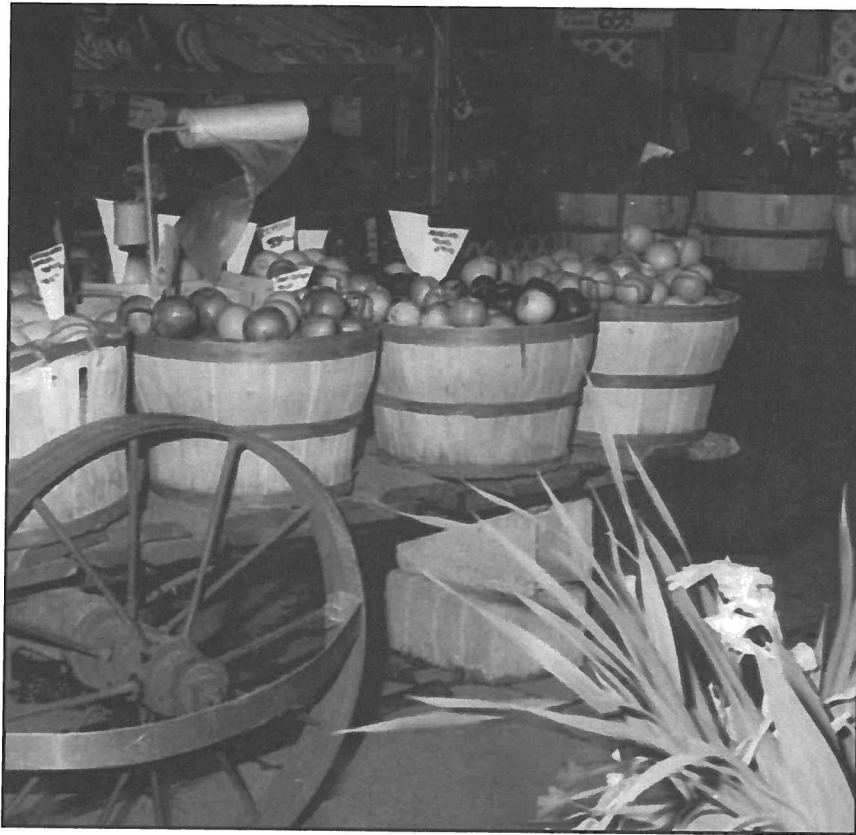


S O P H I A

W I S D O M

*Say to Wisdom, "You are my sister."
Proverbs 7:4a*



Come and Eat

FALL 1995 VOLUME 5 NUMBER 3

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SOPHIA: A Greek feminine noun associated with the biblical wisdom tradition, translated "wisdom" and personified in the book of Proverbs; equivalent in the New Testament to *logos*, the creative word that was with God in the beginning, creating and giving life to the world.

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Terry Vatr, our photographer for both front and back cover of this issue, teaches high school English and does freelance photography and writing. She is a member of Church of the Way.

Food As Metaphor

by Sarah Klassen

Whenever we share a meal, whether in a home or in a restaurant, in the workplace cafeteria or on an air-flight, at a picnic or at the Lord's table, our eating together can be more than just a pit stop to make sure we have sufficient carbohydrates, fat and protein for the day. The sharing can refuel us in a deeper sense, lifting our spirits and energizing us. It can unite us and lead to a better knowing of each other. Anticipating, eating and preparing a meal can all offer pleasure (my favourite cookbook is titled *The Joy of Cooking*).

The joy of cooking, and of eating, has been captured by cinematographers and film directors who have recognized the potential for metaphor in food and food preparation. In *Six Degrees of Separation*, Will Smith cooks up a tasty meal of pasta for his sophisticated hosts whom he is planning to con. In *Man, Woman, Eat, Drink*, a Taiwanese chef prepares irresistible meals to lure his daughters home for Sunday meals that inevitably "simmer with tension," according to one reviewer, who wonders if "gratuitous food is getting to be the art-theatre's answer to sex and violence" (*Winnipeg Free Press*, Oct. 7, 1994).

Two outstanding art films that exploit food as metaphor are *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Babette's Feast*. The food that is prepared and eaten, on camera, is delectable, exotic, mouth-watering, skilfully prepared and aesthetically presented. In each case, the woman preparing the food is an artist empowered by her art. But the effect of the power is different in each case.



Tia (*Like Water*) cooks festive meals that are both delight and temptation. The passion she pours into the task affects those who eat. When she cries or nicks her finger in the preparation, the dis/ease and pain are intensely felt by the guests. Tia is the victim of a tradition that requires the youngest daughter to renounce love in order to care for her demanding mother. Does her strange power embrace a certain, perhaps subconscious, vindictiveness? Cooking – and she loves to cook – is the one way she can express herself and cause those around her to take note. And be miserable.

Babette (*Babette's Feast*) comes as an outsider, a servant, poor, into a community marked by rigidity and joylessness. When she receives a sudden windfall, she decides to spend it all on a feast for the villagers. The passion she pours into the preparation is love, and the result surprises the dour guests into joy. The abundant and splendid feast has the power to loosen their tongues and open their hearts so that conversation and laughter are possible and community can begin. Like the woman who offered her two coins in the temple, or like Mary Magdalene who broke the alabaster jar and poured ointment extravagantly over Jesus' feet, Babette gives everything she has.

Besides being a gift of love, the meal is a work of art and Babette, whose artistry has long lain dormant, gains satisfaction from having created something beautiful and having done her best.

Women, whether they love or hate cooking, wield power when they wield the mixing spoon. And in the process, at least sometimes, they make art, though not always out of love, as Babette did. Sometimes meals are made to show off or to generate indebtedness or, grudgingly or willingly, out of duty. There are choices to be made, both in preparing food and eating it.

One of God's earliest instructions to the creatures he had just formed concerned eating: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Genesis 2:16b, 17 NRSV). From the start, eating has been linked with making choices that, besides affecting our physical well-being, have moral, social and spiritual implications.

This issue of *Sophia* explores some of those implications. We invite you to turn the pages and enjoy the feast; we enjoyed preparing it for you.

Sarah Klassen, *Sophia's* editor, is spending this school year in Klaipeda, Lithuania, teaching English at Lithuania Christian College. We shall miss her, and we hope to hear from time to time what life is like in Lithuania.

*When he was at the table
with them, he took bread,
blessed and broke it
and gave it to them.
Then their eyes were opened
and they recognized him.*
Luke 24:30,31a (NRSV)

Few of us need to be told that a meal can be an important sign of hospitality and friendship. When your daughter announces that she would like to invite the young man she has been dating to your home for dinner, you sense correctly that their relationship has moved to a more intimate and serious level. Inviting this young man to the family dining table invites this stranger into your family's inner sanctuary. It indicates an acceptance of him and an openness to build a growing relationship.

Something special happens as we gather around a table to share food with one another. As the food is eaten, our conversation deepens and we begin to reveal our true selves. And so we linger around the table with the remnants of our dinner before us, reluctant to leave the intimacy of that circle. If you are trying to convince yourself that a certain person is not a full, valuable human being, brother or sister, be careful not to invite that person to dinner. Oscar Wilde is known to have said, "After a good dinner, one could forgive anybody, even one's relatives." The dinner table is such an intimate, holy, transforming, mysterious place; you've got to be careful with whom you eat around it.

Meals with Jesus

by Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen

Jesus seemed to be aware of the importance of eating together. In the gospels, he is often described as either going to dinner, coming from dinner, eating dinner or telling stories about dinners. The aroma of food wafts through the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. In fact, there are scholars who speculate that Jesus' choice of dinner guests at these meals was the primary source of the hostility his ministry generated!

The simple act of sharing a meal became a vehicle of cultural protest against petty boundaries, distinctions and judgements. Here was one who was more caring than careful. Harlot and tax collector, male and female, Gentile and Jew—he ate with them all, enabling them to see themselves as people loved and accepted by God. His teaching and behaviour around the table contradicted those who labelled these folk unacceptable, and presented a new vision of what the people of God ought to be: a welcoming, inclusive community reflecting the compassion of God.

Today, every time we gather together as a church to celebrate the Lord's supper, we joyfully proclaim that, wonder of wonders, Jesus still chooses the same kind of sinful, disreputable dinner companions that once got him in so much trouble. I suspect we often feel like the discouraged, disoriented, none-too-perfect disciples that we meet near the end of the

gospels, journeying away from the Jerusalem cross to Emmaeus. We identify with their discouragement and their hopelessness because we also feel helpless in the face of evil. We disciples are so few. So unfaithful. What can anybody do? In the midst of injustice, pain, suffering and death, feeling despondent, defeated, disoriented, it's easy to forget *why* we gather.



STREILEIN

Rigid boundaries marked the world in which Jesus lived. Barriers between male and female, Gentile and Jew, sinner and righteous, were central to the Jewish understanding of themselves as the people of God set apart from everything that would defile their holiness. As Jesus joined the prostitutes, tax collectors and other "sinners" at the table, he shattered the assumptions of the religious and social world of his day which pronounced these people unacceptable and labelled them as outcasts.

