Eating Together in the Twenty-First Century

Social Challenges, Community Values, Individual Wellbeing

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Chapter 6
Potluck in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Two auto-ethnographic accounts

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Two auto-ethnographic accounts

Tamas Lestar and Jason Garcia Portilla

Introduction

In recent years, the topic of belongingness has gained increasing interest in academic research (e.g., in higher education: Schmidt and Sandars, 2018). In a call to the British government to consider pathways for prosperity without growth, Jackson (2016) explains that some community values, such as belongingness, may benefit society by effecting responsible and pro-environmental behaviour. In a society built upon less sustainable values (ibid.), the author states that it is often easier in and through spiritual communities to maintain socially and environmentally responsible practices. Jackson (2016) maintains that the influence of the "outside" world makes it nearly impossible to commit oneself to a lifestyle benefiting both people and the planet.

Drawing on this, it is important to investigate what we can learn from spiritual communities and their exemplary practices at a time when environmental and social perils abound. One of these practices, called potluck, has become widespread among Seventh-day Adventist believers since the early nineteenth century.

The etymology of the word *potluck* is not entirely clear but may refer to "having whatever is available" (Cambridge Dictionary) at social gatherings (called potlucks) where people bring and share different dishes, often homemade (Julier, 2013). During its camp meetings and outreach activities (described later), the Adventist Church, established in the early nineteenth century, embraced the practice widely, and it remained common in its ranks to date.

Drawing on historical accounts and personal experience, the rest of the chapter is presented as follows. First, we provide a brief description of the social and medical significance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with a focus on the history of potlucks and eating together. This is followed by two auto-ethnographic accounts presented by the authors. We then conclude by highlighting key aspects for consideration and future research.

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Seventh-day Adventists are among the fastest-growing Christian denominations with more than 21.9 million members worldwide (Seventh-day Adventist World Church Statistics, 2021). It is one of the most widespread Protestant denominations around the world (Feichtinger, 2016). Following the Roman Catholic Church, the Adventist Church is the second Christian organisation with the most extended network of health and education systems and centres, with visible aid organisations worldwide (Feichtinger, 2016; Rogers & Kellner, 2003; Hunt, 2016; Seventh-day Adventist World Church Statistics, 2021).

The World General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has the following sustainability statement approved in 1992[1]: "Since human poverty and environmental degradation are interrelated, we pledge ourselves to improve the quality of life for all people. Our goal is a sustainable development of resources while meeting human needs" (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992).

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) is the humanitarian aid organisation of the Adventist Church. According to its website: "ADRA has been at the front lines of social change for more than 30 years. Today, ADRA's projects around the world support many of the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs], including ending poverty, achieving food security, ensuring healthy lives, and achieving gender equality. […] Its work empowers communities and changes lives around the globe by providing sustainable community development and disaster relief". Adventists place a special emphasis on promoting UN SDG 3 "Good health and well-being", UN SDG 2 "Zero hunger", UN SDG 4 "Quality education", UN SDG 11 "Sustainable cities and communities", and UN SDG 12 "Responsible consumption and production". However, directly or indirectly, ADRA fosters virtually all UN SDGs worldwide.

The Adventist diet and potlucks

The Adventist Church traditionally highlights the importance of diet and health, including advocating vegetarianism, which is not the dominant practice of mainstream Christianity (Nath, 2010; Lestar, 2017). This nineteenth-century Christian movement promotes beliefs for which frugal, earnest vegetarian, or mostly plant-based regimes help shape spiritual and physical health (Nath, 2010). Medical research shows that Adventists, who often follow vegetarian or purely plant-based diets, live longer and have lower risks for many degenerative diseases (e.g. cancers) than the general population (Fraser et al. 2020; Banta et al. 2018; Fraser & Shavlik, 2001). Vegetarianism and frugality have been recognised as two major lifestyle attributes of ecospiritual practice (Lestar & Böhm, 2020, p. 59).

