

# The Best Education Happens around the Table: Four Decades of “Mennonite Dinner” in Wheaton, Illinois

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## Introduction: Welcome to Mennomeal

Last year marked the fortieth year of more than 1,200 weekly dinners that Wheaton College emeriti faculty Sharon Coolidge Ewert and Norman Ewert have held in their home every week that the college is in session.<sup>1</sup> With invitations by word of mouth and open to all, each Thursday night between 40 and 100 students and a few others gather for a home-cooked meal that Norm and Sharon prepare. They sit around a long table in a two-story, plant-filled solarium and up a staircase in a house that Norm and Sharon designed and built themselves to host this weekly event. Student attendees have dubbed it “Mennonite Dinner” or “Mennomeal,” but Norm and Sharon simply call it “Thursday Dinner.” Entering the home, students chat with other guests while in line for a buffet attended by their hosts in matching aprons. Following Norm’s welcome and introduction of the evening’s “special guest” speaker, prayer by a student or visitor, and Sharon’s listing of the full menu, attendees select their food before finding seats, mostly within view of the special guest.

As students eat and eventually pass smaller plates of dessert throughout the room, the guest will speak from their own experience, often on themes that are less commonly raised on the campus of the well-known US Evangelical<sup>2</sup> institution just a block away: socioeconomic or political marginalization, pacifism, justice, a faith-motivated lifestyle of hospitality and simplicity, Christian commitment to nonviolence, and the value of international service work. Special guests have included Latin American theologians and Palestinian health administrators, the Archbishop of Canterbury and African pastors, Wheaton College faculty and administrators, Nepali environmental activists and church leaders engaged in reconciliation work in their home regions of Rwanda as well as nearby Chicago. Following a short presentation, students ask questions of the speakers, and many linger afterward for individual conversations. In beginning- or end-of-year personal introductions, participants clearly express the meaning of this dinner to them as a place and time of formative learning, qualitatively different from their educational experiences in the college classroom. This paper examines what we call the “table pedagogy” of Mennonite Dinner, focusing on the generative elements of the ritual practices that comprise this weekly gathering.

### **Methodology: Observing Participants at the Table**

This paper is the first in a series, drawing upon several years of participant observation in the Thursday evening dinners, as well as ethnographic interviews with hosts and participants from various eras. It sets forth the Mennonite Dinner’s background, and as such draws primarily from interviews with the hosts and participant observation during 2019. As with most research projects, this one embarked from a blend of personal interests, trusting relationships, and intellectual curiosity, along with a bit of serendipity. Before undertaking the more formal process of researching the Mennonite Dinner, we both had regularly attended the gathering since 2014, sometimes accompanied by our immediate families; moreover, we were “special guests” on different occasions. Our shared scholarly interests in experiential learning and participatory forms of pedagogy directed us to wonder about the sort of learning that occurred as students gathered at the home each week. At the same time, we were simply struck by the longevity of the gathering, and we wanted to learn more from Norm and Sharon, who are also faculty colleagues, about why they started and continued to sustain the dinner. Accordingly, we began the project

as fairly immersed participants and, therefore, had to consider how best to proceed in becoming “observing participants,” meaning researchers who study a group to which they already belong (Kirner and Mills 2020, 71). That we were familiar with many of the dinner participants, and at ease with the mood and ordinary rhythms of the dinner, meant that we could move quickly to explore our primary research questions. However, our “native status” in the gathering was no guarantee that we had a “clear or accurate understanding” of the cultural patterns and social forms enacted by dinner participants (Naaeke et al. 2011, 156).<sup>3</sup> This required us to be mindful of the assumptions we had formed along the way about the significance of the gathering, and to remain open to the likelihood that other guests attached different meanings to it.

We began by inquiring with Sharon and Norm, who both supported the idea of carefully documenting the dinner routines and of speaking with students and other guests about their participation. Moreover, they expressed genuine interest in learning about what guests thought about the dinner, and were hopeful that our observations would shed light for them on what promotes the dinner’s learning. We organized our data collection efforts around a handful of related tasks. First, we took careful field notes of our weekly participation in the meal and of the routines, dialogue, and interactions of others present. We focused our repeated observation on documenting specific activities. These included the pre-dinner preparation practices, the serving of the food, the meal itself (with a particular focus on the interactions that occurred among dinner guests and with the special guest speaker), and the dismissal and post-dinner routines. Second, we interviewed the hosts, Norm and Sharon, and began conducting interviews with current students and alumni who regularly attended the dinner. Our interviews and open-ended, informal conversations with Norm and Sharon generated much of the content considered in this discussion. Future work will develop a more comprehensive and systematic analysis of the significance of Mennonite Dinners for regular participants, namely undergraduate students, alumni, and faculty/staff guests.