We move from preoccupation with our own defeats to contemplation of Christ's victory; from lamentation of our misdeeds to celebration of God's deeds in Jesus Christ. As Jesus breaks the bread, we recognize him, and see ourselves as people loved and accepted by God. We no longer mourn God's absence but celebrate Christ's presence in this resurrection meal. In eating with Jesus, we, like the disciples at Emmaus, like the tax collector Zacchaeus, like the harlot who anointed Jesus' feet, are freed to celebrate what it means to have journeyed from marginalization to acceptance, from incomprehension to sight, from sorrow to joyful commitment.

Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen is *pastor of the River East MB Church in Winnipeg. She and her husband, Richard, have one son.*

Illustrator Dorothy Streilein is a Grade 12 student at the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute and attends Elmwood MB Church. Following graduation she hopes to study graphic art at Red River Community College.

by Julia Kasdorf

Onion, fruit of grace,
you swell in the garden
hidden as the heart of God,
but you are not about religion.
Onion, frying into all those Os,
you are a perfect poet,
and you are not about that.
Onion, I love you,
you sleek, auburn beauty,
you break my heart though
I know you don't mean
to cause me to cry.
Peeling your paper skin,
I cry. Chopping you,
I cry. Slicing off
your wiry roots
I cry like a penitent
at communion, onion.
Tasting grace, layer by layer,
I eat your sweet heart
that burns like the Savior's.
The sun-crust you pull on
while you're still underground,
I've peeled it.
Onion, I'm eating
God's tears.

(Previously published in *West Branch*.)

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” HEBREWS 13:2 NRSV



VATRT: PHOTOWORKS

Our entertaining patterns have changed. When we were a rural people, the time to visit was Sunday afternoon; formal invitations were unnecessary, the menu simple: coffee, buns and jam, perhaps a fruit square.

As we became more urban, Sunday noon, right after church, became the time to have guests. A full course meal was prepared and invitations given. The person (woman, more likely than not) preparing the food might find herself distracted during a long morning sermon, thinking, “Did I set the oven too high? too low? did I set it at all?”

Today some churches, in an effort to nudge large congregations to get to know one another, and to make contact with newcomers, schedule a “hospitality Sunday,” sometimes calling it “soup and sandwich Sunday” to make it sound simple and not too much work.

We asked a number of women about their Sunday noon meals, promising not to divulge names. Do they eat at home or eat out? Both.

Reasons for eating at home varied. Restaurants are simply too expensive for some individual or family budgets. For others there are ethical considerations: restaurant staff who serve you at noon cannot go to church. Some still value the social opportunity of inviting guests into the home and sometimes adult children come home for a free meal. One responder said that a quick home meal left the afternoon free for activities like cross-country skiing or biking.

Reasons for eating out were equally varied. Busy schedules and demanding careers leave no time or energy for cooking. Not everyone enjoys cooking. Going out provides opportunity for spur-of-the-moment getting together with friends. Those who do like to cook for company often prefer to do this any day but Sunday.

The Hebrews passage about entertaining angels doesn’t say anything about where such entertaining should take place, or in what form. Is it possible that angels enter restaurants as gladly as dining rooms? Do they look for a full-course meal, or might they settle for coffee or tea? Are they looking for something other or more than food?

It’s the word “strangers” that’s the challenge. How “strange” are these hospitality-recipients that turn out to be angels? If I invite nice people of my own age, well-mannered family types with good command of English, and with education, cultural tastes and income similar to mine, can I expect to hear the whirr of wings? Or do angels inhabit disgruntled complainers, the obviously awkward, the ones with different-coloured skin and all sorts of unfamiliar orientations, the poor, the old and lonely, the unemployed or unemployable?

The passage does not specify the motives that should prompt the hospitality. But it makes quite clear that hospitality should take place. And it does suggest that we won’t know, when we pick up the phone or tap someone on the shoulder at church or in some way initiate a gesture of hospitality, whether we’ll find ourselves in the company of angels.

It's breakfast and everyone breezes through the kitchen at a different time. A huge bowl of granola, apricot jam on toast, slices of cheese—we each have our own menu preference.

At lunch we are scattered. One hunches over a textbook while absent-mindedly eating a sandwich. Another nibbles on grapes during a lively conversation with companions.

For supper all six of us try to be together. The evening meal is an anchor point for the family. This is protected time.

The dinner bell is our signal. As I glance over the table to be sure the salt and pepper haven't been forgotten, I hear footsteps on the stairs. Eager people gather to heap their plates and share their lives.

The mealtime ritual begins with scripture reading and prayer. Possibly even a song. Some days we take time to share concerns and pray for each other; other days we have one eye on the clock because someone has to leave soon.

As we pass the food, everyone plunges into conversation. There is never enough time to exchange information and make plans. Affirmation and encouragement are given as stories unfold. Sometimes we express disappointment and disagreement; at other times laughter fills the room.

When six busy people live together in one house, every obstacle imaginable militates against having a daily meal together. When schedules are topsy-turvy, we choose a meal other than dinner to be our family time. I recollect an early morning birthday celebration with a warm breakfast cake, fresh from the oven. We placed one large candle right in the middle of it. Finding creative alternatives has provided us with some of our best memories.

Summer meals are special. Our family is scattered during spring and summer, so those who happen to be around for meals fill plates in the kitchen and find a spot on the verandah or in the back yard. Birds and rustling leaves provide our dinner music, an occasional bee stops to inspect the rhubarb dessert and the city traffic hums in the background.

September is reunion time. The fun of daily picnicking is replaced with a dining room atmosphere, including placemats and glass serving bowls. In December, Advent candles provide ambience, while during Lent a centerpiece of sackcloth and ashes reminds us of repentance. In spring a bouquet of daffodils brings sunshine right to our table.

What does it take to maintain a daily family meal? Determination. Creativity. Flexibility. A cheerful setting and an atmosphere of welcome attracts family members to this sacred occasion. What else does it take? Not getting upset

when it doesn't work out. Never giving up or saying it isn't worth the effort.

Right now I am thinking back twenty years. In my mind's eye my husband and I are sitting at the table with two young boys who either gobble their food or refuse to eat it altogether. They spill juice and exasperate us with their spats. As parents our inclination is to share a few tidbits of adult conversation in the lulls.

Dissatisfaction with this daily routine led us to take stock of our parental goals, not once, but many times. We

wanted to have family meals with meaningful communication around the table. We wanted to share our values with our children, daring to believe

that all this could happen in a gracious atmosphere. No doubt we were idealistic! But we set out to make some changes.

First of all, we had to deny ourselves parental interaction and instead initiate family conversation. When the number around the table grew, we wondered how it was possible to connect all the different ages from two to ten to teenager. With the advantage of hindsight we now say, yes, it was possible.

Communicating our values was another challenge. We used story telling, impromptu discussions, worship time and planned teaching. Always we struggled for balance, for creativity and for effectiveness. The responses of our children served as a barometer of our successes and mistakes.

All the while we were thinking about how to develop the gracious climate. As parents we agreed that a family dinner, no matter how simple, should be served attractively. We also wanted relationships around the table to demonstrate politeness, respect and kindness, in accordance with our overall commitment to character building in the lives of our children.

Looking back, I see how each year has brought changes which we have had to take into account around our dinner table. But the sense of being a family keeps drawing us to the mealtime ritual.

I am more convinced than ever that regular family meals are an important key to family togetherness. Effort put into having gracious and meaningful interaction around the table pays rich dividends in happy memories and the desire to be together again.

Carolee Neufeld and her husband, Ken, have just completed a term as pastoral team at the St. Vital MB Church in Winnipeg and are presently on staff with Freedom in Christ Ministries.

Around the Family Table

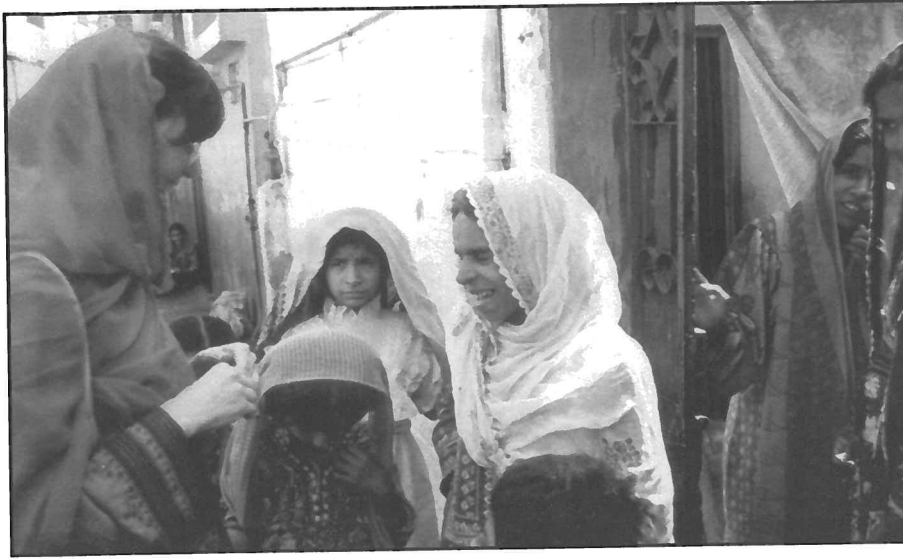
by Carolee Neufeld



*What does it take
to maintain a daily
family meal?*

Hospitality in Pakistan

by Gwenyth Nickel



the idea that to accept such generosity outright is rather rude and greedy-looking. Putting people at their ease is really the essence of hospitality, and I soon learned the “trick” that Pakistanis use in order to put their guests at ease about accepting a beverage. So, instead of asking *if* my guest would like something to drink, or even *what* she would like, I began by asking if she would like something hot or something cold. This was a wonderful way of allowing a ready acceptance, and it avoided the three or four refusals that usually were necessary as a prelude to accepting refreshment.

