

Ministry Today: A Congregation-Wide Worldwide Feast

What unique ministry practice happens in your congregation? What might you share with the Presbytery, an expression of our wider connection to each other? Send your Ministry Today ideas and stories to Jeff Japinga, executive presbyter, at ep@ptcaweb.org.

The first Sunday in October is known across the Presbyterian Church (USA) as Worldwide Communion Sunday, an opportunity for congregations large and small, east and west, north and south, to emphasize and celebrate the unity of the church around the common practice of communion.

While now recognized worldwide, the genesis of Worldwide Communion Sunday is attributed to a pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Dr. Hugh Thomson Kerr. Here's how Presbyterian Outlook described its 1930s founding in an October, 2002, article:

Dr. Kerr first conceived the notion of World Communion Sunday during his year as moderator of the General Assembly (1930). It was their attempt to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity—in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another.

How Worldwide Communion Sunday is celebrated in local congregations, however, can be as diverse as the worldwide church. At First Presbyterian Church in Maple Plain, there is a long-standing tradition on this specific Sunday to hold a communion feast: the sharing of a meal, as part of their morning worship, much like the early church shared a full meal as part of their communion feast.

At First Presbyterian, that means moving the worship service out of the sanctuary and into the fellowship hall, where tables have been set and decorated. There, a usual Sunday liturgy features hymns sung, confession spoken, pardon granted, the Word read and spoken, the sacrament of communion celebrated. An elder at each table helps distribute the communion elements. And then, with this nod to the early church, lunch is served: fruit and meat and nuts and drink, shared around table with conversation and laughter.

“Since sometime in the 1970s this congregation has celebrated World Communion Sunday in their place of fellowship, rather than the sanctuary,” reflects the Rev. Meg Newswanger, for 18 years pastor of First Presbyterian. “It is a reminder that every time God’s people gather around a table it is a holy communion with one another and with Our Lord. We are more aware of each other, and by extension of all Christians around tables all around the world. It is an expression of the Body of Christ in worship.”

It's a tight squeeze in a nearly filled-to-overflowing fellowship hall. In this different space for worship, however, it was still most definitely church: a gathering of the believers who shared

with each other a “joyful feast of the people of God,” in the words of the communion liturgy. And during which it could give thanks for its many blessings.

EDITOR’S NOTE: This year, the celebration of Worldwide Communion Sunday coincided with the final Sunday in the 18-year ministry of the Rev. Meg Newswanger at First Presbyterian Church, Maple Plain. The Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area gives thanks for the long, faithful, impactful ministry that Meg had at First Presbyterian.