

Eating Together Faithfully: *Education for Faith Formation through Christian Foodways*

A collaboration between Duke Divinity School and Life Around the Table



INTRODUCTION

Background on Eating Together Faithfully: A Framework for Conversation

Eating Together Faithfully: A Framework for Conversation (ETF) was developed by Life Around the Table (LATT) as a way to invite conversation around the complex topic of food and faith. Piloted in 2017, field tested in 2018, and published in 2019, ETF is a proven model for theologically addressing the broad range of connections embedded in the ways we eat and invite others to eat. ETF engages participants in the study and practice of a way of living based on Food that LAUGHS:

- **L**ocal / incarnation
- **A**ffordable / grace
- **U**ncomplicated / ordinary made holy
- **G**ood / justice
- **H**ealthy / flourishing
- **S**easonal / time and liturgy

The Framework takes participants through eight guided conversations, exploring the theological and practical implications of each of these words for their lives, their communities, and our world. Through this guided study over simple meals together around the table, participants discover what it means to eat with God's intentions for all creation in mind.

The goals of the ETF Framework are (1) to form an ecological spirituality grounded in the convictions of our faith, (2) to build Communities of Practice around the themes of food and faith by learning from one another and praying for one another, (3) to spark biblical imagination by learning to read scripture through an agrarian lens, (4) to strengthen the relationship between the Lord's Table and our daily tables, and (5) to become invested in the health of each other, our communities, and all creation.

Creation of an ETF Course at Duke Divinity School

In the spring of 2019, Dr. Frederick Edie, Associate Professor of the Practice of Christian Education at Duke Divinity School (DDS), invited Rev. Grace Hackney, Founder and Executive Director of LATT, to co-teach a course at DDS, using ETF as the primary resource for exploring the ways the Christian faith is formed through eating together.

Because of the depth, complexity, sensitivity, and potential impact of the conversations offered, historically the LATT team only trained ETF facilitators during intensive 3-day training retreats. Thus, Edie and Hackney embarked on an experiment to translate the 3-day ETF training retreat experience into a semester-long college course. The course would seek to meet the goals of the ETF Framework (listed above), as well as the goals established by the unique structure of a seminary course.

Eating Together Faithfully: Education for Faith Formation through Christian Foodways (XTIANEDU 804) was offered as a 3-credit course at DDS in Spring 2020. Initially, the class was open to 14 students. When the course filled up shortly after registration opened, the class size was increased, and ultimately 19 students enrolled.

The primary goal of this paper is to share Edie and Hackney's lessons learned in teaching the ETF Framework in a seminary setting. We will share our methods and course structure details, reflect upon successes and failures, and offer feedback from students. **It is our hope and intention that seminaries around the country can glean best practices from this inaugural seminary ETF class, as they design ETF courses at their institutions.**

A Master's Level Seminary Course

Eating Together Faithfully was originally designed as a series of conversations held around a table for a minimum of eight sessions, with each session lasting two hours. The process of translating the ETF Framework into a Master's Level Seminary course was a bold experiment, which proved to be both challenging and incredibly rewarding. Training seminarians to carry these conversations into communities they currently serve, or will serve in the future, offered an opportunity to consider pedagogical needs of various contexts, and deeper engagement with the materials offered in ETF. It also offered an opportunity to explore how the additional supplemental materials would enhance the pedagogical, spiritual, and theological aspects of the Framework. Our hope was that students would experience a transformation in the ways they think about eating with God's intentions for all creation, and in turn they would be equipped with the tools to facilitate similar experiences in their current and future ministry settings.



COURSE DETAILS

Course Title

Eating Together Faithfully: Education for Faith Formation through Christian Foodways

Course Description

This Practicing Theology in Ministry (PTM) course in Christian education offers faith leaders the opportunity to imagine, practice and reflect upon meal sharing as a focal point of Christian communal life. Utilizing Life Around the Table's innovative curricular framework, *Eating Together Faithfully: A Framework for Conversation*, students will participate in reflective conversations about food, justice, and faith while sharing simple meals together. Along the way, they will acquire crucial skills for shaping hospitable learning communities, asking good questions, and leading conversations on difficult topics including racism, sexism, economic exploitation, and ecological crisis all as they relate to the abundance (or scarcity) of food.

