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—Arthur M. Sutherland, Associate Professor of Theology,
Loyola University Maryland, and author of
I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality

“People in today’s culture long for a sense of belonging. *The Welcoming Congregation* offers a warm and friendly invitation for churches to reach out to their communities with true hospitality. Through colorful, contemporary examples and thoughtful, biblical underpinnings, Henry Brinton invites the church to the table of genuine hospitality. Follow the ideas in this book and help your church take on the magnetic quality that genuine hospitality evokes.”

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“Churches need help practicing the spirituality of hospitality. In this useful guidebook, Henry Brinton insightfully communicates practical, successful, and effective models of hospitality. Do you want, or need, your church to grow? Then buy this book and put it to use. You’ll be glad you did.”

—Peter Baldwin Panagore, First Radio Parish Church
of America, www.DailyDevotions.org

“In writing *The Welcoming Congregation*, Henry Brinton has quite simply provided a book that should be in the hands of every pastor. Citing biblical examples, such as the widow of Zarephath, Abraham and Sarah, and Jesus himself, and coupled with the instructions of the apostle Paul and other New Testament writers, Brinton not only weaves a compelling argument for hospitality but does so in a way that is easy to read and full of ideas for practical adaptation in one’s own congregation. For a contemporary look at how others welcome the strangers among us, Brinton takes us to such places as Saddleback, Washington, DC, Scotland, Berlin, San Francisco, and other locales. This is a book that I didn’t want to put down, and from which I benefited enormously.”

— Timothy F. Merrill, Executive Editor, *Homiletics*

“In our ever-growing complex and diverse world, faith communities are challenged to extend and live out an authentic gospel hospitality. Henry Brinton’s helpful handbook explores the scriptural history of hospitality and reminds us that congregations must constantly strive to find ways of welcoming others. He also offers a selection of best practices to assist congregations in extending God’s gracious and inclusive love to others. Brinton’s work encourages us to look for new ways both to embrace people and to include them in the life of the church.”

—Ana María Pineda, RSM, Associate Professor
of Religious Studies, Santa Clara University

The Welcoming Congregation

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Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality

Henry G. Brinton

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To my wife, Nancy, and my mother, Mary Loraine,
who always make people feel welcome.

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Foreword

*M*ost mainline Protestant churches are in decline, but not all. I've made it my business to visit our growing congregations in order to learn more about why they are thriving. I asked a pastor of a congregation that had spectacular growth among young adults what was his most significant act of leadership that encouraged growth.

"I fired the ushers," he replied. "Those old men were stiff and cold. All they knew how to do was to hand people a bulletin, thus making a horrible first impression on visitors. I fired them, searched for people whom God had given the gift of hospitality, and the rest has been easy."

I've learned that hospitality may be the key factor in a faithfully growing church. One could argue this theologically. Paul tells us that we ought to welcome others in the same way that Christ has welcomed us. A major reason for the crucifixion of Jesus was his practice of radical hospitality—an open-handed, table-time conviviality.

"We want church to begin in our parking lot," declared one dynamic pastor. "We're vetting and training teams of friendly greeters who meet visitors in the parking lot, welcome them, hand them off to the hosts who stay close to them in the service, then invite them to lunch afterward."

The most notable change in church architecture in the past fifty years is the enlargement and the open atmosphere of the narthex, the hallway into a church's worship space. A hundred years ago our churches received people in a dark, cramped entrance hall. Today churches build spacious, open, light, comfortable "Welcome Centers" as a sign that they desire and expect people who are not seasoned members.

Indeed, I have learned that the main difference between a congregation in decline and one with a future is the difference between practicing the faith for the exclusive benefit of "insiders" (the members of that congregation)

or passionate concern for the “outsiders” (those who have yet to hear and to respond to the gospel).

Jesus Christ died for the whole wide world, not just for those inside the church. Therefore, a theological test for the fidelity of a church is hospitality. We are having a national debate about immigration, a debate in which I have tried to urge hospitality in the state of Alabama, and I’m rediscovering the radical nature of the seemingly benign Christian notion of hospitality. Christians are people who know how to welcome people even as Christ has welcomed us.

Pastor Henry Brinton knows all this. His fine handbook develops hospitality as a crucial, revealing, demanding Christian practice. He advocates best practices that he has tested and found fruitful in his own and other congregations for welcoming and discipling new Christians. Use of Henry’s book can change your congregation’s culture, turn your church inside out, and give you the practical help you need to enable your church to be more hospitable and therefore more faithful.

Will Willimon
Bishop of the North Alabama Conference
of the United Methodist Church

Introduction

A cab driver from Ghana took a fare to Montgomery County, Maryland, and then decided to attend a service at a Baptist church in that area. After he walked in, the congregation phoned the police, describing him as a trespasser. He said, “No, I am a Baptist, from Ghana.” They insisted he was trespassing. Similarly, when a Cameroonian immigrant visited a Disciples of Christ church in Lubbock, Texas, congregational leaders refused to serve him Communion, even though the pastor had just intoned the words, “This is Jesus Christ’s table, people shall come from everywhere to it.”¹

Even if you have not personally experienced such dramatic examples of inhospitality in the church, chances are that you can point to times when you felt the cold shoulder of indifference. I recently attended worship at an Episcopal church in Washington, DC, renowned for its practice of Christian hospitality and the welcome that it extends to the homeless of its community. Not a single person spoke to me in the coffee hour that followed the service.

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples,” says the Lord through the prophet Isaiah (56:7). What could this possibly mean for us today, in our highly fragmented and often inhospitable society? How can churches today better live out Jesus’ message of inclusion and become welcoming congregations?

America is growing increasingly diverse, with the U.S. Census Bureau predicting that minorities will be in the majority by the year 2050. The number of Hispanics will triple and represent 30 percent of the population, blacks will increase to 15 percent, and Asians will climb to 9 percent.² We have elected our first African American president, and 66 percent of the population now views the growth of America’s minority populations as advantageous to the economy and society, up from 39 percent in 1992.³ Most Americans say they like to live in diverse communities, and about two in three claim they prefer to live close to people belonging to different races, religions, and income groups.⁴

That's what people say. But the truth is very different. In fact, it is much more common for people to cluster together in "lifestyle communities" among those who are just like themselves—especially those who share their political affiliation. According to *The Washington Post*, the clustering of Democrats in Democratic areas and Republicans in Republican areas has been a growing trend for at least thirty years. Our country has become increasingly polarized, and today large numbers of Americans fail to have significant contact with people belonging to the other party. As a result of this communication breakdown, many feel that the views of their political opponents are not just wrong, but completely incomprehensible. In the 2008 presidential election, a third of the supporters of both Barack Obama and John McCain said they *detested* the other candidate.⁵

This trend toward a fractured and polarized community is the exact opposite of the challenge God lays before us in the book of Isaiah. The Lord does not want us to be a *common* community, one in which Republicans worship with Republicans, Democrats pray with Democrats, liberals study the Bible with liberals, and conservatives go on mission trips with other conservatives. Instead, God wants us to be an *uncommon* community, one that is truly countercultural in our shattered society—"a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isa. 56:7).

So where does this unusual vision come from? Before the time of Isaiah, the people of Israel were considered to be God's chosen ones, and the purity code of Deuteronomy excluded two particular categories of people: eunuchs and foreigners. Deuteronomy says that "no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD." And "no Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD" (23:1, 3). Only certain foreigners, such as the Edomites, would be admitted, because they were considered to be relatives of the Israelites. In short, the common community that existed in Israel was made up of like-minded Israelites—it was a comfortable congregation of people who shared the same ideas of what was pure and what was not.

But then God came along with a new vision of community, one in which all people who honor the Lord in their actions are to be included. Speaking through Isaiah, God said, "To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, . . . I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off" (56:4–5). The tragedy of the eunuch was that he was cut off, literally—no chance of having children to carry on his name. But suddenly God said that if the eunuch was faithful, God would give him an everlasting name.

What a radical shift this was. Suddenly, the community of faith was not limited to people of the same nationality or political party. Being admitted to

the assembly of the Lord did not require being a man or woman in a traditional family with 2.5 Israelite children. Through the prophet Isaiah, God called for barriers to fall in the religious community, which began a movement of inclusiveness that only accelerated when Jesus began his gracious and loving ministry. Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, welcoming children, talking with women (even foreign women!), and healing those who were considered unclean and estranged from the community of faith. Jesus practiced a ministry of hospitality that truly welcomed strangers into the community—the kind of hospitality described by Yale Divinity School theologian Letty Russell as “the practice of God’s welcome by reaching across difference to participate in God’s actions bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis.”⁶

That form of hospitality is far more nourishing than cookies and coffee after Sunday morning worship. Unfortunately, it is not being practiced very well by churches today, despite the desire of many congregations to be welcoming. Because church members often have the aspiration to receive strangers but not the skills or techniques, I offer this book as a user-friendly and useful guide to Christian hospitality. It tells stories of inclusion, contains examples of the best practices of truly welcoming congregations from across the country and overseas, and offers suggestions about hospitable practices that can be used by churches across the social and theological spectrum. I offer this guide to laypersons, clergy, and other religious professionals because I am a parish pastor who believes that hospitality is the key to becoming an uncommon Christian community—one that embraces all people with God’s love and grace. The need is greater now than ever, since all of us are living in a highly polarized society, in an era negatively affected by religious extremists of all faiths. I am convinced that God wants—and the world needs—churches that are truly welcoming.

My Travels

With the support of a National Clergy Renewal Program grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., I recently took a three-month sabbatical from my work as senior pastor of Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Virginia and visited communities of faith in the United States and Europe that are attempting to be uncommon Christian communities—congregations where people of diverse opinions and perspectives may gather, worship, talk, and debate. Church is, in my opinion, the healthiest place for people to wrestle with difficult issues, as long as the community of faith has a clear understanding of its core

convictions and a strong sense of call to be a “meeting ground”—a place for healthy and respectful dialogue in an increasingly fragmented world. My goal was to discover how churches were welcoming and including people of different backgrounds and opinions, and helping them to find both common ground and holy ground within the community of faith.

I began with a visit to the Iona Community in Scotland, worshiping and learning in a place known for seeking new ways to live the gospel in the world today. I talked with members of this ecumenical Christian community, experienced the innovative worship of the Wild Goose Resource Group, and reflected on the lives of Christians who have been practicing their faith in Iona since the sixth century. I then traveled to Southern California to experience the Saddleback Church led by Rick Warren. Rick has expanded his evangelical ministry to include work on AIDS and global poverty, and he often says, “I’m not left-wing, and I’m not right-wing. I’m for the whole bird.”⁷ I experienced the ministry of hospitality being practiced at Saddleback and learned what “whole-bird Christianity” looks like from the evangelical perspective. I then spent time in Berlin, Germany, where I visited the Reconciliation Parish, a church that has been rebuilt on what was once “no man’s land” near the Berlin Wall. I met with Pastor Manfred Fischer, who talked about his ministry of hospitality and reconciliation since the removal of the wall. Finally, I spent two weeks commuting from my home in Fairfax, Virginia, into Washington, DC, where I worshiped and studied at the Washington National Cathedral, a community of faith that is committed to being a place of reconciliation and a voice for generous-spirited Christianity. I met with Samuel Lloyd, the dean of the cathedral, as well as other Cathedral leaders; participated in Benedictine prayer services offered by the Cathedral’s Community of Reconciliation; and met with area clergy for meals and conversation about the work of hospitality and reconciliation being done in their churches.

Back at Fairfax Presbyterian Church (FPC), I rejoined associate pastor Jessica Tate, who had been acting as head of staff during my sabbatical.⁸ Together, as colleagues in ministry, the two of us have continued to work to expand the vision of our congregation—a vision that had been articulated at the start of my project as “an uncommon Christian community, embracing all people with God’s love and grace.” Along with members of the congregation, we have used sabbatical discoveries, personal experiences, and insights from readings to improve our practices of hospitality so that strangers will be welcomed into a place of acceptance, included in a network of relationships, and given time and resources to grow in Christian faith and understanding. We want FPC to embody the verse of Scripture that appears behind the pulpit in our sanctuary, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples”

(Isa. 56:7), and to become a church that is a true meeting ground, where people of diverse opinions and perspectives may gather, worship, talk, and debate. As Christians, we understand Jesus Christ to be the meeting ground between God and humanity—as Paul says, “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Theologically, we want FPC to be solid at the center and grounded in the God who comes to us as the Holy Trinity. But we also desire that it be soft at the edges, with a commitment to embracing all people with God’s love and grace. Solid at the center and soft at the edges—that is the consistency of an uncommon Christian community. In order to be such a community, we have worked with the elders of the church to develop a mission statement that challenges us in five critical areas: “By the power of the Holy Spirit, we at FPC: Worship God with honesty, joy, and imagination; nurture our lives of faith in Christ; extend hospitality and grace to all people; serve a world in need; and work for reconciliation among people of diverse perspectives.”⁹ Worship, nurture, extend hospitality, serve, and work for reconciliation—these five areas are the focus of our efforts as we work together to become an uncommon Christian community.

Our success in this mission will depend on FPC becoming an ever-more hospitable place, one that finds effective ways to reach across differences and practice God’s welcome. Along with Christine Pohl, a professor of church in society at Asbury Theological Seminary, we do not want our church to become like some communities that “help assure that the people we and our children encounter on a daily basis are much like ourselves in education, race, and socioeconomic background.”¹⁰ And we hope that our findings, shared in the pages of this book, will be of practical help to anyone who wants to move away from the polarization of life in America today and create a community that embraces all people with God’s love and grace.

The Changing Mainline Protestant Church

So, who am I to write this guide to Christian hospitality? Most importantly, I am the pastor of a neighborhood church in a suburb of Washington, DC, a congregation that has many of the same strengths, weaknesses, joys, tragedies, insights, and blind spots as thousands of other churches across America. Its story might sound a lot like your own congregation’s. Over the course of a half-century of existence, my church has undergone a series of challenging and sometimes wrenching changes, as have most other mainline Protestant communities. Chartered in 1954, FPC began its life as a booming, traditional,

middle-of-the-road church that served as a meeting ground for a large, ideologically diverse community of believers who may not have agreed on politics but who identified themselves with a particular religious tradition and proudly wore the label “Presbyterian.” But over the years FPC has lost members left and right to more specialized, politically focused congregations, and our story echoes a broader, troubling change in mainline Protestant denominations across the country. I fear that this is a change that could lead to the disappearance of churches that strive for balance in religious practice and belief—that seek to be solid at the center but soft at the edges. This shrinkage of the moderate religious middle reflects the polarization of contemporary politics, where the most powerful voices now speak from the far right and left.

Today, many Protestant Christians think of themselves in political terms—as conservatives or liberals, instead of as members of a particular religious tradition. Sociologists have observed that people seek out homes in areas where they can be surrounded by those who share their political views and cultural proclivities. Now, it seems they are also gravitating toward specialized communities of faith that are at opposite ends of the theological spectrum: on the right, conservative churches that preach traditional theology and sexual conservatism, and on the left, liberal, inclusive congregations that offer a range of theological perspectives and sexual orientations. In 1988, sociologist Robert Wuthnow was one of the first to observe that denominationalism is eroding and that new coalitions are forming across denominations—coalitions focused on abortion, biblical inerrancy, sexual issues, and other shared concerns.¹¹ The result is that congregations are becoming groups of like-minded individuals, instead of cross-sections of the religious community. For middle-of-the-road congregations such as mine, this trend has led to a loss in membership—after peaking at 1,200 in the early 1980s, we now have about 700 active adult members.

This poses a challenge for welcoming congregations that want to be houses of prayer “for all peoples.” Uncomfortable with being identified with either end of the political spectrum, these moderate congregations strive to maintain a creative tension between time-honored truths and new theological insights—between conservative and liberal, if you like—and try to root their ministries in both tradition and innovation. At FPC, we certainly base our beliefs on the Bible, but we also affirm that God is leading us to new understandings about what it means to be good and faithful people in the world today—an approach that requires a certain willingness to change. Although many Christians once understood the Bible to support slavery and the second-class status of women, for example, we now read it and hear God calling for freedom and equality. I am convinced that openness to growth and change has to be part of the

ministry of any welcoming congregation, as it follows the example of Holy Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit. After all, Isaiah was a reformer, as was Jesus—both reached across differences, practiced God’s welcome, and made the world a more just and loving place.

Such an approach challenges people in hospitable churches to perform a balancing act, always weighing conservative certainty against liberal openness. This, unfortunately, is an approach that fewer and fewer people are willing to take. Loren Mead, an Episcopal priest and founding president of the Alban Institute in Herndon, Virginia—an interfaith organization that works to support congregations—observes that Protestants today seem less able to tolerate differences than ever before. They feel pressure to resolve contentious issues, such as those involving sex or gender, no matter the cost in relationships.¹² And my colleague Roy Howard, pastor of Saint Mark Presbyterian Church in Rockville, Maryland, says that some church professionals are actually encouraging polarization, instead of resisting it. “Church growth manuals that have proliferated in the past several years advise that ‘like attracts like,’ and leaders should be positioning their ministry to attract people who are just like them.” While these churches do seem to succeed in attracting members, Roy laments this style of growth, noting that “this kind of church bears no resemblance to the church described in the New Testament of rich and poor, strong and weak.”¹³ Although dividing into congregations of like-minded persons may be easier to live with, it cannot be truly healthy since we gain deeper understandings through conversations and relationships with people who are different from us. That is why this book is focused on congregations that have developed practical and effective skills for hospitality, with a track record of success in embracing a wide range of people with God’s love and grace.

Roots and Fruits: What You’ll Find in This Book

I am a parish pastor—not a seminary professor, church historian, sociologist of religion, or biblical scholar—and my passion for hospitality comes out of a deep love for the church and a strong desire to see congregations become more welcoming. The knowledge shared in this book comes more from lived experience than from academic sources, although you will certainly find references to some of the best writing on hospitality being done by scholars today: Christine Pohl, Diana Butler Bass, Letty Russell, Arthur Sunderland, Amy Oden, Ana María Pineda, and others.¹⁴ I truly believe that embracing all people is the will of God and that we show faithfulness when we move

ever closer to that goal. And so I offer this guide to help Christians of all backgrounds, in my congregation and in yours, to become more welcoming to the strangers all around us. Each chapter contains discussion questions, an action plan for your congregation, and a preaching suggestion designed to bring Christian hospitality into the worship life of your church. I am grateful to Westminster John Knox Press, to David Maxwell, and especially to editor Jana Riess, for guiding this book into print.

The first part of the book, “The Roots of Hospitality,” contains five chapters: Biblical and Historical Roots of Christian Hospitality, Sites, Worship, Meals, and Small Groups. In this section, you will discover that congregations that pay attention to first impressions are successful in attracting strangers, and churches that further disciple those visitors via meals and small groups deepen people’s connections to God and each other. The opening chapter on hospitality explores its biblical and historical roots, the practices of Jesus and the church, and the shape of hospitality today—including its challenges and best practices. Chapter 2 reveals the importance of sites—both physical sites and Web sites—in building inviting and accessible bridges between the outside world and the inside of the church. Chapter 3 looks at worship, an aspect of congregational life that must be warm and welcoming in a hospitable congregation, with instructions and teaching moments geared more toward visitors than members. Chapter 4 stresses the importance of meals, since the practice of hospitality almost always involves eating meals together. Shared meals help not only to nourish people individually but to strengthen the identity of the group that dines together. This section on the roots of hospitality ends with an exploration of small groups in chapter 5, since Christian hospitality becomes deeply rooted in a congregation when personal connections are cultivated in intimate and honest gatherings.

The book’s second part, “The Fruits of Hospitality,” describes how congregations rooted in hospitality are able to grow in reconciliation, outreach, and ever-broadening perceptions of God. Chapter 6 acknowledges that theology tends to divide people and often leads to conflict, but a shared meal and an honest small-group discussion can do the work of reconciliation by uniting people at the level of a basic human need while building relationships across social, economic, and political divides. Chapter 7 describes another fruit of Christian hospitality—outreach to the community. Welcoming congregations have Bible studies and small-group meetings in the homes of church members, and they open their church buildings to ESL classes, twelve-step programs, and interdenominational programs that feed and house the homeless. Chapter 8 explores how Christian hospitality can inspire new perceptions of God’s inclusive love and help strangers to become friends.

Our perceptions of each other change when we discover that Christ is present with us in the breaking of the bread and that together we are nothing less than the body of Christ in the world today. Finally, the conclusion identifies Christian hospitality as the key to becoming a house of prayer that embraces all people. I believe that every time people sit down to eat and drink together there is the possibility that community will grow and people will be reconciled to one another. This is good news for a fractured world, and a strong sign of the importance of being a welcoming congregation that embraces all people with God's love and grace.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do you see signs of polarization in your community?
2. What are the core convictions in your congregation?
3. Describe what it might mean for your church to be “solid at the center and soft at the edges.”
4. Many Christians are moving away from the center and toward the extremes of the political and theological spectrum. What is lost when this happens?

Action Plan

Gather a small group of church leaders to study this book over the course of ten weeks, spending one week with the introduction and a week on each of the eight chapters and the conclusion. After the leadership group completes its study, members of this group can become leaders of congregational small groups. These groups can meet for ten weeks at the start of the program year (September through November) or gather for a five-week Lenten series, discussing two chapters per week.

Preaching Suggestion

What would it mean for your church to be “a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa. 56:7)? Identify the barriers to inclusion in your community of faith and the potential you see for reaching across differences and becoming more hospitable.

PART 1

The Roots of Hospitality

Congregations that make a positive first impression in everything from architecture to worship help invite the stranger into their midst, and congregations that further welcome and include those visitors through meals and small groups deepen the connections people have to God and to each other. Hospitable places and practices are necessary anchors for congregations that want to welcome and include new people in the life of the church.

Biblical and Historical Roots of Christian Hospitality

*B*uilding that “house of prayer for all peoples” that we discussed in the introduction feels like an enormous task. Most of us have a natural fear of strangers, and we are reminded every day of the political, racial, cultural, sexual, and economic distinctions that so often divide us. We know that we are most comfortable with people who look and act like ourselves, and that it is easiest to build community among groups of like-minded individuals. But we also realize that the kingdom of God will not be homogeneous; instead it will include “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands” (Rev. 7:9). So part of our challenge as Christians is to prepare ourselves for life in the kingdom by doing whatever we can to build inclusive communities, and we will do this best by following the style of hospitality practiced by Jesus Christ and his earliest followers.

Hospitality in the Bible

Christine Pohl, the author of *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, says that the most important biblical passage for the entire tradition on Christian hospitality is found in the final judgment of Matthew 25, in which Jesus says, “Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me’” (vv. 34–35). The message of this passage is that we welcome Jesus the king when we welcome a stranger, and that our place in God’s eternal kingdom is connected to the place we make in our own

lives for those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, in prison, or a stranger to us. “God’s invitation into the Kingdom is tied to Christian hospitality in this life,” writes Pohl. “Acts of welcoming the stranger, or leaving someone outside cold and hungry, take on intensely heightened significance when it is Jesus himself who experiences the consequences of our ministry or the lack of it.”¹

But hospitality is not simply an action tied to final judgment in the Bible. No, throughout the whole of the Scriptures it is a practice that is valued and demonstrated by people of faith in various times and places. In a New Year message following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said that he used to think that the greatest command in the Bible was “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” but then he realized that this command appears in only one place in the Hebrew Bible. More significantly, he said, “in more than thirty places it commands us to love the stranger.” This is difficult, because for the most part it is not too hard for us to love our neighbors, people who are similar to us. “What’s tough is to love the stranger,” said Sacks—the person who is not like us, who has a different skin color, faith, or background. “That’s the real challenge. It was in ancient times. It still is today.”²

In Genesis 18, Abraham and Sarah are camping by the oaks of Mamre, and Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looks up, sees three men standing near him, and immediately jumps up and runs from the tent to meet them. Bowing down, he offers them water for washing, bread to eat, and a place to rest. They accept Abraham’s offer of hospitality, and he works with Sarah and his servant to prepare a full meal for them. In the course of the meal, one of the men predicts that Sarah will have a son, which causes Sarah to laugh to herself, since both she and Abraham are advanced in age. But they quickly learn to take these words seriously, since it is none other than the Lord who is appearing to them in the form of these three strangers. The Lord says to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son’” (Gen. 18:13–14). Sure enough, Sarah conceives and bears a son named Isaac, just as God had promised, and years later the writer of the letter to the Hebrews uses this story as the basis for the recommendation, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2). This passage reminds us that hospitality not only welcomes strangers but recognizes their holiness. “The stranger at our door can be both gift and challenge,” concludes Catholic sister Ana María Pineda, “human and divine.”³

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people of Israel that their Lord is “God of gods and Lord of lords,” and that this mighty and awesome God is a deity who “executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” (10:17, 18). Of all the qualities that could be lifted up in a description of a mighty God—winner of battles, destroyer of evil, builder of nations—how remarkable it is that Moses focuses on God’s desire to love and feed strangers and to execute justice for widows and orphans. Moses goes on to insist that this quality of God’s character is meant to shape the character of the Israelites themselves; he commands: “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (v. 19). This call for hospitality toward strangers appears multiple times in the Hebrew Scriptures, and it is usually linked to the experience of the Israelites themselves, as slaves and strangers in the land of Egypt. The Old Testament texts, writes Christine Pohl, “reminded the Israelites that they knew the heart of the stranger from their own experience (Exod. 23:9) and therefore had to treat strangers well.”⁴

Hospitality is clearly a quality of God and is meant to be a quality of God’s people as well. “The LORD watches over the strangers,” says Psalm 146:9; “he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.” And just exactly who are “the wicked” that God brings to ruin? “They kill the widow and the stranger,” says Psalm 94, “they murder the orphan, and they say, ‘The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive’ ” (vv. 6–7). Again and again throughout the Bible, God’s people are taught to treat the aliens among them with justice: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 22:21), and “when an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien . . . you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:33–34). Before the people of Israel cross into the promised land, Moses says, “‘Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.’ And all the people say, ‘Amen!’ ” (Deut. 27:19).