As we balanced our plates and field notebooks, we were rarely the only note-takers at the table or in adjacent spaces, as some students come to the table carrying the tools of the student learner. Our pre-existing relational embeddedness in Mennonite Dinner, as well as occupying a research space with many people we knew well, challenged us to be attentive to how our own different backgrounds and positions affected our observations and interpretations. While one of us (LMY) recognized names, institutional references, or broader Mennonite cultural-historical phenomena unfa-

miliar to the other, the other (JGH) drew on years of ethnographic work especially attuned to how religious actors (e.g., Pentecostal Christians) enact and deploy rituals beyond the confines of their own familiar religious and social networks (Huff 2016). This mix of eclectic cultural insider know-how and research experience proved beneficial. For example, it enabled us to quickly enter into conversations with Norm and Sharon and other participants about shared experiences (e.g., familiar Mennonite practices and dinner routines). At the same time, it reminded us to be careful to not take for granted the meaning of the discourse and practices we observed, and to regularly seek further explanation from research participants about seemingly familiar phenomena (Suwankhong and Liamputtong 2015, 4-5).

### **History and Purpose**

“It was really an accident, quite frankly” is how Norm and Sharon explain how Mennonite Dinners began. While this may be literally true, this reply also foregrounds characteristic elements of Mennonite Dinner which can contrast to the classroom: it is deliberately informal and non-strategic in its evolution, structurally defying an agenda determined by a central authority. The best special guests are comfortable with minimal pre-programming; the hosts prefer short, unpolished, and open-ended presentations; they come receptive to honest, authentic conversation about how they have grappled with difficult or confusing realities.<sup>4</sup> Dialogue around sincere questions is prized; verbose special guests who talk at students are not invited back. While there are no specific learning outcomes, Norm articulates their theme in the time together as responding to the question, What is the nature of Christian responsibility in the context of the global church? noting that this leads to discussions of stewardship, justice, war, and peace.

Since its beginning, the dinner centred around hospitality and student curiosity. Norm Ewert’s first experience with Mennonite Dinner was as a guest, in his sixth year as Economics faculty. In 1978, several students asked three Mennonite World Conference (MWC) staff women, living temporarily a block from the current Ewert home, about Mennonite identity and perspectives. The women invited the students over for Sunday dinner and conversation, and after several weeks, they invited Norm to join the group of about ten to fifteen students. When the hosting MWC staff moved in 1979, Norm continued to host the dinner in his own home, with some food provided briefly by his congregation, Lombard

Mennonite Church (LMC). Mid-way through that academic year, Sharon (then in her second year as English faculty) met Norm, and she began helping him with the dinner (noting wryly, “I should have known . . .”). They co-hosted at Norm’s house for an academic year, eventually marrying in June 1980 and moving into Sharon’s small 900-square-foot house one block west of the college’s administrative building, where they still reside.

Growing up in rural Mountain Lake, Minnesota, among a large Mennonite Brethren farming family that migrated there from Russia in 1874, Norm was well accustomed to a frequent flow of missionaries and international visitors gathering around extended tables for conversations involving international communities and a range of circumstances; several dozen of his extended Ewert family have done church service through the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Sharon grew up mostly in Elgin, Illinois, part of a non-denominational evangelical church with her family that did not have many guests around the table, so it was initially a stretching experience for her to regularly host growing numbers of people for weekly dinners. Like many people who find their ways from Mennonite cooking to Mennonite churches (Bailey-Dick 2005; Trollinger 2007; Epp 2012b), Sharon’s introduction to Mennonites (via Norm) came squarely within the context of the food and fellowship of shared cooking and eating, a practice noted as widespread for expressing cultural identity and for bridging diverse Mennonite communities and other religious groups (Epp 2012a; Waltner 2018). Mennonite Dinner main dishes are in roughly equal frequency typical US Midwestern foods or internationally inspired recipes amenable to serving a crowd.<sup>5</sup> The only food reflecting the Ewert family heritage is the *Zwieback*—a two-part yeast bread roll—served several Thursdays throughout the year and which Norm and Sharon regularly make in great quantities for other church-related events.<sup>6</sup>

Hosting the weekly dinners came to make practical demands on their lives. Their house and dinners grew and formed around each other and the changing rhythms of life. Both of them developed impressive construction skills, and started expanding their relatively small house immediately upon marriage, eventually adding a full second story and the 21-foot solarium which since 1983 has housed Mennonite Dinner. House additions and remodels took the dinner into consideration. Sharon and Norm extended the south railing and floor 16 inches one summer to provide more space for the foldable tables (which Norm built for the dinner), created a buffet line peninsula where a kitchen-dining room wall used to be, used materials of light commercial duty quality, chose an oven and

refrigerators sized to suit their unique cooking and storage needs, and put large plants on wheeled stands to accommodate the weekly solarium rearrangement.<sup>7</sup> For four decades, the preparation and hosting of the dinner has been integral to their weekly schedule and to their own relationship: Monday menu planning;<sup>8</sup> Tuesday shopping at several stores, sometimes splitting the list in two and each gathering the necessary ingredients from different areas of the store; Wednesday preparation and cooking; and Thursday serving. They note that “from the beginning, it was a commitment of both of us . . . we always did [the shopping] together, and the prep work, and the clean-up. It was a joint effort. [Otherwise] it would be too much.” While Sharon tends to plan, organize, and bake, Norm chops ingredients and oversees the crock pots; both men and women students and others become their helpers and conversation partners for set-up and clean-up.