Course Objectives

1. Students will participate in the establishment of a learning community, practice discerning some of the dynamics at work in learning communities, and begin to discover ways to nurture these dynamics in settings where they will be called to offer educational leadership. *Objective assessed through regular reflective conversations on the pedagogies employed in this class and through student journaling.*
2. Students will participate in, lead, and reflect upon a specific educational Framework – Eating Together Faithfully (ETF) – in the effort to grow as educators and faith forming leaders, and more specifically, as facilitators of ETF. *Objective assessed through weekly journaling and end of term assignment.*
3. Students will practice interpreting scripture in light of biblical concerns for food, food production, feasting, and famine. *Objective assessed through 1-2 short essays.*
4. Students will reflect upon the practical theological implications of food and foodways as these pertain to issues of justice, economics, sustainability, health, Christian faith and Christian service. *Objective assessed through the second of two short essays.*
5. Students will consider how the ETF Framework may be best contextualized in their local communities. They will attend to learners' knowledge and perceptions of scripture, their dominant styles of learning, perceptions of and preferences for leadership, local foodways, their cultural contexts, how they engage with diverse attitudes and opinions, and more. In light of these considerations, students will suggest what themes, texts, practices will be prioritized within ETF, and how it may be taught effectively in their communities. *Objective assessed through end of term essay.*

Class Structure

The class was offered in the Spring of 2020 at the Duke Divinity School as a 3-credit, twelve session course, open to second and third year students, as well as fourth year Student Pastors. The class met for 2.5 hours on Wednesday evenings. The room assigned was adjacent to the student lounge, where a small kitchen allowed access to dishes, refrigerator, and a small stove. During our first class, we acknowledged the lack of racial diversity in the class (all white). Instructors invited students to be prepared to “do the work” of confronting the privilege in the room. For about half of the students, this was their first class in Christian Education at Duke.

During the first four class sessions, the class met as one group of 21 (2 co-instructors, 19 students). These initial four classes provided the foundation for engagement in the eight sessions established in the ETF Framework.¹ These classes began with the introduction of short, reflective readings from different foodways, followed by prayer. During these first four sessions, students volunteered to provide a snack, which the group enjoyed during a 15 minute break.

During Sessions 5-11, three Table Cohorts were formed to work together through the first seven conversations of the ETF Framework. When assigning the Table Cohorts, an effort was made to ensure that each table included at least one person who “enjoyed and was competent” in cooking for others. During these sessions, class would begin with one of the instructors giving a brief overview of the session conversation, the food for the evening was introduced, and Table Cohorts were dismissed to their own spaces to begin the ETF conversations.

These Cohorts remained together for the remainder of the semester. Edie and Hackney were each assigned a Cohort, and Jimmy McKinnell, Ministry Engagement Coordinator for LATT, joined the third Cohort. Edie, Hackney, and McKinnell facilitated the first conversation, and each student was assigned a subsequent session to facilitate. Guidelines and suggested timelines were offered to table facilitators.²

In the original class plan, each Table Cohort would source and prepare an evening meal for the class for Sessions 5-11. Additionally, two guest chefs were invited to share an evening meal and their stories. Below is the the initial plan for the evening meals for Sessions 5 through 11:

1. Dr. Edie
2. Rev. Hackney and Jimmy
3. Table Cohort
4. Guest Chef (Zweli’s restaurant, Zimbabwean)
5. Table Cohort.
6. Guest Chef (HarvestShare and Reality Center)
7. Table Cohort.

This intended plan was interrupted by the COVID-19 Stay-in-Place order, and only one Table Cohort and one guest chef had the opportunity to prepare a meal for the class. Once class sessions were moved to Zoom, students were encouraged, but not required, to bring their meals to the virtual table.

