

Leading from the belly: Pastoral plenty

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

“Seventy-eight percent of all clergy are either overweight (48 percent) or obese (30 percent).” —Pulpit & Pew Research Project

I was sitting in my usual seat behind the pulpit, famished, thinking, “Will this anthem ever end?” My stomach was growling. Only through heroic spiritual effort was I able to put thoughts of lunch aside and pronounce the benediction.

Have you ever had a wedding reception at the Forest Hills Country Club? Now they know how to do hors d’oeuvres right! The reception food at the Northwestern Hotel is surprisingly good too. Their ham biscuits are to die for.

Speaking of mortality, the best funeral food I’ve ever had was after the funeral of one of my trustees. Old Sam knew how to do things properly. A buffet for 200! Must have cost a fortune. Of course, what did he care at that point about cost? Carved roast beef. Marinated shrimp. The works. A heck of a lot better than standing in the kitchen with nothing to comfort you but cold fried chicken, I can tell you.

First Church, across town, has a real chef, certified by the Culinary Institute of America, no less. I’m talking crêpes suzette for a board dinner. Handmade petit fours for a reception. Prime rib for a Women On Fire luncheon.

Us? All we can afford is dear, sweet Marianne. That woman’s cooking is a sacrilege. My greatest failure as a transformative leader is my inability to get her out of our kitchen. She almost killed the Mary Martha Circle last year with her chicken salad.

My best experience at a church-run facility was at Sunnyside Center, which is run by the Episcopalians. No slopping out a glob of oatmeal on a plastic tray for them. I’m talking ham, eggs, fried potatoes, sautéed mushrooms—a sort of faux English breakfast to fit their faux English churches. Say what you will about their theology, the Episcopalians have class when it comes to dining.

When it comes to quantity, though, give me a Baptist convention. All you can eat. Each evening ended with an ice cream sundae buffet. Baptists believe that more is better and too much of anything is wonderful.

But I have never eaten better coconut cream pie than Miss Agnes's, at my first church. I wonder if she is still living. I wonder if she still makes those pies. Maybe she needs a pastoral call.