After their first son was born in 1983, both parents and their baby would sit with the students around the table and have conversation, around whatever topics the dozen or so students wanted to talk about. Three developments happened during the 1980s. First, the dinner switched from Sundays to Thursdays, to accommodate the weekly preparation demands of two busy professor-parents. Second, the students wanted to do something to support the MCC relief sales that raise funds for international programs. Norm and Sharon quipped that since neither one could quilt they decided to use what knowledge, materials, and connections they had, sharing their construction skills and scrap lumber left over from building their own house to make dollhouses, barns, and related pieces. Some of the dinner attendees then helped build and finish these items in the solarium space once plates were cleared after the meal. In this process, several Mennonite students made helpful contributions: two from a contractor family and one with links to a lead MCC relief sale auctioneer in southern Illinois were instrumental in building dollhouses from plans and in getting them sold.<sup>9</sup> Third, the open conversation had a brief foray into a book study, but at some point after 1990—neither Norm nor Sharon can remember exactly when or how this became regular<sup>10</sup>—they started having the “special guests” who would focus and lead the conversation, the asking and answering of questions among all present. The student numbers gradually grew from the initial dozen or so students to fill the larger solarium space available, with about 15–20 students in 1990. From the outset, attendees often included a few with Mennonite heritage, but it was always open to all with interest in the dinner’s central themes. Some students and faculty arrange their schedules to permit weekly attendance; others attend

irregularly, or even just a few times over the course of their college years. From 2015 to 2019 (140 Thursdays), Norm's records (based on dinner plate usage) show that attendance ranged from 25 to 125, averaging 56 eaters per week.

Norm and Sharon downplay the foods' religious and cultural meaning often foregrounded in studies of Mennonite hospitality and communal eating, saying that the food itself matters but is "only a vehicle" for the gathering and conversation that occurs around the table.<sup>11</sup> While stating that having food draws students to the dinner (though some attend but do not eat), Sharon and Norm themselves do not articulate the importance of communal eating, though they note that having food is integral to building community from preparation through eating and cleaning up. Instead, to offer interpretation they point to two frequent special guest theologians who have often discussed with students the ritual significance of breaking bread together at the dinner as a theologically meaningful act of Christian discipleship: Dr. George Kalantzis, a Greek Wheaton College theology professor who regularly attends and leads student reflection, and South American theologian, Dr. René Padilla, a leading figure in developing Latin American evangelical theology and published scholarship over the past half century.

As Norm and Sharon describe the dinner's history and character, student initiative is a clear theme. As dinner guests, students also have an active role to play. This included their role in the after-dinner construction projects, but also in sharing recipes and critically in the asking of questions. Norm and Sharon well recall the details of individual students from decades back who returned home from international studies and wished to introduce a favourite new dish to the Thursday night dinners. In a pedagogical inversion, students would work side-by-side with Sharon, demonstrating and teaching her to make *ugali* cornmeal mush, the African curry which is now a regular Mennonite Dinner staple, and other dishes that required adjusting spices and ingredients to those available in Wheaton. One student "sat here in my kitchen and made it, and kept adding spices [until it tasted right], and I kept adding them up, and we wrote up that recipe together." Every week, they earnestly hope for "good questions," which are heartfelt, honest, and authentic for both guests and students.<sup>12</sup>

### Sustaining a Table Pedagogy

What makes possible such honest and authentic engagements? To explore this question, we consider the weekly dinner as a “community of practice” (Wenger 1999) wherein hosts and guests regularly gather and enact a diverse collection of interconnected rituals. We make use of Collins’ (2004) work on interaction ritual chains to examine and make sense of the rituals that dinner participants ordinarily perform. According to Collins, an interaction ritual has four primary “ingredients,” which include: (1) the physical gathering of two or more people in the same place, so that “they affect each other by their bodily presence,” (2) the existence of boundaries that delineate who is and who is not a participant, (3) the directing of participant “attention upon a common object or activity, and by communicating this focus to each other become mutually aware of each other’s focus of attention,” and (4) the sharing of a common mood or emotional experience by participants (2004, 48).

While Collins’ notion of ritual overlaps with ideas generated by various “traditions of ritual analysis,” including contributions made by anthropologists, it is also one that is firmly rooted in the “microsociological” legacies of Durkheim and Goffman, and contrasts in important ways with how anthropologists have ordinarily used the concept (Collins 2004, 7–9). His limited (i.e., micro) construal of ritual usefully offers a model for understanding how “solidarity and shared symbolism are produced by interaction in small groups” (Collins 2004, 14). Recent anthropological work on global Pentecostalism has used Collins’ interaction ritual chains to ascertain why Pentecostal Christians are so adept at producing and sustaining institutions, “even in situations where material resources are so scarce that few other institutions survive” (Robbins 2009, 62). The generative dimensions of the various interaction rituals that comprise the dinner event are of special interest to our inquiry. We find Collins’ notion especially useful for making sense of how the mundane activities that make up the Thursday dinner generate an “emotional energy” (Robbins 2009, 62) that participants find rewarding. We turn now to detail the different ingredients of the interaction rituals we observed.

