gives to us this food
Sun who makes it ripe and good
Sun above, Earth below
Our loving thanks to you we show.³⁸

We then feasted, quite literally, on a catered meal from a local upscale restaurant. Yet we were eating in the same space, with the same setup, lighting and dishes as our NOAH guests. The conversations centered around the topics of food, food injustice, and OCS. Some of our table guests had personal experience with food insecurity or injustice (including me), some had volunteer experiences with food programming at St. John's/OCS programs or at others in nearby towns. Predictably, even with guidance and some over-talking on my part, the conversations varied substantially at each dinner.

³⁸ The Magic Onions. "Five Favorite Waldorf Mealtime Blessing Verses," April 27, 2016. <https://www.themagiconions.com/2016/04/5-favorite-waldorf-mealtime-blessing-verses.html>.

Dinner Conversation about Nourishment

At our first dinner Dr. Susie, who has recently been certified as a Functional Nutritionist and is a licensed Physical Therapist, explained a little bit about her work and her goals.

“Functional medicine is basically using lifestyle, food and nutrition...in a very well-rounded approach to healing... and chronic disease prevention.” She has already started volunteering her time for our NOAH meal and she is working to make those meals more nutrient dense. She is also trying to reverse the stigma that healthy eating is not interesting: “A big thing of mine is that eating healthy is not boring!”³⁹

At the same meal, CJ, our Dutch farmer, had a lot to say about nutrient-rich foods and how expensive they are for most people. He explained that even though people on SNAP get Farmers Market coupons, the value is only \$25 for the entire summer season. “It's kind of a joke isn't it?” he asked. CJ also brought up the idea of having Pantry volunteers glean from local fruit and vegetable farms with the permission of farmers, and suggested we attend local farm produce auctions.⁴⁰ While CJ's farm is not large, our area is home to Amish farmers who have very large farms and sell huge amounts of produce at much lower cost at bulk auctions.

I was somewhat frustrated that the first One Table conversation had not adequately addressed ideas about what the word nourishment meant, and so, at our second and third meals, I decided to ask table guests to specifically define the word. A white board with the word “nourish” at the center was rolled out and guests were invited to contribute words that came to mind. This was the list of words that ‘nourish’ generated at the second meal on September 28th (words that were close to identical, or identical, are italicized in both lists):

³⁹ One Table September 21, 2023.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Fill. Emotional Support. Provide. Thrive. Love. Build. *Faith. Enrich. Wholistic. Growth.*
 Community & individual (these words were connected). Dignity. *Caring. Health*
 (see Appendix 9).

At the third meal, we did the same simple exercise and came up with a remarkably similar set of words:

Educate. Connection. *Good Health.* Food. Friendship. Comfort. Support. Attention, *Care.*
 Replenish. *Enrich.* Happiness. *Growth. Spirituality.*
 (see Appendix 10).

Interestingly, the word “food” only appears on one list as descriptor for nourish. The lists reflect a breadth of definition and understanding that incorporate relationships, faith, physical health, and care. This simple exercise encouraged people to think far more broadly about what it means to nourish and be nourished, and it fleshed out the fullness of nourishment as encompassing the body, mind, heart and spirit. Providential and wholistic nourishment helps us expand and understand a theology of Nourishment more broadly.

Survey Responses

The richest source of information resulted from individual surveys which were emailed to participants after the dinners concluded. 100% of guests completed a survey and reflection. The survey included a list of nine words and participants were asked to choose the word or words that best described their experience at the dinner, plus a brief reflection on why those words were chosen. They could also include their own words if none on the list accurately reflected their experience. The nine words provided were:

Excitement	Nourishment	Surprise
Compassion	Spiritual	Awareness
Bread	Injustice	Community

In addition, these words were added to the list by the participants:

Conversation	Connection	Potential/Opportunity
Motivated	Solidarity	Appreciative

Overwhelmingly, the word ‘community’ rose to the top of the survey results, having been chosen nearly twice as much as the second most common answer, which was ‘awareness’.

Fifteen of the twenty-two participants, or 68%, chose ‘community’ as one of their descriptors.

36% of respondents chose ‘awareness’, the next most common response (see Appendix 11).

Concisely, Kathi, who attended our first meal, chose “Community. Because that's what it was.”⁴¹

Angela, who is a member of the OCS Steering Committee, and the full-time director of an active county resource agency, also chose the word “community”. She noted that OCS will always rely on a community of people: “The process of enhancing and reinvigorating the OCS Building relies on a community of people ~ planners, funders, supporters, participants, friends, neighbors, and more,” she explained. But Angela also added the word “connection” to our list for this reason: “Because the lovely result of all that will be good in the OCS Building will be connection ~ with all who touch, visit, dine, shop, learn, discern, weep, laugh, play, etc.”⁴²

One local business owner, Josie M., attended the second dinner and chose three words: “community, nourishment and excitement”. Part of her answer purposely mirrored our OCS mission statement, which she remembered hearing at the dinner: “Nourishment because we were given food, questions, and conversation that fed us in body, mind, and spirit!” she wrote. She continued by elaborating on the excitement that she felt: “Excitement because I always get so pumped up when we talk about what OCS is doing... It is such important work for our

⁴¹ One Table September 21, 2023.

⁴² One Table September 28, 2023.

community. When I got home, I was so full of energy I started folding laundry to my husband's dismay, because he wanted to go to bed!"⁴³

An important aspect of nourishment is that to be well-nourished allows us to have the energy we need not only to survive, but also to thrive, so that we are able to complete our daily activities and have enough energy to enjoy our work and our families. Josie clearly communicated that she was being nourished by the conversation and gathering of One Table.

Also attending One Table on the second night, September 28th, was a world-renowned musician named Solange, who is part of an international music performance collective in the Adirondacks. She was as excited as Josie when she left the dinner that night, choosing both "community" and "awareness" as her descriptors for our gathering. "I felt a true sense of community and connection with each person..." she wrote in her email, and she continued, "We (capital W!) each brought awareness to each other about what is flourishing and what needs more support." Like Josie, Solange went home, perhaps even a bit over-nourished by the conversation as she concluded: "Honestly it was hard to go to sleep when I got home that evening because I couldn't stop brainstorming about all of the great topics and potential things we discussed. I began a list and once I gain some more clarity, I can't wait to share it with you!... I would love to help a dinner event like this happen each month!"⁴⁴

Solange's final statement clearly stated one of my future goals for One Table, which is that we might continue to have these community dinners, perhaps monthly, to create connections and generate new ideas and possibilities for our small city, particularly as it relates to nourishing our neighbors.