Adventists follow a variety of dietary customs that prioritise health. Most Adventists abstain from alcohol consumption, are almost entirely non-smokers,

and steer clear of products containing caffeine. Although strictly plant-based diets are reasonably rare, the lacto-ovo-vegetarian diet is prevalent. About half opt for omnivorous diets, which frequently include little or less meat than the average consumption of the general population. Studies typically show that a vegetarian diet has health benefits, such as lower death rates from cancer, cardiovascular disease, and other maladies and greater mental health (Banta et al. 2018, Key et al. 1999; Beezhold et al. 2010; Tonstad et al. 2009). In California, studies show that Adventists, often vegetarian, live longer than the general US population (males 7.3 years and females 4.4 years) and have reduced rates of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and several diseases (Fraser et al. 2020). Thus, the Adventist diet, as it is currently practised, reportedly yields the healthiest Americans (Lestar, 2022; Buettner, 2015).

The biblical motivation for the plant-based diet, according to Adventists' interpretation is found in Genesis 1:29: "And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat".[2] For many Christians, God allowed people to eat meat after the flood (Genesis 9:3) to preserve Noah's (and his family's) life. However, according to the Adventist interpretation, eating meat was not God's original and ideal plan for people. Nonetheless, given that generations following Noah insisted and got used to eating meat, God instructed on what types of animals could be consumed as an exception, but not as a command to eat meat (Deuteronomy 14:8). Therefore, according to the biblical principle of Deuteronomy 14:8, the Adventist diet also excludes biblically "unclean" animals, such as pork or seafood. Yet, the Adventist biblical interpretation is clear that in every generation before Noah, people used to live several hundreds of years (e.g. Methuselah lived for 969 years, according to Genesis 5:21–27). But the lifespan of the generations after Noah was drastically reduced (Neue Luther Bibel, 2012: 1644–1655), partly due to the introduction of meat consumption.

Seventh-day Adventists live around six years longer than the average American (for strictly vegetarian Adventist men, it's about a decade) (Fraser & Shavlik, 2001). One of the five so-called "blue zones" in the globe, where people live the longest, is Loma Linda, a small community in California where around one-third of the population is Adventist (Buettner, 2015). The town's many Adventist centenarians attest to the advantages of a plant-based diet in addition to other lifestyle choices linked to prayer, exercise, employment, and community life, including eating together on Sabbath potluck (Lestar 2022, Buettner, 2015). Along with other "blue zones" hotspots in the world (e.g. Sardinia, Okinawa), Loma Linda shares as common denominators for longevity a mostly plant-based diet, moderate physical activity, no smoking, and family and social engagement (Buettner, 2015). Adventist church members' happiness is enhanced by enjoyable moments like eating meals together at potlucks while celebrating Shabbat (usually after church service on Saturdays).

A Sabbath church potluck is a lunch gathering where each person or family brings a delectable dish to share. Frequently, church members bring their dishes before the church service and set them out in the dining room or kitchen. After the service is finished, volunteers arrange the dishes, plates, and utensils on the serving tables. The cuisines and foods in the Adventist communities frequently reflect the diversity and ethnicity of the attendants. Many Adventist groups from varied and distant geographies share potluck as a practice to emulate what Jesus and the early Christian church did (e.g. feeding the congregation: Matthew 14:13–21, breaking of bread and prayers: Matthew 26:17–30; Acts 2:42) demonstrating hospitality and fostering both new and existing ties within the church.

Seventh-day Adventist Christians also periodically participate in the Lord's Supper, or communion service, to commemorate Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. The Lord's Supper typically includes unleavened bread, unfermented (non-alcoholic) wine, and foot-washing.

Autoethnography as a method

Autoethnography is a qualitative method that analyses, interprets, or capitalises on the author's personal experience and links it to their findings and those of other researchers. A researcher's personal experience (autobiography) is used to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practises, and experiences (Poulos, 2021). Autoethnography recognises and appreciates the researcher's interactions with others. It uses in-depth self-reflection and reflexivity to name and examine the relationships between the individual and the community, the specific and the general, the personal and the political. Autoethnography indicates how people decide what to do, how to live, and the significance of their actions. It balances emotion, methodological rigour, and creativity; it works to advance social justice and quality of life (Adams et al. 2015).