There are a number of routines in which guests participate each week that orient bodily copresence. The first of these is the removal of guests’ shoes near the main entrance. As the 5:30 p.m. start time approaches, one can usually find a small group of two or three people bending over or squatting near the close-quartered entryway to remove and add their shoes to an ever-growing pile. It



is also not unusual to see one person helping another (e.g., placing a hand on another's shoulder to balance) with this simple task. After this, guests typically find a place in line to wait with others. Most weeks, one line forms and winds its way from the entryway, through the living room, wrapping around the kitchen table holding dinner plates and salads, to the start of the buffet. Large gatherings often necessitate dividing the line—which on occasion extends through the dining room and out the door—in two so that guests can get their food efficiently and be seated quickly. The food line is also a mundane practice that orients copresence. While in line people readily greet one another and begin conversations. The food line itself is a chain of mini-gatherings, usually comprised of guest-pairs who are engaged in casual conversation with people they know. Queuing is also a practice whereby strangers meet and introduce themselves, in ways that do not normally occur when waiting to enter the college cafeteria, for example. Guests typically spend the first ten minutes of the dinner engaged in practices that orient their bodies and attention towards one another. The Ewert home is a relatively quiet place at 5:15 p.m., save the sounds of a few people cooking, setting out dishes and food, and cleaning in the kitchen. Fifteen minutes later the soundscape of the space is remarkably transformed, with 40 or more people assembling to wait in line and engaging in informal, convivial conversation.

Other such activities of physical copresence are enacted as the gathering continues. Guests move through the line to fill their plates with food; they join with familiar and unfamiliar others around the table, on the stairs, or in the living room to begin eating and to wait for the “special guest(s)” to share.<sup>13</sup> Near the end of the meal people voluntarily assist Sharon in distributing desserts by passing among guests. Upon dismissal, guests crowd the kitchen space as each person individually removes dishes, with each student carrying plates, utensils, and cups to the kitchen sink. A handful of guests stay after dinner to disassemble tables and to rearrange solarium plants and furniture. These are familiar activities to guests who regularly attend. They are routines that begin and end at predictable intervals. So even as the dinner is a relatively informal event, it is also a coordinated activity that orients participants towards a “high degree of mutual focus and shared emotion” (Collins 2004, 50). The formation of a table pedagogy is directed in part by what Norm and Sharon intend. But it is also an emergent practice that takes shape dynamically as student-guests focus on one another through the oft-repeated routines of conversing in line,

sharing food on the stairs, and enacting the many other micro-gatherings of the event.

Notably, Collins' sociology of gatherings concentrates on the bodily interactions that human actors have with one another. Our observations of the dinner, along with participant interview findings, directed us to also consider another set of practices of copresence, namely, those occurring between people and plants. The "solarium," as Norm and Sharon call it, is a space filled from floor to ceiling with scores of house plants and small trees. Flora of various shapes and sizes completely surrounds the main dinner table where participants gather together. Being present with and among plants in the space was memorable for many of the students we interviewed. One alumnus, for example, shared:

When I look back on this Mennonite experience, it is more about the presence and the attentiveness, the attentiveness to the food. Dr. Coolidge and Dr. Ewert, they make this food. Such delicious [food], and not mass-produced food at all. Great food. So the attentiveness to the food, the attentiveness to the speaker, and the quiet listening. And, obviously, the vegetation—you are almost in an indoor garden.

Another alumnus explained why he regularly attended the dinner:

I came for the speakers, and I stayed for the plants, and the light, and the food, especially the curry. And the, like, you know, ambiance of human voices around me. Kind of like this bubbly, warm, very alive atmosphere. And all of those things contributing to a lively space. A lively, sacred space.

For both of these graduates being present with others—including both human and non-human others—engendered feelings and attachments that made the dinner gathering all the more meaningful.

In addition to enacting these routines of bodily copresence, dinner guests engage in a range of communicative practices that focus their attention and generate a shared mood. Shortly after guests sit down and begin to eat, Norm stands at one end of the main table and calls the guests to order. His invitation begins with a soft, slow clap, and then he proceeds, "Well folks, if I could have your attention." It is a notably subdued signal. And it is not uncommon for another guest to shout or whistle to quiet the crowd. Once the table talk is quieted, Norm briefly identifies the invited guest for the coming week. He continues, "We're delighted to have a very special guest with us here this evening." From time to time he invites another person at the table to introduce the guest. But on most occasions Norm begins with a brief, two- to three-sentence

introduction. A similar introduction is performed for every “special guest,” and it usually involves identifying who they are and where they are from, and offering a short statement about the work they do. Norm’s restrained manner of calling guests to order requires participants to quiet themselves and to listen carefully. Sharon noted, “Norm always stands there with his foot [resting] on the wall, but he’s not really in charge.” Hosts and guests alike come to this space open to the generative, unscripted conversations that will occur.

