



February 2024

A Meal for Peace at St. Luke's

St. Luke's Presbyterian Church in Dunwoody, Georgia, hosted a *Meal for Peace* in October, so I reached out to their senior pastor to see how everything went. [A Meal for Peace](#) is a framework provided for people to gather, eat a South Sudanese meal, and reflect on the meaning of peace both for South Sudan and in our own lives. Our conversation, however, did not start with the *Meal for Peace*. Since Rev. David Lower has been a family friend for a long time, questions of "How are you?" and "How is the family?" led to long discussions. The topic of parenting quickly came to the forefront. In particular, coaching children when they are the target of bullying.

"Is there a parenting group at your church to discuss these issues, because they are so heart-wrenching?" I wondered.

David shared about a Sunday school class at St. Luke's in which parents discuss the joys and challenges of raising children. "Every child and every situation is different," he said, reflecting on his experience in the class.

"Sometimes we learn from each other new approaches, and sometimes we just acknowledge 'that is really hard.' Sometimes it is just good to hear that affirmation."



Seven years ago, Shelvis attended Pastor David Lower's installation service at St. Luke's Presbyterian Church in Dunwoody, GA.

Next, we discussed helping our kids navigate all the various theologies they hear. In particular, I struggle when my children encounter harmful instead of hopeful ways of viewing God. For example, a few weeks ago, when lying in bed, my nine-year-old said: "I wish I died before I was seven..."

"Why?!?!?" I asked, taken aback by the thought.

"... because someone at school told me, if you die before you are seven, you automatically go to heaven. BUT, if you are older than seven, you have to be prepared."

On this topic, David shared his appreciation that St. Luke's provides a safe space for his children to discuss different perspectives. Their faith community encourages people to "chew on ideas together." Above all, to keep God's love for everyone at the center. What a gift.

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My appreciation for St. Luke's growing, David then shared about their experience hosting a *Meal for Peace*. With laughter in his voice, he explained that some parts were hard to implement. Specifically, the meal part.

"Are you sure you just want rice and beans?" members serving in the kitchen asked in confusion and disbelief. The *Meal for Peace* manual suggests rice and beans, cooked in an authentic, South Sudanese way (a [YouTube video](#) provides a step-by-step cooking demonstration :-).

"Would it betray the medium if we offer a simple chili on top?" came the next question.

"That is not the design of the medium, and there is solidarity in the simplicity," David tried to explain. Affirming the spirit of hospitality in which the questions came, David added "It can be a delicious beans and rice."

Scheduling the meal during the congregation's regular Saturday breakfast brought another concern: "Rice and beans for breakfast?"

Continuing to reflect, David added, "Applying the beauty of that medium into the context of Dunwoody, Georgia, is a challenge... it fell in the context of our habits curiously... but we did it, we tried, and for the first time in this church's history we had beans and rice for breakfast... a basic meal is a new, strange experience in a context of privilege, and a great opportunity—it was all the more meaningful."



St. Luke's hosted a Meal for Peace one Saturday morning in October and served rice and beans for breakfast :-). The Reformed Church in America (RCA) put together a manual with discussion questions to guide meaningful conversation about peace.

During St. Luke's rice and bean breakfast, they followed the outline in the *Meal for Peace* manual created by the Reformed Church in America (RCA), which includes questions like:

"Why is it important for us to love the people of South Sudan and support the work of peace and reconciliation for their beloved homeland?" and "How are you experiencing peace today?"

"We shared that morning so soon after the terror in the Middle East. It was so fresh in our minds," explained Pastor Lower. "Connecting with people across the world, struggling with the trauma of war, and praying, was a powerful time... the prayer was when it all came together in our experience."

Shelvis and I virtually attended St. Luke's *Meal for Peace*, joining in their prayers. "We did not know if the internet would sustain our video call. We did not know if our stories would resonate. But in the end, it felt like a sacred space," Shelvis reflected.

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“[It] has us thinking about what to do next,” David continued. “For our first *Meal for Peace*, I invited our interfaith community to join us, a local synagogue and mosque. Because of the fresh trials in the Middle East, they could not attend... One of the ways we have talked about having another *Meal for Peace* is to have an interfaith *Meal for Peace*; to let the medium of having a meal to connect with people across the world, to let that be amplified by having our different faith communities together. That is what we imagine trying to do next...”

The beauty of St. Luke’s vision of an interfaith *Meal for Peace* gave me chill bumps. Sharing a meal across lines of difference to foster harmony and love felt powerful. I thank God for their willingness to try something new, to pray for people across the world, and to invite local neighbors from other faith traditions to a meal, for peace.

Thank you for your continued support of our family and our South Sudanese partners.