Alongside autoethnography, a questionnaire was piloted among Seventh-day Adventist believers and visitors in Worthing, UK. Open-ended questions were asked to gather information about the lived experience of potluck participants. We quote some of the responses to provide additional viewpoints about the theme. Our plan for future research is to develop the survey further and use it to gather big data, both quantitative and qualitative, from the global Adventist community.

Autoethnography was beneficial for this study because we have immersed ourselves in the church culture of Adventism for decades. We had the added advantage of becoming intimate with how potlucks work and the culture surrounding them. Besides introducing the survey, we held informal conversations with participants about eating together. This enabled us to gauge feelings towards the topic better than through formal inquiries alone. Because of the timeframe, we were also able to see whether attitudes towards potlucks changed over time, including times before and after the pandemic.

Our goal was not to compare the Adventist's efforts to other communities but to present the practices of eating together as a religious organisation in Worthing, UK, and beyond.

We have taken part in as many potlucks and similar events as possible in the Adventist Church, observing others and asking questions about the benefits and nuances of health and community life. We took notes and pictures of these events and made notes of the conversations we heard and witnessed.

One benefit of ethnography is that it does not solely rely on the participants' views but also benefits from direct observation. One recognised risk of the method is "going native" (Kislov, 2019), when the researcher gets too involved with the studied community and bias distorts their vision. As auto-ethnographers, we are already native, and as such we acknowledge the potential impact of our assumptions on our narratives.

Auto-ethnography 1: Tamas Lestar

My first encounter with Adventism was at the age of 17 when I visited a Bible camp in my home country, Hungary. Camp meetings, as they are called, have a long-standing tradition in the Adventist Church. I had an interest in literature, fine arts, and spiritual teachings, so I visited the camp to learn more about these topics. I only found out on-site that the food was plant-based, and after a few days, I remember sneaking out of the camp for some *real* food. Notably, Adventist people do not smoke and do not use alcohol. I was a keen consumer of wine, but they explained that the Scriptures encouraged the use of unfermented wine only. It took me a few years to embrace the lifestyle and become a vegetarian, which is a widespread but not mandatory practice in the community. There was no rush or any pressure.

Since those early years, I have taken part in numerous potluck gatherings across the globe, including European countries, Asia, and the African continent. On some occasions, the food is prepared together onsite or organised centrally. Apart from the general benefits of socialising, eating together with fellow believers provides opportunities for learning new recipes, lifestyle practices, and ideas for food preparation. For example, in a recent camp meeting in Transylvania, kitchen workers prepared stuffed cabbage on Friday for Saturday's meal. The food was brought to a boil and kept overnight in a huge pot clad in sawdust. This skilful technique made it possible for the food to cook slowly, a way through which making food on the Sabbath day was prevented. Adventists generally do not work or cook on Saturday, which they celebrate as the day of rest.

Church gatherings for divine service all over the world include one or two sermons, a Bible study, and a children's story. After most of the services are finished, members often invite visitors to their home or a church venue where they share meals and talk freely about the content of the messages, family, hardships, joy, plans for outreach, and of course: food. In my home country

of Hungary, these potlucks generally took place in the church. I remember, specific dishes, and cooks became popular for their special quality and taste. Everybody would remember the bean soup and the granary patties of Auntie Anna and Auntie Mary. Several years on, members keep reminiscing about those goodies.

Potluck events were open to members and non-members alike. In fact, they were regarded as a means of outreach where the community's friends and visitors could get familiar with the Adventist worldview, together with the flavours and food practices. In this sense, potlucks may serve as testing points to remain within or transit through the community bonds (see Chapter 10 by Avakian).