Norm initiates another key practice after the special guest’s opening remarks. At a September 2019 dinner when the CEO of Peace and Hope International, Dr. Nina Balmaceda, ended her short talk, Norm queried, “I wonder if anyone has a question they would like to ask Dr. Balmaceda?” Usually Norm’s invitation is followed by a moment of quiet. It passes as soon as someone, usually a student, raises a hand to draw the attention of the guest. This practice of inviting table guests to pose a question is fundamentally important for Norm and Sharon. They explained to us the significance of the question-asking by contrasting it with the kinds of conversations that they had with students in the courses they taught.

Jamie: You see [the students] in the classroom, and then you see them here. Same? Different?

Sharon: I taught medieval English . . . so the questions in the classroom were more academic kinds of questions. Here you can see those same students interacting in a different way, you see their passions, the things that matter to them in a way that I couldn’t see in the classroom. I do think that it’s a lot more integrative here, though. Because there are direct implications of their conversations.

As Sharon and Norm see it, the dinner gathering is to be a space where guests learn how to ask questions, a practice they hope that students will continue after they graduate. Norm explained:

Now an analogy that’s definitely not Anabaptist. What I’ve said over the years is that I like to plant little bomblets in people’s heads, that have a delayed fuse, and that eventually they go off, asking the kinds of questions that I think people need to be asking, and I think that our guests here on Thursday nights help plant some of those little bomblets in a sense. It’s not that all the time, but there’s an element of that.

They hope special guests will help students examine something with depth and nuance, not simplistic answers.

This practice of question-asking, and of patterned interaction between special guest and other table guests, is considered by Sharon and Norm to be an ideal use of time and fellowship. The table pedagogy, then, implies a certain kind of “participation structure” (Carlsen 1991) whereby all guests are to take part in shared discourse that follows certain ground rules. Among these is the preference that students play an active role in determining what gets talked about at the table. Notably, it is through the practice of question-asking that the student-guests have an opportunity to define “the way in which the [special guest] is to continue with the conversation and thus defines their relationship to each other” (Mishler 1975, 105). Norm and Sharon hope that first-time special guests will adopt this posture of engaging other table guests accordingly; but there’s always the possibility they won’t. Sharon observed, “We [don’t] know that they’ll come in and engage students the same way.”

However “accidental” its origins, the dinner gathering at Norm and Sharon’s home has taken on a discernible ebb and flow that is partly shaped by the rituals that guests share and perform each week. The dinner event mobilizes and enacts a range of rituals that facilitate physical copresence and regularly direct participants’ attention towards a set of common experiences. Moreover, Sharon and Norm are clear about the effects Mennonite Dinner generates in the lives of those who gather in their home each week. Among these are the dinner’s impacts upon the hosts. Norm closed one evening, “Thank you for coming, for asking perceptive and thoughtful questions. The interaction has been nourishing and fun.” During an interview, Sharon used language that resembled Collins’ ideas on how interaction rituals generate “emotional energy” (2004, 109). She explained:

It gives energy. That was always a boost to my week, to get to Thursday night. . . . And you would think it would be a drain, given the work, but it never was. I mean, the house just vibrates with energy. With all these students here, and some of them . . . stay around and talk, and the last Thursday night of the academic year, when some are graduating, some of them just are in tears, not wanting to leave.

There are also those effects that Norm and Sharon hope are produced in the students, which they expect will be delayed. Sharon continued:

Students have told us that they have in their own ways, as they’ve graduated and gone out to their own communities, have tried to do

Mennonite meal on a small scale. You know, so something gets . . . they see something, they catch something, that they want to try themselves.

That some students “catch something” and “do Mennonite meal” in other contexts returns us to one of the central claims of Collins’ model of interaction rituals. Namely, that successful rituals generate both short-term and enduring outcomes in those who perform them. Among these are the more passing, yet generally positive, feelings experienced by Thursday dinner participants in the routines of conversing in the food line, passing food at the table, and learning to ask questions of and dialogue with the special guest. The mundane, oft-repeated habits of bodily copresence and mutual focus are the mechanisms by which dinner guests “become caught up in each other’s emotions” (Collins 2004, 108). Norm and Sharon’s comments also capture well Collins’ point about the more enduring effects of ritual practices: “The emotions that are ingredients of the [interaction ritual] are transient; the outcome however is a long-term emotion, the feeling of attachment to the group that was assembled at that time” (2004, 108). Mennonite Dinner produces a “group solidarity” that continues beyond students’ time at Wheaton College (Collins 2004, 108). Some graduates—very few of whom identify as Mennonite—continue to experiment with their own forms of “Mennomeal.” The formation and maintenance of a table pedagogy that they carry along with them into everyday life after graduation raises interesting questions about the reproduction of ostensibly Mennonite practices within a larger, non-Mennonite institutional setting. To conclude, we explore some of these questions.

### Conclusion: Living Questions

Just as the *More with Less* cookbook has often served as a first encounter with Mennonites, Thursday’s Mennonite Dinner has become emblematic of what being Mennonite means in a context where Mennonites are little known and sometimes theologically peripheral in an academic institution often viewed as a central guardian and purveyor of US Evangelical orthodoxy. When discussing with Norm and Sharon the role Mennonite Dinners serve in this marginal zone of being *and living* as Mennonites among non-Mennonites, they noted that this mirrors their own experience as Mennonite faculty at the college. Mennonite Dinners have been their effort to bridge their own Sunday and Monday communities.

