



# The Art of the Coffee Hour

By Donna Schaper

**I**ncarnationalists, like me, love the way the holy occupies the ordinary. We are most excited at Christmas time when God becomes human, the holy becomes flesh, eternity becomes time, and heaven comes down to earth. Our theology of the incarnation—literally, being made flesh or made meat (what I sometimes call Christ con carne)—is reflected in our coffee hour, whether we realize it or not. The church coffee hour is not the afterthought of the worship service at all. Instead it is its reality test.

At the coffee hour we either extend the hospitality we proclaim or we withhold it. We either feel the grace we have acknowledged or we do not. We either extend the Eucharist of the holy meal to the little meal or we do not. Many people judge a congregation by its coffee hour hospi-

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tality—especially newcomers. They can tell by the feel in the room whether they are welcome or not. Scratch a new member of any congregation and they will tell you that someone welcomed them during coffee. Scratch someone who doesn't come back after a first brave visit (all first visits anywhere are brave) and you will discover that no one spoke to them during coffee hour.

I first got interested in coffee hour when a congregation I served was experiencing a growth spurt. Most of the newcomers were Hispanic in origin and liked strong coffee. The women's fellowship (which had a large treasury) didn't want to spend much on coffee so they kept the coffee weak. The larger the groups that came, the weaker the coffee got. Though they were, overall, a generous group of people, they didn't like to put out more cookies than they were used to. One of the members actually slapped the hand of a child who took three one Sunday.

As the newer members were integrated into the congregation, we set up two coffee stands. One was for weak coffee, the other for strong. The younger women (with some men) staffed the strong coffee table, the older women staffed the weak coffee table. This was no testimony to the unity of the body of Christ. Instead, we gave a less than incarnational message. We testified to our difference, not our community. Although this situation finally got humorous and people behind both serving tables got the joke, it said way too much about our sense of hospitality. The coffee table was reunited into one—and that was the test of our reality.

### *Deepening the Coffee Talk*

Many of us don't like coffee hour. We think it is all small talk, or cocktail party gab. It is only that way if we ourselves keep it that way. The conversation and its depth are up to us, not "them," whoever "they" are. It is we who can make the conversation sparkle. It is we who can widen the circle and magnetize the crowd. What makes a coffee hour sing is you—having a great time, extending your joy to others, talking to them about them, learning the art of connection. We often say in Protestantism that our theology is the quality of our encounters, the art in our meetings. Let us make it so.

Ask questions of the newcomer: What brought you to us today? Do you have a place where you usually worship? And

then listen. Ask follow-up questions and be interested in their replies. This is your way of saying "I heard you."

Statistics show that the average newcomer or returnee comes back to worship six months after a major life change: cancer, death, divorce, or some sort of disappointment. Our job is not to find out what that crisis was on the first encounter, but to ready ourselves and the other person for that revelation.

It is not just newcomers who need welcome at coffee hour. Old timers do also. When our shyness glues us to one comfortable person for the entire hour, something is wrong. Circulate. Move. Make it a point to speak to ten people. Really speak to them. Remember something about them: Isn't this the anniversary of John's death? How did your big meeting go this week? How is your mother doing?

Don't always think of yourself as the asker of questions. You may be the one who needs to tell someone about something important that happened to you. When you say something about yourself, it gives other people permission to do the same.

The goal of coffee hour, incarnation-ally, is to embody the welcome Jesus gives us to his realm. Its goal is intimacy, ordinary intimacy. It is kitchen talk. Toni Morrison said, "Is it any wonder the most intimate conversations take place in the kitchen, anguish poured out to an aproned back or sputtered over a chopping board?" When Morrison said this, she meant coffee hour conversations. At their best, they are quick, deep, and self revealing. They are our weekly chance to demonstrate the love of God incarnate to one another, and to all who walk through our doors. □



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## A Quick Guide to Hosting Coffee Hour

Whether in God's house or your own, keep I Kings 20:1 in mind: "Set thine own house in order." Practice the Golden Rule when planning coffee hour, and remember—the details really do matter.

1. Make it your best food, not your worst. Encourage people to bring good things. If you are in charge, splurge. We have one woman at my current church who brings eight dozen homemade chocolate chip oatmeal cookies every time she hosts coffee hour. It is an ordinary feast for the people of God.
2. Ditch the Styrofoam. It says low maintenance rather than high joy. Plus, it ruins the earth. Make washing the dishes what Toni Morrison knows it can be. And don't let men miss out on this fun.
3. Wear name tags. In my current congregation, some people hate name tags. They say "some people" don't want their privacy invaded. That screen says more about some of my people than I want to say. It says they want to be in charge of their space and not let new people in. Name tags make it easier to initiate conversations with new people, and to connect better with people you don't know well.
4. Pay attention to the room. Most churches could stand to be de-dowdyfied. Most rooms where we have coffee still look like last year's tag sale or last century's parlor. That doesn't send the right message to newcomers. Make sure the room is clean, comfortable, and easy to move around in.
5. Consider the coffee hour as the loaves and fishes moment of the week. Gather up all the fragments, and send people home with goody bags, especially newcomers. Or take something to someone who was missing on that day.
6. Serve healthy food. Many people don't eat white flour at all any more, and many others are watching their weight, so the usual pastry and cookie platter is not such a great idea, especially on its own. Fruit, vegetables, even good bread and jam are all great alternatives.