Offering tea is one way of saying, “You are my guest. Feel free to stay. See, I am preparing tea for you. It will give you some sustenance for your journey and will give you time to rest and renew yourself as you sit here and sip it with us. It will be an honour for us to serve you.” The importance of giving guests this kind of affirmation is just one of the lessons that I learned from Pakistani hospitality.

Four vignettes come to mind to illustrate some of the other beauties of Pakistani hospitality.

People are more important than things. Gul Bibi lives in a two-room house with hardly any furniture. It is neat and very clean. Although she has few good dishes, she pulls them out for guests. She doesn’t keep them in the cupboard for fear that someone might break one. She uses them.

Taking time for friends is affirming and upbuilding. We arrived at Abida’s house and noticed that they were getting ready to go somewhere. The kids were scrubbed up and their hair was slicked back. The women were wearing their gold. When asked, they explained there was a wedding on today. “But come inside. Have some tea.” Their actions said, “We have time for you.”

As guests in the homes of our friends we were always offered the best they had, and such generosity extended beyond their food and possessions to other areas of hosting, like time and energy. We, concerned with protecting

Gord and I made ourselves comfortable on soft living room chairs and eagerly read the letter we had just received from our good friends in Pakistan. As we read, we became first astonished and then alarmed. They had been robbed and held at gunpoint in their home. Now they felt frightened and angry. We felt so bad for them; and as we talked and discussed their situation, loneliness for that family and for Pakistan in general began to well up inside us.

I got up and put the kettle on. It was definitely time for a cup of tea. How often we had sat on the floor in our friends’ living room and had drunk tea together. Drinking tea now would bring them close to us somehow. I spread out a tablecloth on the living room floor and set the tea things on it. Sitting cross-legged there, we sipped sweet rich tea and dreamed of Pakistan.

Drinking tea transports us to Pakistan, because tea is really at the heart of Pakistani hospitality. Whatever the weather, whatever the occasion, whatever the circumstance, it’s tea!

And tea-drinking is not restricted to the home, either. Shopkeepers, insurance salesmen, and your local bank manager will order tea for you the moment the conversation turns from

economic exchange to friendly chatter. We even drank tea in the police station when reporting the theft of our minivan!

Perhaps the most interesting invitation to tea we received happened one day on the way downtown. In Karachi at every stop light it is usual for beggars to come to the car windows and ask for a hand-out or try to sell some small objects. Many people—Pakistanis and foreigners alike—consider this more of a nuisance than anything else. But my husband, Gordon, has a wonderful way of relating to people in Urdu (national language) and he made it a habit to talk to the beggars that came to his window, to find out about their homes and families and to show an interest in them.

One day he began the usual chit-chat with a one-legged man. This man was friendly and wanted to talk at length, but the light was beginning to change and we began to edge onwards. “Come and have tea with me!” he called out, even as the car began to move forward. “We’ll talk in the shop and I’ll even buy the tea!” The irony didn’t escape us—an offer to give from someone who made a living by begging from others.

A generous attitude is typical of Pakistani hospitality. Just as typical is



Gwenyth and friends.

our time and with keeping appointments, were more reluctant in returning the same.

There is joy in giving. One day I made the mistake of admiring my friend's burqa—a large black head-toe covering. My admiration was sincere, for this burqa had sequins all down the back and looked quite elegant. The next time we were visiting, there

was a burqa for me. No, I mustn't pay for it. It was a gift. I tried it on and swirled around the room. The women giggled and laughed at the look of me. They took pure joy in seeing my surprise and appreciation. Giving, as it should be, was fun.

Eating together builds a special bond with people. We had come over just for a brief visit. We arrived after

mealtime so as not to give any obligation to feed us, beyond the customary tea. But Sardar Khatoon insisted. "We'll be eating soon," she said. It was two hours later! "You must stay." And she chased one of the boys out the door to the marketplace to buy a bit of meat for the curry.

Eating together, like music, is a universal language. This is nothing new, for people have been saying it for centuries. But in Pakistan it became new to me. There are many differences and barriers that can divide foreigners from the Pakistani people. Language, cultural diversities, attitudes and religious differences are often excuses from both sides to draw apart and be separate. Eating together broke down those barriers, cemented the friendship, even changed our relationship to the status of family. And what a privilege that was for us.

Gwen and Gordon Nickel have lived and worked in Karachi, Pakistan, for over five years as missionaries with Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services (1988-93). They are members of the Elmwood MB Church in Winnipeg and currently live in Rosthern, Saskatchewan, with their three children, Matthew (16), Amalia (14) and Daniel (11).

Letters

WHERE HAVE ALL THE ACADEMIC WOMEN GONE?

As a longtime teacher and aspiring academic completing my doctoral dissertation I could not help but reflect on a recent documentary seen on Public Television and reported by the CBC. A young Canadian physicist from Toronto was denied a position at the University of Toronto because she was a woman. She then applied for and received an appointment to Harvard. This is Canada's loss. Such discrimination forced me to reflect on the fate of women academics at MBBC/Concord College, one of our Mennonite Brethren institutions of higher learning in Canada.

Not having the "inside" track I can only reflect on what is "commonly" known in our Mennonite community. The stories of four Mennonite women academics come to mind when thinking about the formation and existence of our College. These are Carol Weaver, Wendy Kroeker Zerbe, Esther Wiens and Dale Taylor. All served at the College for a time and then left when their services were no longer deemed "suitable." It is hard to determine why they actually left but it seems they were "no longer needed" and/or "not compatible" with

College objectives. In any case they did not seem to see a future for themselves within that setting.

This sends a message to women and to women academics. It also sends a message to young women in the Mennonite Brethren church. So the question arises for me, "How am I to mentor young women who wish to serve in church schools when the future is so uncertain?" Shall I tell them not to hope for a place in our own conference but to find a place somewhere else where the playing field is more level?

I am raising this question because I see many talented and creative young women in our churches who need to be encouraged in their service to the Christian community and beyond. I can not honestly encourage them to work within the church when I don't see women finding a suitable place of service that authenticates their talent and aspirations. So I am left wondering what I shall say to them.

Evelyn Labun
Winnipeg, MB

(Continued on page 10)

Soup and Solitude: *How to Eat Alone*

*Those who live
alone must also,
from time to time,
eat alone.*

But do they like it?

(Compiled by Sophia staff)

A recent *Globe and Mail* article (July 12, 1995) reveals that for young singles the floor, the couch and the bed often win out over the table as the place to eat. Mealtimes companions may be the TV or radio or CD player. Singles support the take-out and delivery segment of the food industry; eating alone in a restaurant or even shopping for single-serving foods feels lonely, they say, and invites pity.

We at *Sophia* decided to collect a few stories of our own about eating alone. Here they are:

Debra Fieguth, writer and editor, says, "Eating is something we all need to do to survive, so whether we eat alone or with others, we might as well do it properly and in style. A nice table,

good dishes and tasty food can be enjoyed just as well by one as seven."

Debra enjoys everything about food from preparing to serving to eating it. An adventuresome cook, she whips up wantons, tries her hand at samosas, and, if the notion strikes, experiments with sushi, preparing it without the raw fish.

"Being single means having the freedom to explore culinary highways and backroads," she maintains as she follows the notion to make cous-cous.

For **Clara Schellenberg**, retired teacher, the kitchen table is the favourite place to eat and the menu includes *Borscht* and *Platz*, the Mennonite foods she learned to love at home. She likes to cook and doesn't mind leftovers. Although she doesn't

Letters

(Continued from page 9)

WORK TO BE DONE

I picked up a copy of *Sophia* at our Women in Ministry Conference [Columbia Bible College, May 1995] and am impressed with the content of the magazine.

Our conference experience reinforced just how much work needs to be done in encouraging and supporting each other as women in the MB church. *Sophia* helps to do that.

Elsie Goerzen
Sardis, BC

OFF TO LITHUANIA

Thank you very much for the gift subscription commemorating my graduation [from Concord College]—I received the newest issue (Spring 1995) only three hours ago and have already finished reading many of the articles. I am continually delighted to hear stories of enterprising, innovative women (and men) of faith.

