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I have fond memories as a child growing up in the church, and I especially enjoyed the carry-in dinners after worship. Families would gather and eat, and then while our parents sat around and talked, we kids would run around the church, exploring every nook and cranny of the building.

During the meal, it was always an adventure to taste the different kinds of foods, but I always aimed for my favorites—especially the green bean casserole. You know the one—with mushroom sauce and crispy French-fried onions scattered on the top. Even today I enjoy making this casserole for certain occasions, such as Thanksgiving or other family gatherings.

Did you know the Green Bean Casserole was originally called Green Bean Bake and it had its 65<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2020? It was invented by Dorcas Reilly in Campbell's Test Kitchen in 1955 and is now served at 20 million Thanksgiving dinners every year.<sup>1</sup> It's a shared experience of a meal for many Americans, something that brings us together in a common tasty treat, a tradition that unites us as one people.

There's something about a casserole that I love—the blending of different kinds of foods into one dish:

from hamburger and French fries, to baked beans or corn. You name it, there's probably a casserole recipe for it. If you Google *casserole recipes*, websites offer lists of the 50 best ones, 75, or even 120 favorite casserole recipes. You could make a different casserole every week for over a year!

How many of you have ever tasted a casserole at a church dinner? That seems to be something we have in common in the church—casseroles. Maybe we could call ourselves a casserole church—a group composed of many different kinds and colors of people, with various tastes, a variety of theological and political views, numerous thoughts about social and justice issues—and yet, we are united in one large casserole dish. Some from St. Joseph County, others from Elkhart County, and some from outside either of these counties. Some worship in person, some listen on the radio, and others watch online. And yet, we're one church, for we all have something in common—our faith in Jesus Christ, who has shown us what God is like:

- a God of welcome and hospitality,
- a God of love and inclusion,

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- a God who longs for peace and justice,
- a God who has moved within history for much longer than we can imagine,
- a God who has created a mysterious and marvelous universe
- a God who offers healing and hope in a fragmented world.

Even though we have so much in common, throughout the history of the past two thousand years, the church has not always been united in thought or action. Differences of opinions have led to arguments and divisions within the church. Some have suggested that the way to be a united church is to go back to the beginning, to create a church like the one portrayed in the Bible.

Luke recorded stories in the Book of Acts about the beginning of the church movement, how the apostles experienced the presence of God's Spirit on Pentecost and how they went into the streets and began telling others about Jesus. Luke wrote how early church members "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." That sounds a bit like our church today,

doesn't it? Teaching in Sunday school, having prayer, breaking bread during communion, and even gathering for fellowship events, though I don't know if they had casseroles back then.

The description sounds good, but wait, there's more: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

Have all things in common? Sell everything and distribute the money to everyone in need? How many of us are willing to follow that church guideline? What if we added that guideline to our church bylaws?

Having in common our shared experience of casseroles is one thing, but having everything else in common? I'm not sure that will go well today. Some have suggested that the picture Luke offered of the early church was idealized, not realistic, for they had their problems too. For example, just a few chapters later in Acts, we read of two people who sold a piece of property and kept a portion of the money for themselves. When the apostles confronted them about their dishonesty and greed, the couple dropped dead.

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We also read about people being imprisoned for sharing their faith. Are these experiences we want to have in common with the early church?

One commentary noted about this early snapshot of the church about sharing all things in common,

It would be easy to dismiss this passage as having any sort of significant demands for our contemporary congregations and communities of faith. After all, the entire description seems rather idyllic, a utopian Christian community living an ideal beyond our practical grasps.<sup>2</sup>

Since the vision is not practical, we may dismiss it altogether, ignoring the possibility of how God might invite us to live together. On our own, we could never match the ideals portrayed in the Book of Acts, but with God's Spirit, we might recognize what we *do* have in common and learn to live a bit differently by caring for one another in the church, by caring for those outside the church.

I think we've been doing a pretty good job of that, don't you? Our two churches have come together as

one church, sharing many things, getting along, offering hospitality. I haven't heard one argument about "that's not the way we've always done it" or "that's my stuff and you can't use it." We really do have all things in common.

We've also increased our outreach giving, both with our monetary gifts and by giving requested items to local agencies in Elkhart and St. Joseph Counties. As people outside our churches have asked about how we're doing worshipping together and engaging in outreach, when I report on how well our transition has gone, they are utterly amazed at what we're doing together.

In some ways, we've become a casserole church—blending together our differences, our similarities, our hopes and dreams, our green beans and mushroom soup, with a sprinkling of French-fried onions on top, held together in our faith in Jesus Christ, who really does make us one.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.campbellsoupcompany.com/newsroom/campbell-history/10-things-you-didnt-know-about-green-bean-casserole/#>

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<sup>2</sup> KAROLINE M. LEWIS, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Pentecost*