⁴³ One Table September 28, 2023.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Rocky, a Revolutionary War reenactor who sports a huge handlebar mustache, attended the third dinner. Rocky is a 30-something History teacher at our local vocational-technical High school. He and his wife Maeve attended the One Table dinner together. This proved fruitful because they were able to debrief and share ideas after the dinner had ended. Rocky and Maeve are also local activists for human rights ranging from gender issues to hunger in our community, and they both currently lead one of our NOAH Meal prep teams, calling themselves “The Cheese Team” because, as Maeve said one Sunday while I visited with her in the kitchen at NOAH, “Who doesn’t love cheese?”⁴⁵

Rocky added a new word to our list: “solidarity”. He believes “we are all in this mission together,” and probably as a result of his continued conversation with Maeve after the dinner ended, both Rocky and Maeve chose the word “injustice” as well.

Maeve gave this explanation about why she chose injustice. “I chose this word because it is something I think about a lot. I feel like it's easier than ever these days to live a life isolated from other people. That contributes to a lack of understanding of other people's lifestyles and experiences. All of this can lead to injustice. Any way that we can work together to solve the social injustice or food injustice in our community, I am behind it.”⁴⁶

Only three people chose the word “nourishment,” and Dr. Susie, the Functional Nutritionist, was one of them. She was intentional in her explanation and seemed to understand the meaning of the word more deeply than others. “The first word that comes to mind would be ‘nourish’ as I felt nourished on more levels than one-- both physically (food) satiated, but also part of something important\ necessary\ bigger than myself and that in itself is nourishing.... I felt a good balance of both anger for the food injustice that exists, while also being optimistic that

⁴⁵ Conversation with Cheese Team Captain, date unknown

⁴⁶ One Table October 5, 2023.

things can be done in our community, and it's definitely motivated me to stay involved and even get more involved.”⁴⁷

I was most moved by the response from a young woman in her 30's who works for a county-wide support organization for children and adults with autism and developmental disabilities. Linda had moved away from this area, and was living abroad, but made the decision to return to her hometown several years ago, even though she did not yet have a job. She wrote “the moment before my savings were gone, St. John's hired me. I had never felt more a part of a community, my hometown community no less, than I did when I worked as parish administrator. Old relationships were revitalized and new relationships were formed.... Seeing and being a small part of the outreach missions made me feel involved as if I was making a difference, however minor. This nourished me.... Being at the dinner brought back those feelings of doing for the community and nourishment for me.”⁴⁸ Linda is even beginning to wonder if there might be a larger role for her to play at OCS when the building opens in spring 2024. This was an important response for me to read as both researcher and employer. I had no idea that Linda had made such deep connections during her time working with St. John's. While I highly valued her work, I thought that we were simply a short stop on a longer journey for Linda, but she clearly sees some flexibility in her participation with OCS. I wouldn't have known that without One Table.

Connection. Community. Awareness. Action. While “action” was not in the e-survey list, it certainly embodies another hoped for outcome of One Table. I remain interested in planning more community meetings following this model to engage in lively conversation, address problems and create greater community connection. In this way, more people could learn about

⁴⁷ One Table September 21, 2023.

⁴⁸ One Table September 28, 2023.

OCS in a way that would nourish our entire community, not simply those in need. The model of a dinner table gathering provides a deep-rooted connection to both eating and relationship that creates an experience of shalom nourishment, or a theology of Nourishment that benefits the entire self: body, mind and spirit.

A Theology of Nourishment

In her book “Heaven's Kitchen: God’s Love We Deliver (GLWD),” Dr. Courtney Bender, Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and Sociology at Columbia University, completed an in-depth ethnographic study of the volunteers engaged in meal prep and delivery at GLWD in New York City during the AIDS crisis of the 1990’s. Bender worked for more than a year as one of the volunteers in the kitchen. Her intent was to determine how “religion is practiced...in non-religious settings,”⁴⁹ particularly in the kitchen of GLWD, a program that began with a religious foundation, but which had gradually taken on the social cause and quietly dropped its religious roots when there were transitions in leadership. One of the volunteers in the kitchen with Bender remarked as she gave time to making meals for people she would never meet or see: “There's something real basic about feeding hungry people.” she said, “For lack of a better word, I think there's something spiritual that happens when you feed somebody.”⁵⁰ Bender’s book further explores how religion, expressed in normal conversation and through action, naturally framed many of the interactions between volunteers, sometimes in ways that clashed, but often in ways that deepened the experience of volunteers and relationships in the kitchen. In GLWD, the act of prepping and feeding provided connection and shared purpose and deepened the awareness that even those who prepared the food were being nourished.

⁴⁹ Courtney Bender. *Heaven’s Kitchen: Living Religion at God’s Love We Deliver. Morality and Society Series.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), Preface, x.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

While the phrase “theology of Nourishment” was coined for this project, scholars such as writer and theologian, Rev. Angel Méndez-Montoya have written extensively about the theology of food. Méndez-Montoya even provided an alternate understanding of original sin by proposing that sin arose from our hungering after something other than God.⁵¹ In other words, Eve’s desire to eat the fruit that looked good to her eyes was a sign that her *whole self* (italics mine) had turned away from God, not just her will or her eyes or her tastebuds. From that point in the Christian story, death and disease in all their forms enter the world, including mental illness, selfishness, pride, food injustice and all the ways our humanity experiences suffering and death. These places of dis-ease⁵² point towards a systemic brokenness in our formative relationship with God, with each other, and with God's creation. We see this kind of brokenness in food scarcity and food injustice, and, as Méndez-Montoya presents it, disordered hunger has a deep effect on our whole selves, and on the human person’s relationship with God. In other words, the whole human person suffers from malnourishment in their relationship with God and food.

Consequently, food and nourishment are also integral parts of our ongoing journey back into continued relationship with God, who is the giver of all good gifts. One could argue, beginning with the manna given by God to the Hebrew people during the Exodus, that simple abundance itself is the hallmark of God, but this is clearly not the hallmark of our modern food system. Wirzba notes, “food is a witness to God because food is God's love made delectable.”⁵³ Yet when ‘food as love’ is not equitably available to all, the whole human person and the community are undernourished. This helps us understand the providence of God through receiving not just adequate calories, but delicious and nutritious food. This is already part of our

⁵¹ Angel F. Méndez Montoya, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 88.

⁵² Purposeful hyphenation, meaning to be ill-at-ease with oneself, with others and with the world.

⁵³ Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 378.

OCS programming as we begin our Food is Medicine program, providing information and experiences so our guests can receive and prepare fresh healthy foods. Dr. Jennifer Ayres, a Candler School of Theology professor and author of the book *“Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology”* wrote: “Food matters... Beyond its immediate nutritional content, food is an avenue for strengthening affective and familial bonds, celebrating life events... and building community. When families, friends, and communities of faith gather around tables to break bread together they are reconnecting with one another.”⁵⁴ Ayres’ statement embodies the idea of shalom nourishment, of whole nutrition for the whole self. The Food is Medicine program being developed at OCS has an expansive goal of nourishing the whole person through diet, education, and relationships.

