

Isolation at the table

by *Nekeisha Alexis-Baker*

Dinner with friends and family. Fellowship meals at church. Celebrating at a restaurant. For most of my life, social gatherings like these were relatively simple affairs where the most complicated issues were whether I had room for dessert and if I should go back for seconds. However, that changed almost three years ago when I felt called to avoid using and consuming the bodies and byproducts of nonhuman animals—a decision that would change the way I relate to people I know and love.

Adopting a vegan lifestyle involves using alternatives to nonhuman animal fibers such as wool and leather, and items that have been tested on nonhuman animals. It also entails changing to a plant-based diet, a switch that, while not easy at first, has now become second nature for me. Removing eggs, dairy and meat from my meals has led to many culinary adventures as I discover new ways to prepare old favorites, try foods I've never eaten before, and unearth vegan goodies that are hiding in plain sight (i.e. Oreo cookies).

Although I am a happy vegan, the path is not always obstacle-free. Often the difficulties lie not in the diet itself, but in the ways people sometimes respond to my eating habits. As Bob and Jenna Torres write in *Vegan Freak: Being Vegan in a Non-Vegan World*:

“All of us who are vegan have at some time or another felt like absolute outsiders in the places that we’re supposed to be the most comfortable: our homes, our jobs and with our friends and families.”

The same is true even in Mennonite circles where peacemaking, sustainability and attention to what we eat are important values. Living in the meat-loving Midwest as a vegan often includes dealing with lack of awareness (How do you get your [insert vitamin here?]), defensiveness (Native Americans ate meat so why shouldn't I?), debates (Jesus ate fish so what's the problem?) and



Nekeisha feeds Destiny Conchita, a goat she helped her neighbors rescue last summer.

Courtesy Photo

being dismissed (I don't want to know what's in my food). The reality is that vegans are often singled-out by both well and not so well intentioned people—even though we can all benefit from making good theological and ethical food choices.

So what might vegans and their non-vegan hosts do to lessen some of the tension of breaking bread together? There are a few things that I would like to suggest. Depending on the social context, these suggestions might also help other people whose ethical choices, allergies or medical conditions make it difficult to eat with others.

To the vegans, first, I encourage you to speak up for yourselves. Explaining or reminding others of your diet well before community meals allows people to plan for your presence. Second, bring something to the table. Preparing a dish to share around the table ensures you'll have something to eat and is a tasty way to introduce veganism to others. Third, take advantage of vegan-friendly spaces. Attending or starting a vegan potluck can support you through the less-than-vegan-friendly moments of your life. Finally, don't be a "martyr." If you are invited to eat somewhere that can't or won't accommodate your needs, eat beforehand or pack a snack so you can enjoy the company, or practice self-care and decline the invitation. Being cranky from hunger won't reflect well on you or our movement.



Church potlucks can be an ideal time to introduce vegan dishes to non-vegans.

To the non-vegans, be aware that while some of us enjoy discussing our decision over a meal, others are less inclined. Asking whether a person is interested in talking about veganism before launching into an interview can make him feel comfortable about either speaking or graciously saying no. Second, veganize a few of your events. Designating a few vegan meals for the congregation, in your small group or at other community gatherings is a way to acknowledge the vegans in your midst. Third, think theologically about food together. What we eat has consequences beyond satisfying our taste buds. So invite a vegan in your community to lead a Sunday school class or a book study, then reflect and pray together about how God might call you to respond. Finally, be a short-term solidarity vegan. At events like church retreats or conferences where a few vegans are in attendance, it is easy to feel like we are a burden to the food preparation. When others agree to eat like vegans

during these gatherings, it reduces the feelings that we are alone. In these and other ways, non-vegans create a more hospitable place for people like me.

Eating together can be difficult even when people share similar

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perspectives and concerns. Such was the case among the post-Pentecost Jesus followers who had a food fight between Grecian and Hebraic Jews shortly after establishing an intentional community (Acts 6:1–4). However, when we do our best to fellowship with marginalized eaters, whether they are vegans/vegetarians, people with food allergies, folks coping with obesity, or people struggling with illnesses like diabetes, we also help to create a more welcoming community. 📖

Resources

Books

Fisher, Bruce, and Robert Alberti. *Rebuilding When Your Relationship Ends*. Atascadero, CA: Impact, 2000.

Ginsburg, Genevieve Davis. *Widow to Widow*. Cambridge, MA: Fisher Books, 1997.

James, John W. and Russell Friedman. *Grief Recovery Handbook*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1998.

Rice, Jesse. *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community*. Colorado Springs: Cook, 2009.

Online

Bryner, Jeanna. "Loneliness Spreads Like a Virus." LiveScience.com. 01 Dec. <<http://www.livescience.com/culture/091201-loneliness-spreads-friends.html>>.

United Nations. *Livestock's Long Shadow*. United Nations, 2006. <<ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/A0701E/A0701E00.pdf>>.