I will be leaving at the end of August for Klaipeda, Lithuania, to study and work at Lithuania Christian College (including an education course—fancy that!)

Can I get my subscription sent there or do I have to wait for the magazine to arrive in a care package from home?

Carmen Pauls
Regina, SK

A HELPFUL DEFINITION OF "FEMINIST"

Some of us were very encouraged to hear a lecture by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen at Regent College. She freely identifies herself as a feminist, so in question period I told her that in some B.C. church circles, feminist means "man-hater," and "anti-family," and I asked her for her definition.

She started with a joke. "Alan Alda says that a feminist is anyone, male or female, who believes that women are people."

She used her biblical definition: "A Christian feminist is a person of either sex who sees women and men as equally saved, equally spirit-filled and equally sent." This doesn't mean that there are no differences between women and men.

Then she went on to say that feminism is like Christianity, it has many denominations. There are some extreme feminist denominations with which she does not want to be identified, but she still calls herself a feminist, though "biblical egalitarian" would be equally acceptable. Similarly, there were some historical (and present) actions of some Christian denominations with which she would not like to be identified, but she still calls herself a Christian. She said she wanted people to find out what kind of a Christian she was before they lumped her in with Jimmy Swaggart, etc. She thought it was only respectful to find out what she meant by feminism before they lumped her in with some extreme feminists.

Donna Stewart
Vancouver, B.C.

eat take-out foods, she and her friend **Erna Klassen**, a retired nurse, enjoy the occasional breakfast of pancakes at MacDonalds or chile con carne on Friday at Salisbury House.

Clara and Erna live in adjacent apartment blocks and often have meals together. Both like to entertain, and if one is having a dinner party the other will help. Clara usually brings the dessert.

When they entertain, they do not restrict themselves to relatives, though there are plenty of those, especially for Erna. In summer Clara cooks *Rollkuchen* (cruellers) on the balcony and serves them with watermelon to guests who also live alone and who are often isolated. At Christmas, Clara and Erna make a point of inviting to a Christmas dinner those who are lonely. "People should do more of that," Clara states.

Sophia editor **Sarah Klassen** often does something else at mealtime besides eat. Reading, for instance. "Books require one hand to keep them open, so they're no good," she claims. "The newspaper is a bit too big, but magazines are fine, they lie nice and flat." Sometimes she eats from a tray while watching the TV news and very occasionally she eats in front of the computer.

In summer she likes to eat outside on the deck from where she can watch the beans and corn grow and the zinnias break into colour, or exchange hostile glares with the grey squirrel who lives in a nest on the highest possible branch of the ash tree.

A TV table is where **Norma McCurdy**, divorced and a mother of four adult children, usually eats her meals, though when company comes she wishes she had a dining room table. Presently unemployed, she doesn't eat out and tries to be resourceful in meal planning. She likes to make a soup from scratch and even pickles cucumbers. Eating alone or with friends, she never resorts to paper plates or cups. Norma keeps fit by cycling, walking and swimming in the apartment pool.

When **Erika Pauls**, high school counsellor, moved from a house she shared with her mother into an apartment, she had to learn to cook on a smaller scale and to shop for one. This meant that there might be very little in the fridge when someone dropped in. Initially she found herself eating poorly-balanced meals.

Eating out with friends is a good social contact, Erika says, and can be fit into a busy schedule. Sometimes time constraints necessitate a restaurant meal on the run. "The first time I ate alone I snuck into the restaurant," she admits.

For the past three years, **Evelyn Labun** has been eating around the economic, intellectual and time demands of post-graduate studies in nursing. She doesn't mind not eating

out since affordable restaurants all look equally drab after a while. Besides, working at home on a doctoral dissertation fits nicely with cooking. Browning the ribs or preparing vegetables for a hearty Mennonite soup or Scotch broth can be a necessary break from brain work. She's there to check on whatever's cooking in the kitchen, and when it's time for dinner, her meal is ready.

Evelyn's kitchen table, from where she gets a fine view of the back yard any season, is her favourite place to eat.

"I find I don't say grace as much," she says. "My grace flows with the rest of my day. It's more on-going, more free-flowing and less prescribed." When Evelyn has company, however, there is grace before the meal.



“Quiet in the Land?” An Exhilarating Conference

Report by Linda Huebert Hecht

The first conference focusing on the history of Anabaptist and Mennonite women took place at Millersville State University near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, June 8-11, 1995. For Elaine Sommers Rich it was the fulfilment of a lifelong dream; for others it was a chance to put faces to names. There was something for everyone, from the specialized scholar of women's history to the lay writer and the interested participant.

The goal of the joint US-Canadian planning committee was to “develop and expand research on Anabaptist women's history and experience” by including as many voices as possible—99 women and 16 men participated formally, with several presenters coming from Europe. The 256 registered participants included university professors and researchers as well as others of all ages and diverse backgrounds.

A second goal was to foster dialogue with “scholars of U.S. women's history and scholars of the Anabaptist experience,” thus challenging writers and researchers to get “out of their skins” (as Kimberly Schmidt, co-chair of the coordinating committee has said) and consider different approaches to history. In one of the plenary sessions a Jewish woman scholar, researching Irish and Jewish history, and a black scholar, recording the history of her home community, gave opportunity for everyone to consider the pros and cons of writing history as insiders and outsiders.

*...presentations
covered
the full range of
women's activities...*



*Manitobans at the “Quiet?” Conference:
(Left to right) Katie Thiessen,
Betty Loewen, Sarah Klassen*

One might have expected the woman missionary to figure prominently in the presentations, since in times past mission work gave women a strong voice. Instead, presentations covered the full range of women's activities, from getting a formal education to working in home and church to taking leadership in times of crisis and revolution. Representations of women in photographs and other works of art, both past and present, added to the variety. Papers on the activities of Baptist, Quaker and Shaker women gave a chance for comparison. The pros and cons of the particular discipline experienced by Hutterite and Old Order

Mennonite women were debated. For women in these and other Mennonite groups, dress has been a key issue, and a number of papers highlighted this topic. The presence of Hutterite and Mennonite women wearing their distinctive dress indicated that these questions were not just academic. Finally, the multiplicity of source materials, from diaries and autobiographies to court records, martyrologies and oral interviews, added to the richness of the conference.

Last but not least, participants heard the work of Mennonite poets, musicians and dramatists. The first day of the conference ended with an informal poetry reading, and on the second night Jean Janzen, Sarah Klassen, Di Brandt and Julia Kasdorf read from their work. Two moving dramatic pieces, “Prayers for Girls” by Johnna Schmidt and “Quietly Landed,”

with original music by Carol Ann Weaver, captivated a capacity audience on the third evening. The artistic and scholarly voices blended in unique explorations of women's experiences.

Before the conference, organizers conducted a tour with Amish and Mennonite women entrepreneurs. Tour members viewed the works of a number of Mennonite women artists, past and present. Particularly unforgettable was the visit with Susie Riehl, an Amish artist self-taught in the art of watercolour painting. Riehl, who cares for her household and family of six children, paints wonderful representations of Amish life and of the beautiful quilts they make. Similarly fascinating was a visit with Rebecca Huyard, a single Amish woman who works in a clinic to help her people obtain treatment for genetically inherited disease.

It became obvious that Anabaptist and Mennonite women have always taken opportunities wherever they could. The conference was a success, and we look forward to another one soon in which the discussion can continue.

Linda Huebert Hecht, independent scholar from Waterloo, Ontario, presented a paper on, "Speaking Up and Taking Risks: Anabaptist Wives, Widows, Sisters, Mothers and Daughters in Sixteenth Century Tirol," at the Millersville conference. She has a BA in history from the University of Waterloo and is co-editing, with Arnold Snyder, professor of history at Conrad Grebel College, the book, *Profiles of Anabaptist Women, Sixteenth Century Reforming Pioneers*. She attends Glencairn MB Church in Kitchener, Ontario.

STORIES THAT NEED TELLING: A Reponse to the Conference

by Katie Thiessen

The excitement began one ordinary Tuesday morning in May as I opened the envelope containing "The Quiet in the Land?" conference program. My eyes raced over all the fascinating session topics and my excitement grew. Could I possibly be part of this first-ever historical conference on Anabaptist women? I am not a historian, a poet, a musician or a writer, I'm an accountant! But I am a woman, a Mennonite woman of Russian-Mennonite heritage who emigrated to Canada in 1948 with my parents after World War II from Germany—and I have never been quiet! My primary school report cards attest to that: they say, "Katy talks too much."

This conference has been tremendously reaffirming for me as a Mennonite woman in the context of Mennonite history, a history that has long been my therapist. Listening to all the stories, poetry, drama and the many interesting papers that were presented, I felt at home here among the delegates. They were telling my story.