On a very practical level, the Israelites are commanded to provide for the needy among them by not keeping all their produce for themselves: “You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien” (Lev. 19:10; also Deut. 24:21), and “you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien” (Lev. 23:22, as well as Deut. 24:19). The Israelites are also instructed to pay ten percent of all their produce in the third year, the “year of the tithe,” and this is to be given to “the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and

the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns” (Deut.26:12). Through the prophet Zechariah, God says, “Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another” (7:8–10).

A beautiful illustration of hospitality is found in the book of Ruth, where a rich man of Bethlehem named Boaz meets a foreigner—a Moabite woman named Ruth. She has moved to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi, and has gone into the fields to glean among the ears of grain, behind the Israelite reapers. Boaz sees her, saying, “I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.” Ruth bows down before him and asks, “Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?” Boaz answers, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me. . . . May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge” (Ruth 2:1–13). Boaz and Ruth become husband and wife and then have a son, who becomes the grandfather of King David.

In this brief and surprising story, an outsider named Ruth becomes the ancestor of Israel’s greatest king, and an insider named Boaz becomes a model of hospitality to the foreigner and the widow. This is a marvelous illustration of biblical teaching on hospitality, although, notes Letty Russell, it is “in direct contradiction of the earlier Israelite view that foreigners should be excluded from Israel.”⁵ It seems that God was working to break down the barriers between Israel and its neighbors long before Isaiah spoke of “a house of prayer for all peoples.”

This concern for strangers continues in the hospitality practices of the early church. When two disciples are walking on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, the risen Jesus comes near and walks with them, but their eyes are kept from recognizing him. When Jesus asks about the events they are discussing, one of them says, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” (v. 18). In this story, Jesus is depicted as a stranger, and his disciples are challenged to show hospitality toward him. Sure enough, as they come near the village that is their destination, Jesus walks ahead as if he is going on. But the two disciples urge him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over” (v. 29). So Jesus goes in to stay with him, and when he is at table with them, he takes bread, blesses it and breaks it, and gives it to them. Then their eyes are opened and they recognize him—and he vanishes from

their sight. Like Abraham and Sarah, they discover that when they welcome a stranger, they welcome the Lord.

The apostle Paul says that one of the marks of the true Christian is to “contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers” (Rom. 12:13). Paul benefits from this practice himself, when he, Timothy, and Silas first arrive in Philippi on their missionary journey to Macedonia and meet a woman named Lydia at a place of prayer by a river (Acts 16:11–15). Lydia hears the gospel message and is baptized along with her household, and then she urges Paul, Timothy, and Silas to “come and stay at my home” (v. 15). This they do. In similar fashion, Peter encourages members of the early church to “be hospitable to one another without complaining” (1 Pet. 4:9), and Paul identifies a faithful widow as “one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints’ feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way” (1 Tim. 5:10). Paul also includes hospitality in his list of qualifications for bishops: “above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable” (1 Tim. 3:2); “hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled” (Titus 1:8). Paul encourages all his followers to “welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7). Clearly, Christian hospitality is grounded in the practices of Christ, and some of the best examples of this virtue are found in the ministry of Jesus himself.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2).

The Hospitality of Jesus

In the Gospel of John, Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, turning more than one hundred gallons of water into wine, so that the wedding celebration can continue (John 2:1–11). Interpretations of this passage may vary, but at its most basic level it is a miracle of hospitality. Jesus goes on to feed a crowd of 5,000 (Matt. 14:13–21, Mark 6:30–44, Luke 9:10–17, John 6:1–14) and then feed another 4,000 (Matt. 15:32–39, Mark 8:1–10), revealing his desire to nourish people both physically and spiritually. He washes the feet of his disciples (John 13:1–20), institutes the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 26:26–29, Mark 14:22–25, Luke 22:15–20), and after his resurrection cooks a fish breakfast for his disciples (John 21:1–24). Jesus

teaches us what it means to care for each other in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), welcomes little children in spite of his disciples' objections (Matt. 19:13–15, Mark 10:13–16, Luke 18:15–17), and instructs his followers in the nature of hospitality with the words, “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (Luke 14:13).

“Many of Jesus' miracles are worked for outsiders,” writes historian Garry Wills in his book *What Jesus Meant*. In the New Testament, Jesus heals the servant of a non-Jewish centurion and the daughter of a woman from Tyre. “But the greatest category has to do with people who are unclean, with whom observant Jews are to have no dealings—with lepers, with prostitutes, with the crippled, with the reviled, with the uncircumcised, or with those made unclean by their illness (therefore ‘possessed’).” The miracles of Jesus are targeted to teach lessons about the reign of God, and “one of the main lessons is that people should not be separated into classes of the clean and unclean, the worthy and the unworthy, the respectable and the unrespectable.”⁶ Jesus understands that hospitality is best directed to persons on the margins of society, and this causes him to be criticized repeatedly for eating and drinking with undesirable people. “Look,” say his opponents, “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Luke 7:34).

But Jesus never allows criticism to disrupt his table fellowship with those who need to hear his message. When the Pharisees ask why Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, he responds, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matt. 9:11–12). He allows a sinful woman to kiss his feet and anoint them while he is having dinner with a Pharisee, and because of her great faith he forgives her (Luke 7:36–50). He calls out to a notorious tax collector named Zacchaeus and invites himself to dinner, saying, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:1–10). And Jesus even allows himself to be changed by one of these encounters: When he meets a Canaanite woman from the district of Tyre and Sidon, he initially denies her request for help, saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. . . . It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” She says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” Deeply impressed by her faith, Jesus grants her request and performs a healing for her daughter, a person outside the Israelite community of faith (Matt. 15:21–28, Mark 7:24–30).

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus enters into the lives of people who are on the margins of society, struggling with hunger, shame, disease, and homelessness. He does this out of deep compassion for them, but also because he shares their experience—we should never forget that Jesus himself appears

to people in the towns and villages of Palestine as a homeless stranger, with no place to lay his head (Matt. 8:20).⁷ His own experience of homelessness, hunger, thirst, and nakedness shapes his empathy for the distressed of this world and motivates him to heal and to save those who are in the greatest need. When Jesus says that anyone who feeds the hungry and welcomes strangers is really feeding and welcoming him, he is not kidding—he knows this deprivation firsthand (Matt. 25:34–35). If we are going to model our ministries on the ministry of Jesus we need to enter into the lives of the distressed strangers in our midst and practice hospitality in the same way that Jesus did. “The ministry of the church is to be partners with strangers,” insists Letty Russell, “to welcome those whom Christ welcomed, and thus learn to be a community in which people are made one in Jesus Christ in spite of their different classes, religious backgrounds, genders, races, and ethnic groups.”⁸

Christian Hospitality through History

Jesus plays a dual role in any experience of Christian hospitality—he is both our host and our potential guest. We gather to feed the hungry and welcome strangers because that is what Jesus did as a gracious and loving host during his earthly ministry and because that is what Jesus continues to do through the Christian community today. But we also practice hospitality because it gives us an opportunity to welcome Jesus in the form of people who are hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, sick, and in prison. The line from Matthew 25, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” echoes again and again throughout the ancient Christian texts, notes Christine Pohl, and “contemporary practitioners of hospitality refer to this text more often than to any other passage.”⁹ Over the centuries, the question of whether to offer assistance to a stranger has been intensified by the Christian understanding that it is Jesus himself who stands before us, in need of food and shelter.

One of the Greek words for hospitality, *philoxenia*, literally means “love of the stranger.” It combines the general word for love for people who are connected to us (*phileo*) with the word for stranger (*xenos*), reminding us that hospitality is always “closely connected to love.”¹⁰ But the word *xenos* has other meanings—in addition to “stranger,” it also means “guest” and “host.”¹¹ So the word itself captures an essential mutuality that is at the heart of hospitality, uniting strangers, guests, and hosts. “Many early Christian texts deliberately confuse the roles of host and guest,” writes church historian Amy Oden in her book *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*. “Particularly in stories about hospitality offered, it is

sometimes hard to tell who is giving and who is receiving.”¹² The New Testament word *philoxenia*, a love of the guest or the stranger, is quite clearly the opposite of a word we hear frequently today in our fear-filled and anxious world—*xenophobia*, fear of the stranger.¹³ And this is nothing new, since people have been fearful of strangers since ancient times. In the early church “Christian hospitality was meant to be remedial,” says Christine Pohl, “counteracting the social stratification of the larger society by providing a modest and equal welcome to everyone.”¹⁴

A distinctive characteristic of worship and hospitality in early Christian households was the inclusion of believers from different political, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In a fractured first-century society, these followers of Christ were trying to create uncommon Christian communities that embraced all people with God’s love and grace. Since members of the church believed that God had “broken down the dividing wall,” that is, the hostility between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14), they expressed respect and recognition for Christians of different backgrounds through the practice of hospitality and shared meals that helped people to see themselves as brothers and sisters at the table of God. Church members offered hospitality to meet the needs of traveling Christians and the local poor, as well as to enjoy fellowship when local believers would gather; as a result, early congregations developed a “translocal and transethnic identity.”¹⁵ Of course, not every community lived up to this ideal. In his first Letter to the Corinthians, Paul complains about “divisions” and “factions” at the Lord’s Supper (11:18, 19), and James warns against making “distinctions” between the rich and the poor in the community of faith, giving seats to the rich while forcing the poor to stand (Jas. 2:1–7).

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, Benedict of Nursia developed a rule for monastic life that stressed hospitality to strangers, a practice grounded in Christ’s identification with the stranger in Matthew 25:35.¹⁶ He called for the monk in charge of provisions for the community and its guests to be wise, mature in conduct, temperate, and humble, with special concern for children, guests, and the poor (Rule of Benedict 31:1, 9). Although monastic hospitality through the medieval era often followed the pattern of existing social structures, aligning monastic authorities with secular powers, the rules developed by Benedict inspired Christians through the centuries to welcome strangers in the name of Christ. Even today, the “heart of Benedictine spirituality is hospitality,” writes church historian Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, reminding us that “a Christian community is not a closed community but extends welcome and shelter to all, regardless of class, status, or respectability.”¹⁷

The Protestant Reformation may have divided Christians over a variety of theological issues, but one place of unity was hospitality—both Protestants and Catholics agreed that it was central to the moral life. The question “Who is my neighbor?” emerged as the crux of the German reformer Martin Luther’s ethics, and professor of theology Arthur Sutherland notes that Protestants were in agreement that the cross demands a love that shows itself in the hospitable treatment of others. If you look at Rembrandt’s sketchbooks you will see that they are filled with drawings of the poor, the lame, and the homeless; Sutherland is convinced that Rembrandt’s “Calvinist background is responsible for this.”¹⁸ As a refugee from France, John Calvin had personal experience as an alien in Geneva, so he called for a generous response to strangers, grounded in the conviction that all human beings were marked with the image of God.¹⁹ “Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him,” wrote Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (3.7.6). “Say that he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions.” Of course, the strangers coming to Geneva were fellow Calvinists fleeing Catholic persecution, and the radical hospitality that Calvin recommended probably would not have been extended to people who were not Protestants.

Even so, Calvin’s words were solidly grounded in the traditions of the church, which the aforementioned historian Amy Oden has studied and found to be full of examples of hospitality. In *And You Welcomed Me*, she includes excerpts from diaries, letters, sermons, and travelogues, all of which demonstrate that early Christians saw protecting pilgrims and hosting strangers as both a moral duty and a privilege.²⁰ Christine Pohl observes that for much of church history, “especially in relation to strangers, hospitality was a basic category for dealing with the importance of transcending social differences and breaking social boundaries that excluded certain categories or kinds of persons.” Unfortunately, as the number of Protestant denominations increased over the years, “their diversity and their voluntary character meant that there was no institutional setting in which Protestants were pressed to welcome persons who were significantly different from themselves.”²¹ This helped to create the situation we are facing today, in which specialized Protestant congregations give Christians the opportunity to worship and serve among people who are very similar to themselves in race, income level, and political orientation. We have lost the institutional settings that used to encourage the creation of a “house of prayer for all peoples,” so we must now be much more intentional in our practice of Christian hospitality across the boundaries that divide us.

The Challenge of Hospitality

In many of our congregations the welcoming of strangers from foreign lands and unfamiliar cultures is a complex and daunting challenge. Across America today immigrants are coming to church, just as they always have, and congregations are trying to find room for them. But where previous waves of immigrants were largely European, these new arrivals are coming from non-Western countries with cultures and skin colors more alien to white Americans than that of Europeans. The missionaries that white American churches sent to Africa, Asia, and Latin America were successful beyond their wildest dreams, and those who heard their preaching are now coming to the United States and either starting or joining churches here. Frequently, these newcomers are more openly passionate about the faith than are native-born Americans, and they rattle established churches by introducing new worship styles and beliefs. This is not always well received. Said one white member of a Presbyterian congregation in Virginia, after witnessing a spirited African-style service in the church she had attended since 1955, “If they want to worship that way, fine with me. But don’t bring it into my sanctuary.”²²

The incorporation of African, Asian, and Hispanic immigrants into American congregations is just one of the hospitality challenges that the church faces today. “Hospitality depends on defined communities but it always presses those communities outward to make the circle of care larger,” says Christine Pohl. “It requires the crossing of significant social boundaries and simultaneous affirmation of certain distinctions.”²³ When I served as pastor of the church mentioned above in the 1990s, social boundaries were crossed when Ghanaian pastors assisted with Communion, African immigrants taught church school and served as elders, conga drums were occasionally used to call the congregation to worship, and international potluck dinners were held after worship services. But at the same time, certain distinctions were affirmed—the main Sunday morning worship service was rarely done in the African style, and many immigrants chose to worship separately on Sunday afternoons in the Twi language of Ghana. In 2003, some immigrants left that church to form a Ghanaian Presbyterian congregation, while others remained at the church in order to have a multicultural experience. Crossing significant social boundaries while also maintaining certain traditions is a difficult balancing act for congregations in our multicultural world. It requires developing honest and caring relationships across racial and cultural divides, and learning how to appreciate the diverse styles of worship and leadership brought by Christians from other cultures.

This can be hard work for American Christians who are attracted to stability, comfort, and control. “God’s people will be a people where just hospitality flows from gratitude for God’s past care and from their own painful memories of refugee life,” writes Ana María Pineda. This presents an upsetting reality for those of us who would rather forget our painful memories. Church members today do not tend to gravitate toward Scripture texts such as “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor” (Deut. 26:5), and “there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, and from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9). And yet, it seems to Letty Russell that “God just does not like uniformity in human life and community or in nature. . . . God’s intention is to ‘remove all the bars’ and create *a world full of riotous difference*.”²⁵ That is a profoundly disorienting image to those of us who appreciate uniformity and predictability. *A world full of riotous difference* is not something that most people want to see in their Sunday morning worship services.

Because true hospitality has always been upsetting and disorienting, Christians in the early church denied welcome to two categories of people: those who persisted in immoral lifestyles (1 Cor. 5:9–11) and those who propagated false teaching (2 John 9–11). “I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber,” said Paul in his first Letter to the Corinthians. “Do not even eat with such a one” (5:11). And John lifted up the importance of “the teaching of Christ” to the Christian community, while giving the command, “Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching” (2 John 9–10). It certainly seemed prudent to draw a line between the Christian community and these two groups of people, but over time the church came to see that it was difficult to make accurate judgments about certain types of behavior—exactly who is “greedy” and who is a “reviler”?—and it was not always easy to define the boundaries of “the teaching of Christ.” Furthermore, the denial of hospitality through excommunication or anathema rarely led to repentance or reform. In fact, John Wesley said that anathemas had a natural tendency to “utterly destroy” neighborly love, mercy, and justice.²⁶ Today, Jean Vanier of the L’Arche community—a federation of communities made up of people with disabilities and their partners, caregivers, and family members—suggests that communities who welcome strangers should ask for minimal conformity and provide maximal space for diversity.²⁷ Letty Russell concludes that “if we spend our time erecting barriers against those who are considered marginal because of their class, race, sexual orientation, or gender, we have moved away from the practice of hospitality.”²⁸

At the heart of Christianity is a tension between maintaining a distinctive kind of community (one which disdains immoral lifestyles and false teachings) and practicing hospitality toward strangers (some of whom will certainly be embracing unorthodox lifestyles and teachings). This was made clear to theologian Miroslav Volf when he finished a lecture in the winter of 1993 and was asked the question, “But can you embrace a *četnik*?” At that time, the Serbian fighters called *četniks* had been doing violence in Volf’s native country, raping women, burning down churches, destroying cities, and herding people into concentration camps. He had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ, so the question was concrete, penetrating, and personal: could he embrace a *četnik*—the ultimate other, the evil other? “What would justify the embrace?” wondered Volf. “Where would I draw the strength for it? What would it do to my identity as a human being and as a Croat?” It took him a while to answer, but he knew immediately what he wanted to say. “No, I cannot,” he answered, “but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.”²⁹

This is the challenge of Christian hospitality: to embrace all people as God has embraced us in Christ. This involves developing the skills to see everyone as a child of God, a sinner for whom Christ died, a person bearing the image of God—no matter how obscured that image might be through personal sinfulness or societal prejudice. In Le Chambon, a small community of French Protestants that rescued Jews during the Second World War, citizens opened their homes, schools, and churches to strangers with quiet, steady hospitality and made Le Chambon the safest place for Jews in all of France. Residents defined a neighbor as anyone who needed help, and by doing so they saved the lives of over three thousand people being persecuted by the Nazis. When the police asked their pastor André Trocmé to turn in the Jews, he responded, “We do not know what a Jew is. We know only men.”³⁰ In the face of terrible danger, he and his congregation were an uncommon Christian community that took a bold stand based on common human identity. They knew that every stranger is created in the image of God, made in the same human flesh.

Doing the same today will require that we find ways to see each other as equals in a fractured, stratified, multicultural society and to develop practices of hospitality that welcome strangers and build communities of respect, honesty, and care. This does not mean that we will never make distinctions, because an important dimension of Christianity is that we are called to a distinctive life, holy to the Lord. But within that holiness is the command to welcome strangers, so part of our distinctiveness is that we live in a hospitable community with a long history of a sacred covenant between guests,

hosts, and God. The wonderful irony of our faith is that we are a holy community, set apart from the world, but an essential aspect of our holiness is that we embrace all people with God's love and grace. So while we will need to differentiate and sometimes even exclude people, concludes Christine Pohl, "our first priority must always be one of welcome, embrace, hospitality."³¹ To maintain this priority will involve identifying the best hospitality practices being employed in the uncommon Christian communities at work in the world around us.

The Best Hospitality Practices in the Church Today

God has shown us love and grace, so we show love and grace to others—this is the foundation of Christian hospitality, on which all of our practices are built. "Christians welcome strangers as we ourselves have been welcomed into God through the love of Jesus Christ," writes Diana Butler Bass. "Through hospitality, Christians imitate God's welcome." She tells the story of Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church, in Seattle, Washington, which hosted a tent city for the homeless on the church's front lawn. "There's a lot of talk among churches about reaching out to the community and it never happens," said one church member, "but our church hosted Tent City. It really makes you think about what churches are supposed to be doing. I mean, what would Jesus have done? He would have hosted Tent City!"³²

We will see in the chapters that follow that the best practices of hospitality always include a site, a worship service, a meal, a small group, the work of reconciliation, outreach into the community, and new perceptions of God's inclusive love—although there is no one particular way to deliver these gifts. Not every church is going to build a Tent City on its lawn, serve a breakfast to the homeless, host conversations between former enemies, or provide dinner for prospective new members. Hospitality does not even have to be based in a church building. But whether it is practiced at church or at home, hospitality is a sign of life. Jean Vanier of the L'Arche community writes that "welcome is one of the signs that a community is

Best Practices: Hospitality 101

- A welcoming site
- A worship service
- A meal
- A small group
- The work of reconciliation
- Outreach into the community
- New perceptions of God's inclusive love

alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren't afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share."³³ Since Jesus is present in our practice of hospitality, as both our host and our guest, we don't have to be afraid. We can trust that we are not alone when we welcome a stranger, but that we are standing with the Risen Christ and are acting as channels of his love and grace.

We have a treasure of truth and peace to share, and these riches can be made available to others by planting the *roots* of hospitality—sites, worship, meals, and small groups. From these roots will come the *fruits* of hospitality—reconciliation, outreach, and new perceptions. These fruits will grow as we open our homes and churches to others and will ripen in our relationships with the strangers who will come to us, since every guest brings us fresh insight into the character and the work of God. John Wesley spoke of the mutuality of ministry and how everyone could expect to be transformed by acts of Christian outreach. This is certainly true in the practice of hospitality, because it opens our eyes to what God is doing in the lives of people who come to us and to what God is doing in our lives as we provide a welcome.³⁴ Ana María Pineda is right to define hospitality as “the practice of providing a space where the stranger is taken in and known as one who bears gifts,” because the gifts of hospitality are delivered by both guests and hosts.³⁵ It is never enough for a welcoming congregation to master the art of being a host—a spirit of receptivity to the gifts of guests is required as well. Both giving and receiving must be a part of the experience of everyone involved in Christian hospitality, an arrangement that reflects the character of Jesus himself, the one who comes to us as our guest and our host.

Discussion Questions

1. What reasons does the Bible command us to go beyond love of *neighbor* to love of *stranger*?
2. Where do you see hospitality in the practices of the people of ancient Israel?
3. What happens when Jesus welcomes and includes people?
4. Can you identify examples of *philoxenia* (love of the stranger) and *xenophobia* (fear of the stranger) in today's church?
5. Should hospitality be denied to any categories of people? If so, which ones?
6. At first glance, which of the best hospitality practices is most important to you? Why?

Action Plan

In teams of two, walk through the neighborhood around your church and note the people of different races, cultures, ages, and economic groups that are living around the church. List the groups of strangers that are currently not being welcomed by your congregation. Identify some of the barriers to their inclusion and begin thinking of practical ways to show better hospitality.

Preaching Suggestion

Offer a sermon on the Walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), focusing on the welcome extended by the disciples to Jesus the stranger, and the hospitality extended by Jesus when he broke the bread and they recognized him. In every welcoming congregation, there are opportunities both to act as a host and to receive the gifts of guests.

Chapter 2

Sites

Soon after landing at Los Angeles International Airport, picking up my rental car, and beginning to drive south toward Orange County, I discover that I am in the desert. The sky is a hazy blue, without a single rain cloud in sight, and the sun bakes the mountains, hills, and highways that roll out before me. Everything is brown and dusty except for the farms and lawns touched by irrigation, and the streambeds I cross are like biblical wadis—bone dry except in the rainy season. As I pass palm trees and cacti, I begin to notice that there are very few pedestrians, although I do see groups of fitness-conscious cyclists getting their workouts along the concrete roadways. For the most part this is a driving culture, one in which people love their cars and their wide, fast highways. And given the harsh nature of the environment, it makes sense to hop into an air-conditioned car and cruise to your destination in comfort.

When I reach Lake Forest and enter the campus of Saddleback Church, I find myself in a facility that fits this driving culture perfectly. The leaders of this church understand the importance of physical sites in Christian hospitality and have built a campus that includes numerous “threshold places” that link the church to the world around it. Wide driveways welcome me to the campus, with excellent signage pointing to large and convenient parking lots. A traffic light in the middle of the campus helps to control the flow of cars driven by the nearly 20,000 worshipers who attend services each week. The driveways are friendlier to cars than to pedestrians, but trams are available to transport worshipers to the various buildings on the campus, and a sign directs first-time visitors to a special shuttle area equipped with coffee and donuts. The landscaping and architecture are reminiscent of a theme park, with waterfalls and large tents, making me understand why some people refer to the church as “Six Flags over Jesus.”

Saddleback was founded in 1980 by pastor Rick Warren, who started the church by going door-to-door through the community and talking with people about why they were not involved in a congregation. Rick found that people were tired of boring sermons, unfriendly church members, and poor-quality child care. “He asked why people don’t go to church,” says Mike Constantz, the pastor of missions at Saddleback, “and then used their reasons in his letter of invitation to the first Saddleback Service.” Rick positioned Saddleback as “a church for the unchurched”—one with positive and practical messages, friendly people, and dedicated nursery workers—and wrote his letter to neighbors who had given up on traditional church services, rather than to Christians from other churches. The first Saddleback service was held in a high school theater and attracted 205 worshipers, and as this uncommon Christian community grew it moved through nearly eighty different facilities until the church began to develop its current campus in the early 1990s. Rick still “wants to attract the unchurched,” says Mike. “He wants to address people’s concerns and meet their needs.”

