

Growing numbers say diet must reflect the divine

G. Jeffrey MacDonald Religion News Service | Sep. 4, 2008

When Marilyn Lorenz of Alma, Mich., talks about living out her Catholic faith in daily life, she starts by describing what's inside her refrigerator.

The produce is grown on nearby farms, and the milk is organic and hormone-free. Meat comes from a local farmer who lets his animals graze freely and doesn't use antibiotics.

"Packing animals in factory farms, I think, is against God's wishes," says Lorenz, who changed her shopping and eating habits after a speaker at her parish broached the issues in 2007. "It isn't something my faith could ever support."

In bringing faith to bear anew on diet, Lorenz is among a growing movement of believers from various traditions who are exploring how to better reflect their moral values in the ways they eat. A few examples:

- In Pennsylvania, the Laurelville Mennonite Church Center's annual conference on sustainable farming was just for farmers when it started five years ago, but this year attracted non-farmers from more than 40 Mennonite congregations in five states.
- Three congregations in Clemson, S.C., teamed up for the first time this summer to host dinners featuring local foods, host workshops on eco-friendly eating, and launch "Upstate Locavores," a regional group to promote local food sourcing.
- Methodists in North Carolina, Congregationalists in Massachusetts and Catholics in Michigan have in the past year started organic gardens on church property in part to encourage consumption of foods grown without pesticides or chemically based fertilizers.
- In June, Conservative Jewish lay leaders and rabbis proposed new guidelines for ensuring high ethical standards in kosher food production under a new label, the "Hekhsher Tzedek."

Thinking of diet in religious terms is, of course, hardly new. Jews and Muslims have long followed kosher and halal codes respectively in order to maintain purity. Though Christians generally haven't required year-round dietary codes, fasting and abstaining from certain foods have traditionally been important in certain seasons, such as Lent.

For many congregations, today's initiatives are tackling new terrain. The faithful discuss how God might want them to eat in light of new research on health, working conditions in food supply chains, and environmental crises.

In the process, they're learning new ways to model the values they profess -- and to tread lightly when seeking converts.

Consider, for instance, the challenge facing James Patterson, pastor of Institute Church of the Nazarene in

Institute, W.V., who now believes he's accountable to God for both the spiritual and physical health of his predominantly African-American congregation, where one in four parishioners suffers from either diabetes or high blood pressure.

Patterson encourages followers to honor their bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit by shunning fried food, as he tries to do, but is careful not to suggest an inherent link between a God-pleasing diet and one that's beyond many people's budgets.

"Poor people really can't afford all the things that are necessary for healthy eating, even if they can get a ride or catch a bus down to the farmer's market," Patterson said. "So it isn't as simple as just saying, 'this is going to be our ministry philosophy' and going with that. You have to know who your congregation is and how much they can actually afford."

Elsewhere, proponents of diet discipleship are figuring out how much eco-friendly eating they can preach without ruffling a flock's feathers. In Newbury, Mass., First Parish Church allows a local organic farmer to distribute vegetable harvests on the premises every Friday, and individual plots in the church's new community garden must be treated with organic products.

But the idea of replacing First Parish's monthly ham and bean supper with a locally sourced, organic feast wasn't going to fly with some of the church's longtime members.

"We'll have an organic or vegetarian dish at the community suppers, said deacon Erin Stack, "but we honor people in the congregation who say, 'I'm making the ham and beans. That's what works for me.'"

In North Carolina, a faction at Fuquay-Varina United Methodist Church tried to stop a plan to turn most of a ball field into a 7,500-square-foot organic garden. Now the congregation's gardeners, who call their work "a Christian practice," invite former naysayers to partake of the bounty at a seasonal picnic.

Picnickers follow one rule -- no meat allowed -- in order to focus gratitude for what the garden gives as nourishment. This year, about 250 of 800 worshippers stuck around after the Sunday service for homegrown tomato sandwiches.

"By just having (the garden) out there, we hope that when people come to church on Sunday, they may be thinking, 'Oh, maybe some garden-fresh food would be good to eat today,'" said parishioner Christine Burtner. She says farming with chemical fertilizers "is not honoring the land because you're killing off the biology that's there."

Despite hurdles, mission-minded eaters aren't giving up on neighbors who don't seem to share their passions.

Since last November, Jewish Vegetarians of North America has given away almost 20,000 copies of a new DVD, "A Sacred Duty: Applying Jewish Values to Help Heal the World," which promotes vegetarianism as an antidote to environmental and moral crises. The challenge now, says President Richard Schwartz, is to get his fellow Jews to stop "dodging the issue."

"If they really took seriously Jewish values -- on compassion for animals, taking care of our health, protecting the environment, conserving natural resources and helping the hungry -- (they would see) it all points to vegetarianism," Schwartz says.

Source URL (retrieved on 05/27/2017 - 12:37): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/growing-numbers-say-diet-must-reflect-divine>