A potluck in my experience in Hungary consists of a beautifully decorated table with several types of warm or cold dishes and desserts. There is no written plan about who brings what and how much, and it is not mandatory to join the scheme. All participants in the church service are welcomed to the table and, after a short grace is said, diners serve themselves, take a seat or remain standing, eat, and socialise. The catch-as-catch-can situation makes the event more interesting compared to outings with menus already disclosed. The variety of dishes often trigger lively conversations about recipes and related details. The leftover is taken away by random distribution, considering the needy and visitors first. Nothing goes to waste. Potlucks are peaceful, quiet, and cheerful events where the focus is on socialising with the other. I do not recall any dispute or loud arguments in many years of experience.

I found similar arrangements in several other regions and countries of the world. While the level and type of democracy is culturally influenced and varies from region to region, these differences (between the global South and North for example) could be addressed in another paper. In this account, I focus on my experience as a European in European geographies. Some of the literature in the field point out the non-democratic, exclusive nature of potlucks as they create division and inequality (Julier, 2013; Lestar, 2018). While this may be so in specific contexts, my experience in the church is the direct opposite: Adventist potlucks (in Europe) are inclusive, democratic, creating unity and equality. To begin with, contribution is not a requirement, and it is not monitored at all. All are invited, while special attention is given to visitors and the most needy, lonely members. Then, no matter what one brings to contribute, no matter what diet one follows, there is always a seat for anyone to sit and enjoy the meal and the conservation. Other than general respect in the community, there is no partiality that would stand out to my European eye.

For the last few years, I have been a community member in the Worthing Seventh-day Adventist Church. Potlucks in Worthing are somewhat different as they are often held at various family homes week after week. These domestic visits feel more personal and provide more opportunities for meaningful conversations and to get closer to one another. To accommodate

ten to twenty people at a time, we often use several rooms for dining and the garden in good weather. Small chat groups emerge randomly and organically, although the youths tend to choose a separate room on their own. Different conversations or activities may go on in each space. At times there is a quiz or a short film and discussion. These are not planned in advance. There is a calm and cheerful atmosphere, although lively arguments occasionally occur. There is no division between plant-based, vegetarians, or meat eaters. I cannot recall a table-side quarrel about dietary choices. The food served is almost entirely plant-based. Those who consume meat happily prepare plant-based dishes for the benefit of all. This does not follow any regulations. There are no written or spoken guidelines. It just happens to be this way, and it works.

We asked community members to fill out a survey about potlucks in the church before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Here is what they say:

> "It brings relationship closer amongst people, you get to know more of your church members and chat about so many things. It develops belongingness and security. And also it's nice to share different food, culture and traditions. It is a relaxed environment where you can fellowship and share/talk about life and share God's love to each and everyone".

> "It's an opportunity to fellowship and encourage each other".

> "Potlucks become an opportunity for extending socialization with existing and new members. However, it is a habit and becomes an almost every week routine. […] The positive elements include the opportunity to catch up with issues that there is no time to discuss during the various time breaks during the various church service activities. Lots are happening in various peoples' lives over the week, and the potluck gives a space for sharing this type of new information to others".

> "For me it's like the old days when I was young in the church".

> "No negative elements (or maybe my lack of temperance in eating)".

Some survey participants mentioned that eating and spending time together in potlucks provides a sense of belonging and fellowship. I second this opinion, although I do not consider myself an outgoing person by nature. On Saturday mornings I often wish I could stay in bed or in my own room for the day, reading a book or just spend time by myself. However, meeting friends, visitors, and community members in the church and at the potluck table always brings meaning into my life. By the end of the day, I feel refreshed and rejuvenated, ready for a new week of work. I find fulfilment in sharing and providing food and space for others. I have come to believe that

human beings are social beings by design, and a weekly balance of individual and community activities has a positive impact on my well-being and personal development.

