

Feasts in White in the Cleveland Chapel Baptist Community

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*White dresses, white hats, white gloves,
White table linens, white aprons, white altar coverings for communion,
And the white garments of Christ.*

Feasting in the Cleveland Chapel Baptist Church of Spartanburg, South Carolina is an integral part of life. It encourages fellowship and therefore is done “every chance we get,” (Pastor Brown says once or twice a quarter). Community dinners, pot luck suppers, the Christmas Gala and Vacation Bible School are each organized by committee. The women of the Audio committee are especially active in the kitchen. They wear white aprons while they serve “soul food”-- the cuisine of choice—macaroni and cheese (the community favorite), fried chicken, pigs feet, mashed potatoes, smothered pork chops, custard and sweet tea.

These white-aproned women of the church, assigned by talent, serve food willingly with carefully selected table cloths and china. They want to appear professional and clean. These same women also work in another facet of the church community, preparing other women for baptism by helping them dress in the white baptismal robes; symbols of purity. Occasionally the pastor, Reverend Timothy Brown, delivers a message

at a prayer breakfast or a prayer at larger meals. He is acclaimed by his congregation and the women are quick to point out his unique ability to respect the Holy Spirit, to limit his passions that God may speak through him unhindered so the sheep may be fed-- another kind of soul food they might say.

The kitchen of Cleveland Chapel Baptist Church is witness to another manner of eating. On one wall hangs a large depiction of "The Last Supper." The representation of the body of Christ is evident both in the service of the women and also in the words of Pastor Brown who claims "dinner is an intricate part of growing up"—both physically and spiritually.

The congregation has been growing significantly over the last few years and Communion has been expanded to two services on the first Sunday of each month, once in the morning and once in the evening. The evening service is reserved for fellowship of communion with sister communities in the area. The second service, also led by Pastor Brown, is meant to include members of the local Christian population outside of Cleveland Chapel. Feasting on the body of Christ is intricate to the tradition. Members like Ms. Cheek hold that this possible because "Pastor Brown doesn't sugarcoat anything." He simply breaks bread and serves the meat and potatoes (or the macaroni and cheese and fried chicken) of Christianity. Members view the act of communion as a physical manifestation of the need for forgiveness of sins and spiritual reminders. Communion is of course accompanied by truth, the Word of God, their nourishment.

We interviewed members of the Cleveland Baptist Church about their experiences of feasting, fellowship, and communion. Our first personal interview was an attempt to glean information, recipes and personal opinions on the roles of foodways in the

community. During our conversation with two members of the congregation, Ms. Cheek and Ms. Nesbitt, we found it particularly fascinating that they focused on the color they associated with the community's foodways—white.

Ms. Debra Cheek and Ms. Marquetti Nesbitt spoke of white aprons and white table cloths used for church functions. The Audio Committee, which is very active in food events, has nearly twenty members and over the past years has made a tradition of incorporating the use of starched white table cloths and white aprons for those serving food. The annual celebrations with which the committee might work are the Christmas Gala, Soul Food Sunday and Black History Month. During the interview, Ginnie and I also noticed a large piece of art work on the wall behind in the dining room, adjoining the kitchen of the church. It captured a moment of the Last Supper in the Upper Room with Christ. Jesus wore also wore a white robe, was surrounded by disciples and other traditional figures like Mary Magdalene, all seated at a table covered in white linen. Ms. Cheek and Ms. Nesbitt agreed that the work reminded them of the “daily bread” promised by Christ and were quick to add that their “bread” was not only tangible food but more importantly food which fed the spirit and soul—food for an appetite driven by faith.

Another encounter with Ms. Nesbitt and other community members would be in attendance of a Sunday Morning Worship Service followed by communion. Immediately upon entrance of the Sanctuary, one would notice the covering of the pulpit, altar and chairs with white cloths. Pastor Brown wore a white robe, as appropriate for the church season and a belt with an embroidered red cross. Behind Pastor Brown and the pulpit there was a commissioned painting of Christ in water over the Baptismal Pool. The

figure of Jesus wears a white robe with a red cloth draped over one shoulder. The painting was commissioned and was dedicated in August of 2004 under the previous minister. After the message came the ritual of communion. Those men in charge of distributing communion wore white gloves to pass plates which held both the bread and juice. Also present at the morning service of communion were deaconesses, traditionally clothed in white from head to toe.

Whether dressed in their white deaconesses dresses or in their white aprons, the women of Cleveland chapel participate actively in the communion of the congregation. As the women take on the roles of food preparers in the community, they, like the official church leaders, are clothed in a different type of white robe reminiscent of Christ – an apron -- just as the tables are covered in the white linens of a sacred meal reminiscent of the Last Supper. For the Cleveland Chapel community, sharing a meal of traditional Southern foods is indeed a sort of communion ceremony itself in which the women in white are the celebrants.