



The Big Lunch

Article by Wilma Kenny.

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Most weeks, during term time, Christians host a lunch, a big lunch, a very big lunch. There are no invitations, no dress code and no belief boxes to be ticked. The numbers of people who attend vary from 500–700 students and young people from all different cultures and backgrounds.

The event, which takes place in Fisherwick Presbyterian Church, is the result of the members' desire to reach out to the student population as they watched them walking past the church and not into it. This was over ten years ago.

Ruth Crawford and the team have remained faithful to feeding young people, many lonely, afraid or just plain hungry for some decent food.

The lunches started small, taking place during Fresher's Week, with 30 to 50 students turning up. In Zechariah we find the people of Judah discouraged at the laying of the foundation for a temple. Zechariah told them, "Who has despised the day of small things?"

The organisers had no idea this was just a small beginning. Over the years the lunches have evolved into a significant event. They see the gift of food as a symbol of Christ's grace and mercy.

Reverend Derek McKelvey, minister of Fisherwick church, explained this is the reason for not charging. The lunches are a symbol of God's free grace. David Cromie, youth and student worker, has been involved with the lunches for the past four years. He described the space as "open, mobile and accessible." The students can walk down the street from digs or lectures and come into the hall without feeling intimidated.

Some come with friends, others alone. Some want to chat, some want to simply have a nice lunch. Interns and volunteers such as Daniel Von Hoff, from the USA, sit with the students chatting and making themselves available for more personal conversation or prayer. Daniel

said, "There is a diversity of people from all cultures who come to the lunches - there are Erasmus students, Catholics, Protestants and other religions." Daniel would love more Christians to attend the lunches to make friends with the diners.

David said, "A small percentage of the students who come to the lunches decide to come to church but it's the long term legacy which is significant." One young person attended the lunches and many years later found himself in difficulty. He remembered the church where he had been given free lunches and looked to it for help. This is a typical scenario as deep relationships are formed through the lunches which would not be possible in another church setting. Those who do not profess to be Christian know there is help out there. Some of course may never join a church but the team hopes that a seed has been sown and someday they will remember the simple gesture of a free lunch.

David said, "We deliberately do not preach at the students. The hall would be empty if we did. Anyway, there would be no opportunity to talk if a message was given. It's all about relationship and conversation. Queen's can be a lonely place. We want to offer them friendship. Some want to be alone or sit with their friends. We try to be sensitive. We don't push the spiritual - the students will ask questions themselves." Once a year the lunch is moved into the main church building. This stimulates lots of questions, especially from students of different faith backgrounds as they wonder at the stain glass windows and beautiful ornate surroundings of the church.

Ruth Crawford and her team have remained consistent throughout the years. Ruth has been a member of the church all her life. She has seen many changes in the area but her vision for the students remains the same. She describes the initiative as a joint effort and describes the team as "dedicated and loyal." The team spends most of the morning organising the food. The students queue for their lunch - this moves swiftly and steadily as each student is given soup, a hot dog and some fruit. A vegetarian option is available for those of different cultures.

So many relationships and friendships are made through the student lunches at Fisherwick Presbyterian Church. This touches not only the students but mothers who have taken the time to write to the church to thank them for providing the service. There is one notable relationship which was the result of a meeting at the lunches. This is the marriage of Gareth and Hannah Hooks, two hard-working medics.

Most of the stories will never be told or return to the helpers in the kitchen and at the tables. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree" (Matthew 13).

Jesus indeed takes and grows the small things and uses them for His good and the good of man. Oh, and by the way, there is such a thing as a free lunch.