The preceding discussion draws attention to the dynamic interplay of culture and power in the creation and reproduction of a weekly dinner gathering within the broader context of a collegiate institutional setting. In his richly historical studies of food and power, the anthropologist Sidney Mintz (1986; 1995a; 1995b) employs conceptual tools that are helpful for explaining Mennonite Dinner's ritual dynamics. The mundane practices that make up the gathering are part and parcel of what Mintz describes as the "daily life conditions of consumption that [have] to do with inside meaning" (1995b, 5). Mintz reminds us that we human beings are always at work creating meaning and significance within our shared, ordinary routines of food production and consumption. It is this production of inside meaning, or the "interior embedding of significance in the activity of daily life, with its specific associations (including affective associations) for the actors" (Mintz 1995b, 6), that has been important in our learning about the Mennonite Dinner's interaction rituals.<sup>14</sup> For Norm and Sharon, the routines of food production and consumption that form the weekly meal are associated with specific forms of learning; moreover, the significance they impart to these routines is linked to ideas about the nature and practice of faithful Christian living:

Sharon: For me, when I was an undergraduate at Wheaton, Wheaton was really good at integrating faith and learning. When I came back as a faculty member, that's what they sort of trained me in. But it was my involvement in the Mennonite church that really made me think about faith and *living*. How does everything that matters to me, how does that work out in the way I relate to people, how I live, choices I make. And I think that's, I don't want [Thursday dinner] to be just an academic place. And I don't think it is.

Norm: No.

Sharon: I think it's maybe that's the connection with the food. That it's the living out, it's the modelling.

Interestingly, they both clearly see the dinner as a learning space distinct from the classroom, yet connected to their vocation as Christian educators:

Norm: It's probably integrating at a deeper level, the faith and learning, it's sort of integrating that . . .

Sharon: *and living*

Norm: . . . integrating,

Sharon: and living

Norm: . . . yeah, really, the faith and living, and global responsibility.

Sharon: So I see it as coordinated *with* the kind of learning they're doing on campus. But I think it is different. I mean, if those questions are really prompted from deep within them, you know, people learn better when they can ask a question. This I really want to know the answer to, [more] than here's what's pre-programmed and scheduled for you in the classroom, and you need to learn this. So there's an urgency about the questions. And some of it stretches them. And for some of them, it's not always comfortable.

Norm: This is sometimes the first exposure students have had to sort of an Anabaptist kind of worldview. You know, I've always said that Anabaptist thinking is really the logical conclusion of evangelical theology.

Norm and Sharon clearly express that it is not the phenomenon of a large communal meal that makes Mennonite Dinner characteristically Mennonite, but rather the issues raised in the table conversations. Minimizing the food's centrality to what the dinner is about exemplifies their understanding of lived-out faith: a ritual faithfully practiced across four decades of planning, procuring, preparing, and serving Mennonite Dinner is an ordinary, regular Christian act. It is the "*and living*" addition to "faith and learning" dyad hailed on campus a block away. In the Mennonite tradition that can seek to "simplify or indeed eliminate religious ritual altogether," the weekly dinner illustrates the sanctified daily routine (Epp 2012a). Norm and Sharon identify a difference in how Mennonites and the College enact faith integration: ". . . being Mennonite is core to who we are: faith, learning, and living. Mennonites tend to live it out, and don't often stop and talk about it; in the academy, we talk about the issues, but don't always live it out. Dinner is where both of these things come together."

Notably, Mintz clarifies that the "interior embedding of significance" always occurs within larger, more encompassing social, economic, political, and institutional systems and environs, which he associates with "outside meaning" (1995b, 5). Outside meaning refers to the "background conditions against which inside meaning takes its characteristic shape" (Mintz 1995b, 6-7). We observe the dynamic interplay of inside and outside meaning in Norm and Sharon's own retelling of the early years and subsequent evolution of Mennonite Dinner. The origins of the gathering, and its ongoing practice, are not only the product of their commitments and convictions as Mennonites. The dinner has also taken shape in the

“environing conditions” (Mintz 1995b, 5) within which they have sustained family life and interacted with students and colleagues over the course of working a combined eighty-one years as Wheaton College faculty.

