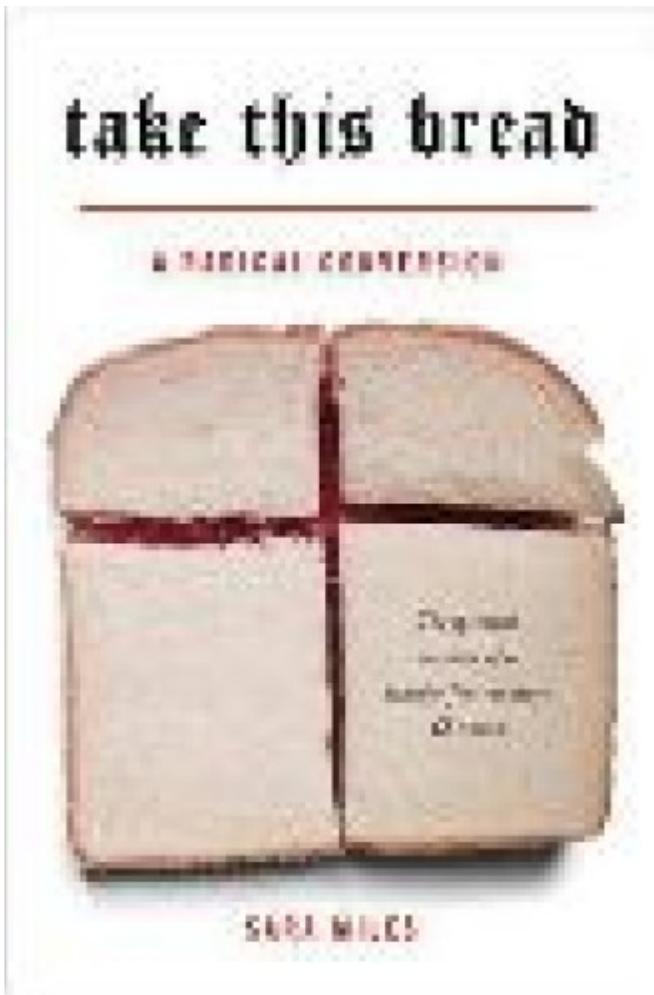


Taste and see

By [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion

Sara Miles
Ballantine

Sara Miles describes herself as an unlikely candidate to walk into St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in 1999 at the moment when the congregation was receiving

communion. With little knowledge of what she was doing, the secular-minded lesbian journalist took communion herself and realized that she was hungry. In her memoir, Miles recounts how this experience drew her into Christianity as a faith of intimate incarnation received and expressed in love.

Communion was an unexpected encounter for Miles. "I couldn't reconcile the experience with anything I knew or had been told. But neither could I go away: For some inexplicable reason, I wanted that bread again. I wanted it all the next day after my first communion, and the next week, and the next. It was a sensation as urgent as physical hunger, pulling me back to the table at St. Gregory's through my fear and confusion." Against the inclination of nearly every friend, lover and family member, Miles followed that hunger into the Christian faith.

As Miles's understanding of the Eucharist deepened, she looked for ways to extend communion far beyond that first piece of bread. She began operating a food pantry that served more than 250 people every week, using the sanctuary and Eucharist table as its center. Miles became increasingly convinced that the people who walked through the door of the food pantry were the church. She was moved by the universal need that everyone shared both to be fed and to feed.

Describing the volunteers who eventually ran the pantry, she writes, "We had homeless guys and women with missing teeth and a couple who spoke only Tagalog come join us; a transsexual with a thick Bronx accent, some teenagers, an ancient Greek woman from across the street, and a dapper man from St. Gregory's choir who came and played the accordion during the pantry. They were all people who, like me, had come to get fed and stayed to help out. Who, like me, took that bread and got changed. We were all converting: turning into new people as we rubbed up against one another."

Miles's view of the Eucharist is one that many Christians might find disturbing: she emphasizes radical inclusivity. She realizes that walking into a church and being able to immediately receive communion (without going through baptism or confirmation) is hardly a common experience. The power of such an inclusive love is what drew her to the table in the first place. For most of us the Eucharist is an insider's meal. *Take This Bread* may provoke conversation about whether that should be the case.

The conversion of the sanctuary into a food pantry and back again was by no means seamless, and Miles confronted significant resistance from church members who were afraid of the damage that the food pantry might cause. Furthermore, she struggled with her own often contentious nature. As she pushed the congregation to start a second food pantry day—on Sundays—Miles writes, “I had no clue that I was crossing the line from self-righteous do-gooder to crusading zealot.” In her book, she reaches little resolution about when and how to force change, but she does strive to be honest about her own limitations.

At times, Miles is abrasive, as when she wittily criticizes certain ways of being religious. Creeds and mumbling liturgy are particularly unacceptable to her. Regarding her first encounter with the wider Episcopal communion, she writes: “An old white man in an alb slumped in a chair on the dais; a silent priest sat facing him beneath a bank of ornate candles. An organist wheezed out a dirgelike hymn, and at some mysterious signal, the congregation stood up, rustling sheets of paper. . . . In a depressive mumble, the priest started speaking the words to a psalm, and the people around me recited it dully in unison and then sank back into their pews.” For Miles, an invigorated liturgy goes hand in hand with a dynamic and vital faith.

The book is sprinkled with the very self-righteousness that Miles finds repulsive in other Christians. It is saved, however, by her rigorous self-examination and her acknowledgment that faith and conversion are long, hard processes.

Perhaps the most moving story in the book is that of a young girl from the food pantry who approaches Miles near the baptismal font of the church and asks for the “water God puts on you to make you safe.” Miles knows that she cannot offer this child safety and that Christianity is by no means a religion for those who want to be safe. Yet the girl’s request for baptism is direct and undeniable. She spontaneously baptizes the girl, and a priest helping in the food pantry anoints her with oil. “Jesus is always with you,” the priest tells the girl, “no matter what happens to you, even when bad things happen to you. You’re not ever alone.”

In *Take This Bread*, we find hope that an invigorated, incarnate and imaginative Christianity is emerging from the political battlefields. Miles joins other memoirists in what is becoming a tradition of renarrating Christianity by taking incarnation seriously. Her combination of insightful meditation on Christian practices and skilled storytelling makes this book moving, delightful and significant.