The idea that food matters has led to the development of a popular area of contemporary theology devoted just to food and consumption, specifically around common tables. In addition to her books, Kendall Vanderslice has created a website and podcast called “Edible Theology” where she specifically presents communal meals as alleviating loneliness and cultural polarization.⁵⁵ Vanderslice’s website invites us to sit around the table together: “Everything...at Edible Theology is designed to help us tell better stories, which ...help us build better communities, one table at a time.”⁵⁶ This stems from her observations about what happens when people gather together to eat from her perspective as a single woman, as well as from her research. She concludes that communal meals are healing and restorative physically, spiritually and societally.⁵⁷ She sees the full trajectory of scripture and of God’s generosity as being

⁵⁴ Jennifer R. Ayres, *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 2.

⁵⁵ Vanderslice, *We Will Feast*, 35.

⁵⁶ “Edible Theology.”

⁵⁷ From her website: “Edible Theology Project, Inc. is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that fosters connection through stories about food, shared around the table. This creates spaces where everyone can be known, valued, and loved—by God and by each other.”

wrapped in the experience of meals “opening in a garden (Genesis), and ending at a feast (Revelation).”⁵⁸ She sees the work of Jesus through the lens of “a ministry of meals: dining with society’s most marginalized” in a way that “honor[s] the interconnectedness of all creation.”⁵⁹

Vanderslice also refers to even the simplest meals she researches and attends as “feasts.”⁶⁰ For Vanderslice, feasts are places where people gather at potlucks, Dinner Church events and other planned communal meals. Communal meals such as the classic church potluck supper model can nourish entire communities as religious historian Daniel Sack noted: “Protestants eat before church, after church, and occasionally during church...If you ask American Protestants why they go to church, they're likely to say they go not for the doctrine or the ethics but for the community-- a community usually built and sustained around food.”⁶¹

Méndez-Montoya also explores the grace of God as it is experienced around the table through experiences of shared meals. Méndez-Montoya spends time unpacking his own theological focus which he calls “Alimentary Theology,” or the theology of human biology and digestion, a theology that is experienced through active eating, particularly around a shared table.⁶² As part of his Alimentary Theology, Méndez-Montoya refers to a “true sharing of food for thought, soul and body. Rooted in loving care for one another and imitating God's own radical gesture of love.”⁶³ Méndez-Montoya envisions God as a “super abundance” and as a trinitarian community that “self-shares of love, truth, goodness and beauty.”⁶⁴ He continues by writing that, in his view, all of “creation is a cosmic banquet.”⁶⁵ While Méndez-Montoya's view is

⁵⁸ Vanderslice, *We Will Feast*, 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁰ Reflected in the title of her book as her thesis: “We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship and the Community of God”

⁶¹ Quoted in Vanderslice, *We Will Feast*, 35.

⁶² Angel Méndez Montoya, *The Theology of Food*, 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶⁴ Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 3.

⁶⁵ Angel Méndez Montoya, *The Theology of Food*, 3.

expansive and seeks to view the span of creation as a banquet of abundant generosity, narrowing this vision to the daily gift of a communal table, when that is possible, allows us to see God's generosity in our everyday consumption.

However, in many church communities, a version of an 'upstairs-downstairs'⁶⁶ mentality exists, creating separation rather than community: "While plenty of churches eat together after their services, very few do so with the intention of drawing in those who are hungry. And plenty of soup kitchens offer meals to folks without homes, but rarely do men and women with secure incomes attend to eat and enjoy the communion."⁶⁷

I recognize our own St. John's/OCS community and our NOAH Sunday meal in this statement, and I consider how OCS, with its new facility and greater visibility, might overcome this. Part of the separation in our NOAH meal is determined by our local Food Bank, which provides us with much of our free and low-cost food resources, but which requires us to separate meal time from worship time by at least one hour. This creates a clear separation of church and state events. From Vanderslice's perspective "Jesus did not separate the practice of feeding the hungry from that of feasting with friends."⁶⁸ Yet few public meal programs specifically engage in crossing economic or social boundaries, and the fact that our NOAH meal is served in a basement rather than above ground, no matter how practical that was when the meal program was started, underscores the clear difference between parishioners in the sanctuary and neighbors eating a meal in the basement, creating a literal 'upstairs-downstairs' experience.

⁶⁶ This is a colloquial reference to a British TV series from the 1970's which featured the lives of a privileged class or the 'upstairs' people, and the servants who worked for them, the 'downstairs' people. This was a literal division as the kitchen and service areas of a grand home were often located in the basement or downstairs area of these estates.

⁶⁷ Vanderslice, *We Will Feast*, 108.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

What Vanderslice and other food theologians seem to be talking about in their various theologies of food and table fellowship can also be incorporated into a broader theology of Nourishment. After months of research, including the staging of the One Table dinner meetings, my attempt to express the fullness of nourishment led me to sometimes refer to a theology of Nourishment more informally as ‘shalom nourishment’. Shalom, derived from the Hebrew word ‘shalam’, more richly means a wholeness of peace and reconciliation for the entire person, physically, spiritually, and practically.⁶⁹ Shalom refers to “an overall sense of fulness and completeness in mind, body and estate.”⁷⁰ This idea of completeness and wholeness applies aptly to a theology of Nourishment. The full meaning of nourishment often gets clipped to represent only physical sustenance in terms of nutrients or calories rather than well-being and relationship. Even the conversational way One Table guests were invited to define the word nourish included words like comfort, happiness and love and spoke to the breadth of their understanding. Thus, a theology of Nourishment or ‘Shalom Nourishment’ refers to a wholeness of sustenance that feeds the body, the mind, and the spirit or soul.

Nourishment also includes context, which means that where the table is placed also matters, and that those who sit around the table can contribute to the fullness of what it means to be nourished in a larger sense. Dr. Ayres posits that these tables where we share meals evoke the Christian table of sharing and fellowship, but they also nourish us by allowing us to “make present...an alternative future in which God restores relationships among persons, the communities and the earth.”⁷¹ NOAH guests, who are not coming to a meal expressly for Christian companionship, are also included in this future, as are our One Table guests.

⁶⁹ Hershey, “The True Meaning of Shalom.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ayres, *Good Food*, 62.

Wirzba, who asked the question about why God's creatures must eat, believes that food is ultimately about relationships. Even in the original garden, the person acting in defiance of God did not act alone but had a partner. In fact, the only thing in the garden that God said was not good was the fact that the man was alone. From hungering after things that are not-God, to the silver-tongued serpent that tempts the couple to turn from God, a pivotal event which introduces a new and fractured way of seeing and knowing each other, the Garden continues to provide new paradigms for understanding our relationship with God and with each other, and it is the original table around which we all still metaphorically gather, an underpinning of the Eucharistic table in the Christian church.