Prior to moving to Worthing, I frequented the Adventist community in Clacton-on-Sea where members run a scheme through which we shared a meal with homeless people (about twenty of them) every Saturday. While all contributions were welcomed, most of the dishes were prepared by one woman only who never complained about the lack of support. It was interesting to mingle with and get to know the homeless people week after week. Eating together with rough sleepers gave additional meaning and flavour to the potluck event. One day they took part in our communion service where Adventist people, following the Biblical account, wash one another's feet, then eat unleavened bread and drink unfermented wine together. This symbolic act, arranged about four times a year, provides an extra spiritual layer to the meeting which is often followed by a regular potluck. It is a humbling experience.

Auto-ethnography 2: Jason Garcia Portilla

I have been a vegetarian since my childhood, not because my relatives were, but because I never liked the taste of meat. In fact, it was always a social discord whenever I was invited to eat. However, social pressure in my Colombian hometown would "force" me to consume some meat, start drinking alcohol, and smoke in my teenage years. By that time, I had experienced a conversion from Roman Catholicism (as more than 92% of Colombians were Catholics) to atheism (a more comprehensive account of my personal conversion and research testimony is to be found in Garcia Portilla, 2022, pp. 394–403).

In any case, I avoided red meat, which I found disgusting in my early twenties. However, I started to develop asthma and sinusitis, which were treated with conventional medicines by different physicians, only to get worse. One day, I had to be taken by emergency due to an acute headache, and I was fortunate to be seen by a doctor who knew natural remedies and introduced me to the fascinating field of natural healing. I complimented my independent studies by reading a lot of sources about the combination of different types of food. One Taoist source on longevity (Daniel Reid) was influential for me to discover that I was allergic to the hormones for which chickens are given to grow quickly. I stopped eating chicken and returned to the vegetarian origins of my childhood (increasing the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables in the right combinations), and I was immediately healed of asthma and sinusitis!

As an ecologist, I continued to add reasons to my mostly plant-based diet (e.g. eco-efficiency, 10% law of thermodynamics in the trophic net, contribution to climate change, and disincentivising the Amazon deforestation). However, I would continue to be a "flexitarian" (mostly plant-based), who drank alcohol, and socially (occasionally) smoked.

One day, I was given a great employment opportunity in a far-off place where I didn't have any friends or relatives, and the atmosphere was a little cold. The cuisine of that place added to my confusion since I had never witnessed so many people consuming so much meat three times a day. There weren't many food choices for me. However, one day when I felt alone at noon in that foreign city, I found, against all odds, a delicious plant-based restaurant, which I did not know was owned by Adventists. By that time, I had already become a Christian (Protestant) believer (further details in Garcia Portilla, 2022: 394–403; Garcia Portilla, 2019).

People there welcomed me and assured me that I could eat even if I had no money. Their compassion, understanding, knowledge, and kindness, among other qualities, set them apart from the rest of the world, and I started going there every day. One day, a kind Adventist nurse sat down next to me at the table and inquired about my place of worship. I retorted that I did not attend any churches. I was amazed when she informed me that the restaurant was managed by a Christian organisation to which she belonged, and she invited me to join. She explained that the restaurant was vegan since the Bible endorsed veganism as the best diet (Genesis 1:29). I was intrigued and visited the Adventist church for the first time in Bucaramanga (Colombia), a Sabbath in November 2007. From that Sabbath (Saturday), I found a lovely, tranquil, and harmonious place in the Adventist Church. The environment is quite friendly, and the individuals are fantastic. When I first met the Adventist Church members, I felt I had always known them, like the relatives of my own blood family. It was surprising to me that, as an outsider, I was invited to partake in an exquisite plant-based potluck the very first Saturday I visited the church. By a Divine revelation, I made the decision that the Adventist Church was the congregation I wanted to be in.

