

Casserole

Club

'The cheapest meal in town made with lots of church-lady love'

By Ann Hafften

Six months into her pastoral call, Meta Herrick Carlson realized that at age 27 she was the only church member in her age group.

St. John Lutheran (www.stjohnsmpls.org) graces a sunny corner on Nicollet Avenue in the Tanglewood neighborhood of southwest Minneapolis. "St. John's is a great, intergenerational congregation. There are plenty of 30- and 40-somethings and all ages mingle and serve really well together, but that one decade, the 20s, was noticeably missing," Carlson said.

While she wanted to start a young adult Bible study, Carlson knew full well that the church bulletin and newsletter weren't going to do the trick for promotion. So she e-mailed all her contacts in their 20s and used Facebook to invite them to the first Casserole Club.

The invitation that went out last winter highlighted informality, Scripture and home-cooked food: "Enjoy good food and conversation. Drop in after work or come in your sweatpants. We're casual and welcome anyone curious about Scripture and how it speaks in our lives today. RSVP for the casserole dinner, and bring \$3 for the cheapest meal in town made with lots of church-lady love!"

Several older women stepped up to prepare casseroles and sometimes Carlson cooks. The most popular dishes? "Really anything with chicken—chicken enchilada,

chicken with broccoli," she said.

Participants come and go, but between 8 to 13 can be expected each month. Normally half are regulars and half are new to the club.

Lee George, who went to high school with Carlson, saw Casserole Club on Facebook: "I thought it would be a great place to develop my spiritual perspective. Being Roman Catholic in a study made up mostly of Lutherans urges me to find the common aspects of our belief. Casserole Club has reaffirmed that my spiritual community needs to be broader than the community I see on Sundays."

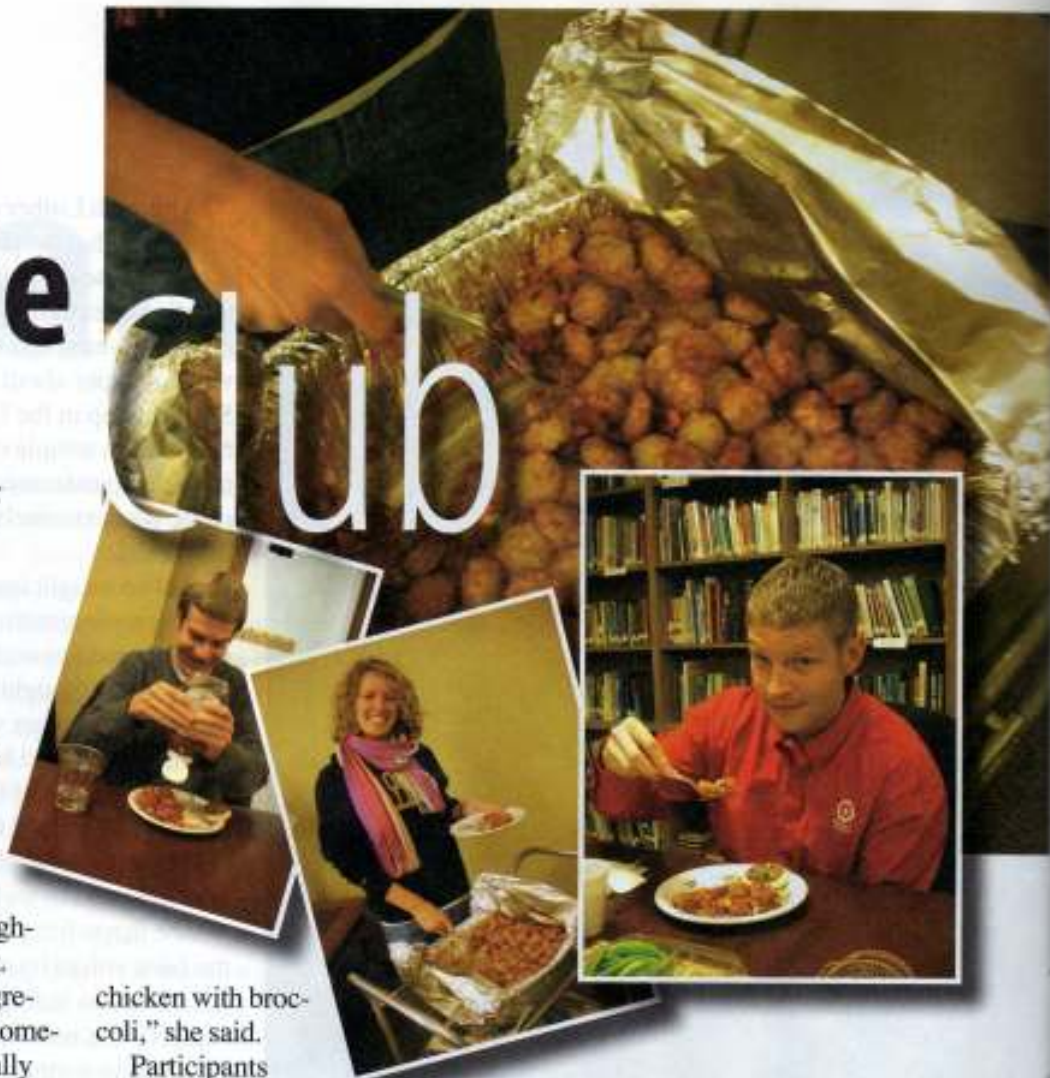
Participant Will Amundson said, "I spend most of my days at school with people who never talk about religion. Casserole Club reminds me that there are other people my age who want to talk about faith too."