As the eldest child of an immigrant family, I also listened, a lot. My mother always chastised me for being *nieschierig* (nosy), but these were the beginnings of my Mennonite history lessons. After all, what did struggling Mennonite families do on Sunday afternoons? They gathered together for *Faspa* (cold supper) and talked about their beloved homeland, the Old Colony in Russia, their beautiful fruit gardens, the warm and early springtime, the terrible war years, the Trek, the camps, the family and friends who were sent back to Russia, the relatives who disappeared and on and on. That was my history class, and a scary one for a small child. I can still hear them talking in hushed voices about *de Russe* (the Russians) who would come at night and take the men away. They took my grandfather away. For a long time I imagined that the dark clouds at night must be *de Russe*. The dark shapes must somehow swoop down and snatch the men away.

Throughout my childhood these stories were told over and over again. And always I was fascinated. They defined who I was and where I came from. Mennonite history helped me to understand tensions and conflicts between my parents. During my adolescent years especially, my relationship with my mother was often hostile and bitter. How could I see that she was frightened and lonely? I saw only anger. How could I know about her terrifying experience as a young girl during the war, on a wagon with her elderly mother, her older sister with six children (and pregnant with her seventh), on the trek out of Russia, hunger, cold and fear always with them?

At last the war was over and Germany seemed a haven for a brief while.

Uncertainty and turmoil affected everyone, and often decisions were made hastily and sometimes unwisely. And so a hasty marriage was arranged and pregnancy followed. Soon there were two babies and the urgency to leave Europe resulted in the traumatic separation of my mother from her family. She did not want to go to Canada. She who had been the pampered youngest daughter of a prosperous Mennonite family never saw her mother again.

Like many of the poor immigrant women, my mother became a martyr to her husband and many children. She buried her grief in endless hours of household labour. It was her penance. My mother needs to tell her story.

Katie Thiessen is active in the Douglas Mennonite Church in Winnipeg and in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada as board member of the Eden Mental Health Services.



Food: Friend or Foe?

by Eleanor Martens

For most of us food is more than just a means of satisfying hunger. It can represent nurture, celebration, solace or community. I get bear-hugs from my children when they arrive home to the smell of chocolate chip cookies. Going home to mother's *borscht* and *platz* evokes for me the warmth of parental love. When our small group at church gathers around a potluck meal, it becomes a creative, often lavish expression of our kinship and care. Within the larger community the products of our Mennonite kitchens assume mythic status in their capacity to please and preserve our ethnicity.

In spite of this, we as Mennonite women also experience conflict with food. Scholars among us have begun to explore themes of power, the gendered division of labour and even theology as they relate to women's provision of food in our Mennonite communities. These are fascinating subjects, well worthy of a critical look. But as I see it, there is another area where we have a major problem with food, one which we encounter daily, and that is in eating it.

How many women do you know whose daily confrontation with the scale sets the tone for the entire day? How many women's gatherings that you attend invariably turn to the topic of food and the tribulation of trying to lose weight? I wonder whether Mennonite women vary significantly from a recent survey, which found that 70% of all Canadian women are preoccupied with their weight and that 90% are dissatisfied with their bodies. Study after study has found that a predominant fear among North American women from all walks of life is that of becoming fat. Many would rather lose weight than achieve any other goal.

Adult women are not the only ones who worry about their weight. Someone has observed that girls used to play

"grownup" by stepping into their mothers' high heels. Now they emit shrieks while stepping onto their mothers' scales. Health educators are concerned because dieting worries and eating disorders are afflicting more and more children under the age of ten. A Canadian schools study found that between elementary school and junior high, the 31% drop in self-esteem among girls is largely related to concerns about weight and appearance.

Slimness, it appears, has become the ultimate female virtue, dieting the hallmark of femininity. Of course we all know there are sound health reasons why a woman should maintain a reasonable body weight. But if health is what this obsession is really about, why do we feel that a healthy appetite is something to be indulged only on the sly? Why do so many women feel like "foodaholics" no matter what they eat, and why do they punish themselves for violating the "rules" about eating by fasting, vomiting or exercising to the point of exhaustion and illness? And why, at an age when caloric needs are at an all-time premium, do more than half of the grade nine girls in a local Christian high school wonder if they should be dieting?

Psychologist Carol Gilligan believes that maturing teenage girls turn to diets out of the ambivalence they feel about their increasing body fat and size. They want the "womanly" look, but feel their enlargement is not really accepted by society. Another theory suggests that the enjoyment of food arouses guilt in women because it is a form of self-indulgence, something frowned upon in those who are to be self-sacrificing nurturers of others. Still another holds that since marriage in the western world has become less of an economic arrangement and more of a venue for emotional and sexual fulfillment, increasing emphasis has been placed on women's sexuality and physical attractiveness. In the patriarchal

world, where female "beauty" is usually defined by male culture, it is important for women to be small, fragile and compliant. Could this explain the childlike appearance of the women we are told to model ourselves after, and the scorn heaped on larger women who are always "too pushy," "take up too much space" and never "look after themselves"?

Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth* (New York, 1991), suggests the current slimness craze is backlash ideology that attempts to usurp the sense of worth women have achieved through political and economic gains. She calls it a "mass neurosis...a secret underlife poisoning our freedom...that uses food and weight to strip women of their new sense of control."

Whatever the reason, it is sad that so many Christian women feel enslaved by these secular norms and biases. Pastor Lisa Dahill ("A Woman's Secret Shame" *Daughters of Sarah*, Fall, 1993) has discovered that for many women in her parish, "the primary central spiritual struggle of their lives is the daily struggle with food, weight, and body image.... These are the spiritual torments that eat up our faith in despair and self-hatred. A faithful, church-going woman may affirm salvation by God's grace alone through Jesus Christ. Yet she experiences herself in her heart of hearts not as infinitely beloved in body and soul, but as fat—and thus flawed and inferior in God's sight."

So—what can we do? How can we resist the relentless pressure and cultivate greater self-acceptance among ourselves? Neglecting our appearance is not the answer. We all have standards by which we feel acceptable to ourselves and others and certainly our Christian witness is never enhanced by slovenliness or careless disregard for the tastes and sensibilities of others.

We could perhaps stop talking

about our bodies in a contemptuous way and more openly “share the stories of our bodies’ lives and cravings and hurts,” finding them to be “not places of deep shame, but of great holiness” (Dahill). We can reject the Christian books and magazines that endorse and glamorize the “ideal” body by featuring “Christian” beauty queens and female success stories about triumph over fat. I have pitched out church library books like *God’s Answer to Fat—Lose It!* that suggest the only ideal temple of God for a woman is a slim one. While resolutely refusing to spend the dollars and hours this ideal demands, we can still exercise regularly. Physical activity, if not overdone, is truly

empowering, much more so than dieting. It generates strength, competence and a sense of well-being. So does eating—a well-balanced diet with less junk food and smaller portions—the big problems with North American diets.

Maybe instead of saying, “You look great—have you lost weight?” we could compliment another’s “strong” or “healthy” look. Perhaps we could learn to celebrate features that popular culture wants to devalue. Stretch marks, wrinkles and middle-age folds can uncover wisdom and grace that youthful bodies can only hope for. Let’s make sure our daughters know these things, that we welcome them in any shape or form, and

that it’s what’s inside that body that makes them valuable.

When it comes to food and femininity, women need to develop standards of comfort and pleasure that are not imposed on them by the marketplace or the media. Laura Brown calls it “body wisdom”: “A woman who self-nurtures with food, and who does so without guilt and self-hate, has broken the most basic of messages given women against feeling good and worthy of love and sustenance.... [She] has engaged in an act of quiet revolution.” (Cited in *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation*, edited by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen. Grand Rapids, 1993.)

10. Because of a diet restriction, **Esther Wiens’s** mother cooked her own meal separately from the family’s. While her family ate the regular meal she had prepared for them, and while her own food was cooking, she read to the family. She might select editorials or items from the church page of the newspaper, a letter from Russia or an article from *The Readers’ Digest*.

9. For **Julia Kasdorf**, the “food of home” is the bean soup her family enjoyed every Sunday night. The soup was made of white beans and milk, and torn up white bread in it. She also remembers half-moon pies: *appleschnitz* cooked with spices, placed on a round of pastry which was folded over, a quick way to make pie.

8. In **Merle Good’s** home, meals began with silent prayer. When his father moved his silver, all heads were raised, the prayer was over. The length of prayer time could never be accurately predicted. One day Merle decided to give the signal. He shifted his silver, but no one moved. When his father gave the customary signal he said, “Merle, take your plate and go to the closet.” Merle still wonders how, with a family of seven boys, his father knew who moved the silver.

7. **Phyllis Pellman Good** enjoyed stewed crackers with her grandparents. You pour scalded milk over saltines, then weight the crackers. They are served with butter, melted and browned to produce a nutty flavour. The last time she had stewed crackers she ate too much and lost her appetite for them. However, Phyllis’s daughter picked up the habit with after-school stewed-cracker snacks.