Guests, not Visitors

Saddleback is famous for its hospitality, welcoming newcomers as guests instead of as visitors. “The term ‘visitor’ implies that they’re not here to stay,” writes Rick in his book *The Purpose-Driven Church*. “The term ‘guest’ implies that this is someone for whom you do everything you can to make them feel comfortable.”¹ A staff member named Erik Rees, pastor of ministries and life mission, leads a “guest services team” that is in charge of first impressions—they are determined to help people have a good experience as guests. Traffic attendants are trained to welcome people and point them toward the worship venues, greeters are positioned along walkways to welcome people and answer questions, and ushers are placed in the worship venues to respond to people and seat them. The goal is that each guest will receive a total of three greetings before sitting down in worship. Sure enough, I receive three

Best Practices: Greeting Guests

Make sure each guest is greeted at least three times before seating.

Choose greeters who project warmth and smile readily.

When giving directions, use an open hand rather than a pointing gesture.

Once worship begins, be responsive to guests’ needs, but don’t intrude or single them out.

welcomes from two greeters and an usher (I arrive too early to encounter any traffic attendants), and for good measure another two ushers greet me after the service. We also are asked to turn and greet our neighbors, not once but twice, during the worship service. These first impressions are critical—Rick believes that guests “are deciding whether or not to come back long before the pastor speaks.”²

Physical Sites

Erik Rees understands the role of physical sites in hospitality, and he knows the importance of threshold places that build an accessible bridge between the church and the world around it. At Saddleback, these sites include adequate parking lots, pathways with good signage, and a Welcome Center on the patio outside the main worship venue. Erik tells me that he tries to look at the campus through the eyes of a guest, making sure that a first-timer feels relaxed and comfortable. He pays attention to landscaping and signage, so that people have a good first impression and don’t experience frustration while searching for buildings or events. Across the campus, colorful banners contain important information about the life of the church, as do flat-screen televisions flashing a steady stream of messages. Erik wants all guests to have a quality experience, whether they use the play areas surrounding the Children’s Ministry Center and Nursery Building or go into the building called The Refinery, which contains snack bars and lounge areas and is surrounded by a skate park, waterfall, and volleyball court, as well as numerous patios. In a fast-paced world, says Erik, all of this “gives people permission to slow down.”

Of course, such physical sites will have limited effectiveness unless they are staffed with hospitable volunteers. The people Erik recruits for his guest services team are men and women who project personal warmth and smile easily, because he knows that they are the most important people to guests, making contact in the crucial first ten minutes.³ When he trains his traffic attendants, he teaches them to guide people with an open hand instead of pointing, since pointing can be experienced as a harsh and stabbing gesture. He plants the path to worship with greeters and sometimes moves them if they become impediments or act in ways that make guests uncomfortable. These qualities have been at the core of Christian hospitality for centuries; in fact, the preacher John Chrysostom said in a fourth-century sermon on First Timothy, “the hospitality here spoken of is not merely a friendly reception, but one given with zeal and full of life, with readiness, and going about it as if one were receiving Christ himself.”⁴

Saddleback's guest services team tries to be *proactive* in its welcoming of people on the path from parking lot to worship venue, with warm greetings from parking lot attendants, greeters, and ushers. But once guests have entered worship, the team becomes *reactive*—only answering questions and providing particular information that is requested by the guests. Once guests are seated, “we don’t bother them or single them out,” says Rick. “We allow them to watch the service without publicly identifying themselves. We want them to feel welcomed and wanted without feeling watched.”⁵ After the service, guests can visit the Welcome Center on the patio outside the main worship venue, ask questions, and learn more about the life of the church. They are welcome to take as much time as they need to explore the life of the church, without worrying that someone will come up and question them about their experience or pressure them to become involved. The guest services team is intentionally *reactive* after worship, not proactive.

Agents of Hope

Since Rick always wants people to feel welcome, Saddleback has worked hard to be sensitive to the fears and needs of spiritual seekers. The traffic attendants, greeters, and ushers are all taught to think of themselves as “agents of hope”—volunteers who can make a difference in people’s lives. When a welcome is given in worship, people are told that they can expect to enjoy the service; they are assured that they will not have to say anything and are promised that no one will embarrass them. By studying the gated communities around them, Saddleback leaders have discovered that their neighbors want to preserve their anonymity and privacy.⁶ The leaders hold worship in a variety of venues, with the same message (transmitted via video from the main worship center) but different musical styles, ranging from traditional to gospel to hard rock. “Different worship venues make space for different types of members,” notes Gerald Sharon, North American Director of the Purpose Driven Network at Saddleback. “It takes all kinds of churches for all kinds of people.” The service is simple, clear, and easy to follow, making it accessible enough that members feel comfortable inviting their unchurched friends to attend. Rick is convinced that the most natural way to increase the number of visitors to your church is to “create a service that is intentionally designed for your members to bring their friends to.”⁷ This approach has clearly worked at Saddleback—the church has grown because people are bringing their friends with them, and the staff and volunteers are working hard to give them a quality experience, all the way from parking lot to Welcome Center.

Guests are allowed to remain passive for as long as they want, simply looking and listening for months—or even years. At a membership class in September 2009, the hundred or so people in attendance were asked how long they had been attending Saddleback. Some said they had been worshipping for more than ten years, although most had been coming for less than a year. The church does not set up a “you and us” dichotomy when addressing guests but tries to send the message that “we are better together.” Erik tells the story of a man named Tom who sat in the very back row when he first came to Saddleback, and over the course of two years he moved to the front and became a very active member. God can do the work of transformation, but change takes time, especially since so many Americans are living an isolated and nomadic existence, what Catholic writer Henri Nouwen once called “a world of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture, and country, from their neighbors, friends, and family, from their deepest self and their God.”⁸ The overcoming of this isolation and estrangement takes time, patience, and faith that God is at work in the Christian community.

Coffee Shops and ESL Classes

Not every church can—or should—build a food court with a skate park or a welcome center on a sun-drenched patio. But every welcoming congregation needs to create threshold places that serve as bridges between the outside world and the inside of the church—sites that are inviting, accessible, and comfortable. A good example is the Welcome Centre of the Iona Community in Scotland, a congregation we’ll explore in more depth in chapter 4. Visitors there first encounter a simple rectangular building along the road to the ancient Iona Abbey, containing an information desk and bookstore. Another exemplary threshold place is the Great Room of Fairfax Community Church in Virginia, which is an open and light-filled gathering space, complete with a shop serving coffee and smoothies, and free wi-fi Internet access. Then there’s The Gathering, a new church in Sevierville, Tennessee, designed for social interaction between congregation and community. Its lobby has a mountain-lodge feel, with a coffee bar and a bookstore. Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Burke, Virginia, made its existing narthex more hospitable by mounting flat screen televisions on the walls, with information about the life of the church. Still other churches have included restaurants in their church buildings, which create comfortable environments for conversation: The Family Christian Center in Munster, Indiana, has a Starbucks in its lobby; Brentwood Baptist Church in Houston hosts a McDonald’s in its

Lifelong Learning Center; The University Vineyard church in Fresno has a youth bistro with coffee and Christian bands; and a cafe at the Reformed Church of Highland Park, New Jersey, is a “Robin Hood restaurant”—eat all you want, and pay what you can.⁹

A classroom can also be a threshold place, especially if it contains a course in English as a Second Language (ESL), directed toward newcomers to America. In Lawrence, Kansas, a team of volunteers at Plymouth Congregational Church offers free ESL classes on Tuesday and Thursday nights, and about sixty students took part during the first year. The classes were started by Shannon Gorres, pastor of Hispanic Ministries, after discovering that the number one need among Spanish speakers was accessible English classes. But the ESL classes quickly attracted immigrants from a variety of backgrounds. Nonna Tarkhova spoke only Russian when she started the classes, and after six months was able to say, in perfect English, “I visited the Russian art museum in Minneapolis.” The volunteers do not have to speak foreign languages to participate in the program, but they do need to be “fluent in compassion and patience,” says Shannon. Each week, volunteers spend time conversing with the English-language learners, helping them to become more comfortable with the language, culture, and church. The immigrants “really want to become integrated into the community,” says ESL volunteer Graham Kreiker. “This is an opportunity to help them in a big way.”¹⁰

Although a growing number of churches are offering such programs, the need for English-language instruction is still great, and immigrants encounter long waiting lists for classes—even the ones they pay to take. Churches that want to make a connection with newcomers could do no better than to offer such hospitable sites to non-English speakers who are anxious to feel at home in American churches and neighborhoods. Offering “low-cost English classes” is a critical step in the integration of immigrants, writes Jeb Bush (former governor of Florida) and Robert D. Putnam (professor of public policy at Harvard). In these classes, “immigrants build personal ties with co-ethnics and native-born Americans,” connections that “foster assimilation and help newcomers navigate our complex institutions.” Our great-grandparents actually did a better job of this than we are doing today. A century ago, religious, civic, and business groups joined forces to provide classes in English and citizenship to the immigrants in their communities. At that time in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, for example, where two-thirds of the population was made up of immigrants, Bethlehem Steel (the town’s largest employer) and the local YMCA offered free English instruction to thousands of immigrants, even paying them to take classes!¹¹

Thinking Like a Host

Whether congregations build coffee shops or offer ESL classes, it is critical that church members begin to think of themselves as hosts. This is an enormous step for any of us, but it is the key to making good decisions about creating appropriate sites for hospitality. Unfortunately, we often go to church with the attitude of a guest, not a host—we are concerned more about ourselves than about those who visit with us. Consider this mind-set: as guests, we are focused primarily on having a good time. We enter the church, and look for our friends. We pass personal judgment on the furniture, decor, and feel of the place. We sit where we want to sit, with little regard to making room for others. We listen to the church’s music, and decide whether we enjoy it or not. As guests, we are basically consumers, concerned about our personal comfort. The experience is all about us.

How different it is to be a host. In this role, we are focused primarily on serving others. We greet our guests at the door and look to connect them with people they would enjoy. We make sure that the church is set up in a welcoming way—decorated appropriately, well-lighted, and conducive to people getting to know one another. We sit in places that will leave room for others and help them to feel comfortable. We pick church music that our guests would like, even if it is not our favorite. As hosts, we are concerned about the comfort of others. The experience is all about them.

The congregation I serve, Fairfax Presbyterian Church (FPC), gathered for a mini-retreat on hospitality soon after I returned from sabbatical. We spent two hours looking at our building and evaluating our threshold places. About 115 church members broke up into small groups and then moved through the building, looking at different spaces and thinking about how we could be better hosts to the guests who came to us each week. The small groups were intergenerational—including children, youths, and adults—and the reports they made at the end of the exercise were fascinating. Some recommendations were simple, such as adding brighter colors and flowers to the women’s bathrooms. Others were high-tech, such as upgrading the sound system and lighting in the sanctuary. Still others were

Best Practices: Think Like a Host

Focus on serving others and making them comfortable, not on whether you are having a good time.

Greet everyone, not just people you already know.

Make sure your building is an inviting place, and pay attention to things like lighting, seating, and signage.

creative—converting a classroom on the main level to a comfortable family room for parents and children to relax and enjoy each other and adding a sign to the church entrance in multiple languages. And some were ambitious, expensive, and clearly long-range—building a clear glass roof over our church courtyard to turn it into an all-weather atrium for fellowship and recreation.

Most encouraging to me was the way in which FPC members acted like hosts throughout this exercise, instead of like guests. They paid attention to the ways our spaces are set up and assessed whether various sites had atmospheres that were welcoming or not. They noticed the importance of signage, lighting, and sound systems. They came up with creative proposals for converting classrooms into hospitable spaces and courtyards into gathering places. A task force is now working on these ideas and figuring out what our church can accomplish in one, two, and ten years. Most importantly, we are now acting more like hosts in our interactions with people who come to us from outside the church. We are working harder to greet guests and are making sure that visitors can find their way easily to the activities that are of interest to them. And we are looking critically at our building, knowing how much easier it is to feel comfortable in a brightly painted and well-lighted space than in a room that is dull and dark. Inviting threshold places can take time to plan and construct but even the most inhospitable structures can be made more welcoming by people who have learned how to think like hosts.

Abraham the Host

The Bible teaches us how to be hospitable, from beginning to end. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we find stories of people acting as hosts, welcoming strangers, and discovering that there is something truly holy in their acts of hospitality. Consider Abraham, the father of our faith—and not only our Christian faith, but the Jewish and Muslim faiths as well. As we learned in chapter 1, Abraham is camping by the oaks of Mamre, sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day (Gen .18). This is his threshold place—the link between his home and the rest of the world. He looks up and sees three men standing near him. Is he surprised? No doubt. A bit frightened? Probably. After all, they are strangers, they outnumber him, and he has no way of knowing if they are friends or foes. But Abraham does not dash inside to get a weapon.

Instead, Abraham decides to play the role of host. He runs to meet them, and begs them to stay. He offers them water for foot washing, the shade of a tree for rest, and a morsel of bread for refreshment. They consider his offer, and then say, “Do as you have said” (vv. 1–5). At this point, Abraham bends over backward to meet the needs of his guests. He hastens into the tent and asks his wife Sarah to make cakes. He runs to his herd, picks out a tender calf, and gives it to his servant to slaughter and cook. He takes curds and milk and the carefully prepared calf, serves it to the three strangers, and stands under a tree while they eat (vv. 6–8).

And who are these three men? Genesis tells us that they represent the Lord in disguise (v. 1). The Bible leaves their exact identity a bit mysterious—some scholars believe that the three are God and two angels. Later, the letter to the Hebrews calls them angels, when it recommends to us, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:2). At the very least, Abraham’s willingness to be a host puts him in touch with something that is holy.

I think we have largely forgotten this in the life of the church. We’ve seen that Christians today tend to act like guests and consumers when they go to church, focusing primarily on having a good time. But God calls us, just like Abraham, to be hosts. This means being on the lookout for strangers instead of friends, making the church hospitable, ensuring that worship is welcoming, and picking music that our guests would enjoy. Just imagine that! Actually picking music for others, not for ourselves. As hosts, we are constantly challenged to be concerned about the well-being of others. And when we do this, the Bible promises that we will have the experience of entertaining angels. In the biblical stories of hospitality, God is always present in surprising and wonderful ways.

Jesus the Guest

In Matthew 25, Jesus appears before all the people of the world as a judge, and says to the righteous men and women, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (vv. 34–35). And the righteous say, “Huh?” They are confused. They say to Jesus, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and

welcomed you?” (v. 37). They simply don’t remember a time when they had the opportunity to serve Jesus in this way. Then Jesus says to them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (v. 40).

It is when we act as hosts to other people that we come face to face with Jesus. It is when we show true Christian hospitality—welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry—that we discover that God is with us in surprising and wonderful ways. This is a critical point because Scripture stresses not only hospitality to people but also hospitality to God. When Abraham serves three mysterious men, he is really serving the Lord. When we show hospitality to strangers, we are really entertaining angels. When we welcome a newcomer, we are actually welcoming Jesus. Hospitality to people is the very same thing as hospitality to God. If you want an authentic experience of God—and I think we all do—then the place to begin is by welcoming strangers.

The Catholic activist Dorothy Day discovered that Jesus was present with her in a homeless man one day. She said, “There He was, homeless. Would a church take Him in today—feed Him, clothe Him, offer Him a bed?” Again and again, Jesus surprises us by appearing in homeless shelters, in dirty clothes, with broken spirits. Can we see him there? Are we willing to feed and clothe him there? Jesus promises that when we help “the least of these,” who are members of his family, we are really helping him. When we welcome, feed, and clothe the stranger, we are put in touch with something that is holy.¹² Members of FPC discover this truth every winter, when the congregation opens its fellowship hall and multi-purpose room to the homeless in a church-based hypothermia program. On cold winter nights, up to seventy homeless men and women enter the church building for a warm dinner, conversation with church members, games and movies, and a good night’s sleep. They are hosted by FPC for a week or two, and then the program moves to another church, with the location shifting throughout the winter. Church members come to the end of the program feeling that they have been given the opportunity to serve Jesus by serving the homeless, and all are glad that our church building is used as a welcoming and hospitable site for our homeless neighbors.

There are many ways that we can welcome Jesus by welcoming strangers. We can do it by creating sites that serve as threshold places between the church and the world: welcome centers that provide information to guests, areas inside the church building set up for coffee and conversation, comfortable rooms where parents and children can gather and relax, ESL classes for immigrants in the community, warm rooms for the homeless on cold winter nights. Whatever physical sites a congregation chooses to create, the critical

factor is to focus on the needs of others. Back in the 1980s, a congregation called Mountain Christian Church in Maryland began to shift its direction, going from being a church that focused on itself to a church that concentrated on the needs of spiritual seekers. By putting others first, its congregation has grown from several hundred members to a weekly attendance of close to four thousand. Their facility now includes a large contemporary worship space, a café, a children's center and nursery, a chapel, and an auditorium. But even more important is the existence of ten care groups—from Alcoholics Anonymous to a women's cancer ministry—and a variety of opportunities to serve others in the community, including an innovative program called "Second Saturday Serve," in which teams gather on a Saturday morning once a month to go out and assist the community in places ranging from homeless shelters to Boys and Girls Clubs. When building hospitable sites in our churches, the focus should always be on serving others.

Virtual Sites

The construction of a physical welcome center or coffee shop can take significant time and money, so welcoming congregations might want to start with a low-cost alternative—the creation of a virtual site. Web sites are often the first threshold space that a visitor encounters, and they can make a positive first impression and deliver a powerful message of welcome. At Cedar Ridge Community Church, an emergent church in Spencerville, Maryland, the home page (<http://www.crcc.org/>) has a tab that says, "I'm New," opening up access to pages with "Times & Directions" and "What to Expect." The latter explains what happens during a Sunday morning worship service, where to go when you arrive, and what to do if you have questions about the church. The home page also has tabs for "Who We Are," "Get Involved," "Calendar," and "News," which provide easy access to information that is important to people crossing the threshold of the church for the first time. A few minutes on the Web site offers guests at Cedar Ridge a feeling of familiarity that makes the initial visit to the church building much less intimidating.

A number of churches are now designing Web sites that have several levels of privacy. One level is open to all and geared toward the outside world, and a second level (with password protection) is oriented toward communication between church members, including budget information, meeting minutes, and sensitive prayer concerns. With this approach, the open level can be hospitality-focused and designed as a highly welcoming threshold place, while the protected level can be congregation-focused and structured

to address the internal concerns of the membership. At FPC, we have redesigned our Web site in this way, knowing that most of our visitors are making first contact with us on the Internet and are in need of general information about the church—not details about a small-group meeting that will be of interest only to long-time members (<http://www.fairfaxpresbyterian.org/>). The home page of Cedar Ridge is clearly outside-oriented and hospitality-focused, while also containing the message “You are currently viewing this site as an anonymous user. Some features may be unavailable until you register with the site.” Once registered, a person can join a group, have conversations with other group members, share photos, and view the group’s calendar.

Welcoming congregations put the needs of strangers first in their Web site design. Grace Cathedral, an Episcopal cathedral in San Francisco, describes itself on its home page as a “house of prayer for all people.” An easy-to-navigate welcome page contains cathedral news, service times, and a full-color visitor guide available for download (<http://www.gracecathedral.org/>). A section called “visiting” contains additional information on concerts, events, and cathedral tours. Additional pages offer descriptions of the church and community, with invitations to “pray, grow, and serve with the cathedral community,” while a handy “search” bar gives inquirers access to information about specific aspects of the life of the cathedral. An equally inviting Web site links people to Willow Creek Community Church in the Chicago area, via three tabs on the home page: “I’m New to Willow” (What We Believe, Vision, Values), “Watch Messages” (Current Series, Watch Online, Podcast), and “Choose a Campus” (Location, Service Times, Web sites). A set of seven links at the bottom of the home page give access to numerous aspects of the ministry and mission of the church, from Christian twelve-step support groups to a program for children with disabilities (<http://www.willowcreek.org/>).

Best Practices: A Welcoming Web site

Remember that many guests’ first impressions of your church happen online, not in person.

Be sure that your Web site has clear and easy-to-find instructions on attending worship services and classes.

Design the Web site with links to your congregation’s various ministries and outreach programs.

Hospitable Sites

Whether physical or virtual, hospitable sites make a positive first impression and provide a bridge between the outside world and the inside of the church. “Hospitality begins at the gate, in the doorway, on the bridges between public and private space,” says Christine Pohl, challenging congregations to create contemporary equivalents of the city gate so that church members start to build relations with strangers.¹³ These include The Refinery and Welcome Center at Saddleback, the ESL classes at Plymouth Congregational Church, the homeless hypothermia program at Fairfax Presbyterian Church, and the Web sites at Cedar Ridge, Grace Cathedral, and Willow Creek. The creation of inviting and accessible threshold places is the first step for congregations to take as they seek to embrace all people with God’s love and grace.

The best sites are designed by people who see themselves as hosts—people who make an effort to reach out to newcomers, practice authentic stranger love, and put the needs of guests ahead of their own. This requires an adjustment in attitude for many of us today because we so often fall into the trap of seeing ourselves as guests in church, with a consumer mentality more concerned about being served than about serving others. But for those who are willing to act as hosts wonderful surprises await—they discover that they are in touch with something holy, with the opportunity to entertain angels. Or even Jesus Christ himself.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the “threshold places” in your church building? Are they bridges between the church and the world around it or barriers? If they are barriers, how can they be turned into bridges?
2. In your own church involvement, do you think of yourself as a host? What could you do to play this role better?
3. When have you acted as a host and experienced a holy moment?
4. How could your church building be modified to meet the needs of guests, in addition to the needs of members?
5. If your church has a Web site, is it easy for a stranger to navigate? How could it be improved?

Action Plan

Create intergenerational teams in your congregation to do an assessment of your building. Make sure that each team includes children, youth, and adults of all ages. Try to look at your building through the eyes of an outsider and make notes on how various spaces in the church could be made more hospitable. Take pictures of entrances and public spaces. Pay attention to signage and whether it is easy or difficult to find various rooms. Visit neighboring churches and observe what they have done to make their buildings more welcoming. Consolidate your findings and present a brief report to the leaders of your church.

Preaching Suggestion

Tell the story of Abraham at the threshold of his tent, welcoming the Lord in the form of three strangers (Gen. 18:1–8). Stress his embrace of the role of host and his attention to the needs of his guests. Explore the fear of strangers that so often overcomes us and limits our hospitality. Emphasize that Abraham's willingness to be a host led to a powerful encounter with God.

Worship

*D*Driving from northern Virginia into the city of Washington, I catch sight of the National Cathedral long before I cross the city line. The cathedral is one of the most prominent landmarks in the nation's capital, riding the crest of a hill called Mount Saint Alban like a giant Gothic cruise ship, high above the Capitol, the White House, and even the Washington Monument. Mount Saint Alban and Capitol Hill are the two great hills in the city, representing the sacred and the secular, heaven and earth, God and country—and they dominate the skyline. These twin poles reflect Pierre L'Enfant's original plan for the Federal City in 1791 that recommended both a Capitol building for national government and "a church for national purposes, such as public prayer, thanksgiving, funeral orations" which would "be assigned to the special use of no particular denomination or sect; but be equally open to all."¹

But it was not until 1893 that the Protestant Episcopal Cathedral Foundation was given a charter to establish a cathedral, and not until 1907 that the foundation stone was laid, with the participation of President Theodore Roosevelt. The massive limestone structure—the sixth largest cathedral in the world—was built across most of the twentieth century, through wars and times of economic crisis, and was finally completed in 1990, in a ceremony involving President George H. W. Bush. The final stones have now been added to the cathedral's towers, soaring 676 feet above sea level—the highest point in Washington. The towers themselves stand as an invitation to worship, pointing toward the heavens and inviting visitors to look beyond the things of the earth.

After entering Washington, I drive along the Potomac River past the infamous Watergate Hotel, up Rock Creek Parkway, and then farther up Massachusetts Avenue in Northwest Washington. A few minutes later I enter the fifty-seven-acre cathedral grounds—called "the Close." The recent installation of a large underground parking garage has solved the cathedral's

perennial parking problem, and visitors can park for free on Sundays. Visiting on an autumn day, I find the trees on the Close changing from deep green to bright yellows and oranges, while the sounds of bird songs—instead of car horns—fill the air. Tourists walk the grounds, looking up in silence at gargoyles and spires, and students from the three Cathedral schools run across the lush green lawn in athletic uniforms. Washington National Cathedral is a surprisingly serene oasis in the middle of a loud and often contentious city.

The cathedral is dedicated to hospitality and describes itself in brochures as “a church for national purposes called to embody God’s love and welcome people of all faiths and perspectives.” The massive doors of the building are open every day of the week to the 700,000 people who visit every year, and touring is allowed except when worship services or special events are underway. Thirty-minute guided tours start regularly throughout the day, and self-paced audio tours are available for rental during regular touring hours. Behind-the-scenes and specialty tours are also provided, focused on cathedral art and architecture, including gargoyle tours. These stone gargoyles are structures designed to keep water away from the limestone building, and they are carved in the form of fantastic creatures—including Darth Vader, a figure that was selected through a children’s design competition.