Such environing conditions can be observed in at least two ways. First are those related to the “constraints of work and income and their own available energy” (Mintz 1995b, 7) that Sharon and Norm experienced as full-time Wheaton College professors. When the meal occurred, how food purchasing and preparation materialized, and which international guests were available to speak were factors shaped by forces that transcend Norm and Sharon’s aims, interests, and plans. Second are those conditions associated with Wheaton College as an evangelical institution of higher education. The college is an “outside” conditioning factor that Sharon and Norm occasionally referenced during the course of our conversations; it is the larger institutional context within which most dinner participants (i.e., undergraduate students) ordinarily engage in learning and assemble in classrooms where they ostensibly integrate such learning with Christian faith. Most guests, in other words, come to Mennonite Dinner with well-formed habits of learning and emerging ideas about the nature of Christian living that are shaped in part by their experience as Wheaton College students. For Norm and Sharon, the weekly meal offers these same guests the opportunity to actively participate in and to experiment with different kinds of learning and, most notably, Mennonite-inspired “faith and living” practices. A helpful metaphor for describing the community of practice that is the Mennonite Dinner is that of a borderland: a space where overlapping meanings and practices, both inside and outside, Mennonite and evangelical, intersect and interact in dynamic ways.<sup>15</sup>

As we have noted, students have had an active role from the outset in keeping the dinner going, and in making it what it is today. The pedagogy of the table has qualities that engender belonging and frequently lead student participants to replicate the Mennonite Dinner in post-college life. Different from the classroom in both form and content, the dinners are embodied on multiple levels: close interpersonal interactions, eating, being with the plants, sitting among a community of practice with shared interests and developing commitments. Unlike the typically less embodied, “informative” and “intellectualist” (Smith 2009, 28) pedagogies of the classroom, dinners are a holistic “place of physical, spiritual, and emotional nourishment,” in a student’s words. Sharon and Norm identify that the classroom faces certain pedagogical limitations which are distinct from learning around the table, a vision that



Sharon herself learned by joining a Mennonite church community as an adult.

In tandem with a collegiate religious context that places high value on the verbal articulation of theological claims, providing explanations, and giving proper answers, this table pedagogy aims to instill a lifelong practice of asking good and important questions about Christian life in global perspective. Questioning is central to the Dinner's success and pedagogical impact. It is not something to grow out of, by virtue of an answer-giving, formal education, but rather it is a dynamic, active expression of faithful Christian living. Students and others can glean practical wisdom about forming habits of ordinary discipleship from the Ewerts' commitment.

When asked if they had paused to discuss the direction these dinners should take, Norm firmly interrupted mid-sentence: "No." The back-and-forth conversation that unfolded next seems apropos to conclude our analysis:

Sharon: We tend not to do that until long after the fact. We just do it!

Norm: It's more, what have we done? Rather than, what are we going to do? It was an accident; it just emerged.

Sharon: In some ways, it's harder when you stop and say, well, should we do this? Or, why are we doing this? You just do it.

Norm: If now we were asking, shall we, from scratch, should we start bringing fifty to sixty students into our house every Thursday night, into retirement . . . No?!

Sharon: If you start something, don't question every week. Just do it; make it a tradition.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Norm Ewert taught Economics at Wheaton College (1973–2014); Sharon Coolidge (who uses the surname Ewert outside the College setting) taught English (1977–2017). Upon retirement, each was made Professor Emeritus. In 2014, Sharon was named the Wheaton College Alumna of the Year, recognizing her decades of leadership including a long tenure as department chair and serving on the college's presidential search committee.
- <sup>2</sup> In this paper we employ Rah and VanderPol's (2016, 11) distinction of lowercase *evangelical* (a broad historical-theological movement since the Reformation) from uppercase *Evangelical* (a twentieth-century development in conservative US Protestantism that situates itself within earlier Anglo-American evangelical streams, but which has developed markedly

different social engagement from earlier expressions). Contributors to Labberton (2018) explore contemporary racial, political, sociological, ecclesial, and global implications of these terms.

- <sup>3</sup> Our “native” status took many forms. As faculty in the Human Needs and Global Resources (HNGR) Program at Wheaton College, we regularly host people in diverse global networks. So we often function as a kind of network broker, occasionally asked to nominate visitors or others to invite as special guests. We also help to foster student participation in the dinner. Each year the cohort of HNGR student-interns (approximately 25 undergraduates) is asked to serve as special invited guests; they come to share with their peers about their experiences of living and learning abroad for six months. We also regularly publicize the dinner in courses that we teach. One of us (LMY) is also Mennonite, and belongs to the same local Mennonite congregation where Norm and Sharon attend. Finally, we share a collegial relationship with Norm and Sharon, both of whom were active participants in the HNGR Program during their tenure as Wheaton College faculty, including Norm as a founding member of the Program in 1976.
- <sup>4</sup> Invited special guests are drawn mostly from people based at or visiting Wheaton College—faculty/staff, administrators, international graduate students, visiting scholars in residence, Chapel speakers, featured presenters, pastors, artists, Evangelical public figures—or occasionally from outside organizations, including Mennonite church or service agencies who are passing through the Chicago region. They aim to have a diverse array of speakers throughout the year.
- <sup>5</sup> The weekly meals have multiple elements. A fruit and/or vegetable salad or vegetable/chips appetizer with dip or salsa are on the kitchen table where guests pick up their Corelle dinner plates. The buffet line has main dishes kept hot in crock pots or over warmers: rice and a stew topping, baked potatoes and chili, dhal or curries and rice, baked pasta dishes, shepherd’s pie, pulled pork barbecue, casseroles, and burgers grilled outdoors often at the first and last weeks of the school year. Regular dishes with international origins include several from the Mennonite *Extending the Table* cookbook or other sources: groundnut stew, coconut bread, chicken adobo, a New York restaurant’s Tunisian stew referred by a church friend, and a student’s shared recipe for many regular guests’ favourite meal of clove-rich African curry topped with chopped dates, slivered almonds, and feta cheese. Meat and vegetarian versions are always offered. The end of the buffet has toppings such as cheeses, sour cream, crackers for soup, nuts, or condiments, and filled water cups are set out for people to take to their seats. If there is bread, butter and jam will be on the table and windowsills near the stairs, along with pitchers of water for refills. Homemade desserts are passed toward the end of the meal, usually individually cut and plated in the kitchen (when not finger foods like cookies or brownies/bars): stacks of frosted cakes that can be cut to size once the final number of attendees is known; homegrown rhubarb cake with whipped topping; ice cream (especially following spicy food or burgers) with a range of sauce and sprinkled toppings passed around the tables. Several desserts and other dishes have been drawn from the Mennonite classic *More with Less*, as well as an assortment of Mennonite church, camp, and community cookbooks, in addition to online recipes that work well for large numbers. Over the decades, they have compiled a thick three-ring binder of loose-leaf recipes and meal planning aids