“In its ultimate, theological bearing, eating is not reducible to the consumption of calories,” writes Wirzba, “Instead, it is about extending hospitality and making room for others to find life by sharing in our own...Eating, in other words is an invitation to enter into communion and be reconciled with each other.”⁷²

The tables around which we gather become central places not only of nutritional sustenance, but also of genuine transformation. “When we receive with gratitude food from the earth, prepare it with love and intentionality, and share it with friends and strangers at the table, we open ourselves to God's transformative presence in the world.”⁷³ Ayres wrote. While many theological models about food and eating are based on a specifically Christian understanding of Eucharist, the table on its own has a powerful role to play in the possibility of generating community. This is particularly true in the intimacy of a smaller gathering at one table, which was the model for One Table meals and fellowship. To gloss this, Ayres writes that “at the center of the Christian tradition sits a table...there we receive sustenance, build relationships and [are

⁷² Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 51.

⁷³ Ayres, *Good Food*, 54.

challenged] to seek flourishing in the world." ⁷⁴ From that central table, ripples of nourishment radiate, as the ripples from the tables where Jesus gathered with his disciples to eat continue to be felt thousands of years later as Christians continue to remember and re-enact.

The inspiration of the expansive Christian table started the work of our NOAH Meal program and Food Pantry over 30 years ago, but tables clearly sit at the center of many non-Christian traditions as well, and the table remains a place where connections are made, and fellowship is cultivated. Interestingly even fast-food restaurants still include common table space so that patrons can sit together to eat. Perhaps even these places help us understand the broader picture of nourishment rather than simply consumption.

The expansive Christian table also inspired Fr. Bill to begin the food justice programming that now continues at OCS. Our NOAH meal particularly embodies the Christian notion of the table as providing for the whole person, where friends sit at the same tables week after week, check in with each other, talk politics, family and always share the Joke of the Week. While takeouts are available, the core group of people that gather together every Sunday in the church basement to sit and eat together remains lively and connected. The Covid-19 pandemic gave us the clearest picture of the difference between this communal meal and the takeout-only meals that we provided during the pandemic. On an average pandemic Sunday, we served about 30 takeout meals a week compared to our current total of approximately 150 meals a week. The difference is remarkable. People come to socialize, to eat, to sit and to connect with each other. Recently one of our weekly NOAH guests gave a check to OCS so some of his disabled friends would be able to attend when the renovated building opens. (see Appendix 12).

⁷⁴ Ayres, *Good Food*, 55.

Kendall Vanderslice concisely sums this up: “God created us with two basic needs: to draw nutrition and energy from food, and to find companionship and sharing life with others. At the table, not only are these needs met, they can be met with great delight and joy as we commune with one another, with God and with God's creation.”⁷⁵

One Table was designed specifically to create a space of physical, intellectual, and spiritual nourishment,⁷⁶ grounded in the scriptures referring to Jesus at the common table with his disciples and followers. Many of these biblical guests, much like our One Table guests, and NOAH guests, were strangers to Jesus and to one another, but Jesus utilized common table fellowship so people could learn who He was and enter into relationship with him. This table-based model of theology through nourishment continues to inform Christian worship and table fellowship today.

One Table meals began simply with bread being passed, grace being spoken and food being shared, but the basic and familiar acts of gathering and eating, coupled with the significance of the place--the church basement where free meals are served on a weekly basis—gave each person who attended an opportunity to become aware of the work being done to nourish our neighbors.

By simply walking across the street and into the new dining room space to another common table, where desserts and coffee were ready, and where strings of lights made the unfinished dining room seem more like a party space than a construction zone, our One Table guests had shifted from one central table to another. Both tables, basement and upstairs dining room, provided nourishment physically, emotionally and spiritually but even our One Table guests could feel the difference in the atmosphere when they were upstairs in the new space. The

⁷⁵ Vanderslice, *We Will Feast*, 167–68.

⁷⁶ Mirroring our OCS Mission statement to nourish in body, mind, and spirit.

basement table spoke of history and commitment. Our new space, even while unfinished, speaks of hope as it points to an accessible and delicious future where all our guests will have the most beautiful dining room in our small city.

“It is helpful,” Wirzba writes, “to characterize eating as a spiritual exercise. The purpose of people who gather around a table to eat is not simply to shovel nutrients into their bodies. Eating together should be an occasion in which people learn to become more attentive and present to the world and each other.”⁷⁷ One Table provided the opportunity for our community members and leaders to do exactly that.

Innovation Outcomes

The goal of One Table was to connect community members to each other and to our OCS project while feasting around a table. By practical standards, that goal was well met. The majority of One Table participants chose the words “community” and “awareness” as their overarching themes from the One Table dinners. In addition, two of the attendees have now volunteered for the Strategic Planning Committee for OCS.

Josie, who owns a local vintage clothing shop downtown, is now responsible for helping us plan events for OCS including our Twilight Farmers Market and the anticipated soft opening for the building in the late spring of 2024.

Dr. Susie, our Functional Nutritionist, has connected with our growing Food Is Medicine program. By helping us develop table tents with nutritional information, voluntary surveys and measurement tools for our Pantry and NOAH guests, Dr. Susie hopes to help our neighbors create dietary goals that may help alleviate medical conditions such as diabetes, obesity, and high

⁷⁷ Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 68–69.

blood pressure. These surveys will also provide us with necessary data for grant writing and goal setting as we move forward (see Appendix 13 for Table Tent graphic).

Since January, two additional meals, based directly on the One Table model, have already taken place. A first meal was held for our NOAH team captains (14 attended) and a second meal was planned for our Food Pantry volunteers (28 attended). While brunch on Saturday morning proved to be a more compatible time, the format was the same: gather for a meal, learn more about OCS, engage in important conversations about these programs by guiding our volunteers through a series of questions, and tour the new facility across the street.

Both meetings were exceptionally well received since neither program had ever gathered volunteers together for a communal meeting. For the Pantry meeting, a local strategic planning coordinator was hired and her conversation with the Pantry volunteers was described by one observer as “watching a steam valve explode” because the conversation and observations were so lively. The shared comments, ideas and questions have proved to be essential as we get closer to moving the Pantry and our church offices into the renovated building as Phase One is completed in late spring this year. We are also planning “Lunch and Learn” events for local business leaders.

We also received several donations for our ongoing project from those who attended these meetings, helping us get closer to our goals of raising “\$1000 from 1000 people” to acquire the final million dollars needed for completion (see Appendix 14).

Setting the Table

While practical goals were clearly met at One Table meals, was a theological framework of Nourishment established? In a recent blog post by a group of scholars from the Bible Project entitled “What Does it Mean to Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness?” based on Jesus’ Sermon

on the Mount, the authors acknowledge basic human needs for food, oxygen, water and shelter. However, they also see that Jesus points to a parallel need to be in right relationship with God and others. They quote from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus states “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied,” (Matthew 5:6). From this, the writers conclude that “Jesus suggests that loving others is a basic human need like eating food or drinking water.”⁷⁸ The writers note the brokenness in our world today and see that our desires for God's righteousness are sometimes supplanted by fear or by “an appetite for self- protection” and a desire to hoard resources. These darker appetites represent a “deadly kind of hungering and thirsting.” This underscores the idea from Dr. Mendez-Montoya that sin is disordered hunger for something other than relationship with God.