But a formal tour is really not required for a visitor to benefit from the cathedral, because there is value to walking into the main worship space of the cathedral—the “Nave”—and simply allowing your eyes to be lifted upward along the columns to the pointed arches and ribbed vaulting of the one-hundred-foot-high ceiling. The building itself communicates a message of uplift and inspiration, from its layout in the shape of a cross to the biblical and theological images in its stained glass windows, stone statues, wood carvings, wrought iron, and fabrics. “No matter your church, your faith, or your reason for visiting, we welcome you to Washington National Cathedral,” says a brochure available at the West entrance. “Each year, the Cathedral opens its doors to thousands of worshipers and visitors who come to find peace and inspiration, listen to beautiful music, and experience the Cathedral’s extraordinary art and architecture.”

But the sense of welcome and openness communicated by the building is muted somewhat by the signs that now appear at every entrance, asking the public for donations. The cathedral receives no funds from the government, despite the fact that it is the Washington *National* Cathedral, nor does it get support from the Episcopal denomination, even though it serves as the cathedral for the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church USA. Washington National Cathedral is on its own financially, and its endowment was hit particularly hard by the global economic crisis of 2008–2009. So signs

throughout the church now say, “Your support keeps the Cathedral open to all . . . \$5 Adult . . . \$3 Senior/student/military . . . \$15 Family . . . Requested contribution . . . Thank you.” This solicitation may be grounded in an economic necessity, but unfortunately it sends a message of desperation that seems out of place in a building of such elegance, grandeur, and rock-solid stability. Like it or not, Washington National Cathedral needs the support of a community larger than its own congregation, which may be inevitable for an institution that seeks to be “a church for national purposes.”

Welcoming Worship

I discover a significant crowd at both the 8:45 a.m. and 11:15 a.m. Sunday worship services, creating a solid sense of community in the massive cathedral. When Samuel T. Lloyd III became Dean of the Cathedral in 2005, he began to develop a true congregation at the cathedral, one that is focused on worship, spiritual formation, service, stewardship, and hospitality. While there have always been worshippers at the cathedral and many people have considered it to be their church home, there was not a membership-based congregation in place until Sam arrived. Now visitors can become members of the Cathedral Congregation by attending an Inquirers’ Class, deepen their faith by exploring Scripture and books in a variety of classes, and enjoy Christian fellowship in small groups within the congregation. The Vicar of the Cathedral, Stephen Huber, says that many of their new members are unchurched and are “finding beautiful worship that engages them and connects them in a sense of community.” Such opportunities for community are particularly important in the city because “invisibility is a major detriment to the practice of

Best Practices: A More Welcoming Worship Service

Don’t barrage guests with pleas for money. (Would you do this to guests in your own home?)

Lighten up. Humor and a personal touch are important in helping guests feel at ease in a new situation.

Choose accessible hymns and songs.

Try to keep the length to no more than an hour.

Make sure the bulletin spells out what guests need to do, including when the congregations sits, stands, or joins together in prayer.

Have church members, not guests, identify themselves by wearing name tags.

hospitality in urban areas,” observes theologian Arthur Sutherland. “Because we encounter dozens or hundreds of people each day, everyone becomes a stranger to us.”² On Sunday mornings, members of the Cathedral Congregation break through this invisibility by identifying themselves with purple buttons and hosting a coffee and cookie reception after the service. At that time, more signs appear with suggestions for donations—in this case, one dollar for coffee and cookies.

Worship begins with a stirring organ prelude, and then Sam stands and offers a warm welcome to the gathered worshippers, talking briefly about the life of the cathedral in the week to come. He takes a minute to introduce the Scriptures that will be read in the service, and speaks of how we will be shaped as disciples of Christ throughout the service of worship. I appreciate the way that Sam’s personal warmth takes the chill out of the limestone room and how his focus on the life of the cathedral puts me in touch with the human dimension of the institution. Most impressive is his introduction of the Scriptures, which sets the stage for the readings and sermon that will follow, and his statement of belief that the service has transformative power; for both members and guests, the value of the worship service is increased by the promise of spiritual growth. In his sermon, he says that “churches are the one vehicle in society that keeps alive the story of God’s love for us.”

Since arriving at the cathedral, Sam has done whatever he can to make worship more hospitable, welcoming, and user-friendly—for example, eliminating the sung masses that were part of the cathedral’s tradition, picking accessible hymns, and shortening the service so that it is much closer to one hour. The service is easy to follow, unlike the liturgy I encountered one Sunday at an Episcopal church in Virginia, where I spent the hour fumbling with a prayer book, a hymn book, and a bulletin, never quite sure if I was on the right page. Sam is pleased with the growth of the Cathedral Congregation, which had increased to about 750 members as of October 2009. He sees them as “a community that is a small subset of a larger worshipping community.” The purple buttons that members wear are not status symbols, but signs of hospitality, since the buttons identify people who are available to answer questions or provide a cup of coffee after worship. Sam tells me that he wants to draw people together through the worship experience, “creating a community for that hour,” knowing that 75 percent of the people in worship on any given Sunday are not part of the Cathedral Congregation. At Washington National Cathedral, hospitality begins with worship—a communal experience of praising God, hearing Scripture and a sermon, and responding with thankful words and actions.

Worship as a Gateway

“Worship is the initial attraction,” says Steve Huber. “People are attracted to the beauty and accessibility of worship.” Following Sam’s welcome, the praise of God begins with an introit, processional hymn, opening acclamation, and a song of praise. All these components are printed in the bulletin, along with musical notes where appropriate. No assumptions are made about prior knowledge of the liturgy, and instructions for sitting and standing are included in the section containing the Scripture lessons, such as “The people stand to sing and remain standing for the Gospel.” When the time comes to respond to God’s Word with thankful words and actions, the bulletin explains that “an offering is collected to support the Cathedral’s work of sharing God’s love with the world.” Then, during Holy Communion, when visitors often wonder if they should receive the sacrament or not, the bulletin clearly states, “All who seek God and a deeper life in Christ are welcome to receive Holy Communion.” The worship concludes with an anthem during Communion, two hymns, and an organ solo, all of which send the congregation into the world (as the words of dismissal say) “rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.”

As beautiful as this is, Steve is quick to add that worship at the cathedral is not a performance piece in which music and preaching are designed to be enjoyed without personal engagement or commitment. He senses that “people want to be engaged in conversation” and observes that many members and visitors move from worship into the Sunday Forum, a program between the two Sunday morning services that focuses on “critical issues in the light of faith.” This discussion of current events and issues includes a guest speaker and is hosted by the dean, with questions submitted by Cathedral Congregation members and visitors. When I attended, the guest was religion scholar Karen Armstrong, author of *The Case for God*, and several weeks later the Cathedral was visited by the Georgetown University Muslim Chaplain Yahya Hendi, who spoke on “What You Need to Know about Islam.”

In worship, Sam predicts that people will be shaped as disciples of Christ. He is right; this shaping begins as the Word of God is heard in Scripture, song, and sermon. It continues as people are nourished by Holy Communion and are engaged in conversation by coffee time and the Sunday Forum. And even though the Communion service is quite “high church” at the cathedral, it has not lost touch with the simple meal that Jesus shared with his disciples in the upper room. According to Stephen Gerth of Saint Mary the Virgin Church in New York’s Times Square, worship takes place in a “dining

room,” and our actions and attitudes in this room reveal the level of our commitment to Christian hospitality. “How a congregation enters and leaves its ‘dining room’ says something about how its members are in relationship, about what it values,” he says. “How people speak to and with one another in our ‘dining room’ reveals something, too.”³ Hospitable worship never forgets that it is offering real food—both Word and Sacrament—to truly hungry people who need to be fed.

The process of feeding and forming disciples at Washington National Cathedral continues as people pass through the gateway of worship and enter a variety of classes, lectures, and dialogues throughout the week. Steve Huber tells me that Washington National Cathedral has a progressive slant on life, “but tries really hard not to beat people over the head with a particular position.” Instead, the goal of the cathedral community is to meet people where they are and walk with them into a deeper experience of Christian faith. Many new members are coming to the cathedral with no church background or with an experience of separation from the church that has lasted eight or ten years. For them, worship is the gateway—it engages them and connects them to a sense of community. Within this community, they discover opportunities for Christian formation and the deepening of their spiritual lives. Of particular importance is “Disciples of Christ in Community” (DOCC), a program of Christian formation that was developed in the late 1960s at Trinity Church in New Orleans and has been used successfully at Washington National Cathedral. Grounded in a shared meal, lecture, and small-group discussion, DOCC “builds trust and helps people to see why they need a Savior,” says Sam. “It has a strong emphasis on community.”

There is a lot of talk at the cathedral, but that is a good thing; conversation is an essential aspect of welcoming and including people from different backgrounds. “A big part of the cathedral’s ministry is talking about things,” observes Sam. Here, people share with one another in programs on reconciliation and interfaith issues, and listen to voices from across the political and theological spectrum, from the President of Iran to pastors such as Rick Warren and Tim Keller. Sam tells me that the cathedral hosts a women’s interfaith book group called “Daughters of Abraham,” made up of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women who meet monthly; it has also convened groups of African American pastors talking with white pastors about teaching in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr. Washington National Cathedral becomes “a house of prayer for all peoples” when it opens its doors and welcomes people into programs of dialogue, discovery, and spiritual growth. This attitude of hospitality begins with quality worship, described by Steve as “a gateway to membership and participation.”

Connecting with Guests

The biggest challenge of moving people through the gateway of worship is making a meaningful connection with them by learning their identities, needs, and desires. This is a challenge not only in large churches, such as the Washington National Cathedral and Saddleback, but in smaller congregations as well. At Cedar Ridge Community Church, the emergent church in Maryland with the excellent Web site we discussed in the last chapter, Sunday worship is attended by about 275 people and includes singing, a welcome, a prayer, and a message, followed by Communion. During the worship time that follows Communion, guests are invited to participate in a variety of ways. Around the worship space there are stations where worshipers may light a candle, write a prayer, or make a financial offering. “Prayer Servants,” identified by badges around their necks, are available to minister to guests in prayer for any need. After the service, guests are welcome to visit the “Connecting Space” next to the welcome desk where volunteers stand ready to answer any questions. Immediately following every service, the program “Cedar Ridge in 7 Minutes” is offered in the front of the auditorium for first-time guests. This is not a doctrinal presentation, but instead an invitation to follow Jesus at Cedar Ridge. There is also a welcome luncheon every other month, and a four-week experience called “The Journey” several times a year. This introduction to Cedar Ridge and its vision, values, and people is designed as “a time for sharing conversation and food and joining fellow companions in exploring the spiritual walk together.”⁴

Attending a service at Cedar Ridge in July 2010, I completed a welcome card that is clearly designed to help guests “find out more about Cedar Ridge and how you can get connected here.” The card contains blanks for guests to give their contact information and age range, as well as lines to indicate interest in the next welcome lunch and follow-up e-mails on the life of the church. A longer information form, available at the welcome desk, includes a statement of the vision of the church as well as an invitation to commit to the vision, mission, values, and people of the community. This form contains several options, ranging from a request for discussion about membership at Cedar Ridge to a statement of recommitment for current members.

In the service of worship, I am impressed by the warmth of senior pastor Matthew Dyer as he welcomes us to worship and introduces us to the responsive opening prayer, which is projected clearly on both sides of the front wall. Author and speaker Brian McLaren, the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge, offers the message on the first two chapters of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. He talks about the phrase “in Christ,” which is used repeatedly

in this letter, and how Paul intends these words to create a “zone of blessing for others” instead of a zone of exclusive blessing for Christians. Speaking of God’s plan to gather all things together and create a kingdom of reconciliation, Brian describes Christians as “early adopters of God’s plan to gather all things in Christ, and bring things together.”⁵ This focus on being gathered together in Christ continues in the service of Communion that follows, led by Patsy Fratanduono, the pastor of spiritual nurture. As a guest, I am encouraged to receive Communion and then to visit stations to light a prayer candle, make an offering, and receive personal prayers—if desired. Clear and colorful signs are posted at each of these stations, with written explanations of each element of worship. For introverts like myself, reading this information is easier and more spiritually satisfying than having to discuss the meaning of the station with another person.

At Saddleback, we’ve already seen that guests are never singled out in public. However, they are asked to fill out a welcome card in worship, with spaces to provide contact information as well as check boxes for class enrollment, comments, requests, and prayer needs. “Saddleback’s Welcome Card is a vital communication tool,” says Rick Warren. “We use it at least a dozen different ways: to register attendance, record spiritual decisions, gather prayer requests, take surveys, sign up for events and programs, recruit leadership, evaluate services, update membership information, gather sermon ideas, and start new ministries, among many others.”⁶ He urges pastors not to use registration books that are passed down the rows for everyone to see, because these books destroy the anonymity that so many guests seek by exposing their private information to everyone around them.

If guests submit a welcome card in the Saddleback offering, they are given a phone call and a mailing that includes a first impression card, asking guests what they noticed first, what they liked best, and what they liked least. The Saddleback staff tries to make contact, but they do not pester people. Their rule is to make two phone calls and send an e-mail, and then leave people alone. Their main goal is to encourage people to attend a four-hour membership class that is offered on a Sunday afternoon, nine times a year, introducing people to the story, beliefs, and ministry of the church. “Dinner is served, and people can learn who we are and what we believe,” says Gerald Sharon, North American Director of the Purpose Driven Network at Saddleback. “Hospitality involves helping people feel comfortable and lowering barriers.” Another practice designed to make guests comfortable is an announcement made during the worship service that they are not to give offerings. “Saddleback is here to give, not to take,” says the worship leader. “Church members will support the church through their offerings.” This is a much

more welcoming message than the request being made by numerous signs asking for donations at Washington National Cathedral.

Pay What You Can

So, should congregations ask visitors for money in worship? If so, what should worship leaders say about their expectations for giving? Churches certainly have a legitimate need for donations, but leaders do not want to send the message that ministry is all about money. Perhaps we can learn a lesson in hospitality from the One World Café in Salt Lake City, a restaurant that has no menus and no set prices. Surprisingly, you price your own meal, paying what you can afford or think is fair. “Most people give what the going rate is,” says the woman who founded the café in 2003. “It’s the honor system.” Pay-what-you-can restaurants have also appeared in suburban Seattle and New York City. According to *Utne* magazine, these eateries mix together unselfishness and the pay-it-forward concept: patrons who can’t afford much leave only what they can. Those who have abundant resources give a little extra, to cover for the less fortunate.⁷

At the One World Café, everyone has a seat at the table. This is true at welcoming congregations as well, where everyone is invited to sing praise to God, hear Scripture and a sermon, join with the community in prayer, and receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. There should be no specific offering expectations in such churches. Instead, there should be a truly open-ended invitation to give what you can. This fits the pattern of Jesus, who was willing to break with tradition in his own dining habits. In Matthew 11, Jesus criticizes the crowds for their inability to accept what he and John the Baptist are doing. He starts by saying that the people all around him are behaving like children—boys and girls who criticize others for not joining in their games. “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance,” they say; “we wailed, and you did not mourn” (11:17).

Jesus sees that the people of his day expect a certain amount of conformity, with everyone dancing or mourning along with the crowd. But Jesus and John are following God in a different direction, like a restaurant that decides to abandon menus and prices. Jesus understands that people struggle with this lack of conformity, and they criticize both John and Jesus for marching to the beat of a different drummer. “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon,’” observes Jesus. But if the Son of Man is seen eating and drinking, they say, “‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (vv. 18–19). John is

demonized because his self-discipline is too strict, while Jesus is rejected because his behavior is not strict enough. The generation of people around Jesus is behaving like Goldilocks, finding everything too hard, too soft, too hot, or too cold.

In response to these insults, Jesus says simply that “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (v. 19). Divine wisdom is proved right by its results—or, to continue the Goldilocks analogy, “the proof is in the porridge.” Jesus knows that he and John are doing the will of God, and that wonderful things are happening: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (v. 5). These deeds prove that God’s wisdom is at work in Jesus, despite the criticism of the crowd.

Worship That Nourishes People for Service

The proof is in the porridge. This means that welcoming congregations need to be willing to break with tradition—as Jesus did—and focus on offering worship that feeds the heart, mind, and spirit. This does not mean abandoning traditional music for praise music or replacing pews with theater seats (although sometimes these changes are appropriate). Breaking with tradition means offering a worship service that is proved right by its results. Worship shapes people as disciples of Christ, feeds them with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and binds them together in a community of love and grace. If people in the congregation are deepening their discipleship, it is on the right track. If they are finding healing and forgiveness and new life, it is doing God’s will. If they are moving from isolation to deep-spirited friendship, it is performing Christ’s ministry. If they are finding a place in a “house of prayer for all peoples,” it is widening the circle of God’s inclusive love. Like the One World Café, a welcoming congregation might be forging a brand-new path, but it is the right path if everyone has a place at the table and finds nourishment for a life of Christian service.

Hospitality usually involves a shared meal, and in the worship of the church this meal is called the Eucharist, Holy Communion, or the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. One of the strengths of the worship life of Washington National Cathedral is its Eucharistic schedule, which includes five Communion services most weekdays, and six most Sundays. Whether a person is young or old, in elementary school or graduate school, working at a job that is mainly physical or primarily intellectual, the Lord’s Table is open and

good food is available. “Come to me,” says Jesus, “all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Jesus invites everyone to come to him, at whatever age or stage of life, and he promises to help with the burdens of life. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (vv. 29–30). Jesus can say that his yoke is easy and his burden is light because he is not asking us to carry the yoke alone. He is wearing the yoke along with us, like two oxen yoked together. Jesus invites us to join him and walk beside him, and he promises to teach and guide us each step of the way.

At Washington National Cathedral, there is a place for everyone at the Lord’s Table. In the Eucharist we are reminded that Jesus gives us bread that is his body, broken for us in his sacrifice on the cross, as well as the cup that holds his blood, shed for us and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Digesting this good food we remember that Jesus didn’t simply offer to share our burdens, but he actually took the burden of our sin himself and died so that we might know forgiveness and new life. He paid the ultimate price so that we might live in freedom from guilt and shame. Looking at people around the table it is clear that Jesus broke one loaf into many pieces to symbolize both the oneness of his followers and the brokenness of his body needed to achieve this oneness. When Jesus the Master humbly serves us, he breaks down barriers and gives us a new understanding of ourselves as “one loaf, united in Christ.”⁸

And what is it that worshipers are asked to offer as a response? Pay what they can. In churches everywhere, people should offer what they can afford, what they think is fair. This might mean making a donation when the plate is passed, attending “Cedar Ridge in 7 Minutes,” or going to a four-hour membership class at Saddleback. But a response does not have to be made on a Sunday. Whether a worship service includes the Eucharist or not, it should nourish people for service in the week that follows. Worship can lead to making a commitment to Disciples of Christ in Community at the Washington National Cathedral. It might inspire people to volunteer to cook meals for the homeless, sing in a choir, or take part in a short-term mission trip. Appropriate responses could include recommitting oneself to a relationship, mentoring a child, or taking steps to restore honesty and integrity to the workplace. There’s no menu and no set prices in the dining room of Christian worship where everyone can be nourished for service. But everyone who receives good food should be invited to give something in return.

Avoiding “Club Religion”

Since everyone has something to offer, welcoming congregations should invite guests to give of themselves in services of worship and in lives of service. But what if these same churches persist in offering worship that is confusing and alienating to first-time guests? Our congregations need to avoid what Stephen Gerth calls “club religion”—churches that send the clear message that their primary purpose is to serve those who are already members. While on sabbatical in 2009, Stephen did not dress in a clerical shirt and collar, and he recalls that “with the single exception of the main Sunday Eucharist at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, every church I attended could be described as a place for ‘club religion.’ Only at Grace did I sense a purposeful commitment of welcome for everyone, including those who were new, those who were visiting, and those who made the cathedral their home.”⁹

Every church should take a brutally honest look at its order of worship and determine if it is sending a hospitable message or a club religion message. If

Best Practices: Avoiding “Club Religion”

Take time in your services to include practical instructions for guests who may not know what is expected.

Be sure that your “teaching messages” are directed more to guests than to church members.

Remember to celebrate your guests, not just tolerate them.

the worship service does not clearly include those who are not members, then corrective action needs to be taken. An important place to begin is the inclusion of *practical instructions* and *teaching messages* that are geared more toward visitors than church members. In the Iona Community in Scotland, time is taken at the beginning of each worship service to talk about the flow of the worship service and to teach songs to the gathered congregation. The assumption is that visitors are present, but they are not singled

out—the instructions are given to all. What a gift this is to newcomers, who are often nervous about new music and unfamiliar liturgies. Although the members of the Iona Community do not need these instructions, they are happy to tolerate them since they know how important they are to strangers. Then, once the music begins, the music of the Iona community is straightforward and repetitive, with simple but thoughtful lyrics that are easy to learn.

Moments of Christian education can be inserted into worship in ways that are beneficial to guests. During a service at Vienna Presbyterian Church in Virginia, pastor Peter James offers a commentary on the history of the closing

hymn, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” and talks about the meaning of the word “Ebenezer” between the verses of the hymn.¹⁰ The experience is worshipful, educational, and totally accessible to guests who may never have heard the hymn before. At Fairfax Presbyterian Church, director of music Kenneth Martin always includes notes in the worship bulletin about the history and theology of the choral anthem, and he takes a few minutes to teach new hymns to the congregation before they are sung for the first time.

Practical instructions and teaching messages may be offered in worship that is not on Sunday mornings as well. When visiting Washington National Cathedral on a Monday night, I took part in an hour of Benedictine Life and Prayer, sponsored by the Cathedral’s Center for Prayer and Pilgrimage and the ecumenical Community of Reconciliation. Following the example of the sixth-century monk Benedict of Nursia, a group of twelve warmly welcomes me and includes me in a reading and discussion of the Rule of Benedict and a time of Centering Prayer. The leader does a graceful job of teaching us all a technique for Centering Prayer, focusing on breathing and on the clearing of thought with the repetition of the word “Jesus.” It proves to be a serene gathering, filled with the presence of God. Instead of being an experience of club religion, it is a service that makes me feel very much at home.

God’s Own Welcome

The hospitality of a welcoming congregation is more than a good idea—it reflects the hospitality of the God who embraces all people with endless love and grace. We’ve seen that in Isaiah 56, the Lord reaches out even to once-excluded foreigners and eunuchs and says, “these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer . . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (v. 7). Throughout the long arc of the biblical narrative, God desires to expand the circle of inclusion and to welcome people in ways that will not merely accept them, but will “make them joyful.” This is first seen in the servant of the Lord in Isaiah, who becomes “a light to the nations” (42:6); then the circle widens when Jesus becomes “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt. 11:19); finally, the apostle Paul goes beyond the people of Israel to share the good news of salvation with Gentiles. The message of God’s acceptance includes feelings of joy, which means that a spirit of jubilation should always be included in hospitable worship. After all, our challenge is not simply to tolerate guests but to celebrate their presence like the shepherd who finds his lost sheep,

calls together his friends and neighbors, and says, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost” (Luke 15:6).

In her book *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*, Elizabeth Newman says that worship is participation in God’s own hospitality. As we join God in extending welcome, we participate in “God’s own communion, God’s own giving and receiving, made possible in Christ through the Holy Spirit.” We enter into a drama with God—as did Abraham, Moses, and Mary before us—and “we begin to see what it means to receive the stranger.”¹¹ Worship is hospitable when it enables people—through prayer, hymn-singing, Holy Communion, and passing the peace—to participate in the constant and mutual giving of our Creating, Redeeming, and Sustaining Lord.

Effective worship has less to do with a congregation’s particular style than with its ability to give people an experience of God’s own welcome. Washington National Cathedral, conceived as a “national house of prayer for all people,” succeeds in this mission as it welcomes people throughout the week, to services such as Holy Eucharist, Centering Prayer, and Choral Evensong. But the cathedral, along with all welcoming congregations, faces the ongoing challenge of being sensitive to the perspective of first-time worshipers and finding ways to make newcomers feel welcomed and included. The best hospitality comes from presenting worship as an opportunity for transformation, using it to connect people to a sense of community, filling it with good spiritual food, and making it a guest-centered and God-focused experience. “Worship ought to train us not to control God,” says Newman, “but to receive from God,” to “lean into the mysterious fullness of God, an abundance so profound and deep that it is beyond our grasp.”¹² A focus on these practices will improve the worship of any welcoming congregation, because they are rooted in the joyful, mysterious, and abundant hospitality that God shows each of us.

Discussion Questions

1. Sam Lloyd of Washington National Cathedral promises that worshipers will be shaped as disciples of Christ. How does this add value to the worship service?
2. Washington National Cathedral, Cedar Ridge, and Saddleback all have techniques for moving people through the gateway of worship to a place of meaningful connections. Which approach appeals to you?
3. What is most nourishing about your congregation’s service of worship? What are you doing to make sure everyone is being fed? Are there opportunities to make a “pay what you can” response?

4. When do you fall into “club religion,” and how can you get out?
5. How can your worship be a participation in God’s own hospitality? What can you do on Sunday mornings to widen the circle of God’s inclusive love?

