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### Church 'casserole queens' receive overdue tribute

Mary Jacobs, Apr 25, 2007

**By Mary Jacobs**  
*Associate Editor*

Curt Wollan remembers growing up with church basement ladies. In fact, his mom was one of them.

"Everybody knows these women," he said. "They're the ladies who have the potluck suppers to raise funds for the orphans, who are the bedrock of the church.

"It's time they were celebrated."

And that's exactly what he's doing. Mr. Wollan is executive producer and director of *Church Basement Ladies*, a popular musical comedy first performed by Minnesota-based Troupe America.



Though it centers on a small, rural Minnesota church, the play is a tribute that would be familiar to members of just about any denomination. After all, food and fellowship has long been part of American church culture, with members preparing meals for everything from

baby showers to funerals to anniversaries.

And don't forget dinner on the grounds and church potluck meals. Some churches even publish their own cookbooks.

To celebrate the recent opening of *Church Basement Ladies* at Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse in Rock Island, Ill., producer Dennis Hitchcock invited local "church cooks" to submit their favorite "hot dish," or casserole recipes.

Some 99 local churches and synagogues of different denominations submitted recipes. Four of the nine winners were United Methodists. **-see their recipes-**

"We (Methodists) must be the cooks," said Dorothy Hotle, 83, of Riverside UMC in Moline, Ill. "There weren't any Baptists or Presbyterians."

Ms. Hotle's Overnight Ham



PHOTO COURTESY TROUPE AMERICA INC.

Jell-O, anyone? *Church Basement Ladies*, a musical comedy now being performed in Illinois, Tennessee and Minnesota, portrays four women who prepare meals in a church kitchen in 1964.

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Ms. Hotle's Overnight Ham Casserole was one of the nine winning recipes. Circa '21 will feature one recipe during each week of its nine-week run, which concludes May 26.



Church Basement Ladies portrays four women -- from an elderly matriarch to a young bride-to-be -- and a minister. The women work together to handle a Christmas lutefisk dinner in record-breaking time, the funeral of a dear friend, a Hawaiian Easter fund-raiser and a steaming, hot July wedding. The entire play takes place in the church basement kitchen.

Growing Up Lutheran, a book by Janet Letnes Martin and Suzanne Nelson, provided the inspiration for the musical, written by Jim Stowell and Jessica Zuehlke with music and lyrics by Drew Jansen. But the themes, creators say, transcend denominations.



"Everybody knows these women," said Mr. Wollan. "They're your mothers, your friends' mothers. You rely on them. But you don't mess with them."

He calls them 'Steel Magnolias of the Prairie.'

"Church basement lady" is a mantle that Kathy Grace of Springdale UMC in Springdale, Iowa, wears with pride.

"We're the ones who do a lot of cooking and serving up food," she said. "Our work down there in the basement promotes a lot of fellowship." Her Mexican Casserole was another winner.

Many of the winning recipes have family ties or stories behind them. All call for at least one can of cream of chicken or mushroom soup.

Ms. Grace's recipe came from her daughter-in-law, who got it from her grandmother.

Jane Duben, a member of Asbury UMC in Bettendorf, Iowa, won for her Beef & Wild Rice Casserole, but she insists the credit must go to her friend and fellow church member Ruth McMorran. She copied the recipe from the church cookbook and sent it with a note of praise to the contest. "All I did was bake it and take it," Ms. Duben said.



Ms. Hotle's casserole -- a recipe from late church member Charlene Van Daele that appeared in the church's 1989 cookbook -- is known as "the funeral casserole" among church members. Ms. Hotle recently retired after serving 10 years as the church's funeral luncheon chair.



"It was such a rewarding mission, because you're helping grieving families," she said. "When they arrive, they've got long faces. But as they eat and have fellowship, their grief lifts a little."

Debra Rhoads of Calvary UMC in Walcott, Ill., was the fourth winner with her Chicken Monterrey recipe.

Ms. Grace worries about the future of church basement ladies, however. Because so many women work out of the

home, "there are fewer and fewer ladies who can step up when the need is there."

Even though she works herself, she helps organize Springdale UMC's annual Christmas



buffet for the entire congregation. Served by candlelight, and with no paper cups or paper plates, the meal has become an important moment in the life of the church.

"You've got to hang onto some of these things that are important," Ms. Grace said.

A national tour of Troupe America's production of *Church Basement Ladies* is planned for 2008; visit [www.troupeamerica.com](http://www.troupeamerica.com) for more information.

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