



BRUCE PARKER/TIMES-DISPATCH

SWEET TEETH. Connie Harvey (left) joined Kim Newlen and other women at a recent Sweet Monday.

Taste and see the sweetness; women mix faith, fun and food

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Women no longer get to know each other at quilting bees or canning sprees. But they do at Sweet Monday at Kim Newlen's home in western Henrico County.

"Everywhere I went I came in contact with women who were working full time, had a husband, children and family responsibilities but were really missing the nurturing from women's friendship," Newlen said.

"I always kept up with women friends from high school and college. My women friends played a big part in helping me grow as a person. A relationship with a man or with children is just not the same."

People were moving toward isolation, and, Newlen said that made her sad. She decided to do something about it.

"God planted an idea," she said. "I love having people in my home."

She invited female neighbors and women from her church for a Monday evening social at her

house. Thirty showed up. Thus Sweet Monday was born a year and a half ago. And on the first Monday night each month, Newlen's home is filled with women. More than 50 attended last month's gathering, a Proper English Tea Party.

Newlen's idea is for a girls' night out that provides inspiration and fun in a way that is inexpensive and requires a minimum of work. To share her idea with others, she's written a book, "Sweet Monday, Women's Socials on a Shoestring," which is sold at some Ukrop's Supermarkets.

The Book, which sells for \$10, has a year's worth of entertaining ideas. More than 500 copies have been sold.

Each month has a theme. One month everyone was asked to bring a decorating idea to share. Another gathering centered around beauty tips. Newlen gives a brief inspirational message and then there's a lot of chatting.

Several similar groups have started since Newlen's book came out in October. Some men at her church, West End Presbyterian, have formed a

"Sweet Monday" men's group, which meets every Monday except the first one of the month to play volleyball. The husbands keep the children for the women's Sweet Monday.

Newlen, who gives her age as four 10's is a graduate of Erskine College and Clemson University, with bachelor's and master's degrees in elementary education. She taught at Collegiate School until 1994 when she stopped to become a stay-at-home mom with her daughter, Kali who is 5.

Her husband, Mark, likes the Sweet Monday idea.

"I like to see her have a good time," he said.

Connie Youndt, a Bon Air resident who has attended Sweet Monday since it started, enjoys meeting other women. She also goes to West End Presbyterian, which meets at Byrd Middle School.

"Our church is growing so fast that you can't meet everyone on a Sunday. This is a good way to get to know people. And Kim just makes everything so special," Youndt said.

Newlen knows entertaining

can get out of hand.

"But there has not been one time, when I thought: 'Oh, no, Sweet Monday is coming and I have to get ready,' I just serve a simple dessert, decaf coffee and something cold and candy — a different kind each month."

She wanted a get-together where women could share.

"There are Bible studies at night, but sometimes women just need to have some fun in a wholesome atmosphere. I'm not pushing church. I'm not pushing a product. We are just sharing our lives," she said.

The annual tea party is the most elaborate Sweet Monday. Guests brought their favorite tea cups and goodies to share. It's the only time anyone brings food.

One of Newlen's favorite Bible verses is James 1:17.

"It says all good and perfect gifts are from above," she said. "I think that's what Sweet Monday has been — a real gift. God knows I love surprises, and Sweet Monday and the book have brought one surprise after another."

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