Action Plan

Send teams of two to attend worship at other churches and to make notes of what they find to be confusing and off-putting as first-time visitors. Have them look for ways that neighbor congregations are helping their visitors to feel welcome through spoken words, printed instructions, and teaching moments in the service. Take a close look at your own worship bulletin and mark the places where the clarity of the service could be improved. Report all these findings to your church’s worship team or committee in the spirit of making a high-quality service accessible to all.

Preaching Suggestion

The invitation of Jesus is “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:16–19, 25–30). Where have barriers been unintentionally erected in worship, preventing people from coming to Jesus? How can your service be better centered on guests who are carrying heavy burdens? What good food can you offer those in need of nourishment, renewal, and rest? In what ways can you extend God’s own welcome through your service of worship?

Meals

I begin my trip to Iona with a flight to Scotland, landing in Edinburgh. Then a car trip, driving on the left side of the road—I have to be especially careful as I leave the airport, struggling to overcome my normal American reflexes that pull me to the right. After driving through the lush green Scottish countryside, I take a car ferry from the town of Oban to the Isle of Mull, which offers truly stunning views of the coastline. On Mull, I discover that grazing land is more valuable than blacktop, and the result is that many of the roads are “single-track,” meaning that they are wide enough only for one car. Fortunately, there are small passing areas positioned strategically along the roadway, and I quickly learn that there is a protocol about which vehicle stops and which one passes. In addition, I discover that I am supposed to raise a finger from the steering wheel as an acknowledgment of the other driver (no, not the middle finger, thank you). Finally, I reach the town of Fionnphort and take a passenger ferry across a windswept sound to the Isle of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland. I feel like I have reached the edge of the world.

Of course, this is a very twenty-first-century perspective. When St. Columba was banished from Ireland and traveled to Iona in the year 563, the isle was the easiest of points to reach by sea, and it would have felt close and convenient instead of remote. As in all things, what you see depends on where you stand. This rugged and rocky island became the cradle of Christianity in Scotland since it was from this point that Columba launched his missionary expeditions onto the mainland—even saving a man from the Loch Ness monster, according to legend. He established a Christian community that has existed in various forms for the past 1,500 years, currently as the progressive—but also deeply traditional—Iona Community. Today’s community was gathered by the Rev. George MacLeod, a Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) pastor during the Depression, who rebuilt the Iona Abbey and

revitalized Christianity on Iona and throughout Scotland. Outside the Abbey is St. Martin's Cross, one of the high outdoor crosses of the Celtic Church, standing in the middle of the power and beauty of God's creation, exposed to earth, sky, and sea. According to the *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, the Celtic everlasting pattern of the weaving vine on the cross points to the intertwining of earth and heaven and reminds pilgrims that Iona is a "thin place," with little to separate spirit and matter.¹

One of the lodging options on the island is the St. Columba Hotel, which has stunning views of the Iona Abbey and Sound of Iona. Meals are central to the hospitality of the hotel, with tea offered every day on the porch overlooking the water, and wonderful dinners served with vegetables grown in the hotel's organic garden. After dinner, guests can walk to the stone Abbey for the daily 9:00 p.m. worship service, which on Monday nights is called "World Space." A service in August 2009 featured international songs, led by a choir of young people gathered for the youth conference of the Iona Community. The preacher tells her personal story of being born in Kenya to British military parents who rediscovered "the Christian way" while abroad. There are amazing acoustics in this ancient, candlelit stone space, enhanced by the sound of the wind whipping around outside. The spirit of the service is ancient, future-oriented, and energetic.

A Place for the Whole People of God

One of the members of the Iona Community is a man named Alan Watt, who was born in Dundee, Scotland, and was involved in a youth club led by a forward-looking minister connected to Iona. Alan lost his wife in childbirth, raised a son by himself, and had a career as a social worker before being called to ministry in the Church of Scotland in midlife. The community network supported him through these difficult transitions, and he eventually married an associate member of the Iona Community named Ann. Meeting me at the Welcome Centre, Alan explains that the Iona Community is fundamentally a missional group, a dispersed community. It is rooted in the Church of Scotland, but it is a broad, all-inclusive community that is open to people of all denominations. Members gather on the Isle of Iona for week-long programs, but their core activity is meeting as groups once a month in their home communities. They are accountable to each other in their use of money and time, they work for justice and peace, and they meet together as family groups, where they share leadership in Bible study and look at issues

in the light of Scripture. Regular intercessory prayer, in particular, creates strong bonds among members of the community.

Alan explains that George MacLeod wanted Iona to be a place for the whole people of God, a community that was always seeking “new ways to touch the hearts of all.” They accept people for what they are, and look forward to what they will be. There is an expectation of transformation at Iona, as members and guests live and eat together in community and participate in worship and work. Expectations are high: as Alan and the community say, “We will not offer to God offerings that cost us nothing.” The Iona Community has a long history of working to bridge the gap between Protestants and Catholics, and it now takes an open and all-inclusive view of gays and lesbians in the life of the church. Members have also served a world in need by working as peace-makers in Israel/Palestine, conducting mission trips to Malawi, and making visits to Cuba. The original members of the community ministered in lower-class Glasgow, and more recent members have befriended young offenders in the penal system and worked on HIV/AIDS education. They know and practice the truth of what Letty Russell writes in her book *Just Hospitality*: “If we hear a person crying out in fear, hospitality includes addressing the issues of fear, not just offering comfort.”²

The community is committed to biblical hospitality and acceptance, welcoming all people. Inspired by the vision of George MacLeod, members of the community spent forty years rebuilding the Iona Abbey, with dormitories and a refectory (dining hall), which welcomes up to fifty guests for programs each week, as well as thousands of pilgrims in the summer months. They added a Welcome Centre and Community Shop along the road to the Abbey, where visitors can have their questions answered and browse books and crafts while sipping a cup of tea or coffee. Needing even more space for participants in programs, the community built an additional dormitory for forty-eight people called The MacLeod Centre, around the corner from the Welcome Centre. “May those without shelter be under your guarding this day O Christ,” says one of the Celtic prayers from Iona. “May the wandering find places of welcome.”³

Members of the Iona Community, like my guide Alan Watt, are warm, receptive, and happy to talk about the life of the community. I enjoy following him on a tour of the Abbey and dormitories, concluding with tea in the refectory. That night I return for a healing service in the Abbey, followed by tea, coffee, and cookies in the refectory—a small reminder of the importance of creating community around food and drink, a hospitality practice for which Iona is known. Members of the community believe that Christ can be

encountered in a stranger, and they live by the ancient Gaelic Rune [Poem] of Hospitality:

I saw a stranger yestreen:
 I put food in the eating place,
 Drink in the drinking place,
 Music in the listening place:
 And in the sacred name of the Triune
 He blessed myself and my house,
 My cattle and my dear ones.
 And the lark said in her song
 Often, often, often
 Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.
 Often, often, often
 Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.⁴

Table Hospitality

Christian community on Iona began with St. Columba and his Celtic monks in the sixth century, continued with the building of the Abbey by a Benedictine community in the twelfth century, and was revitalized by the rebuilding of the Abbey by George MacLeod and the Iona Community in the twentieth century. Through the centuries, Christians have gathered around tables on Iona to experience *koinonia*—a Greek word meaning communion or fellowship. “When guests come to live in Iona Abbey today, they come to share in the daily life of a resident community, which worships and works together, year in, year out,” writes Ron Ferguson, author of *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*. “Sitting around a refectory table in any one week may be a professor of theology, a Roman Catholic monk, an unemployed teenager, a Quaker peace activist, an army chaplain, a single parent with children, a businessman, a battered wife, an inner-city gang boy, and a Presbyterian minister.” Such diverse people form a community during the week they are together for a program—eating together, washing dishes, worshipping, creating art or music, talking, and walking. “Somehow,” says Ferguson, “the Church at large must work at ways of restoring real community to its heart, and intentional communities such as Iona can offer hard-won experience in the quest for such an essential recovery.”⁵

Hospitality on Iona begins at a table in the Iona Abbey refectory, sharing tea and cookies with people from a rich variety of backgrounds. On a Tuesday afternoon, I hear the life story of Scotsman Alan Watt and then watch as

he engages a number of young guests in conversation, asking questions about their experience at the Iona Community's youth conference. On a Wednesday night, I sit in the refectory after worship and am approached by a teenager from Oklahoma who is spending the week at Iona with his youth group. I marvel at the confidence he shows in approaching me—a middle-aged man and total stranger—and realize that his ability to reach out has been shaped and strengthened by his time in the community. Over tea, we talk about what has brought each of us to the island and what we are gaining from our time there. On Iona, the expectation is that members and guests will make connections around tables, with both friends and strangers. In contrast, most table fellowship in American church communities involves people who already know each other.

The Abbey is unique in that it is neither a retreat house nor a conference center, but a place designed to give guests an opportunity to live with the Iona Community and share all aspects of life in community. This begins with meals and daily worship and moves quickly to programs and chores. Accommodations are not luxurious—mostly bunk beds in dormitories—but a week with the community offers visitors a valuable opportunity to explore spiritual and social issues and to grow closer to God and their neighbors. Those who want to go deeper in their relationship with the Iona Community can become a friend or an associate member of the community or even a full member. There are currently about 1,500 friends of the community and an equal number of associates, while there are about 250 full members of the Iona Community. Members live mainly in Scotland, England, and Wales and work in various professions. Although not ordained monastics, they are required to commit to a fivefold rule of life: (1) daily prayer and Bible-reading; (2) sharing and accounting for the use of money; (3) planning and accounting for the use of time; (4) action for justice and peace in society; and (5) meeting with and accounting to each other.

Clearly, the bonds of friendship grow stronger as people are willing to move deeper into the life of

Best practices: Welcoming Meals

Remember that God's people need to be nourished around tables with fellowship and food.

Make group meals a regular, anticipated part of your church's life together.

Avoid "club religion" at meal-times by finding ways to help people who don't yet know each other sit together for food and conversation.

Think of meals as potential outreach methods for the larger community.

the community and make commitments to meet with one another and be accountable to each other. When members meet in regional family groups away from the Isle of Iona, they open their homes to one another for monthly meetings. Members share leadership in Bible study and look at contemporary issues in light of Scripture. Connections between people are strengthened by intercessory prayer, and meetings always conclude with Communion or an *agapē* meal. Gathering around tables for *koinonia* is central to the experience of Iona, both on and off of the island.

Meals and Coram Deo

Welcoming congregations know the importance of gathering people around food and drink, since it is when people share a meal that they become close to each other and close to God. This is revealed in Isaiah 25, in which the prophet says “the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines” (v. 6). The Lord is showing table-centered hospitality in this passage, gathering all the people of the world together in a marvelous feast. “Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth” (v. 8).

What an amazing vision. God becomes our host and gathers us together for food and drink. God comes close to us, wipes the tears from our faces, and removes our disgrace. The passage also says that God will destroy “the shroud” that is cast over all people and will “swallow up death forever” (vv. 7–8). It is at this feast, eating and drinking together, that we become close to God and to one another. We begin to live *coram Deo*—an ancient Latin phrase that means “before the face of God” or “in the presence of God.” *Coram Deo* is what is at the heart of the welcoming congregation and is what most people are looking for in a church. Churches that practice hospitality are *coram Deo* churches—they help people to have an experience of living in the presence of God.

When a church practices hospitality, people of different backgrounds are invited to sit around tables and have conversation over a meal or a drink. Whether at The Refinery at Saddleback or the refectory at Iona, the focus is on friendship and the development of relationships that help people to learn about each other and forge bonds in spite of their differences. “Through hospitality we discover the ways we are both alike and different,” scholar Christine Pohl pointed out to me in December 2009. “When we welcome other people into our lives, we create space in which each person’s gifts and insights can be shared.”⁶ God knows this, which is why the great gathering

in Isaiah 25 is not in a lecture hall or even in a sanctuary. It's on a mountain, around picnic tables, "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines." When we gather around tables, we are *coram Deo*—in the presence of God.

Hospitality can accomplish what theological discussion and debate cannot: it can build a diverse community and move people toward reconciliation. Across the globe today, theology tends to divide people and too often leads to conflict, whether between the liberal and conservative wings of Christianity or between Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. Our own nation is still highly segregated on Sunday mornings, not much different than it was in 1963, when Martin Luther King Jr. observed that "at 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing and Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation."⁷ Theology tends to divide people, but a shared meal can unite people at the level of a basic human need—food and drink. Over the course of my quarter-century of ministry, I have seen the power of a simple international potluck dinner to bring culturally and racially diverse people together. "Food is our common ground," said James Beard, "a universal experience."⁸ Perhaps the clearest path to unity is through the stomach.

Meals can build relationships across enormous socio-economic divides and reconcile groups that are suspicious of one another. In October 2009, I had lunch with Kathleen Kline Chesson, the senior minister of First Christian Church in Falls Church, Virginia. Her congregation serves 150 homeless people breakfast and lunch every Tuesday and Thursday in a program called Safe Haven, and Kathleen has seen bonds develop between church members and their homeless neighbors—connections that would be highly unlikely without the sharing of meals that takes place in Safe Haven.⁹

From the time of Jesus to today, the practice of hospitality has almost always involved eating meals together—the feeding of the five thousand, the Lord's Supper, the shared meals in Benedictine monasteries. These are all *coram Deo* experiences, where the presence of God is felt, relationships are built, and reconciliation can be accomplished. In addition, shared meals help not only to nourish people individually but to strengthen the identity of the group that dines together. Randolph Charles, the rector of Church of the Epiphany in Washington, DC, tells me that the Welcome Table is "the heartbeat of the parish" and acts as a draw to new members. It regularly attracts 150 homeless men and women and involves sixty volunteers from the 350-member parish. Relationships have developed through the program, and people have come to know each other by name, as homeless people and church volunteers have come together every week for Sunday morning worship, breakfast, and small-group Bible study. Through this innovative

program, the church has learned how to be hospitable to both the rich and the poor and to create a worshiping community out of people from very diverse backgrounds. Randolph admits, however, that there is tension between Epiphany members who want money spent on music and those who want it spent on outreach to the poor. There will never be perfect hospitality in any congregation—the Sunday I attended worship at Epiphany in August 2009, I saw an older white woman refuse the kiss of a black man during the passing of the peace. Then she used hand sanitizer.

The Congregation That Eats Together

Grasping the importance of gathering around tables, many churches are trying to become the “third place” that Starbucks has staked out in our culture—a place for people to go after (1) home and (2) work.¹⁰ Of the hospitable sites listed in chapter 2, notice how many include food and drink: Smoothies in the Great Room of Fairfax Community Church, coffee at The Gathering, a Starbucks at The Family Christian Center, McDonald’s at Brentwood Baptist Church, the youth bistro at University Vineyard Church, and the “Robin Hood Restaurant” at the Reformed Church of Highland Park. The Refinery at Saddleback, which could easily be mistaken for a town square complete with restaurants and snack bars, was mentioned in a mass e-mail from Rick Warren in the fall of 2009. He invited people to fill three things: your soul at worship, a grocery bag for the hungry, and “your tummy” at The Refinery.

Rick is convinced that hospitality grows a healthy church and that relationships are the glue that holds a church together. Such relationships often begin when a congregation eats together. He recalls that when Saddleback was much smaller, they used to rent a country club every three months and have a new members’ banquet. All new members would be recognized and would give a two-minute testimony, offering stories of how their lives had changed. As an act of hospitality, older members would pay for the meals of the new members. Rick and his wife, Kay, would also host an informal coffee meeting in their home called the “Pastor’s Chat” on the fourth Sunday night of each month. It was an opportunity for new members and guests to meet them face-to-face and ask questions. The chats would last from 7 to 10 p.m., and Rick reports that this “simple act of hospitality brought in hundreds of new members and established many relationships that Kay and I cherish today.”¹¹

At Washington National Cathedral, dean Sam Lloyd admits that they do “a poor job of engaging pilgrims with hospitable spaces,” so he is looking

for space on the Cathedral Close for a coffee shop or restaurant. He believes that “cathedrals are places to come and linger,” and he wants Washington National Cathedral to become a public gathering space—a piazza—for art exhibits and other community events. Sam got a taste of this when the cathedral hosted a program called “Lighting to Unite,” in which Swiss artist Gerry Hofstetter illuminated the cathedral with high-powered, colorful lights. At this event, Sam was delighted to see thousands of people on the lawn and many younger couples wandering around the Close. He wants the cathedral to move away from being a pristine park and toward being a “space for the city to gather in all of its diversity.” The first step is to create hospitable spaces for people to congregate, eat, and drink.

Linking Food with Faith

There is a danger to church-based coffee bars and restaurants, however: they can shift focus from the soul to the stomach and leave people without solid spiritual nourishment. Welcoming congregations need to view their food and drink as ingredients in building Christian community, not as strategies for luring people away from commercial eateries. On the Isle of Iona, a strong connection is made between food and faith, one that is made visible every week when the Iona community offers a pilgrimage around the island. On Tuesdays, visitors are invited to take part in a walking tour of the island’s many spiritual sights, while reflecting on their personal journeys and the life of the world. At each station there is a brief reflection and a time of prayer, and when appropriate there is silence, song, or shared food. The pilgrimage begins at St. Martin’s Cross by the Abbey Church on the northeast edge of the island and takes about six hours to complete.¹²

Traveling to the southeast corner of the island, pilgrims come to the Marble Quarry, where white Iona marble was quarried for the Abbey Church’s baptismal font and communion table. This table is where earthly food provides spiritual nourishment and a shared meal reveals the presence of the risen Christ. “The restoration of all things in Christ begins in the mystery of the Eucharist,” writes Esther de Waal in her book *Every Earthly Blessing: Rediscovering the Celtic Tradition*. At the communion table, “Christ is celebrated, the center of the universe, the keystone in the structure which God designed. It is as though the entire universe is simply one whole in which past and present, earth and heaven, are embraced.”¹³

Moving northwest to the Machair (raised beach), pilgrims learn that this stretch of land was once used as the cornfield for the Celtic and Benedictine

monasteries and is now used by farmers for common grazing. So the Machair stands as a kind of parable of sharing, stressing cooperation instead of competition. It is not hard to imagine Jesus standing in such a field of green grass in front of 5,000 hungry people, saying to his disciples, “You give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37). Participants in the pilgrimage often give thanks and share lunch together on the Machair, remembering that they are called to share the gifts of God with one another and with the poor of the world. This shared meal provides not only physical nourishment after a time of strenuous hiking but spiritual refreshment in a sacred and fertile spot, connecting pilgrims both to each other and to the land beneath their feet. “Every meal, like every encounter with a human being, has the potential to reveal God present in Creation,” writes Benedictine Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt. “The table represents the unknown yearning of every human heart for communion with the ‘something more’ that infuses all that exists.”¹⁴

The Iona Community always connects food to faith, whether Communion is being celebrated in the Abbey, tea and cookies are being served in the refectory, or lunch is being shared on the Machair during the pilgrimage. On this rugged island eating and drinking become part of a person’s connection to God’s good creation, a link that is easy to make in a “thin place” like Iona, where the barrier between earth and heaven is almost transparent. Food tastes good on Iona because it is eaten in a place where the glory of God is experienced in creation—in the wind on the beach that evokes the story of creation in which “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2), and in the power of the water around the island, which brings to mind both the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea and the rebirth that comes through Christian baptism. The whole experience on Iona puts you in touch with the elemental and the eternal, whether you are feeling the wind, looking out over the water, sharing lunch in a grassy field, or receiving the bread and wine of Communion in the ancient stone Abbey.

For congregations that are located in typical American neighborhoods, instead of rugged Scottish islands, the same challenge exists: to use food and drink to build Christian community and to feed the soul as well as the stomach. “As the Lord gave his body and blood for sinners,” says theologian Miroslav Volf, “so we ought to be ready to share something of our very selves with strangers” in the circle of our table fellowship.¹⁵ Of course, shared meals are not a quick fix for the spiritual hunger that exists all around us or for the divisions that we face in church and society. Not all gatherings around tables will put people in the presence of God—*coram Deo*—nor will they automatically reconcile people to one another. But every time people

sit down to eat and drink together there is the possibility that God's presence will be felt, people will develop relationships, community will grow, and estranged parties might even overcome the divisions that keep them apart. That is the potential of shared meals, and something that Christians—whether in the Iona Community or an American congregation—can all raise a glass to toast.

Discussion Questions

1. When does your congregation gather around tables for food and drink? What happens?
2. Can you describe a *coram Deo* moment that you have had—an experience of welcome that caused you to feel the presence of God?
3. The Iona Community consciously links food with faith in the Communion of the Abbey and the picnic lunch of the Iona pilgrimage. Are there places that your congregation could connect food and faith? How would the soul—as well as the stomach—be fed by this?
4. Christ is present not only in Communion but in every meal that Christians share. What can we do to remind ourselves of this?
5. How does a shared meal set the stage for reconciliation? If you have experienced this, tell your story.

Action Plan

Offer a mini-retreat on Christian hospitality on a Sunday afternoon. Begin with a congregational lunch, with church members gathered around tables. Identify and interview members who are skilled at hospitality and have them share their practices. Role-play situations in which strangers are welcomed or rejected.¹⁶ Display a large map of your church building and discuss how various spaces could be made more hospitable, including opportunities for food and drink. Discuss next steps and assemble a team of people willing to work on the ideas that have been generated. Close with an *agape* meal or Communion.

Preaching Suggestion

Reflect on the Lord's feast of rich food in which God wipes away tears (Isa. 25:6–9) or the feeding of the five thousand, with emphasis on the command

of Jesus to the disciples to give the people something to eat (Mark 6:30–44). How does God meet us in a shared meal? What connections are made when people gather around tables? Why does reconciliation so often occur? How can we extend God's hospitality to the world?

Small Groups

My flight into Berlin, Germany, lands at Tegel Airport, which might sound oddly familiar to fans of Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the martyrs of the Second World War. Bonhoeffer was held at the Tegel military prison for a year and a half, and it was there that he wrote his famous *Letters and Papers from Prison*, smuggled out of the prison by sympathetic guards. He was then condemned to death by the Nazis and executed at a concentration camp, just three weeks before the Soviet capture of Berlin. So despite the fact that Berlin is now a bustling twenty-first-century city, the scars of the past can be seen all around. Out of my hotel window is the spire of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, badly damaged in an Allied bombing raid in 1943 and left in partial ruins as a reminder of the war. A shack stands in the middle of the road near the Koch Street subway station to mark the location of Checkpoint Charlie, the most well-known crossing in the Berlin Wall during the Cold War. And a span of the Berlin Wall still stands across the street from the office of an uncommon Christian community that has recently built The Chapel of Reconciliation in the Death Strip that used to separate East Berlin from West Berlin.

The morning after my arrival, I take a cab to Bernauer Street for a meeting with a Lutheran pastor named Manfred Fischer, who has served the congregation called Reconciliation Parish since 1975. I arrive a few minutes early and walk along a section of the wall built by the East German government to seal off West Berlin. The Berlin Wall was actually two walls that paralleled one another and were separated by the heavily patrolled Death Strip, designed to keep residents of East Germany from fleeing to the West. The path walked by East German guards is still in place, but it now leads to The Chapel of Reconciliation, an elegantly simple structure that sits at Ground Zero of the Cold War struggle between Soviet Communism and Western Democracy.

I cross the street and enter the parish house that has been the gathering place for Reconciliation Parish since the Berlin Wall was built in 1961. Until then, the congregation worshiped in the red brick Reconciliation Church building, constructed in 1894 in the Neogothic style, with a tall steeple and large nave that could hold a thousand people. But when the Berlin Wall was erected by the Communists, the Reconciliation Church building ended up in the Soviet sector with about one hundred of its parishioners, while more than nine hundred members of the church lived on the other side of the wall, in the French sector. For more than twenty years, the church building stood in the Death Strip between East and West, unable to be used by this congregation divided by the wall. Then the East German government took an action in 1985 that it said was designed “to increase safety, order, and cleanliness on the border of West Berlin.” The government blew up the church building—first the nave and then the steeple. But as images of the collapsing steeple were broadcast around the world, it was clear that the destruction of the church had nothing to do with safety, and everything to do with politics. The East German government, which had divided the city with a wall, simply could not tolerate a church called Reconciliation.

I sit down with Manfred in his office in the parish house across the street from the remnant of the Berlin Wall, within sight of the location of the old church building. He tells me that when he began to pastor the Reconciliation Parish in 1975 he saw that there was a deep wound in the community, but that “it was no longer bleeding.” The Berlin Wall had been in place for over a decade at that point, and no one wanted to do anything about it. The wall actually gave the residents of West Berlin a sense of security—they had been afraid of losing their city, so the existence of the wall helped them to feel protected against Communist attack. Manfred worried about what the wall and subsequent urban renewal were doing to the social network and sense of community in the area, but he did not want to play world politics as a pastor, so he did what he could to help people. He began by doing what Jesus always did: he looked and listened. He looked up and down Bernauer Street and actually made a film of the street to capture what was there. He listened to stories of the parish and learned that when the Reconciliation Church had been built in 1894, in a historic and famous workers’ district, its purpose was to reconcile people to their king—a king who was unpopular with many of the area’s workers. But the world began to change, and soon there was no more king. Democracy came to the church in the 1920s. Then Hitler rose to power, dividing the parish into supporters and resisters of Nazism. Then the Soviets invaded, and after the war

the city was divided. Manfred realized that there had been many upheavals, restarts, and disasters in the life of the church—one about every ten years—so the building of the Berlin Wall was not the first challenge for the congregation.