While all participants at One Table received an ample measure of literal daily bread, One Table also sought to reverse ‘deadly hungering’ and to encourage a more connected community that would engage in conversation about how best to help others acquire their own daily bread through our OCS Food Pantry and NOAH programs. While One Table participants came from a variety of spiritual backgrounds, or from none at all, a theology of Nourishment suggests that the act of gathering at a common table to share “One conversation. One meal. One community.” fed people on a deeper level. It encouraged them to sharpen their vision to see hunger and understand their role in conquering food insecurity and injustice even as we met, socialized and connected with one another, and as we shared God’s daily bread of food and justice.

Jesus, as he preached his sermon from the mountainside, “sets a table and invites those listening to experience a nourishing way of life that satisfies our longing for good relationships

⁷⁸ Bible Project. “What Does It Mean to Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness?” Accessed February 15, 2024. https://bibleproject.com/articles/what-does-it-mean-hunger-and-thirst-righteousness/?utm_campaign=HungerandThirstArticle%202024&utm_content=HungerandThirstArticle%2002152024&utm_medium=email&utm_term=cta%20button

with all people. This is the kind of relating that defines Jesus' Kingdom way of life."⁷⁹ The blog post concludes that if we become hungry for right relationship with others, just as we hunger for food, we will eventually be fully satisfied. "All of restored humanity will live in a flourishing world where no human being does harm or relates poorly to another."⁸⁰ We will live in a world where the OCS mission to nourish our community in body, mind and spirit will be more fully realized, and where there will be no lack of God's providential daily bread. A broad theology of Nourishment will be made available to all those who come through our doors.

⁷⁹ Bible Project, "What Does It Mean to Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness?"

⁸⁰ Ibid.

One Church Street, 1 Church Street, Johnstown, New York



One Church Street Statistical infographic

THANK YOU for your support of One Church Street.
Your contributions have helped us nourish our community

53,586

MEALS

Meals Provided by Food Pantry

In 2023, the Food Pantry saw an almost 10,000-meal increase from 2022.

65

NEW FAMILIES

Feeding more Families

The Food Pantry provided 3 days worth of meals per person per family to 65 new families bringing the total to 2,276 households being served in 2023.

25%

ARE CHILDREN

1 in 4 Children

Children make up 25% - 1 in 4 - of our Pantry beneficiaries.

Children:	1660
Adults:	3,354
Seniors (over 60):	940
Total People:	5,954

5100

MEALS SERVED

NOAH Meals Served

The NOAH program experienced a 10% increase in the number of meals served from 2022 with 5100 meals.

1 in 4

FOOD INSECURE

1 in 4 Families

The rate of Food Insecurity in Fulton County went from 1 in 8 families to 1 in 4 in 2023.

We are amazed at what you have helped us achieve so far. But we are not done yet - and the increased need will continue into the new year. You can help us to meet the needs of our neighbors in 2024 by making a donation today.



One Church Street Jar Graphic



**This is what 1 in 4 of
your neighbors
is eating
today.**



Take out hunger
in Fulton County.



onechurchstreet.org



Note that the statistic above is correct. The jars were originally made in 2022 (bottom image).

One Church Street “Space Mission” ads



We have lift off!
1,000 people
1,000 dollars

www.OneChurchStreet.org

*Help nourish
our neighbors*



One Church Street is so grateful this Thanksgiving for the 9 people who have donated \$38,605 to our mission.

Please consider sharing your bounty with others.

www.OneChurchStreet.org



Truly Grateful for you.



2023 Food Pantry Statistics

An update on 2023 pantry guests:

Re the numbers you asked for a couple weeks ago, my estimates were close, but here are the actual numbers.

Children: 1,669

Adults: 3,335

Seniors: 928

TOTAL: 5,952

Households Represented: 2,272

Pounds of food and cost at Regional Food Bank 2022 and 2023

Orders Picked Up: 01/01/2022 To: 12/31/2022							
All Warehouses							
Agency: Agency Ref is 1175F							
Agency Ref	Agency Name	Fee Pounds	No Fee Pounds	Total Weight	Service Fee	Purchase Cost	Total Charge
1175F	Johnstown Interfaith Churches Council FP	49,138	43,236	92,374	\$5,456.96	\$16,753.94	\$22,210.90

Orders Picked Up: 01/01/2023 To: 12/31/2023							
All Warehouses							
Agency: Agency Ref is 1175F							
Agency Ref	Agency Name	Fee Pounds	No Fee Pounds	Total Weight	Service Fee	Purchase Cost	Total Charge
1175F	Johnstown Interfaith Churches Council FP	45,808	45,594	91,402	\$5,593.80	\$11,120.68	\$16,714.48

**Food Pantry Report
St. John's Vestry
January 2024**

Following are the numbers served for the month of January.

Households: 242	New Households: 9	Total Guests: 644
Adults: 366	Children: 188	Seniors: 90

January was a busy month with all attendance records broken.

Other than being busy, January was pretty unremarkable. Illnesses and injuries took their toll on our volunteers, but we flexed and got the job done with God's grace. Morale among volunteers remains high and everyone enjoys working together as a unit.

Right now, our need is for another driver who is able to go to the Food Bank in Latham one Tuesday a month to pick up our order. I am anxiously awaiting our move to OCS, which, hopefully, will take place in May. I have had people who are willing to volunteer, but there's no place to put them, our space being so small. The new location will give us one small office which I plan to use to invite employees from departments such as Office for the Aging, Legal Aid and Social Services to meet with our guests one on one. We would also like to expand our nutritional education. Once we are relocated, I will be calling on this group to see who your contacts might be and what suggestions you may have.

I have recertified for myself and for the Johnstown Council of Churches Food Pantry with the Food Bank for Food Safety. This recertification is good for 5 years. I will continue to attend webinars as they are offered and pertinent to our program.

Ann Rhodes has been such a blessing in applying for and obtaining grants to help with the running of our program, and I am grateful for her assistance. She and Roger make a monthly trip to the Freihofer's outlet and a weekly trip to Amen Kitchen in Amsterdam. With our ever-burgeoning numbers, this assistance is essential.

Respectfully submitted
Mary L. Gilmour

You are invited....



One Conversation. One Meal. One Community.

Ten people. Three Thursdays.

You are invited to join One Table--part of Rev. Laurie Garramone's
Doctorate in Ministry project that will explore the intersection of
community, church and One Church Street.

Come. share the feast!

One Table is, first of all, a meal.

You will select ONE dinner date and sign up
by copying this link:

[https://www.signupgenius.com/go/8050545A4
AC29A5F85-onetable](https://www.signupgenius.com/go/8050545A4AC29A5F85-onetable)

or scan the QR Code below.

