

Love Feast Beginnings
by Tom Bloomer
composed circa October 1998,
updated in 2001 thanks to input from Al Akimoff and Reona Joly

How Did YWAM Love Feasts Begin?

In 1971 at YWAM Lausanne, there were a couple of serious accidents on Sunday afternoons, notably sledding accidents. When Loren and Darlene Cunningham sought the Lord as to the reason, they understood Him to be saying that there needed to be a new commitment to His holiness, especially concerning Sabbath observance; and then He would restore His protection.

One other key influence during the same period was the visit of two of the Sisters of Mary of the evangelical sisterhood of Darmstadt to the Lausanne base, who loved YWAM but were surprised at the unruliness of the meal times (people jumping up to get things, shouting across the room, reading their mail at the table, etc.). They told Loren and Darlene that their meals were times of peace, quietness, and relationship.

When we came as students in 1974 one of the first teachings in the school was that a meal could and should be an ordered time of fellowship. We were taught to stay seated for a full 45 minutes, to enjoy the meal and talking with the people around us, and to prefer one another at the table.

Reona Peterson-Joly returned from London in 1971, where she was pioneering YWAM England and supporting herself by teaching in a school for Orthodox Jewish children. When Reona heard that the leadership was studying what the Lord meant by Sabbath observance, she shared what she had understood from the Orthodox Jewish families. To sum up: the house was cleaned from top to bottom, to purge it of leaven; there was no work on the Sabbath day; the Sabbath began on the eve of the day, with the best meal of the week, which meant the best china, the best food, the best clothes for the family, and most of all, there was a total focus on the Lord.

Another key influence at that time was Joe and Judi Portale's return to the base, after visiting believers in Czechoslovakia with Al & Carolyn Akimoff. Arriving at the house of a Czech elder on Christmas Eve, they participated in their 'love feast', which consisted of passing around round, flat bread and telling each person what they meant to them, and how they loved them. YWAM first heard about this 250-year-old Moravian tradition in this way, and that's how we began to use the term 'love feast'.

So, the Cunninghams proceeded to study the relevant passages in the Word (Is. 56 and 58, among others), and to restore the Sabbath by adapting the Jewish traditions to YWAM Lausanne:

No work on Sunday -- so the noon meal was usually cold (salads and Sandwiches prepared the day before, to reduce the kitchen work).

No sports or hard play either -- not a legalistic rule, but an outworking of the commitment to 'turn your foot from your own pleasure on the Sabbath'.

The Sabbath was a day of quiet, rest (many took naps), walks in the forest, and concentration on the Lord. (Of course, there was church in the morning and the main weekly community meeting in the evening, too.)

To prepare for the Sabbath, we had a love feast the evening before, on the eve of the Day of Rest.

We moved the tables from the crowded dining room into the larger lecture room, so as to have space for all students and staff to sit down together, and to have guests as well. The tables were beautifully decorated with candles, centerpieces, and flowers. The best meal of the week was prepared, everybody dressed up, and we set place cards so people wouldn't always sit next to their same friends all the time.

Best of all, there was a sense of expectancy and holiness that whole day; with a commitment to spiritual preparation. Students and staff both prayed for hours during the afternoon for the love feast. People would go and knock on each other's doors, to confess things to one another and ask forgiveness. Nobody wanted to be an obstacle to the Lord's meeting with us that evening, and each one took that responsibility very seriously. (A message that Loren preached a lot in those years was 'The Sin of Achan' from Joshua 6, that one person's sin could stop the flow of the blessing of God in the community.)

The children also had their own special meal with decorations, but it was earlier so they could be put to bed and the parents could be free to fully participate in the love feast.

When everyone arrived for the meal, they waited together, so all could enter the lecture room at one time. The joy and expectancy was high, as we saw people in their best clothes, and people wondered who they would be seated with (especially the singles!).

During the meal, all remained seated while one group served the others. Each week a different group would take that responsibility. Sometimes there were special songs and music but it was all completely oriented toward worship to the Lord: it was not just Christian entertainment.

At the end of the meal, the love feast leader gave a meditation on one aspect of the character of God, from the Bible. Then from that meditation, we went straight into a time of worship, still seated around the tables.

The worship was not directed from up front, anybody could lead out in prayer, read a passage of Scripture, start a song, etc. The worship would last at least an hour, or even two, time would stand still, nobody wanted to leave.

We waited upon God together, in His Presence.

In other words, it was a vertically- and horizontally-oriented meal, not just horizontal. When His Sabbath is honored and His people commit to holiness, the Lord makes Himself present in an unforgettable way. . . .

We saw the fruit of the love feasts over the years, it was one of the only times that all the staff, with all the students, and without many outsiders, met with each other and with God. Sometimes guests would make commitments to the Lord after being there with us.

YWAM Lausanne learned to worship God during the love feasts (because as late as 1974, we didn't know how to worship yet, we had 'singing').

From Lausanne the love feast spread to other YWAM bases, then in 1974 the Cunninghams took it to Hawaii, and it went around the YWAM world.

Later, as Jannie Rogers has said, "The god of the weekend stole it away." He's pretty powerful and it's true, it was a tremendous amount of work. The hospitality crew would spend most of Friday to prepare the tables, and they prayed about the seating, even which singles to seat together (really!). Just folding the napkins took ten people a full hour, after lunch. And as base leader, I took the whole of Friday afternoon to prepare the

meditation for the love feast, and to prepare myself, and to pray for the evening. Later we switched the love feast to Friday evening, and took Saturday as a full day off.

In more recent times in YWAM, 'love feast' has come to mean any meal that's a bit different from the normal ones. Such as the 'love feast' we attended at one base which consisted of a buffet, then everyone sharing their most embarrassing experience. No worship, no mention of the Lord; and the Holy Spirit didn't even visit that one.

Fun nights and skit nights and mime nights and costume nights are great. We had many of those during our school in Lausanne in 1974, as a matter of fact we averaged at least one skit per day, and a 'no-talent night' every three weeks or so. Most bases could use more of these kinds of evenings, they're tremendously important in community-building.

But let's not call them 'love feasts', OK? Because throughout the history Of the Church, that term has meant a community meal which is lived in true Fellowship and in the presence of the Holiness of God.

Loren and Darlene did a great job of adapting the Biblical and Jewish Traditions to the hippyish Jesus-movement YWAM culture of the early 1970's. Now we need someone to re-adapt them for postmodern youth. What could a love feast look like for twenty somethings? It should be very different from what we had going for those years in Lausanne, but it would of course include the emphasis on beauty, fellowship, solemn joy, and the holy Presence of God.

When you receive the vision from Higher Up, please invite me once. I'd like to see what it looks like.

Copyright 1998 by Tom Bloomer