Manfred discovered that the church needed to be trained to “stand up again” after numerous disasters, and so he began to bring people together in the parish hall. He invited older people to tell stories to younger people because he believes that “knowledge about how to live is not taught in schools, it is taught in community.” Through the 1970s and 80s he gathered people in groups and asked the questions, “What are we proud of?” and “What do we hope for?” When the East German government blew up the old Reconciliation Church building, which was still trapped behind the wall, it was a watershed moment in the church’s self-definition. This outrageous act strengthened the resolution of the congregation to survive. “The church is not the building,” Manfred says to me. “The picture of the falling church would not be the last picture of this church.” A year after the church building was destroyed, Manfred gathered the congregation and introduced a service of dance and music directed against the Berlin Wall with the words, “We can do something, and if we trust in symbolic actions, we are aware of the silent power of symbols to change the impossible into possibilities.”¹

There truly is power in symbols, and the church is an important cultural force. By the summer of 1989, it became clear that a huge revolution was going on underground in the East. By November of that year, the Berlin Wall had been torn down—something that no one would have predicted when the Reconciliation Church building was demolished just a few years before. “There is a bigger power in the world than human beings,” says Manfred, seen so clearly in the fact that the powerful East Germans destroyed the Reconciliation Church in 1985, and four years later they were gone. Manfred now sees that his job as a pastor is to “try to find the footsteps of God’s power,” and he knows that one way to trace these footsteps is to protect a piece of history. He tells me that understanding needs something *to touch* (in fact, in German, understanding and touching are the same word). Manfred fought for four years to have a portion of the Berlin Wall preserved, and it is now a historical site. It is a stone marker, as is seen so often at important sites in the Old Testament—the portion of the Wall on Bernauer Street is like the stone that Samuel set up “between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer, for he said, ‘Thus far the LORD has helped us’” (1 Sam. 7:12). The word Ebenezer means “Stone of Help.”

A Church of Small Groups

As a pastor on the front lines of the Cold War, Manfred watched his church building crumble and the Berlin Wall crash down. This experience made him acutely aware that the life of the church is always found in groups of people, rather than in physical or political structures. Realizing that young people were cut off from their roots, he gathered them to talk about the importance of eating, dressing, finding shelter, and moving—grounding these discussions in the words of Jesus. Knowing that they needed to learn from their elders, he gathered older people to tell stories to the young. After the fall of the wall, he hosted conversations between members of the East German secret police (Stasi) and their victims, aimed at releasing emotions in a controlled and productive way. Discussions about the significance of the wall have formed “a new kind of parish,” says Manfred—one that has “a shrinking kernel, but a growing fruit.” Although Reconciliation Parish has become a small congregation, its ministry is bigger than ever. Since the completion of The Chapel of Reconciliation in 2000, on the site of the old church building in the former Death Strip, hundreds of thousands of people visit every year, and young people come from around the world to volunteer to host visitors to the chapel. “The congregation is the protector of this holy place,” says Manfred. “People are drawn to reconciliation.”

Christian hospitality requires the creation of intimate and honest small groups, focused on friendship, community-building, Bible study, and spiritual growth. On the Isle of Iona, hospitality is provided to guests by a small, resident group of twenty-five people from the Iona Community, assisted by thirty volunteers from around the world. They offer guests an experience of the common life of the community in worship, work, discussion, and relaxation. Off the island, members of the Iona community continue to gather in

Best Practices: Creating Small Groups

Create core small groups within your congregation so that individuals can make personal connections in intimate and honest gatherings.

To begin, consider developing small groups around a limited course offering, such as an eight-week class or a Lenten series. Then evaluate whether and how the small groups may wish to continue meeting.

Meet at least monthly, and preferably more often.

Devote time in each meeting to personal sharing and prayer for each other, as well as discussion of some assigned topic or reading.

family groups—meeting together is one of the commitments they make in their fivefold rule of life. They open their houses to one another, share leadership in Bible study, look at contemporary issues in light of Scripture, and conclude each gathering with Communion or an *agape* meal.

At Saddleback, newcomers are quickly invited into small groups where friendships can grow as people focus on spiritual topics together over the course of several months. At the beginning of an eight-week sermon series on healing, Rick Warren stresses the importance of each worshiper joining a small group tied to the “Life’s Healing Choices” spiritual growth campaign. “God wired us in such a way that we only get well in community,” he explains. In his sermon, Rick describes the small groups that accompany Saddleback’s spiritual growth campaigns every fall—this is a hospitable explanation, given that most Saddleback members are already familiar with them. Joining a small group is simple and easy, with sign-ups occurring on the patio outside the worship center immediately after worship. Thousands of people respond, and Rick offers the promise, “You will be a different person in eight weeks.”

At Washington National Cathedral, the DOCC program—Disciples of Christ in Community—is a step-by-step journey into the heart of Christianity, with people conversing in small groups that stay together for the length of the course. The program starts with a shared meal and includes lectures and small-group discussions. DOCC is transformative for many people in the cathedral community, and participants talk about it being a course that has changed their lives. “It is the first time they have been able to frame an adult faith,” says Vicar Steve Huber. “Many members come to the Cathedral Congregation through DOCC.” The Community of Reconciliation at the cathedral also provides small-group experiences such as Saturday morning programs on the Benedictine teaching of “holy leisure,” involving a contemplative walk through the gardens and woods, a guided meditation on the life and lessons of St. Benedict, and time for communal as well as individual prayer and reflection.

Leaders of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Maryland are working to create “a church *of* small groups, not a church *with* small groups.” They want the relational quality of small groups to be at the core of the church’s identity, “the DNA of the church.” Already, Cedar Ridge provides weekly handouts for small-group discussions, with questions about each Sunday message, and on the third Thursday of each month a small group gathers to explore ways to heighten awareness of the presence of God through discussion, silence, guided meditation, and deep breathing. Church staff oversee the “Farm Parties” at Cedar Ridge, which are small gatherings of people from

the church and community who come together several times a week to work on the Community Farm, a project located on the church's sixty-three-acre property, which is focused on growing healthy food, feeding the hungry, and building community.

Each of these congregations knows the power of small groups to welcome friends and strangers into places of acceptance, friendship, study, spiritual growth, and service to others. When each participant is offered love and respect, these gatherings provide opportunities for the honest sharing of stories and insights, and the growth of deep-spirited friendships. At FPC, Jessica Tate and I offered a five-week sermon series on Christian hospitality during the season of Lent in 2010. We recruited leaders for twelve small groups and encouraged every member of the congregation to sign up for one of the groups, giving people the option of meeting at church or at a private home, on Sunday morning or at another time through the week. We were stunned to see approximately 150 adults and youths sign up for these groups in a church that rarely attracts more than a few dozen people to Christian education classes. There was clearly an interest in the topic, and an even deeper need to be part of a small-group experience—several people said that they had never been part of such a group before. We continue to offer group discussions in conjunction with sermon series, knowing that these intimate and honest gatherings will bind people together in a life-enhancing—and maybe even life-saving—network of personal relationships.

A Little Goes a Long Way

In early 2010, two celebrity suicides made the national news. First, an actor named Andrew Koenig hanged himself after suffering from severe depression. Then Marie Osmond's son jumped from his eighth-floor apartment after saying that his depression had left him feeling friendless. Suicides now outnumber homicides in the United States, and they are most common among the young and the old. Suicide is difficult to prevent because mental illness is a factor, and counseling and medication do not provide quick or guaranteed fixes. In addition, Americans have become more isolated and lonely in recent years. When a 1985 survey asked, "How many confidants do you have?" the most frequent response was three. When the question was asked again in the year 2004, the answer was zero.²

Zero confidants. From three to zero in less than twenty years. Friendlessness leads to loneliness, which leads to depression, which can lead to suicide. Clearly, having friends can be life-saving, which makes the work of Christian

hospitality more important than ever. Making the church a more welcoming place is not about serving better coffee in the narthex or coming up with an improved system for identifying visitors. Instead, hospitality is about connecting people to the community of faith in a deep and meaningful way. When people become part of a church they begin to develop relationships. Their number of confidants begins to increase. Their loneliness is replaced by friendship, and they do not feel quite so isolated. They make connections with people in ways they have not experienced before. Christian hospitality is not just a good idea—it is a matter of life and death.

Making a place for hospitality has been a challenge for thousands of years. In 1 Kings 17, the prophet Elijah is sent by God from Israel to the city of Zarephath, up north near the foreign town of Sidon. God says, “I have commanded a widow there to feed you” (vv. 8–9). Zarephath was a Phoenician commercial capital known for its exports—including wine, grain, and oil. And yet, it was not prospering at the moment Elijah was sent to it because the region was suffering from a terrible drought.³ Like the United States at several points in its history, it was experiencing an economic crisis.

This becomes clear to Elijah as soon as he arrives at the gate of the city. A destitute widow is gathering sticks so that she can make a fire, prepare a few cakes, eat them with her son, and then die. The future looks bleak for her, and this story makes it sound like she is depressed. But Elijah remembers the promise of God—that a widow in Zarephath would feed him. He knows that his God has commanded hospitality, even in a time of drought and deprivation. So he says to the woman, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink” (v. 10). The widow looks at him, probably wondering if this is the man of Israel that she has been commanded to feed. She knows that he is a foreigner and realizes that she doesn’t have any personal religious responsibility to help him—she worships a different god named Baal. But since a vessel of water is not an outrageous request, she turns to get some for him. As she is going, Elijah calls to her and says, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” She stops and shakes her head, knowing that she cannot do it. Then swearing by the name of *his* god, the God of Israel, she says, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug” (vv. 11–12). She has no bread, not even a morsel to offer. And because she is depressed, lonely, and friendless, she cannot imagine where in the world she will get some.

But Elijah believes in God’s promise, and he will not give up. He is like the young priest in the Clint Eastwood movie *Gran Torino* who has made a commitment to visit with the flinty old widower played by Eastwood, even though Eastwood insults him and tells him again and again that he wants him

to go away. Because the priest keeps coming and refuses to give up, the two of them develop a connection—they even become confidants. “Do not be afraid,” says the prophet Elijah to the widow; “go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth” (vv. 13–24).

Here is the promise of hospitality, delivered by Elijah: with God, a little goes a long way. It sounds incredible, but we see the reality of it in our own lives. A child is born, and parents naturally worry about what is required to raise a child—emotionally, physically, educationally, financially. It can seem overwhelming. I remember when the nurse handed my daughter Sarah to my wife and me for the ride home from the hospital in January 1988, I asked myself, “Is this *legal*?” I felt so unprepared. But with God’s help, there was always enough. Youths come pouring into church for their Sunday night dinner, and volunteer cooks scramble to put the food out. Numbers are always a little bit fuzzy, but with God’s help, a little goes a long way. Church leaders put a budget in front of the congregation, church members make pledges to support the mission of the church, and no one knows exactly how budgets and pledges will match up until after Pledge Dedication Sunday. But with God’s help, there is always enough. In all these situations, it is important to make a place for hospitality—to open our hearts to children, open our church buildings to youths, open our wallets to the mission and ministry of the church.

Like the widow of Zarephath we discover amazing things when we say yes to what God is asking us to do, and when we make a commitment to supporting God’s work.

Scripture tells us that the widow goes and does what Elijah says. She does not have much to share—just a handful of meal and a little oil—but she offers it freely. Yes, times are tough for her, just as they are today for many Americans. But despite her depression and destitution, she makes a place for hospitality. And what is the result? She, Elijah, and her household eat for many days. The jar of meal is not emptied, neither does the jug of

Best Practices: Relational Ministry

Remember that any group or ministry you start in your church needs to be *relational* and not *transactional*.

Ask what you can do to help guests or neighbors, not what they can do for you in terms of filling pews or expanding the church’s coffers.

oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that was spoken by Elijah (vv. 15–16). With God, a little goes a long way.

This is the promise that is made to us as we strive to become welcoming congregations and extend God’s love and grace to all people. Like the widow of Zarephath, we have an opportunity to open our doors to strangers and to share what we have. Like the prophet Elijah, we have a chance to trust in God’s abundance and to believe that the Lord will meet our needs, even in difficult times. One important element of this story is that neither the widow nor Elijah has a full experience of God’s goodness in isolation. The oil and grain meet their needs only when they come together in a *very small group*, a prophet and a widow, an Israelite and a foreigner. Together, they form their own little “house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa. 56:7), and together they discover the amazing power of the one Lord God. “More than anything else,” writes scholar Christine Pohl, “vulnerable strangers need connections with other people.”⁴ Time spent in small groups reminds us that we are always better together than we are apart.

Christian hospitality is all about connecting people to God and to a community of faith, in a deep and meaningful way. It is a way of life that trusts that our resources will not be depleted and that there will always be enough for all. It is an approach to life that brings people together in small groups and fights the deadly threats of depression, loneliness, and friendlessness. It is a dimension of congregational life that can be truly life-saving. In all these ways, we show the world that we want to make a place for hospitality, trusting that God will do amazing things with the gifts of respect, acceptance, and friendship that we can offer.

Relational, Not Transactional

Amazing things happen when we make a commitment to joining God’s work of hospitality, but the results are not always what we expect. Calvary Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, grew rapidly during the 1990s through the incorporation of African immigrants, but the final result was two churches, not one—a Twi-speaking congregation and an English-speaking one, meeting in separate locations. Randolph Charles arrived as the rector of the Church of the Epiphany in Washington, DC, asking how “the church could be hospitable to the rich and the poor.” The Welcome Table ministry was so successful that the number of homeless guests grew to 250 and had to be cut back in order to be manageable. Reconciliation Parish in Berlin had to rediscover its mission after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and it discerned

that God was calling it to protect the painful memory of the wall and build a Chapel of Reconciliation. As a result, the congregation is not growing, but hundreds of thousands of visitors are being spiritually fed. “There is a spiritual well in every parish,” Manfred Fischer tells me. “You have to work to find it. It comes from God’s grace.”

Christian hospitality is part of God’s call, but it does not necessarily lead to growth in church membership. Diana Butler Bass, author of *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, reminds us that true hospitality is not a recruitment strategy but is instead a core practice of the Christian faith. She tells the story of Cornerstone United Methodist Church in Naples, Florida, where members welcome strangers without judgment and treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Members of Cornerstone celebrate the “freedom here to be who we are,” and appreciate the opportunity to be “real, honest to God, real.” Without strict rules for appearance or behavior, their unity comes from being part of God’s family, and their mission rises out of the “apostolic core” of Christianity, which they find in a brief sentence in the Book of Acts: teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers (Acts 2:42).

“Although hospitality at Cornerstone is free,” writes Bass, “it is not without cost.” Being a welcoming congregation can be risky, and even dangerous. A man named Rick arrived with tattoos, addiction problems, and long braids of different colors over his head. The congregation accepted him as a person in need of God’s love, but members realize that they need to hold him accountable for his faith journey and actions, since “he continues to struggle with life issues and is in and out of jail because of his addictions and inappropriate behavior.”⁵ While no one would consider Rick to be an ideal church member, Cornerstone accepts him because he is a brother in Christ, and a sinner for whom Christ died.

Welcoming congregations see membership as relational, not transactional. Such churches want to be in a relationship with strangers because they are children of God, not because they are part of a transaction that will bring the church new money, talents, or volunteer labor. Guests are accepted, fed, and supported because they are signs of the presence of Christ, not because they will give the church a competitive advantage in the religious marketplace. Welcoming congregations know that Christian hospitality creates life-giving connections, leading to the kind of friendship which Ed Loring of the Open Door Community in Atlanta says “brings to the other what no law or revolution can do: understanding and acceptance.”⁶ When personal connections are cultivated in small groups, congregations move from being transactional to relational and begin to resemble the church of the apostles, in which “all who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). The first

followers of Christ were a small group, serving God and each other, and the most graceful and loving of his followers still seek out small groups today.

Discussion Questions

1. What opportunities exist in your congregation for older people to tell stories to younger people, so that “knowledge about how to live” is shared?
2. Can you describe an experience in a small group that provided opportunities for friendship, community-building, Bible study, or spiritual growth?
3. Rick Warren says, “God wired us in such a way that we only get well in community.” True or false? Why?
4. How is Christian hospitality a matter of life and death?
5. What is the value of being relational in the life of the church, even if it does not lead to numerical church growth?

Action Plan

Offer a five-week sermon series on Christian hospitality, covering the first five chapters of this book. Challenge the entire congregation to meet over the course of the series for small-group discussions of the topic, assuring them that they will be changed by the experience. Organize groups in the church building as well as in private homes, on Sunday mornings and at various times throughout the week. Send e-mails with suggested discussion questions to your small-group leaders along with advance copies of your sermons. At the end of the series, evaluate the experience with your small-group leaders and talk about next steps.

Preaching Suggestion

Relate the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath and how they grew in faith together in a time of drought and deprivation (1 Kgs. 17:8–16). Explore the poverty of the widow, the persistence of Elijah, and how—with the help of God—a little went a long way. Stress the importance of making a place for hospitality in our personal and congregational lives, especially in small-group meetings.

PART 2

The Fruits of Hospitality

Once the initial seeds of hospitality have been sown, congregations are able to use those lessons to welcome other people through reconciliation, outreach, and new perceptions of God. These fruits are signs that churches can grow in their ability to make peace in situations of conflict, serve a world in need, and more accurately perceive the reach of God's inclusive love and grace.

Reconciliation

A church that roots its hospitality in welcoming sites, worship, meals, and small groups will grow and bear fruit. This growth may result in a larger church membership, but usually the signs of fruitfulness are more subtle. In welcoming congregations members discover new vitality in their practice of faith and find themselves able to act in ways that are expressions of the gospel. To see how Christian hospitality bears fruit in a congregation, we should take a closer and more focused look at a congregation we just visited in chapter 5, Reconciliation Parish in Berlin, and then explore other churches that are overcoming barriers and making peace in their congregations and communities.

Recall that during the Second World War, some people in the parish supported Hitler, while others did not. The unity of the parish was barely preserved, with two clergy standing up for the Confessing Church, a movement that opposed government-sponsored efforts to align the German Protestant Church with Nazi ideology. The Gestapo kept watch on their sermons and public appearances, and in time the two were put under house arrest and transferred to remote villages in 1942 and 1944. After the war, Reconciliation Parish joined the Council of Protestant Churches in apologizing for their collective guilt during the war, saying, “We accuse ourselves of not having confessed with more courage, prayed with more faith, believed with more joy, and loved with more ardor.”¹

When the Third Reich ended, the parish was rocked again by tumultuous events of the ensuing years: the invasion of the Soviets, the division of the city by the Berlin Wall, and the church building’s destruction in 1985. A new parish house was built in West Berlin after the erection of the wall, within view of the old church, and the parish continued its ministry and mission in this location—including “prayer and debate, music and exhibitions, workshops and services.”² Through all this division and upheaval, the challenge

for the parish was reconciliation—a mission that continues since the fall of the wall and the building of the Chapel of Reconciliation.

The chapel's story speaks to the congregation's emphasis on reconciliation. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Manfred and his congregation began to talk about what they should do with the site of their old church. They realized that God had spoken and something had happened, and that they needed to create a special place to pray and to say "thank you" for the destruction of the wall. There was no other place in Germany to express this sense of gratitude, and in their discussions they came to the conclusion that the site needed to contain a chapel for reunion and reconciliation. The problem was that they had very little money. They were a poor parish in a wealthy area. The denomination was not able to help because the reunion of East Berlin and West Berlin was expensive and full of troubles. In retrospect, Manfred says, "I was lucky not to get support, because we would have built something stupid—big and modern."

The members of Reconciliation Parish then asked, "How can we do it ourselves?" They wanted to rebuild together, making the chapel as big as necessary, but as small as possible. They decided not to reconstruct the old church, but instead to create a chapel that was a seed—small and relevant. It would be new, but not electronic or high-tech; instead, it would be connected to the earth and to the church's history. Determined to create a chapel that was cheap, sustainable, and easy to maintain, the congregation started construction in the mid-1990s and completed it in the year 2000. The inner structure is made of clay walls, because earth is strong and it lasts. Although architects had recommended glass and concrete for the building, the parishioners felt that concrete bore too strong an association with the hated Berlin Wall, so they insisted on local clay. Into the clay the builders—including many students—mixed the broken stones of the old church. The outer structure is made of wooden slats, which allows the building to breathe. As you look through these slats, says Manfred, "what you see is dependent on where you stand."

Everything works by hand in the Chapel of Reconciliation, including the bells from the old church. Manfred says that it is "a seed of another life in a high-tech German city." There is prayer in the chapel every day and the reading of a biography of one of the victims of the Berlin Wall. With no heat or air conditioning, it is not a comfortable living room—instead, it is a sacred room, a room that is truly living. Singing Christmas carols about shepherds in a field takes on new meaning when you are offering your songs in an unheated chapel on a cold December night. When you worship in the chapel, you are truly in touch with nature and you get a sense of the reconciliation

that we are challenged to pursue—not only with each other but with the natural world. The relationship between people and the earth is every bit as strained today as is the relationship between human beings, one to another, and nation to nation.

The Chapel of Reconciliation is an expression of Christian hospitality, open to hundreds of thousands of visitors every year, and it bears the imprint of a group of Christians who have cultivated connections with one another and done the work of rebuilding together. They have gathered in small groups through times of unprecedented disaster and upheaval—supporting one another, sharing insights, building community, welcoming strangers, and sharing what they have. The members of Reconciliation Parish have even designed a chapel that is a metaphor for reconciliation—with its clay walls containing rubble of the ruined 1894 church, the building itself reminds visitors of the importance of bringing diverse elements together and making peace with the past. It is appropriate that this chapel stands in Berlin's Death Strip, on the foundation of a church building that was destroyed by a secular government because it points clearly to Jesus Christ, who was killed on a cross by a secular government and who continues to reconcile us to God and to one another.

But reconciliation is about relationships, not just buildings, so a significant part of the church's work has been to bring former enemies into dialogue with one another. Reconciliation Parish has hosted conversations between former members of the East German Secret Police (Stasi) and their victims, and pastor Manfred Fischer has found that "victims are keen to forgive, and willing." But first there needs to be an honest and open word, such as "I am sorry. I acted in a wrong way." He knows that in East Germany people used to be punished for speaking openly, and they are still suffering from having spoken out—they lost education and jobs that are difficult, if not impossible, to reclaim. Admitting that these people were victims is very difficult for many who did wrong. Manfred saw this same problem with the Second World War generation that did not want to discuss their history under Hitler. But there can be no reconciliation—with God or with other people—without an honest and open word. Overcoming alienation and establishing new and peaceful relationships is best done through conversation, confession, and forgiveness in a safe and hospitable Christian community—one that is grounded in the reconciling work of God. Reconciliation always begins with God since "the heart of believing in the gospel," says professor of theology Arthur Sutherland, "is the affirmation that Christians were once both strangers and enemies to God and who now have been brought into relationship with God through an act of divine hospitality."³

So what does this ministry involve? Paul offers some insights into God's work of reconciliation in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18). In a sermon for the Duke Center for Reconciliation, New Testament scholar Richard Hays says that the interesting thing about the word "reconciliation" in ordinary Greek usage is that it is not typically a religious term. "Rather, it is a word drawn from the sphere of politics; it refers to dispute resolution. So one could speak of the diplomatic reconciliation of warring nations or, in the sphere of personal relationships, the reconciliation of an estranged husband and wife." This work of reconciliation has been started by God in Christ, and Christians are now challenged to make it visible in "practices that show unity, love, mercy, forgiveness, and a self-giving grace that the world could not even dream of apart from Christ."⁴ This is a message that the highly polarized and fractured Christian community in Corinth needed to hear, that former enemies in Germany need to hear today, and that we need to hear as well.

Building Bridges

At Saddleback Church, a series of "bridge events" called Civil Forums are offered to reach the larger community and enable members to invite friends who might not otherwise come to church. On September 25, 2009, a Civil Forum on Reconciliation featured Paul Kagame, president of the Republic of Rwanda, and Yale theologian Miroslav Volf. They talked about the transformational power of reconciliation and how it reunited the people of Rwanda after its 1994 genocide. President Kagame said that he believes that the role of the government is to embrace everyone and "bring them together," while the role of the church in Rwanda's reconciliation process is to be a voice to point out when the government is wrong. He admitted, however, that during the genocide, the church and government "were almost one and the same," so the church could not distance itself from the action of the government. Volf, who lived through the Bosnian conflict and said that there was "always a deep rage" within him because of the injustice being done, said loving one's enemies is the truly Christian response in such a situation. "To forgive is an act of power. When I forgive, I'm in charge," Volf said. "I'm releasing you from the wrong." Although the United States is not experiencing genocide, Rick Warren said that stories of reconciliation are relevant because the country is hurting from division on so many issues.⁵

Promoting reconciliation is at the top of Rick's agenda—in fact, it is the first point in his P.E.A.C.E. Plan, an initiative designed to involve Christians in serving people in areas of the greatest global needs. P.E.A.C.E (short-hand for Promote reconciliation, Equip servant leaders, Assist the poor, Care for the sick, Educate the next generation) has both local and global focal points. In California, members of Saddleback participate in a Christian-Muslim picnic every year, building bridges of relationship, and both Rick and missions pastor Mike Constantz have gathered with Muslims at the end of Ramadan to break the fast together. Saddleback partners with African American churches in the city of Compton, California, to fix up houses and do work projects in communities. Bridges are being built with Hispanic pastors in Southern California, and work is being done to keep young people out of gangs and in school—in Santa Ana, the drop-out rate is 80 percent among Hispanic youths. In Rwanda, teams from Saddleback have partnered with church leaders, equipped pastors, and worked on the issue of reconciliation. “Saddleback has helped to bring unity to the Body of Christ in Rwanda,” says Mike, “the greatest unity in the past hundred years, according to a Rwandan leader.” Mike reports that the showing of the *Jesus* film—a 1979 docudrama about the life of Christ—in Rwandan prisons and communities has helped produce the fruit of forgiveness and reconciliation.