Each week ten of us will share a meal and
conversation about our
One Church Street programs including
NOAH and the Food Pantry,
how we are fighting food insecurity, what it
means to feed our neighbors in body, mind
and spirit, and where you might fit in,
Most of all--we will welcome your questions,
ideas and enthusiasm!

Come to the feast!

Questions? Contact Laurie @
RevLMGR@gmail.com or

(518) 610-1111



Choose ONE date:

Thursday, Sept. 21

Thursday Sept. 28

Thursday, October 5

(We do have a 2-slot waiting list if the date
you choose is already full.)

Dinner is from

6 - 8 pm

in our NOAH Dining Room

at 1 N. Market Street

Johnstown, NY

(Use park side entrance)

Mother Laurie

will contact you the week of
the meal.

Please note: We are serving a chicken dish prepared
by Union Hall, and while we are working hard to
ensure it is gluten-free, we cannot guarantee this.
If you have food allergies, please consider this
before signing up.

E-Mail Survey to One Table Participants

Thanks so much for coming to One Table tonight! I appreciate that you were flexible and that you took a chance in coming to an event when you didn't really know what to expect, or who you were going to meet. Hearing your stories, and sharing our OCS story with you was a privilege.

I do have a short survey about your experience that will help me track the outcome of the dinner for each of you.

This is the question:

Which words from this list of words best describe your experience at the dinner this evening? (If you don't find a word that describes the dinner for you, you can skip the question or write your own word or words.)

Excitement
Compassion
Bread
Nourishment
Spiritual
Injustice
Surprise
Awareness
Community

Can you describe briefly why you chose your words?

To answer, simply hit "Reply" and type in the words you chose (or the words you prefer!!) and type a brief description about why those words describe your experience.

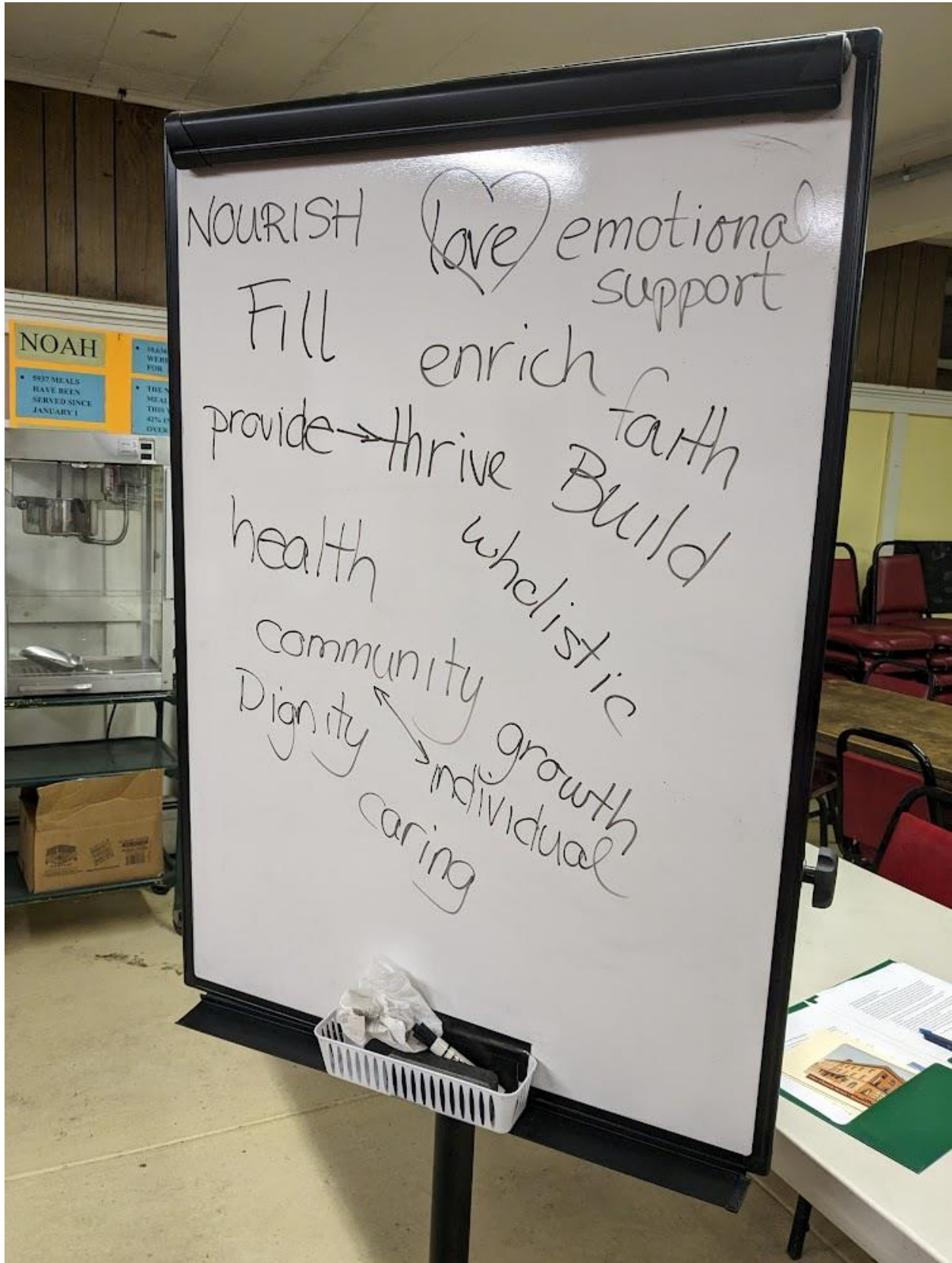
Thank you for doing this. Your answers are important AND interesting to me and will be a help to me as I complete my project.

