

TASTE & READ

The
Christian
Century

Dear friend,

I recently spoke to Joy Ann McDougall, a systematic theologian at Candler School of Theology, who shared a story about a student's ministry project in Johnstown, New York, with holistic community care at its core. Laurie Garramone, affectionately known to her parishioners at St. John's Episcopal Church as Mother Laurie, launched [One Street Church](#) on this simple yet profound premise: nourishing community in body, mind, and spirit.

According to OCS's website, one in four families in their area experiences food insecurity. Food insecurity varies in severity, but it always involves economic and social conditions that lead to limited or uncertain access to nourishing food. With the help of St. John's leadership, a decade-long planning process and capital campaign, and a host of committed volunteers, OCS blossomed into a community hub that offers programs like a free choice food pantry, free NOAH (Needy or Alone and Hungry) meals, and a diabetes management workshop called Food as Medicine.

In response to her students' enthusiasm and drive to address the challenges wrought by hunger and food injustice in her community, McDougall wrote the following reflection about the impact of Garramone's work:

Mother Laurie entered the doctor of ministry program at Candler in 2021 with the intent to deepen the theological vision and expand the community outreach of One Church Street. Although St. John's was well-known as the food church, many community residents were unaware of the hunger and food injustice issues plaguing the area. How could the larger Johnstown community learn about the OCS resources and build a sense of deeper community connection to their ministries?

Laurie's answer: One Table, a communal dinner table where local residents were invited to eat together and learn about hunger, food injustice, and nourishment. The plan was this: Over three successive weeks, three different groups of community leaders, farmers, and business owners gathered for conversation over a common meal. The dinner invitation card was clear: "One conversation. One meal. One community."

Laurie's vision for One Table was profoundly theological and ingeniously simple. Bringing people around a common table, specifically a dinner table, provided an experiential bridge to the fellowship that the folks at the NOAH meal enjoyed each week. And so, One Table was staged in the same place where the NOAH guests had their meal. The community members used the same place settings as the Sunday meal guests. They saw the outdated basement facilities and the poorly laid-out kitchen; they experienced firsthand the difficulty of navigating the steep stairway, which prevented people with mobility issues from attending the NOAH meals. One Table was both ordinary and extraordinary, reminiscent of the many meals where Jesus sat at tables and broke bread. Regardless of status, all participants were welcome to eat at One Table.

Mother Laurie coined the term "theology of nourishment" to describe One Table's vision for her community. She saw the way the whole person can suffer

from malnourishment in their relationship with God and food. Consequently, food and nourishment are integral to relationship with God, the giver of all good gifts. “When those good gifts are not equitably available to all,” Mother Laurie said, “the whole person and the community are undernourished. A theology of nourishment helps us to understand the providence of God through receiving not just adequate calories, but delicious and nutritious food.”

One Table and OCS seek to break the cycle of what Laurie calls the “upstairs-downstairs” mentality of many church communities. In good faith, churches open soup kitchens and food pantries for those in need, but all too rarely do the church members enjoy the feast with their brothers and sisters. Such outreach efforts, however well-intended, create separation rather than community. The sheer fact that the NOAH meal is served to this day in St. John’s basement rather than above ground underscores the dividing line between parishioners in the sanctuary and neighbors who are eating a meal downstairs. OCS, with its new facility and greater visibility to the community at large, was intended to overcome that separation.

For church leaders, OCS is a testament to what a small parish can do when it commits itself to meeting the urgent needs of its neighbors head on. Rather than focusing its resources solely on self-preservation, St. John’s, a church with an annual operating budget of \$240,000, took a leap of faith and flung its doors open to the wider community. The theology of nourishment that guides OCS witnesses to God’s providence through food, relationships, hospitality, and **personal agency**. OCS provides a wholeness of sustenance and a theology of hope rooted in the scriptures: “Feed the hungry and help those in trouble. Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon” (Is. 58:10-12).

In my conversation with McDougall, in addition to learning about the beauty unfolding in Johnstown I was also reminded of the growing field of theologians,

writers, journalists, seminarians, clergy, farmers, laypeople, activists, and more who are approaching food justice with focused, heartfelt, and tenacious attention.

Have you read any books lately related to food justice? [Email me to let me know](#)—I'd love to add to my "to be read" pile and share resources with other Taste & Read subscribers.

See you at the table,
Jasmin

**More food
for thought**





In this video clip, Mother Laurie gives an overview of One Church Street's journey.