One well-known attempt at national reconciliation occurred in August 2008 when the presumptive presidential nominees, Barack Obama and John McCain, came together in a Saddleback Civil Forum on the Presidency and answered questions about their faith, leadership, and compassion. “I have to tell you up front, both of these guys are my friends,” said Rick in his introduction. “I don’t happen to agree with everything each of them teach or believe, but they both care deeply about America. They’re both patriots. And they have very different views on how America can be strengthened.

Best Practices: Building Bridges

Consider holding an event at your church that will bring two very different groups together for reconciliation.

Join with members of another faith (not just a different congregation of your own faith) to do a service project together.

Avoid openly partisan sermons or messages that demonize or mock a particular group of people or point of view.

Consider partnering with local interfaith groups to support dialogue among different religions.

In America, we've got to learn to disagree without demonizing each other and we need to restore civility. . . . We need to restore civility in our civil discourse, and that's the goal of the Saddleback Civil Forum." The challenge for such forums is to take both liberals and conservatives seriously and not write off or disparage the beliefs of either wing of the church or community. "I'm not left-wing, and I'm not right-wing," Rick often says. "I'm for the whole bird."⁶

Cosponsoring this event was a multid denominational religious group called Faith in Public Life whose Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders helped Rick devise his questions to the candidates. These religious leaders, along with the two candidates, were keenly aware that an issue such as the environment, for instance, can no longer be painted as a stereotypical liberal concern. Rick himself signed a controversial statement in February 2006, backing a major initiative to combat global warming, one that caused him to break ranks with other high-profile evangelical leaders. This action built a bridge, however, between Rick and the majority of Americans who are making creation care a priority in their spiritual and political lives. According to The Pew Forum's US Religious Landscape Survey, released in February 2008, there is widespread support for stricter environmental laws and regulations among members of evangelical churches (54 percent), mainline churches (64 percent), historically black churches (52 percent) and Catholic churches (60 percent).⁷ Concern for the earth is alive and well at Saddleback, seen most clearly in the new and very green Refinery building containing snack bars and lounge areas (see chapter 2). The Refinery was the first building in Lake Forest to receive the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environment Design) Designation award, demonstrating Saddleback's interest in "reconciliation" on a planetary scale.

New Creation

In his passage on reconciliation in 2 Corinthians, Paul says, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (5:17). Paul is proclaiming the transformation of *the world*, notes Richard Hays in his sermon on reconciliation, "Not just individuals. The frame of reference is cosmic and corporate. Paul is not just saying, 'Look at me, my sins have been forgiven, and so I'm now a new creature.' He is saying that the whole world is being made new by the cross and resurrection and that all our relationships have to be re-evaluated in light of that transformation."⁸ The fruit of reconciliation is seen in the transformation of the world around us.

What does it mean to be part of this new creation? For Paul, it includes making a constant effort to please God (v. 9), regarding no one “from a human point of view” (in Greek, regarding no one “according to the flesh,” v. 16). Those who are in Christ, and part of his new creation, are no longer trapped in an earthly existence but have been freed by Christ’s death and resurrection to see neighbors in a new light and participate in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. They walk by faith instead of sight (v. 7), and as they walk this way they can see a whole new world.

A glimpse of this new creation was seen in South Africa in the mid-1990s and was later documented in the motion picture *Invictus*. Nelson Mandela spent decades as a leading opponent of apartheid, the country’s official policy of racial segregation. In 1964 the white government had locked him up for life, but in 1990 he was released and was later elected as the nation’s first black president in 1994. In 1995, South Africa hosted the Rugby World Cup Tournament. At the time rugby was a white man’s game, and the South African team was mostly white—a white team representing a country that was eighty percent black. It also had a team symbol, a leaping gazelle called a “springbok,” that reminded most black South Africans of the country’s racist history.

What did Nelson Mandela do? He showed up at a press conference wearing a rugby jersey and cap with a springbok on it. He said, “These are our boys now. We must get behind them and support them in this tournament.” The next day, the Springbok coach took his team to the prison where Mandela had spent nearly three decades of his life behind bars. The coach said, “This is the cell where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. He was kept here for 27 years by the racist policies of our government. We tolerated his imprisonment for all those years, and yet he has backed us publicly. We can’t let him down.”

The tournament opened, and the Springboks played beyond everyone’s expectations. In fact, they made it into the final game. President Mandela was in the stands wearing a Springbok jersey. During timeout, he brought a South African children’s choir out of the stands and they led 65,000 people in the singing of a black African miners’ song. When the Springboks took the field, they were unstoppable, and they won the World Championship. And for the next 24 hours whites danced with blacks in the streets of South Africa—for the first time they saw each other as fellow countrymen, brothers and sisters in Christ.⁹ For a fleeting moment, they caught a glimpse of what life is like in the “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Welcoming congregations know that human beings have an important role to play in cultivating the fruit of reconciliation and advancing God’s will

in the world. God rarely works alone but usually through flesh-and-blood human beings like presidents, coaches, players, teachers, pastors, and church members. Jesus knew this, which is why he entered into relationships with people around him. He did not arrive like a superhero to do his saving work solo, but he counted on John the Baptist to prepare the way and on the disciples to walk with him and spread his message. In the same way, President Mandela needed the Springbok coach, the Springbok coach needed Mandela, and both of them needed a nation of blacks and whites willing to support the rugby team together. Jesus also knew that peace is not simply the absence of conflict—instead, it comes from being in a right relationship with God and with each other, even when the “other” is a stranger. When congregations do the work of reconciliation they reach across barriers of race, class, and politics to connect with people who are different from themselves because they know that God works through a diversity of gifts and perspectives. And they sense that God’s peaceful “new creation” is marked by a network of harmonious relationships, both human and divine.

Reaching Out

Hospitable congregations try to see their neighbors in a new light and serve as places of reconciliation. In September 2006, Washington National Cathedral took the bold but controversial step of inviting former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami to speak on the role that Islam, Judaism, and Christianity can play in shaping peace throughout the world. As noisy anti-Tehran protests took place across the street, he focused on the need for the three Abrahamic faiths to work together for peace and security. Then, in March 2010, the cathedral hosted a “Christian-Muslim Summit,” a gathering of Christian and Muslim leaders for a discussion of matters affecting Muslim-Christian relations and peacemaking efforts around the world. Participants included representatives of the Shi’a and Sunni Muslim traditions, as well as Catholic and Episcopalian Christians. All were leaders in interfaith peacemaking efforts and were committed to the role of the faith community in global reconciliation.

But congregations do not have to be nationally prominent in order to reach out to other faiths. Groups of local congregations can work together for peace. For example, the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington (IFC) is an organization of eleven faith communities that hosts religious dignitaries and international visitors. After Pope Benedict XVI angered Muslims in September 2006 with a speech that quoted a fourteenth-century Byzantine Christian emperor’s perspective on Islamic holy war, the IFC brought

together Muslim leaders and the pope's representative. They worked to fix the damage done to Catholic-Muslim relations by posting the pope's apology on several Muslim Web sites and delivering a message to the pope via his representative. It may not have removed the slight from the minds of Muslims, but it helped the healing to begin. "Building relationships and understanding really changes things," Clark Lobenstine, executive director of the IFC told me in March 2007. "Studies have shown that people who know a Muslim are less likely to be in favor of restricting their civil rights."¹⁰ Across the country, other groups are holding Catholic-Muslim dialogues on spirituality, theology, and interfaith marriage.

Such discussions of difficult issues must be structured carefully so that people will be drawn together instead of polarized. Gerry Creedon, the pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Arlington, Virginia, and chairman of the Diocesan Peace and Justice Commission, has devised an effective approach for talking openly about divisive subjects. Before the outbreak of the Iraq war he developed a one-day program for his parishioners to talk and reflect on the church's analysis of war, which he conducted on three separate occasions to groups numbering between thirty and sixty participants. After prayer, Gerry asked the participants to offer their reasons for either supporting or opposing military action in Iraq. He then gave a presentation on Catholic teaching on war and peace, including both just-war tradition and the older tradition of nonviolence. The program ended with a clear biblical challenge to work for peace, but it took no political stand. Instead, it provided parishioners with an opportunity to engage in dialogue and listen to the voice of the Catholic tradition.

This program, which Gerry led three times and distributed to seventy parishes in the diocese, worked because the focus was on parishioners listening to one another instead of reacting to one another. Thus, a full analysis of the Iraq issue came out of the contributions of the participants themselves. Dialogue is such an important part of the educational process because it draws people into an issue in a way that the simple proclamation of truths never can. It also reduces the resistance and defensiveness most people feel when presented with one side of an issue without an opportunity to reply.¹¹ "The process of dialogue and conversation is so important," says Gerry, looking back into history and noting that Abraham Lincoln took the bold step of including political rivals in his cabinet. He also observes that as president, Nelson Mandela maintained a connection with the Afrikaner community in South Africa even though he had reason to be vindictive toward it. These are healing actions, says Creedon, but "we tend to refuse to be in conversation with our opponents."

Dialogue is important to peacemaking, but so is the witness of a single group of Christians. It would be hard to find a more striking image of religion-inspired reconciliation than what took place in 2006 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, when a group of Amish men and women took a stand for forgiveness after a gunman slaughtered five young girls at an Amish schoolhouse. Most impressive about the Amish response to the schoolhouse murders was the way that these peace-loving Christians reached out with support to the gunman's widow and children. "Such exemplary acts of witness stir the imaginations of the larger world," observes L. Gregory Jones of Duke Divinity School and author of *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*. "We need our imagination to be set on fire by stories that show that what we think is impossible or unrealistic is indeed possible—if we have the courage to cultivate habits of reconciliation." These habits, of course, take time to develop. The Amish were able to forgive quickly and fully because they had been formed all their lives in a spiritual tradition that focused on cultivating the fruit of reconciliation, a very demanding spiritual practice.

I believe that many people today have lost the courage of their convictions and are more comfortable debating internal church issues than taking a risk for reconciliation in the world around us. Instead of arguing endlessly about human sexuality, for example, our Christian denominations ought to be focusing on dialogue with other faiths and reaching out to establish new and peaceful relationships. In a world so bloodied by religious conflict, empathetic conversation might not appear to be a powerful weapon, but it remains the best tool for settling disputes, overcoming divisions and re-establishing relationships—in other words, doing the work of reconciliation. Now, more than ever, dialogue should be a central spiritual practice for hospitable congregations and all who take their religion seriously.¹²

Breaking Bread Together

Although theology tends to divide people and our nation is still highly segregated on Sunday mornings, we saw in chapter 4 that hospitable churches have discovered that a shared meal can unite people and build relationships across generational or socioeconomic divides. At FPC, we make a point of having our youths join the senior citizens of the Golden Age Ministry for their annual afternoon of board games, and then we invite the senior citizens to attend the variety show sponsored by the youths. In the 1990s, at multi-cultural Calvary Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, the greatest

experiences of peace and harmony were found at the international potluck dinners that would follow worship from time to time, featuring the tastiest dishes from the American South and Ghana, West Africa—perhaps the best path to reconciliation is through the stomach! An enormous amount of good can come out of shared meals in churches, in which seniors sit at tables with teenagers, blacks with whites, gays with straights, homeowners with the homeless, and immigrants with native-born Americans.

Several years ago the First Christian Church of Falls Church, Virginia, caught sight of a vision to be a “Meetinghouse” in its culturally and economically diverse neighborhood outside Washington, DC. This vision has become their members’ foundation for ministry, with deep roots in their history and theology as Disciples of Christ—they are committed to being a Meetinghouse with “no creed but Christ.” This vision has attracted new members and has helped to expand their Safe Haven program, the day shelter for the homeless that we learned about in chapter 4. Senior Minister Kathleen Kline Chesson tells me that relationships have developed between church members and the homeless and that they are learning from each other.¹³ They are finding that table fellowship is getting them to a place that classroom discussions cannot—to true relationship.

At First Christian Church hospitality is also doing the work of reconciliation. One rainy day, a homeless man, uninvited and dripping wet, shuffled into an elegant reception being held at the church after the funeral of a long-time member. His presence could have been considered a distraction or an annoyance, with swift action being taken to escort him out of the building until the Safe Haven program resumed its operations. But the pastor greeted him and then smiled as three other members of the congregation rushed up to welcome the man, making sure that he quickly had a plate of food. This hospitable response was certainly based on the personal bonds that had developed through Safe Haven, and it illustrates how shared meals can reconcile people of radically different backgrounds, bringing them into God’s new creation, where suddenly and surprisingly “we regard no one from a human point of view” (2 Cor. 5:6).

If reconciliation is, in the words of New Testament scholar Richard Hays, “overcoming alienation and establishing new and peaceful relationships,” there is a beautiful illustration to be found in The Welcome Table at the Church of the Epiphany in Washington, DC. Diana Butler Bass reports that when this program started there was a worship service, breakfast, and small-group Bible study—but no morning offering. The members of Epiphany felt that it would be inappropriate to ask homeless guests to contribute. But the homeless insisted that the service should include a traditional offering

because they wanted to be like the Epiphany members who are asked to contribute and support the church. One of the Epiphany ushers was deeply moved by his first experience of ushering at the homeless service and recalled, “As the plate passed down the rows, I watched poor people turn their pockets inside out and throw loose change and crumpled dollars in the offering. I almost cried. I learned more about giving that morning than in a thousand sermons.”¹⁴

When the fruit of true reconciliation ripens, people see each other in a new light and recognize that everyone has an important role to play in a world made new by Christ’s death and resurrection. Hosts discover that they can learn from guests, and guests find that they are more than passive recipients in the experience of hospitality. In fact, the roles of guest and host can become blurred or even reversed, just as when Jesus enters a house as a guest of two disciples on the road to Emmaus and then quickly turns into their host in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:13–35). Since fresh relationships with God and with each other are at the heart of Christian reconciliation we should never be surprised when an act of hospitality teaches us something new about ourselves, our God, and the people around us.

Honest conversation, around tables and in discussion groups, is one of the keys to doing the work of reconciliation in our broken world. On campuses across the United States the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship is trying to become more racially and ethnically inclusive, stressing racial reconciliation in large-group meetings for praise and worship, small-group Bible studies, and summer camps for leader training. Their focus is not on political correctness but on the Bible: leaders point to Jesus’ prayer in John 17 that his followers would all be one, and to the description in Ephesians 2 of Christ breaking down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile. “I did an eight-year study of Habakkuk,” said Scott Wilson, director of communications, “and it’s pretty hard to read the minor prophets without hearing God’s passion for justice.” But InterVarsity, like many denominations, is a geographically dispersed and bottom-up organization, one that will not change by issuing an order from above. Racial reconciliation is now part of the training for campus staff, with the goal that it will become part of ongoing small-group meetings. The objective, according to Paul Fuller, an InterVarsity vice president and director of multiethnic ministries, is “to create witnessing communities on campus that are growing in love for every ethnicity.”¹⁵

Welcoming congregations that want to enjoy the fruit of reconciliation can open themselves for community discussions, as Reconciliation Parish

has done in Berlin. They can build bridges with outsiders as Saddleback Church has done with its Civil Forums, Christian-Muslim picnics, and work with African American and Hispanic pastors. Hospitable churches can join an interfaith group and organize a dialogue about peacemaking in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. They can host meals for the homeless in the style of First Christian Church and Church of the Epiphany or build racial reconciliation into small-group discussions as the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship has done. All these approaches will help church members to see neighbors in a new light, participate in Christ's ministry of reconciliation, and catch a glimpse of the new creation that has been inaugurated by the cross and resurrection. Reconciliation Parish should not be a name attached only to a congregation in Berlin—instead, it should describe every church that is engaged in ministries of hospitality.

Discussion Questions

1. Where are there opportunities in your church and community to connect with people different than yourself?
2. What approaches to conflict resolution exist in your congregation? How could you create gatherings for people to speak honestly and admit that they have behaved badly?
3. Where do bridges need to be built between estranged groups in your church and community? What would a "bridge event" look like, and how could it lead to reconciliation?
4. What happens when small groups gather for dialogue and participants focus on listening to one another instead of reacting to each other?
5. How is it true that the best path to reconciliation is through the stomach? What are the limits to this approach?

Action Plan

In your community, identify a group from a different faith or culture with which you feel the need for reconciliation. This could be a group of Muslims from a local mosque or a congregation of Christian immigrants who speak a different language. Invite them to a dialogue at your church on the topic of marriage or parenting (avoid theological or political issues, at least at first). Provide refreshments and translators if necessary. Focus on listening to each other and look for ways to build bridges.

Preaching Suggestion

Offer a sermon on Paul's conviction that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self and giving us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:16–21). Explore the fruit of reconciliation that was produced by the work of God in Jesus, and how we might continue Christ's ministry of reconciliation. Suggest ways that your church might open itself for community discussions, build bridges with outsiders, organize dialogues, host meals for the homeless, or focus on racial reconciliation in small-group discussions.

Outreach

After visiting the Iona Community in August 2009, I traveled with my family to Edinburgh for the Fringe, the largest arts festival in the world. It started in 1947, when six Scottish and two English theater companies showed up at The Edinburgh Festival uninvited and decided to fend for themselves. The next year, their gate crashing was described as “the fringe of the official festival,” and the Fringe was born. Sixty years later, over two thousand shows are being offered in venues throughout the city, from pubs to concert halls. There are children’s shows, comedy, dance and physical theater, exhibitions, music concerts, musicals, opera, and plays. Some events are free of charge, and most cost between five and ten British pounds (\$8.25–\$16.50). The most expensive tickets I purchased were for New Zealand comedian Rhys Darby, which were fifteen pounds. Clearly, this is an entertainment bargain.

Part of the fun is walking the Royal Mile through the heart of Edinburgh and being approached by young men and women who are anxious to talk about their shows, pass out flyers, and encourage people to attend. These performers are enthusiastic, energetic, and earnest—they believe in what they are doing and are effective evangelists for their programs. Although they may not attract more than one person in fifty on the streets of Edinburgh, their passion is palpable. And it is effective if the performers are persistent; I went to shows every day, and my son Sam and I each saw about twenty over the course of the week. As a pastor, I desire the excitement and authenticity of these performers for myself and for my congregation as well.

So what would it mean for ministers and church members to do outreach with this kind of commitment, hope, and hunger? I am not suggesting that we pass out flyers on the street, but instead approach friends and neighbors with real passion, inviting them to join small-group Bible studies in our homes, help with community gardens at church, and take part in mission projects such as ESL classes and hypothermia sheltering for the homeless.

The young performers at the Fringe are completely invested in what they are doing, whether it is a hip-hop version of *Macbeth* or a musical presentation of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. When they speak to you, you want to check out their shows, and not just because the performers are young, attractive, and talented. It is because they have worked hard to develop their programs and are passionate about what they are doing.

I saw no awful performances through my week at the Fringe, although the biggest disappointment—a musical version of *The A-Team*—had one of the largest crowds. This reminds me that popularity is not necessarily a sign of quality, in either theaters or churches. If welcoming congregations work hard to develop new outreach ministries, they need to realize that these programs can do tremendous good for hosts and guests, even if they do not draw a multitude. The level of talent definitely varied from the free Fringe shows to the headline performances, but every performer seemed to bring his or her best, regardless of audience size. That, too, is a good lesson for me and

my fellow church leaders, easily discouraged when the reality of a program does not match our expectations. Regardless of how successful we are, God wants us to bring our full passion and energy to the task before us.

Another lesson from the Fringe is that creativity is celebrated, and everyone seems to appreciate innovation. Actors lie down on the sidewalk to draw attention to their shows; dancers showcase their moves in portable stages set up along the Royal Mile; three “gaga heads” from Tokyo stand on traffic

Best Practices: Don't Curb Your Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is viral—if your church members show it, others will catch it.

Church members should be prepared to explain to strangers about what makes their congregation special.

Be creative about finding ways to reach out to your community—and talk about those ministries.

barriers in full body tights to advertise (you guessed it) *The Body Tights Man Show*. These performers walk the streets in outrageous costumes, selling themselves—in a good way—because they believe in what they are doing. One night, Sam and I were standing in line for a show and were approached by the songwriter for *Axis of Awesome*, a rock-comedy group, reminiscent of *Spinal Tap*. He gave us the pitch for his show, and we said that we already had tickets, which made both him and us feel good. The show turned out to be, well, awesome.

Since outreach is the second fruit of hospitality, welcoming congregations should be passionate about programs designed to reach and serve the world around them. Creativity will certainly catch the attention of the community and make connections with people who need to participate in these outreach activities, either as hosts or guests. As in all aspects of hospitality, there is no substitute for a personal appeal, like the performers handing out flyers along the Royal Mile or the songwriter for *Axis of Awesome* having conversations with people in a ticket line. With hard work and enthusiasm church members can develop programs that not only welcome and include people but serve a world in need. The final judgment of Scripture—a story more dramatic than any show at the Fringe—ends with the revelation that when we serve a hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, or imprisoned stranger, we are really serving Jesus (Matt. 25:31–40).

Home-Based Outreach

At Saddleback, thousands of small-group Bible studies meet in the homes of church members every week, a practice that began when the church did not own a building. But even though Saddleback now has a large campus with numerous buildings, homes are still used for small-group meetings because Rick Warren is convinced that there are four benefits to using private homes: (1) They are infinitely expandable (homes are everywhere); (2) They are unlimited geographically (the congregation can minister to a wider area); (3) They are demonstrations of good stewardship (the church is using buildings that other people pay for, releasing more money for ministry); and (4) They facilitate closer relationships (people are more relaxed in home settings). Rick is convinced that home-based small groups provide a personal touch, especially in a crisis, and notes that “at Saddleback we like to say that the whole church is like a large ship, and the small groups are the lifeboats.”¹

It can be easier to invite friends into your home than into your church, so home-based outreach is an excellent place to do hospitality. As a Los Angeles pastor says, “The front door of the home is the side door of the church.”² In Raleigh, North Carolina, the First Assembly of God has a number of home-based small groups in the city of Raleigh, but also in Cary, Clayton, Durham, and Youngsville, expanding the ministry of the church through several counties. The focal points of these groups range from singles to parenting to Bible study to current events, with one offered in Spanish and another taking place online, via e-mail and blogs.³ A church member reaching out to an unchurched

friend would probably find it easier to extend an invitation to participate in one of these home-based groups than in a service at the main church.

Members of the Iona community have long felt that the heart of their ministry beats in the family groups that meet in their homes, far from the Isle of Iona. These regional groups meet once a month, for intercessory prayer, Bible study, discussion of contemporary issues through the lens of Scripture, and a closing Communion or *agape* feast. These gatherings provide a foundation for outreach to the community, usually around issues of social justice; some members are befriending young offenders in the penal system, and others are working on HIV/AIDS education. “Members’ involvement varies according to the area they live in and their individual circumstances,” says the Iona Community Web site, “but it is clear that across the community there is an unwavering commitment to peace and justice, reflected in many types of activity, from quiet peacemaking in our neighborhoods and families, to political lobbying and nonviolent opposition to weapons of mass destruction.”⁴

People who open their homes to guests are going to do a much better job of opening their churches to strangers, since they have developed skills for welcoming people in their personal lives. Extending an invitation, setting up an appropriate site, preparing food and drink, and planning a program at home are all aspects of home-based hospitality that translate very well into church-based hospitality. They also reflect the will of God for us to go beyond our comfortable gatherings of friends and like-minded neighbors, and extend invitations to those who are different from us. According to the prophet Isaiah, “Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered” (56:8). This gathering is God’s agenda, in both the Old Testament and the New. In fact, writes scholar Christine Pohl, “Early Christian writers claimed that transcending social and ethnic differences by sharing meals, homes, and worship with persons of different backgrounds was a proof of the truth of the Christian faith.”⁵ Showing the enthusiasm and creativity of the performers at the Fringe in Edinburgh, our challenge is to reach out to people around us with the hospitality of God and the truth of the Christian faith.

Outward-Focused Hospitality

Unfortunately, American churches tend to turn inward instead of outward, putting huge amounts of time, energy, and money into self-preservation. This begins with maintenance of church buildings, of course, but it goes

far beyond patching the roof and replacing the carpeting. Self-preservation includes the passing of particular congregational traditions, worship styles, and administrative practices from one generation to the next. While some of this is necessary, I believe it is ultimately self-defeating for a church to take such a self-centered stance. An inward focus can lead to a whole range of problems, from inhospitality in worship services to the improper handling of clergy sexual abuse, in Protestant as well as Catholic churches.