1. **Katie Funk Wiebe** remembers her mother reading from a Bible story book at breakfast; her father had already left for work. Her mother spoke of making *my* dinner or *my* supper.” It was *hers* until she *gave* it to her family. Cooking was an expression of herself.

2. **Heidi Harms** remembers lively mealtime discussion, anecdotes, no fights at mealtime. Family members always sat in the same place. A common grace:
*Fuer genossen’ Speis und Trank
Lieber Vater habe Dank.*

3. “We *had* to be there,” **Elvera Froese** remembers about mealtimes. There was scripture before breakfast, even if it was hurried. Food was tasty, nourishing and plentiful. Anyone could come, even at the last minute.

4. **Alvina Block** remembers meals at her stepgrandmother’s as a treat. The grandmother had worked for a wealthy doctor’s family in Winnipeg, and her meals reflected this experience.

5. In **Jean Janzen’s** home, onions were served at supper only when her father wasn’t home. Consequently, she thought of onions as “wrong” somehow. Jean still makes paska with icing and coloured candy as did her mother who remembered the blessing of paska at Easter in Russia.

6. Everybody got involved in food preparation at special Schmidt family dinners at Thanksgiving, Easter and Christmas. According to **Laura Schmidt** the menu always included turkey and her father wore ski goggles while grating onion. Everyone peeled apples for pies.

Table Memories

Identify the Mennonite denomination whose members, when eating in a restaurant or other public place,

- a) stand to say grace and sometimes even sing.
- b) bow their heads and say a silent grace.
- c) look straight ahead while saying/thinking a silent grace.
- d) dispense with grace altogether.

Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company

by Linda Penner



long came to know the Lord. Children contributed in the effort back then as they still do today. They picked up great vending tricks as they clambered up and down the streets pulling wagons piled with wholesome loaves.

Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company grew out of Tabitha's frustration with consumer goods. Not happy with the ever-increasing amounts of toxins and carcinogens in the food she bought, she began looking for ways to address the situation. She saw stewardship, and faithfulness to our choices in life at the heart of the matter. How are we taking care of the land, and how do we stay accountable to each other in how we look after it? There is just no financial incentive to practise farming in ways other than polluting the land with allergy-inducing chemicals to protect crops from weeds and insects.

Tabitha wondered, what if the consumer began to demand higher quality grain, or, stranger still, didn't mind paying extra for that privilege? That's a tough challenge in a world where people readily spend two dollars for an ice-cream cone, a bag of chips or a bottle of pop but protest about paying the same amount for a loaf of bread. Which of these is more filling, more healthy and satisfying?

What would Jesus do? In business, would he barter for cutthroat prices from hard-working farmers, to give himself a higher profit margin? What salary would he pay his workers? Would he pay just minimum wage because that is what is required by law? Or would he pay more, so they could afford to feed their families? Would he encourage farmers to grow their crops organically (even if that meant paying out more) so that the land stood a chance of being restored to health for the next generation of farmers? Would he offer value to his customer by baking bread (a food by which he named himself) that is free of carcinogens and toxins, or would he just be concerned about his own bottom line and bake

A baker will point out two kinds of people in the world: those who bake their own bread and those who don't. But have you heard of a baker who longs for a world where everyone would bake their own bread?

This would be no ordinary baker, but then, nothing about Tabitha Langel is ordinary. What started out in her kitchen with a friend turned into The Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company on Westminster Avenue, just around the corner from her home. Years before the bakery opened, she and her friend Tom Janzen spent a few hours together each week doing what they both loved: baking bread.

At first, it was a few loaves for each of their families; soon friends and neighbours began placing orders, and before long, they were pumping out fifty loaves a day. A nearby church offered its kitchen facilities, and they soon outgrew this facility as well.

They formed a co-op. Customers who had the means paid full price for their bread. Others could earn the difference by pitching in with the work. One such person, who had been on welfare, welcomed this means of feeding herself and before



Tabitha Langel

cheap “styrofoam” bread that fills but doesn’t satisfy?

An opportunity too good to miss came along: a chance to open shop and practise doing business the way Tabitha envisioned Jesus would do it.

Encouraging customers to bake their own bread is just one of the unorthodox practices of Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company. Other things they do to stay in business is charge more per loaf than anyone else. They grind their own flour in their own mill, which they have on the premises. Daily bread is made only from fresh ground grain.

Expensive, organic grain is bought directly from local growers. (Conventionally grown grain might make \$1.50 for a bushel of wheat, while farmers need to charge \$8.00 or more for organically grown wheat in order to meet their requirements.)

The lactose intolerant can place their orders ahead of time for non-dairy muffins, cakes, cookies, pies or breads. Frugal shoppers can return pie plates in exchange for a deposit. They can save even more if they buy day-old bread.

These and other unique practices have secured the bakery an enviable customer base, one that has grown by 25% in its seven years of operation. That’s a challenge for a company that’s trying to remain small.

The price of bread has never increased in the seven years of operation in spite of the increased prices the growers charge for their grain. The company’s profit margin is raised by marking up non-essential items, like cinnamon buns, muffins, cakes, cookies and pies.

Haven’t you always wanted fresh-baked bread when it’s—fresh? Tall Grass opens for business, Monday through Saturday, at 7:00 a.m. You can imagine how appealing this is. (At conventional stores, fresh bread has been sitting on the cooling rack for up to six hours by opening time.)

The company honours Sundays and holidays by staying closed so workers can enjoy friends and family.

Employees are offered a good benefit plan, and this year the company is beginning profit-sharing. They employ children, new Canadians, old Canadians and refugees, regardless of their work experience. Prospective employees need only a willingness to learn the work, to do it the best way they know how in cooperation with others. This commitment to live reconciled lives can be felt even over the service counter. Customers have

always gone by the honour system. They never take a number, no matter how long the lines get. (And they do get long.)

The simple lifestyle is not cheaper, but when you think about how a few extra dollars buy a better quality of food, food that does not rape the land or kill the environment, thereby ruining lives in the process, somehow it all seems worth it. Tall Grass’s philosophy, which is printed in a brochure that also gives its baking schedule, says, in part,

We at “Tall Grass” believe that good bread is made when we work with our Mother the Earth in a spirit of gratitude and with loving responsiveness to her needs as well as to our own.

In a living dance, the earth, those who grow, those who mill and bake and those who buy, all have unique steps and rhythms to contribute. The bakery is the place where we all meet and where the loaf is born and begins to sing its own unique song.

Miracles keep happening. Day by day God provides the grace and means to continue. This grace is spilling out into the community. The real reason for Tall Grass’s success? Tabitha says it best. It’s a gift of God.

Linda Penner, Sophia editorial staff member, has long been acquainted with Tabitha, and was happy for this opportunity to renew a friendship. Tabitha Langel and her husband have one daughter, Suzanne. They are members of the Grain of Wheat Church Community.

Photos by Linda Penner



Mealtime Rituals that Bond

by Nancy Riediger Fehderau



Nancy Riediger Fehderau and family

It is Christmas Eve. Amid the happy sounds of voices and music, the phone rings. It's our son from California. "Mom, I can just imagine you all sitting down around the big table, and I can almost smell your pizza. It wouldn't be Christmas Eve without your pizza. We're having pizza tonight, too, but not home-made." The phone rings again. Our youngest son greets us from Alberta. "Hi, Mom! Guess what I'm making. Pizza! Have to keep up the tradition, you know."

Shortly after, in Ontario, our daughter and her family sit down with us around our big table festively decorated with candles and greenery. And I serve my Christmas Eve

pizza. It feels good. Our family, scattered around the continent, is connected by pizza tonight.

Pizza became a Christmas Eve family ritual many years ago in the tropical country of Zaire in Africa. We still feel the cosy closeness, eating our pizza and enjoying the cold soft drinks while relaxing on our balcony that overlooks the valley, caressed by the warm night breezes, covered by the soft blackness of the night sky overhead and comforted by the strains of carols and the glow of multicoloured Christmas tree lights from inside. Somehow the pizza that connected us to 'home' far away in North America, today connects us to each other and to the memories of 'home' in Zaire.

In *Why Not Celebrate!* (Good Books, 1987), Sara Wenger Shenk writes, "Like a cloak of security, repeated rituals surround a child with rhyme and reason, with anticipation and fulfillment, over and over again." Pizza for Christmas Eve became just that, a symbol of continuity, shared memories of years past and confident hopes for the future.

Many of our family traditions were birthed during the years that our family spent growing up in Africa. But many also had their beginnings with our parents' families in the Ukraine, coming with them to Canada to be passed on to us. New Year's just could not happen without *portzelky*, those raisin-filled, multi-shaped yeast fritters dunked in sugar! What fun to pick out one that looked like a bird, a swan or a pig. Even in Africa New Year's couldn't be New Year's without *portzelky*. Our children learned to enjoy and to expect them as well.

