

Food and Faith

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Food is important—everyone eats. Food plays some role in religious life for most faith communities, whether that means a church social hour, a covered-dish supper, or the worship of a corn deity. In the southern region of the United States, you might hear about “dinner on the grounds.” Earlier generations spent entire days at church. People might travel nineteen to twenty miles by horse and buggy to get there. When the worship service or meeting ended, there was no time to get home to eat. Church members made a big meal to share and brought it with them to eat outside. (People in the past often called the midday meal *dinner*. *Supper* was a lighter evening meal.)

Several Protestant denominations are particularly associated with having dinner on the grounds: Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist, Primitive Baptist, and Church of God. Even in the early 1900s, many rural congregations held dinner on the grounds every Sunday. First came the preaching service, followed by dinner outside, and the day often ended with singing, games, visiting, and more eating. Today churches may celebrate homecoming, revivals, or rituals and special occasions, such as baby baptisms or weddings, with food. Sadder events like funerals may include a meal shared after the service. Some churches still include meals in a day of worship, but it is rare to see people eating outside. Many churches have built fellowship halls. These halls allow an indoor version of dinner on the grounds. Members can eat in air-conditioning, and rain never cancels the meal!

Some religions and religious denominations in North Carolina celebrate their beliefs with food and fellowship. Moravians, for example, celebrate the lovefeast, which is held in connection with Christmas, New Year’s, and Easter. This ritual also is held on other days of significance, such as church anniversaries. At the lovefeast, each person receives a large, flat yeast bun or a piece of cake, and a mug of coffee containing cream and sugar. This simple meal is symbolic of the fellowship of the church. It suggests that those who break bread together become much like a family. Catholics celebrate the Feast of the Assumption on August 15. The feast includes foods made with wheat, special breads, fresh herbs, and vegetables and fruits such as eggplant, melons, or grapes.

Some faiths place restrictions on certain foods for religious purposes, and these restrictions shape their members’ foodways. In Judaism, pork and shellfish should not be eaten, and meat and dairy products should not be mixed. Wherever they are in the world, Jews who observe these practices adapt their local foods to the limitations. Muslims celebrate the Islamic New Year on March 15. They celebrate with eggs, sugared almonds, other nuts, and candy. Religious beliefs also instruct Muslims to avoid alcohol, pork, meat-eating animals and birds, donkeys, monkeys, and elephants. Members of the Hindu faith do not eat beef or pork, and many observe a totally

vegetarian lifestyle.

Different faith communities may have other food traditions—ranging from special foods eaten in celebration to fasting or giving up certain foods—that are tied to certain times of the year, such as Passover, Lent, Ramadan, or Diwali. Can you name any of these traditions? How have you seen food play a role in religious life?

**At the time of this article's publication, Suzanne Mewborn served as the program coordinator for the Tar Heel Junior Historian Association at the North Carolina Museum of History.*