However, it took me some time until I decided to be baptised as an Adventist and change some old habits (e.g. drinking alcohol or smoking). I never felt any social pressure to such a change, but I lived a direct conversion experience. I found answers to most of the existential questions I always had and discovered the depth of the Bible as the revealed Word of God for humanity. Sabbath after Sabbath (Saturday), I have visited diverse Adventist churches in different countries and regions of the world. A sense of a global family follows wherever I go. Independent of cultural differences, the values tend to be similar, and potlucks are equally tasty (including a variety of local flavours and ingredients). I could not only relate but continue the guiding thread that, from my childhood, had led me to be a vegetarian. I have reinforced the continuation of this thread throughout my life through my love for animals and nature, my care for social justice, and, my desire to improve and maintain good physical health. Today, thanks to having found the Adventist Church, I also have spiritual reasons contributing to what I have been discovering throughout my life. My health habits have improved, and my quality of life has as well. The sense of oneness with the local community church shows how others care for each other in every Adventist

Church I have visited in diverse regions/countries worldwide. Food in the potlucks is one such special expression of that love and affection among fellow Adventist believers (which is often open to every visitor regardless of their belief).

In my more than 15 years as a Seventh-day Adventist member, I have experienced an absolute delight in keeping the rest every Sabbath from Friday evening to Saturday sunset. Some people have criticised our Sabbath observance as "legalistic" or an imposition to curtail our freedom. However, I have never felt pressured to observe the Sabbath as a holy day by my church brethren. On the contrary, I have experienced the freedom to say "no" to any secular activity on Friday evenings and Saturdays and to receive the blessing of the spiritual and physical refreshment of the Shabbat instead. Then I came to comprehend what the Apostle John meant in 1 John 5:3, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous". When we love God, we enjoy obeying Him, knowing that this will ultimately be for our own benefit. Instead, the religious rules imposed by men (and religious institutions) tend to be burdensome.

I have felt a deep sense of peace and joy after each wonderful Sabbath I have observed—including sharing the church service's spiritual food and the potluck's physical meal. Maybe that is why I can sleep like a baby on Saturday evening afterwards (like no other day in the week). I feel rejuvenated each week after Sabbath, and I do not doubt that this positively influences health and longevity.

Summary and conclusions

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a long tradition of potlucks at which food is shared by members, visitors, and friends gathering together. These potlucks may provide several social benefits, including personal and planetary well-being. The purpose of this chapter was to present two accounts of auto-ethnography to illustrate how belongingness may be formed and maintained through the contribution of food practices with a special emphasis on potlucks. Supported by the lived experience of the authors, the following takeaways can be highlighted.

1 While these potlucks may carry different meanings to different individuals, it is important to note that spiritual or social gatherings may benefit persons who would otherwise, perhaps by nature, tend to shun this kind of activity. This is crucial in our current times of social perils when much of the remedy is expected to come through community involvement (e.g. social prescription).
2 Another point to highlight is the importance of a welcoming, inclusive and democratic atmosphere maintained and offered by communities of practice which would like to extend their invitation to both members and outsiders. Neither of the authors presenting their story was born into the Adventist

Church. They came to know the community as adults and food played an important role in their identification process. As pointed out by Avakian in Chapter 10 of this volume, the potluck in religious settings may be perceived as a transitional space where individuals can enter, evaluate, but also decide to exit from the community. The communal meal provides an opportunity for experiencing the culture of the community through its individual members. If that is the case, it may be crucial for community members to ponder upon these events and how to make them more inviting, inclusive, accommodating, and beneficial without having to compromise their own values.

3 No coercion or pressuring was exercised by the communities described. Spiritual or religious organisations have been presented as coercive, an attribute which may need addressing in their realms (Dick and Robbins, 2009). On the contrary, the Adventist Church teaches equality, free will, and religious freedom in all areas of life, including dietary choices.[3] While these formal principles were in tandem with the authors' lived experience in two geographical settings, they may manifest themselves differently in other regions and for other individuals.

In closing, researchers in the future may be interested in collecting large-scale data from target participants across the world and evaluate the enabling and disabling factors of potlucks from different aspects, belongingness being one of them.

Notes

1 https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/caring-for-the-environment/
2 *The Holy Bible, King James Version* (Cambridge Edition, 1769). Scripture quotations from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version in the United Kingdom are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press.
3 https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/one-humanity-a-human-relations-statement-addressing-racism-casteism-tribalism-and-ethnocentrism/

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