¹ See Appendix I for Syllabus (for content and purpose of these 4 sessions)

² See Appendix II for Guidelines for Student ETF Facilitation



THE COURSE & COVID-19

COVID-19 Adaptations

1. Classes were moved to video call instruction via Zoom. The first conversation following the Stay-in-Place order was “Healthy: Flourishing,” and student facilitators were invited to use the new context to frame their Cohort conversations.
2. Facilitators for the first Zoom class were contacted and implemented the following plan:
 - a. The entire class would check in as usual on Zoom. Each student checked in verbally with *where* they were, and a brief word of *how* they were.
 - b. After prayer, Cohorts were sent to individual groups on Zoom for more intimate time to check-in.
 - c. After 20 minutes, the class reconvened with facilitators reporting overall well-being of their Cohort, while maintaining confidentiality. Prayers for the class were offered by an instructor. Instructions were then given to return to Table Cohorts to continue the ETF Framework discussions.
 - d. 20 minutes before the end of the class session, all Cohorts were brought back together for a final wrap up.
3. The class structure detailed above worked well, and this structure was implemented for the remainder of the class sessions.
4. The final class session was initially planned to be a celebration, with a meal planned by the entire class. Instead, the final class was an opportunity to gather via Zoom, to offer pastoral care as needed, and discern a set of evaluative questions.³ We concluded the course with a blessing for each student, using the poem by Jan Richardson, “And the Table will be Wide.” We also commissioned each student as an ETF Facilitator, and invited them to join our online ETF Facilitator community, Mighty Networks.
5. Prompted by the Duke Divinity School’s call for an abundance of grace in light of COVID-19, Edie and Hackney made the following adjustments to the course:
 - a. Students were allowed to opt for pass-fail
 - b. Participation grade was increased from 20% to 25%
 - c. The contextual essay requirement was shortened from 7-9 pages to 5-7 pages
 - d. The final contextual essay was reduced from 30% to 25% of the final grade

³ See Appendix I for Syllabus (Evaluative Questions on page 5)

Learning from COVID Adaptations

1. Students were eager to gather via Zoom. Because the class had built a strong foundation in Sessions 1-6, several students commented that, while they were sad not to meet and eat in person, they were most looking forward to this class because of the nature of the material, and the friendships that had developed as a result of the class. Students were also eager to reflect on the current COVID-19 pandemic in light of the material.
2. Eating together was a critical part of this class. While we did not require that students bring their meals to the virtual table, many did. In the future, we would strongly recommend that students bring their meal to the Zoom call.
3. We learned that meaningful conversation can still happen virtually, though we wonder what would have been different if we hadn't been able to experience the four in-person meals together at the beginning of the semester. We had the normal challenges with the technology of Zoom, with some students (and instructors) with low bandwidth, but no one was prevented from participating.
4. The "chat room" feature on Zoom allowed individual questions and checking in that in-person meeting would not.
5. We recognize that the COVID-19 context brought a gravity to the material that would not have been present otherwise. Continuing to meet allowed students a unique lens through which to process their particular and communal fears. Hackney offered commentary regarding the connections between faith, unjust food systems, and the pandemic. There was also an opportunity to reflect on the Christian response to suffering and Christian hope.



EVALUATION

Our evaluation of this course is primarily based on reflections in Student Journals, anecdotal stories, and reflections from the perspective of Dr. Fred Edie, Rev. Grace Hackney, Jimmy McKinnell (a recent graduate of Duke Divinity, and LATT staff), and David Allen (a second year Masters of Divinity student).⁴ Students were also surveyed using a Google Form the week after the class ended. Of the 19 students in the class, 5 responded.

