

Something Christlike: A life-giving strategy

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 29, 2008](#) issue

The version of Christianity that appears in the media often embarrasses me: it's narrow, sectarian, exclusive and sometimes mean-spirited. So it was a joy to find in the May 26 *New Yorker* an article by novelist Ian Frazier about a church being a church in the best sense.

Frazier conducts a weekly writing workshop at a church soup kitchen in New York City, and he regularly encounters gifted men and women who, for one reason or another, are homeless and hungry. The Church of the Holy Apostles is a landmark, with a high arched ceiling and gorgeous stained-glass windows. Over the years the Episcopal congregation dwindled in size as the neighborhood changed until the 200 members could no longer afford to pay the bills to keep it going. A new rector suggested that "if Holy Apostles is going out of business, it might as well do some good before it does."

So in 1982 the church launched a free-lunch program. Thirty-five people showed up. The program grew and attracted more people and outside support. In a few years the congregation was serving 900 lunches daily and bursting the seams of its mission house.

In 1990, during roof repairs to the main sanctuary, a fire broke out that caused major damage. During insurance-covered restoration and renovation, and while the pews were out, members came up with an idea: Why not leave the pews out and use the worship space, which was empty and unused Monday through Friday, for the lunch program?

Now the church is serving 1,200 meals a day. Volunteers do most of the work. They take the tables down on Friday afternoon and set up folding chairs for the weekend. The budget is now \$2.7 million, which comes from businesses, foundations, the city—and the 200 members, who, instead of closing down a church, are part of a vital and compelling community of faith.

The program rules are simple: no proselytizing and no one turned away. If anyone wants more food, that person can go outside, stand in line, get another ticket and eat again. Frazier asked Elizabeth Maxwell of the Holy Apostles staff about the religious motivation behind the program. She said: “Well, we do this because Jesus said to feed the hungry. There’s no more to it than that. Jesus told us to take care of the poor and hungry and those in prison. . . . In all the intricacies of scriptural interpretation, that message—feed the hungry—could not be more clear. Those of us at Holy Apostles feel we have a Sunday-Monday connection. The bread and wine of the Eucharist we share on Sunday becomes the food we share with our neighbors during the week.”

There has long been an important debate in the church about whether its mandate is to feed the hungry or to address the social, economic and political structures that cause people to be hungry. We are in a major global food crisis, the reasons for which are complex—including the rising cost of oil, which has an impact on the cost of fertilizer and transportation. It is a crisis that ultimately will not be addressed by food aid. If you want to take Jesus’ moral imperative seriously, sooner or later you have to think about politics and economics.

In the meantime, it is important that the world see in the church something of the kindness, compassion and justice of Jesus which is behind the advocacy for social and political change. It’s a matter of both/and.

Maybe the world would find churches more interesting and compelling if they showed something of the love of Jesus in their lives and practices. Maybe there is no more important and life-giving strategy for every church than finding something Christlike to do.