But just imagine making *portzelky* in a besooted outdoor kitchen hut with a dirt floor, on an old wood stove, and then enjoying them outside, beside our thatched-roof cabin at the foothills of the famous Kilimanjaro mountain. The evening sky was ablaze with ever-changing brilliant hues of red and violet, a fitting backdrop for that massive snow-capped mountain. Elephants, giraffe and zebra came to refresh themselves at the watering hole not far away from us. As the cover of darkness slowly and gently rolled in, the exotic symphonies of the African night began. Now that was a ritual which at that moment inimitably bridged time, space, countries and generations.

Both our parents came to visit us during our four years in Kenya. Our "appreciation dinner" ritual was conceived then, and has since been celebrated on many occasions in our family. At that time we chose a day, usually one near the end of their stay with us. The children took time to think about and secretly write down on little slips of paper all the things that they appreciated about Grandma and Grandpa and we did the same. I prepared an elegant candle-light dinner. Just before the special dessert, we surprised them by explaining the particular reason for this feast. Then we read our lists, first for one and then for the other. This significant, tender bonding time ended with a prayer of blessing and commitment as we all held hands around the table. Yes, we did finally enjoy that special dessert as well.

Shortly before my mother died, she gave me a folder of clippings and pictures she had saved for me. In it I found the envelope containing the papers on which we and our children had written or printed our appreciation notes to Grandpa and Grandma, so many years before. They had been written with love and were kept and cherished with love over the years.

Now that our children are adults and beginning their own families, I will find a special occasion, maybe an appreciation dinner, and return to them these heirlooms, these symbols filled with so much love and memories. And so, the flow of life and love continues.

"Family traditions, when deliberately cultivated, build a sense of identity that will hold a family together from year to year and from generation to generation," Sara Wenger Shenk believes, and we resonate with an enthusiastic "Yes!"

In 1995 Nancy Riediger Fehderau, Kitchener, Ontario, has supported her husband through surgery and chemotherapy. Writing and participating in a biblical storytelling workshop were welcome creative outlets during this time. Her interests include women's issues, grandparenting and active participation in the Kitchener MB church and in the MB conference.

MISSION STATEMENT

Sophia offers a forum for women in the MB church. Her pages provide room for dialogue, room for women to speak to each other about their place in the family, the church, the work place and the world. She recognizes that the MB sisterhood is rural, urban and suburban; that it represents all age groups; that it includes diverse interests and experiences; that its members speak with various voices.

Sophia offers herself as a rallying place for women in an uncertain, changing world. She is interested in women's stories, in their aspirations and disappointments, their successes and failures. She invites expressions of joy and sorrow, concern and outrage. She encourages women in the use of their gifts in all spheres of life.

Although Sophia was conceived and brought to birth by and for MB women and celebrates sisterhood, it is her desire to be inclusive. She hopes to challenge both men and women; she welcomes their voices and invites them into dialogue.

Sophia acknowledges the authority of God, the giver of wisdom, and of the sacred Scriptures, the story of God's dealings with women and men. "Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33)

Food Stewardship in the 90s

by Jocele T. Meyer

"We need not be helpless spectators
of the Bosnias, Rwandas, Somalias, and
poverty in major cities of North America.
We know how to do better."

They sit in the corner of the kitchen—three pails overflowing with apples waiting to be made into sauce. Tomorrow we will harvest the corn for freezing, if the raccoons don't feast in the garden tonight. Strawberries, peas, lettuce and blueberries came earlier this summer. I like to garden. Well, I don't like to hoe and pull weeds. But I do like to pick and preserve the fruits of our labour. Our family plants, harvests and preserves together. It's a time of fun, fellowship and hard work—a time to remember our dependence on our creator.

"Give us this day our daily bread" is a common prayer. What does it really mean? Most of us complain when we eat the same food two days in a row. Many in this world have only three or four different foods to choose from during an entire lifetime. I have the option of planting a garden. Others do not have access to land, or must plant to supplement their meagre diets. Starvation in a world of abundance is a sad commentary for Christians today.

One out of seven of the world's total population suffers from chronic hunger and malnutrition. Almost 200 million of these are young children. United Nations agencies report that 3 million children die each year of hunger-related causes. Many of those who survive are mentally and physically impaired.

Hunger is both a cause and a consequence of global crises. "Hungry bellies are the drums of war," said Norm Borlaug, father of the "Green Revolution." It was hoped the Green Revolution would provide access to food for all the world's people, but according to Donella Meadows, co-author of *Beyond Limits*, "although more food is being raised now, it does not feed hungry people more. It feeds more hungry people."

Fighting in Africa has drawn attention to the connection between hunger and conflict. Relief and development agencies such as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) not only supply food to hungry people but also work for peace so people are able to grow or purchase food. I recall a farmer in Chad who had

a thriving poultry business. While on a trip to buy grain for his chickens, he was cut off from his home by fighting. When he returned home his business was ruined. His chickens had died from lack of food and water and his customers were unable to buy the eggs and meat they depended on.

A 1995 *Bread for the World* publication states that in the 1990s "we need not be helpless spectators of the Bosnias, Rwandas, Somalias, and poverty in major cities of North America. We know how to do better. We know how to take preventive actions that get to the causes of crises before they explode." We simply lack the personal and political will to act.

What can you and I do? First, I suggest that we rely on trusted sources such as MCC for information. The secular media may depict a current problem but often ignore the structural causes of hunger and poverty. When ongoing hunger situations are no longer "news," they are soon forgotten. Second, we can develop responsible personal and family eating habits so that we make the best use of the foods available to us. We can practice the principles set forth twenty years ago in the *More with Less Cookbook* by Doris Janzen Longacre and more recently in *Extending the Table* by Joetta Schlabach.

Stewardship of food today requires that we control our eating patterns so that we in the North do not consume more than our fair share of the world's abundance. I find that fasting on occasion, serving more meatless meals and omitting desserts other than fruit except on special occasions are good ways to sensitize me to the food imbalance and injustice in our world today.

Volunteering in a food pantry a number of years ago helped motivate me to work in hunger education and advocacy. There are still such opportunities today. Soup kitchens and food pantries have become permanent fixtures, reminding us that all is not just in our economic and social systems. When we are aware of the plight of hungry people, we reach out to help. Then we can sincerely pray,

Give us this day our daily bread, the bread in which we share your life.

We pray for a bread broken and shared.

We pray that we will share along the way.

Open our hands wide to receive and open our hearts that in our breaking of bread all may know what it means to pray,

"Give us this day our daily bread."

Jocele Meyer and her late husband, Art, worked with MCC for twelve years—one year in Grenada and then with food, hunger and environmental concerns. She lives in east central Ohio on eighty acres of strip-mined land that their family (three adult children and eight grandchildren) is working to reclaim.

Imagine the scene: a white lace tablecloth, wine poured into silver goblets, mangoes carefully sliced and laid out on 19th century hand-crafted china. Dinner at the home of the unbeliever is about to begin. You are momentarily beset by a certain uneasy feeling as you sit down to partake of the carefully prepared meal set before you. Is it best to first gaze intently at your lap for several moments, pretending you are brushing aside crumbs from the as-yet-untouched bread? Is a casual scratch of the brow sufficient? Should consumption begin immediately, with no concern for procedure? Or is a blatant observance of preliminaries preferable, no matter what the setting? Does a balanced, always-appropriate approach even exist?

I am talking, of course, about the pre-meal prayer. Christians in modern times have not received clear direction regarding this issue. Our spiritual leaders need to be encouraged to examine the subject and work out particulars. In the meantime, interim guidance needs to be given.

The traditional view is that pre-meal prayer is an essential part of the meal itself. Some say that biblical authority exists even with respect to method, if only we exert the effort to study and understand the teaching. Others respond that the Bible explains only the broad principles behind the prayer. Liberal elements in some churches, meantime, wonder what all the fuss is about and point to New Testament meals where Jesus dines without the grace being mentioned.

In an attempt to develop a clearer understanding of pre-meal prayer, let us consider five commonly-asked questions:

1. Does the kind of food being eaten affect the prayer? Does a carved turkey with trimmings demand a blessing qualitatively different from

ON PRE-MEAL PRAYER

by *Waldy Derksen*

that appropriate for two pieces of melba toast with marmalade just before bedtime? Is prayer required for junk food snacks? The correct view is that trivial quantities need not be prayed over. Only a meal necessitates a pre-meal prayer. In this case, quantity, not quality, governs.

2. Should a separate prayer be said for dessert? Imagine this scenario: a prayer has been prayed prior to a substantial supper. The main course has been cleared away. Guests and hosts retire to the livingroom, the effects of second and third helpings only now being regretted. The lapse between the meal and the dessert is considerable, say in excess of one hour. You suddenly question, as the peach daiquiri tort is unveiled, whether a second prayer ought to be uttered? Should it matter if the presentation is instead fruit cocktail from a tin can?

Fortunately, consensus has been reached that additional blessing is not required. Dessert, reasonably understood as part of the meal, has been "approved" in advance. Nevertheless, for those wanting to be absolutely sure, a simple and short grace before dessert is an effective way of dealing with lingering doubt. A more controversial approach is to decline dessert altogether, thereby avoiding the issue.

