

# Peace Meals: Church leaders hoping to spark conversations and integration from the home

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
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ALTON – Segregation is a blemish on America's history, and Alton is not exempt.

While institutional segregation may be going the way of the dinosaurs, in its wake is something of a learned behavior for people who came of age in the shadows of its oppressive walls. Because of that, many communities are still segregated by inherent choice instead of laws and standards. Many people are not cognizant of the fact they still live under the shade of America's fractured history, and Pastor Peter Hough of the Alton Mission believes the good intent of integration is growing, despite what many see as a country divided. To help people integrate, Hough is working with Pastor Charles Burton of the Unity Fellowship Church in Godfrey to create a template for integration.

Called Peace Meals, the program groups people into subgroups of eight. Those eight people, through four shared events – most likely meals together – are asked to explore the similarities and differences of life they experience under the same systems with the eventual goal of reconciliation. Hough said people are grouped together with others who are from different backgrounds, races, faiths and ethnicity for the opportunity to learn from one another.

“We want to get everyone who wants to do it involved,” Hough said. “It is needed, because Alton has a history of segregation. We may not have as many structures as we used to keeping it in place, and it may not be directly intentional, but there is some intent involved when you only hang out with people who look like you and believe and do the same things as you. There are fewer structural barriers to unity, but we still need to build momentum in a city built by those barriers.”

Those interested in being a part of the program are asked to contact Hough at [Peter.Andrew.Hough@gmail.com](mailto:Peter.Andrew.Hough@gmail.com). He debuted a film made with Burton at the Community Feast organized by Jason Harrison at the Post Commons earlier this month and he said as many as 60 people were interested in participating. Eventually, however, Hough said he would like to see the entire city have an interest in integration.

When expressing an interest in participation, people will be asked to give their ethnicity, best times of the day and evening to meet and if there is anyone with whom they would like to be placed.

“While our goal is to help people meet those different than them, that can sometimes be kind of scary for people, so they may want to be in a group with a friend or at least someone they know already,” Hough said.

Ultimately, Hough hopes the Peace Meal program will act as a template for people to continue doing their own paths to integration and reconciliation without a program or an organization involved.

“This day and age it can be hard to go knocking on doors to people you don't know very well,” he said. “I'm not saying don't go out and do it anyway, I'm just saying going out there like that and meeting people can be difficult. People can even think you're trying to sell them something. But people should go out there and try to connect with people they don't know or that are different than them. Even if it just means inviting a co-worker over for dinner who may be different than you, make the effort.”

In an email regarding the Peace Meal program, Hough said: “We want to provide just enough direction and support to facilitate lots of Peace Meal groups starting, but we don't want this to be a high-control or programmed experience.”

The program may be less of a program and more of a template, but Hough said they are working on a short orientation as well as discussion guides for people, which lead to the main question the initiative is set to answer: What do we do next?

“By the third or fourth meeting, we want people to focus on reconciliation as well as shared experiences under the same system,” Hough said. “We want them to say whether or not they should keep connecting and what they should do next. We don't know what we need to do next, and the purpose of these interactions could be able to help us with that.”

While this was a program put together by churches, Hough believes this program to be less of a religious construct and more of a community opportunity for gathering.