Insights from the survey and student journals reflected the following outcomes:

1. The class was more creative, participatory, and imaginative than other classes taken previously at DDS.
2. The class allowed students to know one another on a deeper level than other classes, and fostered real community building.
3. This class challenged previous assumptions, dismantled prior ways of thinking, and engaged new ways of imagining ministry.
4. Students reported being more connected and mindful of the food they purchase, prepare, and consume.
5. Students reported an increased connection to the sacrament of Holy Communion and the possibility for all of our meals to be sacramental.
6. Students reported that learning to read scripture through an agrarian lens impacted the ways they read scripture in other classes, or for spiritual growth and preaching.
7. Students reported that this class allowed them space to wrestle with difficult topics without judgment or fear.
8. Students reported that this class caused them to examine their own understanding of the character and nature of God, while also giving them space for the inner work of examining their own spiritual practices.
9. Students reported that they learned more from the interactive nature of Table Cohorts than they would have from a traditional lecture or individualized learning approach.
10. Through final essays, students demonstrated capacity to lead these conversations in a variety of contexts, as well as the ability to begin to discern dynamics at work in various community settings.

⁴ See Appendix III for Student Reflections
& Appendix IV for Four Perspectives on the ETF DDS Course

Recommendations:

1. Each student had the opportunity to facilitate only once. Consider pairing students together for co-facilitation, giving each pair two opportunities to facilitate.
2. Facilitators were not evaluated. Consider developing a peer review rubric.
3. Encourage seminars to provide a food budget for classes. For this class, we suggested \$70 per student to cover meal costs (\$10 per meal). Because we did not meet in person for the final four class sessions, \$420 was donated to a local restaurant (by unanimous vote by students).
4. Consider space available before determining class size. We recommend no more than 10 people within each Table Cohort, to allow trust and vulnerability to occur within an intimate group.
5. Consider having Teaching Assistants leading each Table Cohort, which would free up the lead instructor(s) to float between each group and get to know the entire class.
6. When forming the Table Cohorts, determine a rubric for forming groups based on prior knowledge of material and context of each student (gender, marital status, race etc).
7. Consider ways that Table Cohorts could creatively cross-pollinate ideas with each other, possibly using an interactive web based platform.
8. Be intentional about messaging for the course, to encourage a diversity of students to feel comfortable enrolling. If your group (like ours) is primarily white, it is important to acknowledge the privilege in the room and to “to do the work” of confronting this privilege throughout the class sessions.
9. Vary food and space options, and include field trips, or guest speakers if possible.
 - a. Examples include: inter-faith dialogue, health professionals, food pantries, farmers, food policy makers, community gardens and cooperatives.
10. Include other media in supplemental materials, such as documentaries, podcasts, etc.
11. Meet in person, unless circumstances prohibit. If meeting through Zoom classroom, make plans and develop guidelines for eating together while meeting.



CONCLUSION

During the Spring Semester of 2020, Life Around the Table and Duke Divinity School collaborated to offer a Master's Level Seminary course: *Eating Together Faithfully: Education for Faith Formation through Christian Foodways*.

For twelve weeks, 19 students met with two co-instructors for an experiment in practical theology. Unexpectedly, after seven sessions, COVID-19 forced the class to move to the virtual classroom for the final five sessions. The original experiment became more bold, resulting in a second question: *Can faith formation occur using the ETF Framework, with participants not face to face around a table?*

The answer is yes. In the midst of great uncertainty, the innovative and nimble spirit from instructors and students alike was a lesson in leadership. Many **discoveries were made** in the course of the twelve weeks: factual information about the global food system, new ways of defining "health," deep theological engagement from a very practical perspective, spiritual practices of paying attention, practicing gratitude, prayer, bible study, sabbath, and worship. **Skills were practiced:** deep listening, facilitating critical conversations, prodding each other to question assumptions and privileges, and for some, cooking for a crowd! Perhaps, more questions arose than were answered, and despair for the world was balanced with Christian hope and love.

Dr. Edie and Rev. Hackney are both eager to offer this course again. In addition to Duke Divinity School, other seminaries that have attended Eating Together Faithfully Facilitator trainings are Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina; Memphis Theological Seminary, Tennessee; Methodist Theological School of Ohio; and Western Theological School in Holland, Michigan. Rev. Melanie Dobson, Th.D., is currently preparing to offer a similar course at Lutheran Theological during the Fall of 2020.

Life Around the Table is eager to partner with other seminaries and schools of higher education in leading the Eating Together Faithfully Framework. Each setting will be unique.

To begin the conversation, please contact us at jimmy@lifearoundthetable.org.