3. Is location a factor? Is it important whether the meal is in your residence, the home of another, an exquisite eating establishment, university cafeteria or outdoor camping site? The short answer is that a prayer ought to be said no matter where you are. The location should, however, affect the manner in which the prayer is stated.

For example, prayers sung or recited at significant volume are best



left for private gatherings, either indoors or in remote wilderness areas. I still quiver with humiliation when thinking back to my early teens and recalling the fervour with which "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" was performed at family gatherings in public parks. The stares of others were not just in my imagination. The notes of our musical offerings drifted heavenward, clashing with and quickly succumbing to 8-track players and car radios blasting out the "hit parade" of the day.

4. What is the correct outward form? Holding hands with others while verbalizing pre-meal prayers is allowed but should be reserved for situations where you are at least somewhat familiar with the person at your side and give fair warning of your intentions. Kneeling in public restaurants or stretching out both hands toward the heavens as a conscious posture is generally not necessary. Some outward expression (eg. bowed head and/or folded hands), however, is preferable to no

expression at all. Too often lack of expression indicates lack of prayerful intent. The discipline of routine is helpful in this area.

5. Should the company influence the prayer? Dining with the like-minded may appropriately result in a pre-meal song or verbal recitation of thanks. But what if (as above) you are with a group of non-believers? The pre-meal prayer ought still to be said, in silence, by the believer.

Consider that the form or outward manifestation of the prayer must always follow from the inward thought, or substance. The pray-or's attitude, or state-of-the-heart is to show the awareness of God's goodness. The form chosen should be gentle, not flashy. If attracting comment at all, the outside observer is ideally to be drawn to contemplation of the substance, not the style of the prayer.

There remains the question of what words to use in the pre-meal prayer. For those wanting guidance

even down to this fine detail, the simple "God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food," will serve adequately. Other options include singing "Johnny Appleseed" or "For health and strength and daily food" (or even improvization). Camp groups and churches in your area should be consulted for lyrics and music. Why not, though, learn both a new language and meaningful pre-meal prayer at the same time? My favourite: "Alle guten Gaben, alles was Wir haben, Kommt O Gott von dir, dank sei dir da fuer." (All good gifts, all that we have, comes from you, God, we thank you.) The pre-meal prayer is generally followed by an "Amen." You are now prepared to enjoy the rest of the meal. Oh, but that the rest of life were so simple!

Waldy Derksen is a lawyer who lives, and prays in various places, in Winnipeg. He and his wife, Wanda, have three children. They are members of Jubilee Mennonite Church.

GLEANINGS

🎉 Congratulations to **Elaine Martens Pinto**, this year's recipient of the Governor-General's Gold Medal for highest standing in a Master's program at the University of Winnipeg. Elaine graduated with a Master of Divinity degree. She is currently employed as a chaplain at St. Boniface General Hospital and is a member of the McIvor Avenue MB Church.

🎉 *Sophia* is pleased to accept suggestions for "Gleanings." News about MB women's accomplishments, happenings or other items of interest to readers should be sent to the address on page 2. The deadline for the next issue is December 15, 1995.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Sophia/Wisdom, Inc. will be holding its first annual MEMBERSHIP MEETING on:

Saturday, January 27, 1996, at 10:00 a.m. at the River East MB Church, 755 McLeod Avenue, Winnipeg.

All *Sophia* subscribers are encouraged to attend as members and to participate in electing new board members. Come also to hear and suggest new dreams and schemes for *Sophia's* future.

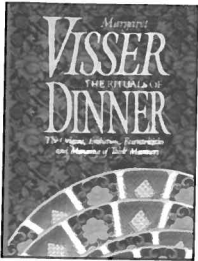
**WIND AND FIRE: Moving The Life Among Us
Anabaptist Women Doing Theology
May 9 - 11, 1996**

Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

This is the third conference of its kind, organized to provide a forum for Mennonite and Brethren in Christ women to work on theological issues. Sponsored by Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Concord College and MCC Canada, it is open to women and men who wish to explore the emerging theological voices of women. There will be papers on different but related topics, art displays, worship, plenary and small group discussion and workshops. Registration \$65 by February 1, 1996; thereafter \$80. For more information and registration forms contact Wendy Kroeker, MCC Canada, (204) 261-6381.

***The Rituals of Dinner*, by Margaret Visser.
HarperCollins, Canada, 1991. (432 pages)**

Reviewed by Margaret Harder



We have probably all been invited to eat with “important” people and wondered whether we would embarrass ourselves by using the wrong fork or plate. Margaret Visser’s book on dinner rituals mentions many such details, but this is not a “how to” book; it is much more a “why” book. The sub-title explains the contents succinctly: “the origins, evolution, eccentricities and meaning of table manners.”

Visser writes, quite convincingly, that table rituals or manners developed in order to control menu, table setting, eating, conversation and behaviour of all present. She leaves the impression that eating should be enjoyable and fun, but says that what we think of as a casual approach to it has been strictly passed on from one generation to another. Manners have been drummed into us from infancy. This makes meals predictable, and in many aspects worry free, because we know what is expected behavior and protocol.

This careful tracing of the rituals of dinner provides interesting reading; and Visser is extremely thorough in her research. Anyone with a yen to read further on this topic is provided with 57 pages of references and bibliography. She is fascinated by all aspects of humans at table, filling the book with details, facts and historical material that give one the distinct sense that dinner rituals, like our lives, are ongoing, constantly changing and evolving, making us not only the beneficiaries of others’ experience, but also the makers of rituals in our own times and homes.

Consider, for example, a lunch served as a buffet meal. In times past, tables were narrow boards, with guests sitting on one side only, so their eating could be observed. These boards were easily moved around. When tables became the more permanent eating places, the fashionable people kept their sideboards, which became known as “buffets.” The number of boards or shelves was often regulated—a high ranking duke was allowed five shelves, a mere gentleman only one. On these boards the family silver and food for the meal were displayed (the former much too valuable to be abused through use). The boards became the ancestors of our buffets and cupboards. Today we frown at a do-it-yourself buffet meal when we long to be served; or we love it for the speed with which the meal can be obtained and eaten—no tipping necessary!

Another interesting theme Visser traces is the use of fingers and the availability of serviettes. At one time people ate with their fingers, according to some a more creative way of eating than with a fork. This made for greasy, sticky, uncomfortable fingers. In ancient Rome each guest had two napkins, one tied around the neck and the other for wiping those greasy fingers. Later on napkins were nowhere in sight, and diners were expected to use the tablecloth to clean

their fingers. Licking fingers or wiping them on clothing, wrote Erasmus, was impolite. However, in Morocco, in 1905, finger licking was allowed, but only in the proper order—little finger first, then second, thumb, third and finally the first. By the early nineteenth century, napkins, about a yard square, were laid on the lap but never totally unfolded.

Napkins lost their practical use with the introduction of the fork, writes Visser; today serviettes are meant to be kept clean. And yet we would be surprised to find no serviettes at a banquet, frequently of colourful paper, folded as a decoration to enhance the table setting. History is still being made!

This is a book to read, lay aside for some time and then pick up again. No nail biting mysteries here, only an infinite number of details, too many to remember for very long without rereading. Here are a few:

*Tiny babies are encouraged by words and pats on the back to burp after nursing; later they learn that belching is certainly taboo.

*The powerful elite introduced forks for eating, instead of fingers, but common use of forks took hold only eight centuries later. The fork had to be seen in action and its advantages recognized. Then it had to be produced and sold in such quantities that people could afford it. Only then did it become a commonly-used utensil.

*“Pot luck” is a modern practice where everyone contributes food and with luck a good variety results. Originally, to be invited for “pot luck” meant a spur of the moment invitation to an informal family meal, taking a chance on what would be served.

*Both host and guest have power. The host decides who, when, where and what. The presence of guests forces the host to make sure the house is presentable, or even impressive, and the food satisfying. The well-mannered host treats guests as if they are honoring her by their presence, when in fact the meal she serves contributes generously to their well-being.

*Table manners dictate when one is allowed to begin eating. This is because every person should take time to acknowledge the first bite as different from any other bite. This is hard to do when one is hungry and the food is ready and waiting.

*Anthropologists list at least 132 main ways of sitting, only 30 of these involving anything resembling a chair. Chairs are constraining and in many societies are used only at formal occasions. In the west, sitting bolt upright and very still on a chair is a sign of decorum. At table it shows self-control and good will, obedience to the rules of correct etiquette.

*The first tablecloths were used in Rome. During the Middle Ages, to “share a cloth” meant that all guests were treated as equals to the host nobleman. The best cloths came from Damascus, Syria; hence our damask, pure white linen tablecloths. Table linen has always been a mark of wealth.

*Giovanni della Casa wrote in 1558: “There never was wind without rain.” Therefore, if your food is too hot, sit back and wait – never blow on the food.

Margaret Harder is a member of the Elmwood MB Church in Winnipeg. She is a retired teacher, and her manners are impeccable!

*“My food is to do the will
of him who sent me.”*

John 4:34 (NRSV)