- that they actively use for the dinners. See Bailey-Dick 2005, Trollinger 2007, and Epp 2012b for more on Mennonite cookbooks.
- 6 In Russian-background Mennonite homes, Canadian food historian Marlene Epp (2004, 2012a, 2012b) notes that *Zwieback* bears particular cultural importance for its association with survival and sustenance in times of hunger and migration. Norm and Sharon recount only one other early attempt to prepare a traditional Russian Mennonite food for Thursday Dinner: a modified *Verenike* (a cheese-in-dough pocket) in casserole form that they both deemed a culinary failure when scaled up.
  - 7 Sharon and Norm's construction and appliance choices also served a fair trade product sale of Self-Help Crafts/Ten Thousand Villages products that they hosted in their home each autumn for twenty-seven years. Drawing hundreds of volunteers and shoppers annually, they prioritized sufficient cooking capacity for *zwieback* and materials that could withstand regular use by substantial numbers of guests.
  - 8 Their food selection criteria are straightforward: they cook things they both like, and foods that keep well as leftovers or frozen for a mid-semester smorgasbord Thursday. They both noted one favourite dish that does not meet their freezable criteria because it includes potatoes, green peppers, and carrots. Other important factors in deciding what to make in a given week include their time available to cook and to clean up; the guest numbers anticipated (considering weather, speaker, and exams); and the likelihood that guests may exceed the planning, as some meals are more stretchable than others. They do not try to match a speaker's background with the origin of the food served, other than remembering repeat speakers' favourite dishes.
  - 9 The after-dinner construction continued for just under a decade, from the early 1980s through the early 1990s. Sharon and Norm picked up making dollhouses again for MCC relief sales on their own, in a spacious basement workshop, when grieving the sudden loss of two long-time friends and colleagues in November 2015. In recent years, there are about a dozen dollhouses, mostly rescued or reconstructions, at various stages of completion on tables and moveable stands in the basement below the dinner tables, each destined for a different relief sale or for auction through the nearby Ten Thousand Villages store, which Norm and Sharon describe as a ministry of their LMC congregation, and to which they have lent leadership since its founding. The Ewerts believe that current students would also have interest in building and restoring the dollhouses, recommending that it not be on Thursday nights now due to the current scale of the dinner.
  - 10 From Sharon: "It might have been accidental, too. It might have been that somebody was here and we just started doing it. I honestly don't remember. It wasn't that we sat down and consciously said, you know, this can't function this way, we gotta do something else . . . It just kind of evolved into it, and it was a good move. But it took off."
  - 11 Nearly all attendees are single 18- to 22-year-old students who live within a few blocks in college dormitories or apartments; most have some meal plan to access food in the highly rated main cafeteria or in a snack shop on campus, while some upper-level students prepare most of their own meals. Students mention that they appreciate not only a free meal, but a home-cooked dinner and one that is often more elaborately prepared than the simpler sustenance of their student lives. Frequent attendees regularly comment to

Sharon and Norm at the buffet line when a certain dish is a favourite; one student even shared having a dream about particular food ensembles from Thursday Dinner. Sharon's opening menu announcement of certain student favourites causes a visible buzz throughout the rooms.

- <sup>12</sup> Sharon notes: "The speakers feel free, I think, in *this* environment to be really honest, and authentic. It isn't like campus, nobody's paying attention really to what they're saying. They can say what's on their hearts, and I think that makes for a good conversation." Sometimes with a new special guest, Norm quietly asks someone before dinner to get the questions off to a good start.
- <sup>13</sup> Student interviews indicate a high degree of personal preference for various locations and seating arrangements, including naming of highly visible spots and assigning social meaning to seating choice.
- <sup>14</sup> Our analysis of the generation of inside meaning by all dinner guests and participants is still very much a work in progress. As we note, future work will build upon a more systematic examination of the significance and associations that students and alumni generate through their participation in the Thursday Dinner.
- <sup>15</sup> We are grateful to the constructive feedback of one of our anonymous reviewers who suggested this idea of the borderland.

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