With gratitude,
Laurie

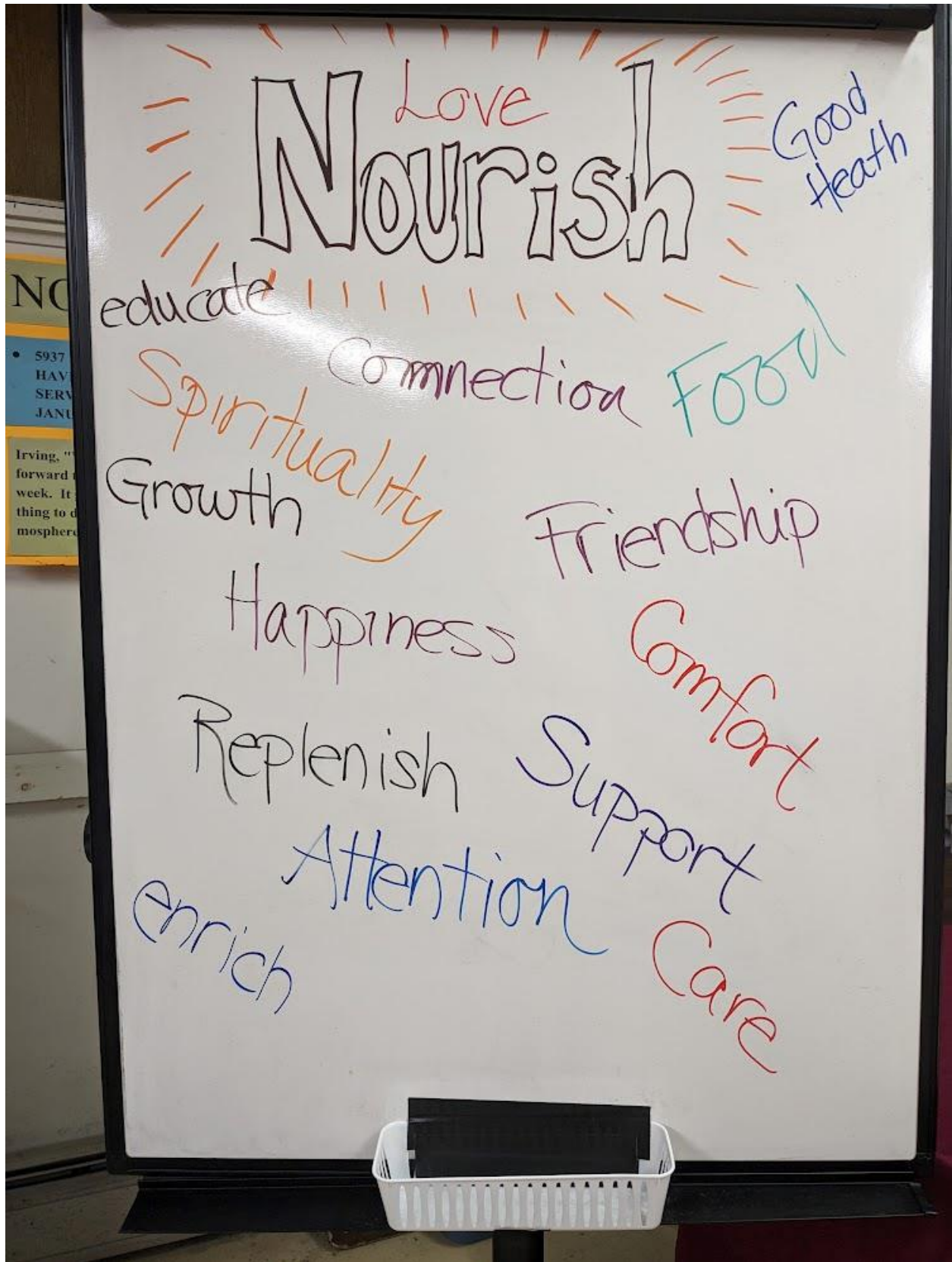
One Table Demographic Data

Words	Kathi L.	CJ C.	Susie B.	Matt L.	Delia B.	Thaddeus B.	Molly G.	Angela F.	Josie M.	Linda H.	Solange P.	Shalla S.	Anni P.	Maeve K.	Reuben R.	Rocky S.	Vittorio M.	Esther M.	Paige C.	Sharron H.	Hollister	Naomi A.	Totals	
Excitement						1					1	1											1	5
Compassion					1																		1	1
Bread													1							1				2
Nourishment			1						1	1														3
Spiritual																								0
Injustice			1											1		1								3
Surprise							1																	2
Awareness		1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Community	1			1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	15
Appreciative																					1			1
Connection								1			1										1			3
Conversation			1	1			1		1															4
Motivated			1																					1
Potential/Opportunity											1	1	1											3
Solidarity																1								1
Age	60	60	20	60	60	60	60	60	40	30	30	40	50	30	70	30	30	30	70	40	60	60	50	
Gender	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	F	F	F	F	M	F	F	M	M	M	M	F	F	F	M	F	

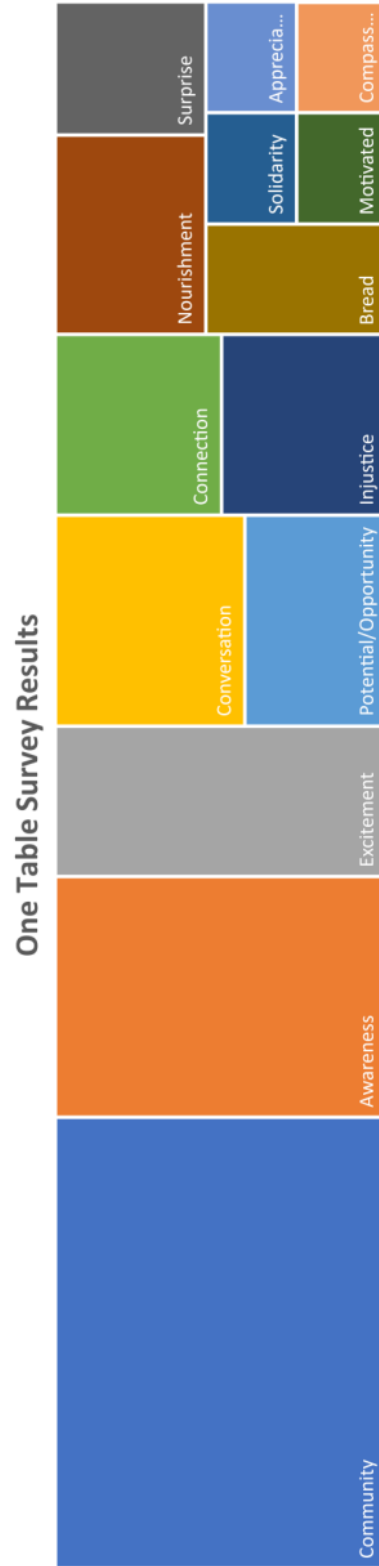
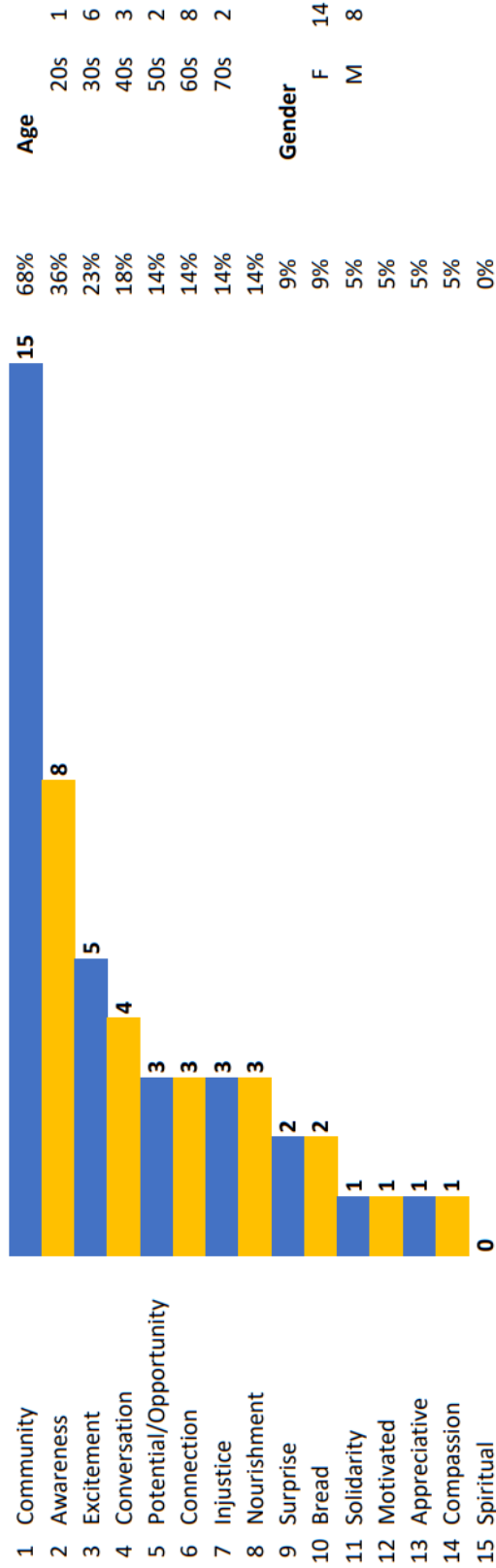
“Nourish” whiteboard exercise from One Table, Thursday, September 28, 2023