Carlson posts a monthly notice on the club's Facebook page, alerting 44 members to an upcoming topic, such as "Folk-Gore: R-rated Stories from the Old Testament," "God Changes his Mind" and "Sassy Jesus."

Casserole Club was launched as a ministry, "not that people should necessarily join the church," Carlson said. Nevertheless more than half of participants now worship at St. John—and now longtime members often ask 20-something worshipers, "Are you from Casserole Club?"

"[It's] a great way to be involved with our church," said Brian Lensch, who attends with fiancée Carleen Fuchs. "It's difficult to read the Bible by yourself and truly grasp all of the themes—[such as] what we see as the message and incorporating it with our current lives, culture, economy and so forth. It's something we really try not to miss."

Lensch calls it "an eclectic religious group with a passion to sit down, enjoy a meal and also feed our minds, body and spirit with the message



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Will Amundson (left), Laura Melcher and Brian Lensch enjoy nourishment for both body and soul at the monthly Casserole Club at St. John Lutheran Church in Minneapolis.

from Christ.”

When Casserole Club moved outdoors for the summer and switched to a potluck cookout in the pastor’s yard, Carlson promoted it as “the best/only young adult-backyard-happy hour-Bible study in Minneapolis!”

Carlson originally thought the club might appeal to struggling young people low on funds and drawn to a \$3 home-cooked meal. Instead, young professionals showed up, looking for a spiritual home, she said.

“I’ve had fun working within the institution with the freedom to try new things,” Carlson said. “It cannot fail because it’s organic. I can be creative and listen while participants make it happen. Casserole Club is a fun outreach that doesn’t have to be a big program, just an experiment.”

Paul Buck was “looking for a group like this to connect with other young adults outside of the usual Sunday services.”

Buck, who is studying dentistry, said, “I’m glad each session doesn’t build on the next, so I feel comfortable coming only occasionally when it fits with my schedule.” Although he doesn’t call St. John his congregational home, he says it’s “enhanced my view of the church.”

Both the way Carlson chose to communicate and the wording seem to work: “Come if you’re Lutheran and come if you’re not. Come if you’ve been to church lately and come if church freaks you out a little bit. Come if you read the Bible and come if you don’t own one. We’ve got extras.” □

For more information about the Casserole Club, contact Meta Herrick Carlson at pastormeta@stjohnsmpls.org.

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Occupation: Secretary

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