“Nourish” whiteboard exercise from One Table, Thursday, October 5, 2023



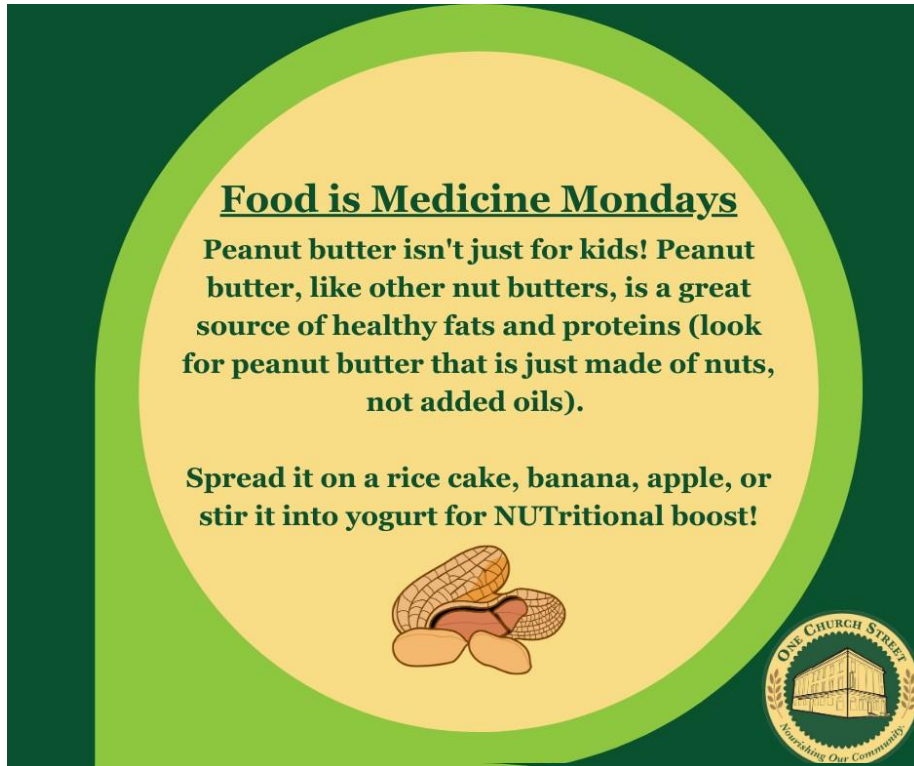
One Table Survey Graphs



Dennis F. writing a check for OCS when attending a NOAH meal



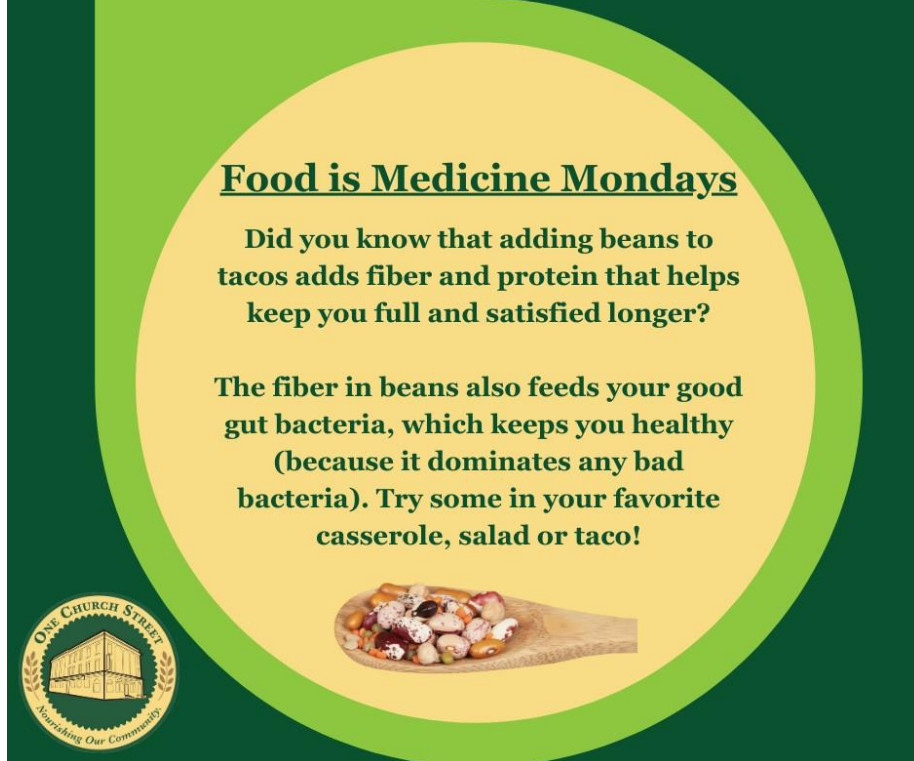

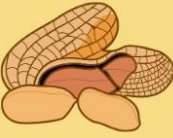
Table Tent cards—Food Is Medicine



Food is Medicine Mondays

Peanut butter isn't just for kids! Peanut butter, like other nut butters, is a great source of healthy fats and proteins (look for peanut butter that is just made of nuts, not added oils).



Spread it on a rice cake, banana, apple, or stir it into yogurt for NUTritional boost!



Food is Medicine Mondays

Did you know that adding beans to tacos adds fiber and protein that helps keep you full and satisfied longer?

The fiber in beans also feeds your good gut bacteria, which keeps you healthy (because it dominates any bad bacteria). Try some in your favorite casserole, salad or taco!



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