Jesus, by contrast, was never self-centered or concerned about self-preservation. Instead, his focus was always outward. He was always seeking the lost. In Luke 15, the Pharisees and the scribes grumble about Jesus and say, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (v. 2). They can’t get beyond their inward focus, one that attempts to preserve the purity of the religious community by excluding tax collectors and sinners from table fellowship. But Jesus practices outward-focused hospitality by looking first to the needs of the larger community and elevating religious mission above institutional maintenance. “Which of you,” he asks, “having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” Even the Pharisees and scribes have to admit that yes, that’s what they would do. “When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices,” Jesus points out. And furthermore, the good shepherd calls together his friends and throws a party, for he has found the sheep that was lost. Jesus concludes this parable by saying that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (vv. 4–7).

Seeking the lost through outward-focused hospitality is what Jesus is all about. And that’s what welcoming congregations should be about as well. The Lamb Center, a day shelter for the homeless in Fairfax, Virginia, is committed to going after the ones who are lost, finding them, and then sharing the joy that is being felt in heaven. Homeless men and women are welcomed into the center for Bible study, worship, personal and vocational counseling, and a hot lunch—as well as the opportunity to take a shower, get their clothes washed, and use telephones to search for a job. Seventy-five partner churches support the Christ-centered ministry of the Lamb Center with financial and volunteer help and are grateful that the center helps to keep their focus outward, not inward; toward Christian mission, not self-preservation. In a wonderful and surprising way, this outward focus has an internal advantage: it results in more vital church communities. People are attracted to congregations that put faith into action and radiate excitement about making a difference in the world. Jesus said that those who lose their life for his sake will save it, and he was absolutely right. An outward focus not only benefits the

community but makes congregations more lively and attractive. In seeking the lost, we find ourselves.

I discovered this to be true on a trip I took to Brazil in March 2002. In the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil, visions for church ministry always arise out of the needs of the community. Soccer teams are organized for children, dinners are held for neighborhood families, and milk programs are created for the poor. Since violence, improper housing, bad sanitation, and substandard schooling are facts of life for many Brazilians, especially in urban areas, every church is challenged to take on a social project. One has a dental clinic in its church building, while another delivers baskets of beans and rice to poor families and hosts potluck suppers twice a year. One man, attending a supper in the Sertão region of northeastern Brazil, made the comment, “I’ve never been so happy without drinking.” In São Paulo, the Rev. Wanderley de Mattos and his Vida Nova (New Life) Independent Presbyterian Church have started a creative ministry for children from a nearby slum. Every Saturday morning, up to seventy neighborhood kids gather for breakfast, the singing of contemporary Christian music, and a Bible class. The church hopes the project will help keep these at-risk children away from the dangers of drugs and violence. For many of these kids, the church becomes a place of light and joy in a city of darkness and despair.

What really opened my eyes and amazed me, however, was how the Brazilian focus on mission has actually improved the culture of the church’s life. At a Sunday evening worship service in the city of Natal, the church was packed and over half the worshipers were young people—quite a contrast to a typical American church. Youths wore T-shirts with the message “Jesus:

Best Practices: Outreach

It is often easier to invite people to your home than to your church, making home-based outreach an excellent way to practice hospitality.

As a church, be sure you are expending as many resources toward outreach as you are toward preserving your building, your traditions, or your administration.

Plan your outreach based on the actual needs of *your* neighborhood and community, not just on what other congregations are doing.

Don’t feel you have to reinvent the wheel. One way that churches can practice outreach is by hosting meetings of established organizations such as AA that provide the ministry but need institutional support and a safe place to hold meetings.

He makes me happy” and offered rousing pieces of inspirational music, complete with choreography. A young adult praise band led the congregation in loud and lively contemporary songs. Then a teenage girl challenged the congregation by saying “many young people are turning to drugs because we haven’t gone out to tell them the saving love of Jesus.” And the preacher, Sherron George, an American mission worker, reminded the congregation that the church is the church only when it exists for others.

The church is the church only when it exists for others. When it seeks the lost. When it looks outward, instead of inward. When it welcomes sinners and eats with them. When it sees its challenge as mission, instead of self-preservation. When it focuses not just on the soul but on the needs of the whole person. When its Christian hospitality produces the fruit of outreach. “We can and must help the needy, even though we are so busy in our churches,” says Pastor Jango Miranda, the team coordinator of a mission project in the Sertão region. He is right: reaching out is an essential aspect of Christian ministry and an attractive one as well. People are naturally going to be drawn to a missionary church, one that works from the walls of the church outward.⁶

Church-Based Outreach

Hospitable churches are using their facilities to serve a world in need by offering twelve-step programs, ESL classes, community gardens, and hypothermia programs for the homeless. Across the country, congregations make space available for twelve-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, and other groups for people who want to stay sober and help others achieve sobriety. This is a quiet ministry of hospitality, one that is rarely publicized because of the need to protect the anonymity of people struggling with addiction, but it is a strong sign of a welcoming congregation’s desire to support healing work. Churches that offer ESL classes want to help newcomers to the United States become proficient in English and include them in a community of faith. Riverchase United Methodist Church in Hoover, Alabama, is preparing to expand its facility to include new classrooms, a student worship center, and a computer lab for ESL classes. Senior pastor Jim Savage links much of Riverchase’s growth to the church’s three Hispanic worship services on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.⁷

At Vienna Presbyterian Church in Vienna, Virginia, a public school teacher and church member named Emelie Parker offers a “Friendship Class” for the

intellectually disabled and mentally challenged. The class was started for a few children with Down Syndrome and has grown to include twenty-eight students with various disabilities. To be hospitable to these students, the class is handicap accessible and near a bathroom. Chairs are set up in a square, so that students and teachers can see each other, and the format of the class always includes the sharing of good news and bad news, a Bible study based on the Sunday sermon, and a closing prayer. Consistency is important. The class has grown because students bring their friends and because the group has done its own outreach to the community by participating in walks to fight world hunger.

In the battle against hunger, community gardens on church grounds provide opportunities for church members and neighbors to work in the soil, side by side, and to grow food for the needy. In Billings, Montana, the community garden of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church is described as “a place not only to grow food but to grow relationships.” Members of the church see the garden as a place of hospitality, where neighbors are welcome to plant seeds for vegetables as well as “new seeds for their personal growth.” Since the church has a mission to feed the hungry, all gardeners are asked to donate ten percent of what they grow to a mission organization, a service organization, or a person in need.⁸

Hospitable churches are also distributing goods and making connections with needy neighbors. In Burke, Virginia, St. Stephen’s United Methodist Church reaches out on the fourth Saturday of every month, distributing clothing, children’s books, toys, baby items, food, and diapers to those who are in need. This program is part of a larger outreach program of the United Methodist Church called “Grace Ministries,” involving churches in six Northern Virginia communities. Not only are individuals and families being assisted, but relationships are developing. One recipient said, “Grace Ministries meant a lot to me because there have been many times when I had nothing.” She is now a volunteer in the program.⁹

Living Literally

When we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and welcome the stranger, we are taking the Bible literally. But what would it be like to live by every rule in the Bible for an entire year? A journalist named A. J. Jacobs attempted to do it, and he wrote a book called *The Year of Living Biblically*. His goal was to take the Bible literally, do what it says, and see how it affected him.

He started off as an agnostic, and after a year of living literally he now calls himself a “reverent agnostic.” He started by reading the Bible for four straight weeks, five hours a day, and compiling a list of “every rule, every guideline, every suggestion, every nugget of advice” he found in both the Old and New Testaments.¹⁰ When he finished, he had a list that ran for seventy-two pages with more than seven hundred rules. A. J. saw that many of the rules would be good for him, including things like telling the truth, not coveting, not stealing, and loving neighbors. But he also found rules that are just plain illegal today, like killing magicians and sacrificing oxen. (Well, maybe the last one is okay if you call it “grilling.”)

Trying to live as literally as possible, A. J. grew his beard and hair to the point that he looked like Moses, Abraham, or the Unabomber, depending on your point of view. Following Ecclesiastes, he dressed all in white (9:8); in accordance with Leviticus, he took care not to wear any clothing of mixed fibers (19:19); he let himself watch TV, but he avoided turning it on so he couldn’t be accused of *making* a graven image. He “stoned” an adulterer in the park, but since the Bible doesn’t specify how big the stones have to be, he just tossed pebbles at an adulterer on a park bench. He didn’t kill the man, he just annoyed him. A. J. tried to obey all the laws of the Bible, but he made an interesting discovery: you cannot avoid picking and choosing. Every one of us is, to some extent, a “cafeteria Christian,” making choices from the Bible’s spiritual salad bar. Even people who say they are biblical literalists have to ignore *some* of the Bible’s regulations. Otherwise, for example, a fan of the Tennessee Titans would get in trouble for breaking Exodus 23:13, “Do not invoke the names of other gods.”¹¹

So what are we supposed to do? For A. J., the most important lesson is that there is nothing wrong with choosing. “Cafeterias aren’t bad,” he writes. “I’ve had some great meals at cafeterias. . . . The key is in choosing the right dishes. You need to pick the nurturing ones (compassion), the healthy ones (love thy neighbor), not the bitter ones.”¹² This advice is certainly in line with the teaching of Jesus, who encourages us in Matthew 10 to receive visitors with hospitality—regardless of whether they are significant people, such as prophets, or the less significant people that Jesus calls “little ones” (v. 42). The reason that this sharing of hospitality is so important is that there is an unbreakable bond between a master and his followers, between Jesus the master and those of us who follow him. Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (v. 40). The connection is drawn not only from us to Jesus (“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me”) but also

from Jesus back to God (“whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”). So living literally as a follower of Jesus is really not focused on obeying certain rules and regulations, but instead on living in such a way that we remain connected to Jesus and to God.

Jesus fleshes out this teaching with a series of three examples: Welcoming a “prophet,” welcoming a “righteous person,” and welcoming “one of these little ones.” In the first century, these examples encouraged the virtue of hospitality among the followers of Jesus. The categories of prophets and righteous persons would seem to suggest hospitality toward other believers, but the category of “little ones” is less clear. Perhaps it refers to what we would consider “ordinary Christians,” so that the series of examples would have a kind of descending order, from the prophet to the righteous person to the everyday ordinary Christian. Or maybe the “little ones” are actual children (Matt. 18:6) or people who can become lost sheep (Matt. 18:10–14). One of the problems of taking the Bible completely literally is that we can become embroiled in debates about the exact meaning of particular words.

I think it is better to take the Bible seriously, not literally. If we do, we get the clear message that Jesus is encouraging hospitality among his followers, regardless of who the “little ones” are. Jesus is encouraging us to welcome all people, and he is promising that if we do this, we will receive a reward. In fact, “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward” (Matt. 10:42). Practicing hospitality does not require heroics; giving a simple cup of cold water on a hot day will do the trick. The significance of a cup of cold water is that it is a drink that is not prepared in any special way—it is not heated, mixed, or fermented, but is simply poured from the household supply. Water is something that American Christians have in abundance, but it can be a matter of life and death to a hot, stranded traveler. The point is that giving a cup of water is easy for us to do, but it can make a huge difference to another person, and it leads to a heavenly reward.

Hospitality is one of the good dishes that we are supposed to pick from our Christian cafeteria. It is nurturing and healthy, and it shows love and compassion. When we practice hospitality, we share the good things we have with others, whether it is a cup of cold water, a word of encouragement, or an invitation to join an activity that is important to us. We can be hospitable in church, welcoming visitors and finding out about their interests. We can be hospitable in the workplace, showing interest in new employees and acting as a mentor to those who are younger than ourselves. We can be hospitable in the community, delivering meals to low-income neighbors in their homes

and singing karaoke at a homeless shelter, or sponsoring interfaith book discussions and making a connection with our non-Christian neighbors.

Hospitality does not involve heroics. Instead, it is all about offering what we have to people who are in need. When hospitality produces the fruit of outreach, we make a connection between ourselves and people around us, and we strengthen the bond that exists between each of us, Jesus, and God. Hospitality is a good dish in the spiritual cafeteria, and serving it to our neighbors is how we make our strongest connection with Jesus. We've seen that in the great judgment of Matthew 25, Jesus says that we are helping him whenever we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner. Although we may not be aware that Jesus is present in the lives of these needy neighbors, Jesus promises, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (vv. 31–40). In the end, this type of biblical hospitality is good for us and for our neighbors as well.

A. J. Jacobs says that his year of living literally changed him in ways both big and small. In an interview he says, "There's a lot about gratefulness in the Bible, and I would say I'm more thankful. I focus on the hundred little things that go right in a day, instead of the three or four things that go wrong. . . . I like seeing my life as a series of responsibilities. It's sort of, 'Ask not what God can do for you, ask what you can do for God.'"¹³ That's a wonderful way to live, and it aligns closely with hospitable outreach to people in need. So be grateful. Share what you have. Take responsibility for feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoner. In all these attitudes and actions, we are being good hosts, asking not what God can do for us, but what we can do for God.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is home-based hospitality an excellent place to do outreach?
2. What are some ways that your church might elevate religious mission above institutional maintenance and practice outward-focused hospitality?
3. How is your church using its building to serve a world in need? What more could it do in the area of outreach?
4. What would it mean to show hospitality in the following areas: (1) home; (2) church; (3) workplace; (4) community?
5. In what ways does the practice of hospitality to outsiders lead to a stronger connection to Jesus and to God?

Action Plan

Gather a group of church members to discuss what the fruit of outreach should look like in your particular location and theological tradition. Realize that you cannot do everything. Choose three things that you would like to do in the next year. Pick a project that will challenge members to invite people to something that they are passionate about. Devise a program that will include home-based groups. Plan an outreach effort that will serve the world around you in a new way and help you to make connections with your needy neighbors. Establish an outreach program that will involve gathering members and guests around tables for food and conversation.

Preaching Suggestion

Announce the judgment of Jesus that when you serve one of the least of his brothers and sisters, you are really serving him (Matt. 25:31–46). Explore where Christ is found in your community and why we find it so difficult to see him and serve him. Challenge your congregation to go beyond charitable work to a place of hospitable outreach, where relationships are developed and Christ is honored and received.

Perceptions

When I was pastor of a Presbyterian church in the 1990s, I struggled with a number of older white members after I expressed excitement about the growth of the church through the incorporation of African immigrants. I was feeling very positive about the congregation's growing racial-ethnic diversity, while these members were experiencing a tremendous sense of loss—the church that had felt so pure and comfortable to them and their families was rapidly changing into something that might no longer feel like their spiritual home. My hunch was that developing personal relationships would be the secret to managing this balancing act between diversity and purity, and I hoped that over time some friendships would begin as people of different ages and cultures rubbed elbows during worship, international potlucks, committee meetings, and workdays. In fact, many important bonds did develop, especially as multicultural teams worked together to host weekly coffee hours after worship. Members discovered that the church could be a home to a wide variety of people, old and new, native-born and immigrant. One day, I was deeply touched as I saw one of our elders, a retiree named Alvin Anderson, walk forward at a meeting of National Capital Presbytery and publicly embrace Stephen Nkansah, a Ghanaian parishioner who had become a candidate for ordained ministry.¹

The final fruit of hospitality is a new perception of God's inclusive love, gained through the discovery that barriers can be overcome and strangers can become friends. The overarching narrative of the Bible is a story of ever-increasing inclusiveness, beginning with the life-saving assistance that Rahab of Jericho gave to two Israelite spies (Josh. 2), and the marriage of Boaz of Bethlehem to a Moabite woman named Ruth (Ruth 1–4). It continues with God's call for barriers to fall in the religious community and for people of faith to be part of "a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isa. 56:7). This movement only accelerates when Jesus begins his gracious and loving

ministry, when Paul takes the gospel to the Gentiles, and when the Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with a group of unclean Gentiles “and not to make a distinction between them and us” (Acts 11:12). At each point in biblical history, the religious tradition called for exclusion and purity, but leaders of the faith community discovered that God’s will was inclusion and diversity. This moved the community of faith ever closer to the vision of the book of Revelation, in which there is “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages, standing before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands” (Rev. 7:9). Looking at the grand sweep of the biblical story, theologian Letty Russell observes that “God’s intention would seem to be, not to eliminate difference, but to make it possible to communicate across differences of language, culture, and social location.”²

This movement toward inclusion and diversity is not a smooth progression, however, and the traditions of exclusion and purity always remain strong. Prior to entering the promised land, Moses tells the Israelites, “But as for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them . . . just as the LORD your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God” (Deut. 20:16–18). This concern for purity is present when the Israelites are receiving help from Rahab of Jericho; although she and her family are spared, the city of Jericho is “devoted to the LORD for destruction” and the Israelites destroy “by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys” (Josh. 6:17, 21).

In the New Testament book of Acts, the apostles and circumcised believers—Christians with Jewish backgrounds—are shocked that residents of the Greek world known as Gentiles are accepting the word of God, since the Jews have always had a unique relationship with the Lord. Some go so far as to criticize Peter for reaching out to Gentiles and breaking bread with them, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (Acts 11:1–3). Excluding Gentiles and maintaining purity at the table is a strong tradition in the first days of Christianity, making it truly surprising that Peter is able to overcome the religious prejudices of his tradition and learn a wholly different, radically open way of living. Peter tells the circumcised believers that his transformation began when God gave him a vision of unclean animals and when a voice said to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 11:4–10). The discovery that God can turn something from unclean to clean is at the heart of the movement from purity to diversity,

and makes possible the inclusion of people who have been excluded from the community of faith.

Today, divisions still exist between conservatives and liberals, blacks and whites, immigrants and native-born Americans, straights and LGBTs (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender). Churches continue to struggle to find ways to communicate across barriers of race, culture, class, and generation, as well as to make worship and church programs accessible to people with physical handicaps and intellectual disabilities.³ Although each of these categories has a unique set of challenges, the first step in building an inclusive Christian community is always hospitality. Communicating across differences begins when people sit down together at the same table, share a meal, and develop new perceptions of each other. It continues as people come together in small groups for spiritual formation and the deepening of personal relationships. It bears fruit as they do the work of reconciliation and put time into shared outreach efforts, and it ripens fully when they gather at the Lord's Supper and suddenly discover—like the disciples on the walk to Emmaus—that the Risen Lord is in their midst (Luke 24:30–31). “Christian hospitality is not bourgeois civility in which insiders welcome outsiders,” notes Joseph Small, director of theology, worship, and education for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). “Christian hospitality is exercised when all are insiders, welcoming one another in their God-given diversity.”⁴ An inclusive community is created when people communicate across differences and begin to perceive that “all are insiders”—brothers and sisters in the household of God.

Best Practices: Inclusiveness

Don't judge. Just don't.

Remember the Bible's gradual unfolding of God's “chosen people” to include first some Israelites, then all Israelites, and then (under Jesus) all people, including those on the margins.

Be sensitive as you balance the tension of exclusivity vs. diversity, staying true to the Christian witness while also opening your congregation to all people.

The Challenge of Inclusiveness

At a September 2009 membership class at Saddleback Church, the pastor of membership—dressed in the California casual uniform of shorts, flip-flops, and sport shirt—said that the class was designed to help people decide

whether they wanted to become part of the Saddleback family. Held in a large tent for about 100 people, it included a presentation on God's purposes for our lives, a shared meal, and a session on the church's beliefs, methodology, and history. "What's most important," he stressed, "is that you join a church somewhere. Other churches are our friends, not our enemies." He made it clear that Christians are not to live in isolation, but to be part of the body of Christ—if not at Saddleback, then someplace else.

This is an important point, because the theology of Saddleback Church is not going to ring true to every Christian. Rick Warren holds conservative evangelical views on abortion, same-sex marriage, and stem cell research, while also calling on Christians to fight poverty and care for the environment. President-elect Obama's decision to invite Rick to give the invocation at his inauguration ceremony angered some pro-choice and LGBT activists, but Obama said that there should be room for dialogue on such difficult social issues. Rick says that he never supports particular candidates, but he does take stands on social issues—before the 2008 general election, he issued a video statement endorsing California Proposition 8, which would amend the California Constitution to say that "only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California," eliminating the right of same-sex couples to marry. This reflected his belief that this definition of marriage "has been supported by every single culture, and every single religion, for five thousand years."⁵

Rick has a conservative view of the Bible and its authority, embracing traditional definitions of marriage and a literal understanding of the account of creation found in Genesis. In his mega-best-selling book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, he makes a statement that would be disputed in most modern scientific circles: "Noah had never seen rain, because prior to the Flood, God irrigated the earth from the ground up."⁶ Although it is true that Genesis 2:5–6 says that when God made the heavens and the earth "the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the ground, and water the whole face of the ground," this comes from a poetic account of the creation of Adam and Eve, one that teaches us a spiritual truth about sin and its punishment, not a scientific truth about the origin of the earth and humankind. There is much poetry and metaphor in the Bible that can be taken seriously but not literally—for example, the psalmist's expression "The LORD is my rock" (Ps. 18:2), and John the Baptist's words about Jesus, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36). As people of faith, we can certainly believe that God is our rock and Jesus is God's Lamb in

a theological sense, but we do not have to connect these biblical truths to geology or zoology. As a result, many Christians have abandoned a literal reading of Genesis that would include a seven-day creation and six-thousand-year-old earth, and they now look to the Bible for spiritual instead of scientific truths.

What Rick does not always acknowledge is that the Bible developed over time and out of the evolution of communities of faith. There are contradictions and differences within the Scriptures that reflect the unfolding discovery of God's will for human life. As was pointed out in *The Welcoming Congregation's* introduction, the purity code of Deuteronomy excluded two particular categories of people, eunuchs and foreigners, but then God revealed to Isaiah a new vision of community, one in which everyone who honors God in their actions is to be included. If Rick wants to make a strong connection between Saddleback's innovative hospitality practices and the actual words of the Bible, he needs to acknowledge that God's welcome has become increasingly inclusive over the long span of salvation history.

From beginning to end, the Bible is an account of an ever-changing relationship with God, containing new perceptions of God's will for human life. Letty Russell writes that the book of Ruth

reinterprets things like the violence in Judges and Israelite views against intermarriage and the exclusion of foreigners. Other examples are Deuteronomy's rewriting the law of Moses as the "second law"; Matthew's writing of the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as a new law or guide for daily life in a Christian community; and the story of the Emmaus road, when Jesus reinterpreted the Scriptures (Luke 24:13–35). Reading the Bible is always informed by listening and discussion in community as we continue to seek out how it can speak in such different times and places.⁷

There was a time when the majority of Christians assumed that the Bible supported the enslavement of Africans and the second-class status of women, but the movement of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith has led us to understand those interpretations as terribly flawed, and even contrary to God's will. Similar reassessments are going on now in churches around the world, as Christians discuss the place of sexual orientation in God's plan for creation, and the ethics of same-sex relationships in the community of faith. Congregations tend to become more inclusive as they discover that the boundaries between insiders and outsiders have changed throughout the course of salvation history.

Tensions between Purity and Diversity

The Bible contains a story of growing inclusiveness, but it also speaks of barriers to inclusion. The early church denied welcome to two categories of people—those who persisted in immoral lifestyles (1 Cor. 5:9–11) and those who propagated false teaching (2 John 9–11). Welcoming congregations today certainly need to be on guard against those who can harm or corrupt members of the church. Of particular concern is the monitoring of people who have committed child sexual abuse so that they can receive the benefits of ministry without putting children in danger. Child protection policies need to be adopted and enforced in every congregation, so that children will be safe from abuse and adults can provide leadership within clear and consistent boundaries. At the same time, pastors should be required to understand and abide by sexual misconduct policies, so that they will not misuse the power of their office to hurt members of the congregation under their care. Churches that embrace all people are not communities of faith that lack standards for acceptable behavior.

Welcoming congregations should also be clear about their doctrines and traditions. Washington National Cathedral is “a church for national purposes” with an interdenominational ministry, but at the same time it is a congregation firmly rooted in the beliefs and practices of the Episcopal Church. “We acknowledge who we are—an Episcopal cathedral,” said Robert Becker of the Office of Program and Pastoral Ministries in 2001. “But we also stress the fact that this cathedral is indeed a house of prayer for all people. Often, that translates into special interfaith services that are held here.” When the final stained glass window in the Cathedral was dedicated in 2001—one that recalls the hope of the Hebrew people to return to Jerusalem after exile in Babylon—notable Jewish figures such as Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Rabbi Irving Greenberg, chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, were invited to take part. But this move toward inclusiveness has limits, given the centrality of Jesus in the building’s liturgy, art, and architecture. Michael Wyatt, Canon Theologian at the Cathedral from 2001 to 2006, said that “‘A house of prayer for all people’ does not mean to me that all individuals would find here—or are even entitled to find here—a service that they would have designed on their own. The ownership of ritual prayer is not individualistic.” While the cathedral offers a genuine welcome to every guest, its hospitality is grounded in a distinctively Christian tradition.⁸ It would be wrong to abandon this tradition, because if a church works too hard at being acceptable to everyone, it will end up not standing for anything in particular. There is no virtue in throwing out core beliefs and practices in the quest for complete inclusiveness.

While the Bible warns against immorality and false teaching, the reality is that most exclusion from congregations is grounded in discomfort with diversity. Church members have a deep desire for purity in their worship and fellowship and find that they are most comfortable with people who share their racial-ethnic backgrounds and cultural practices. This is precisely the challenge faced by the apostle Peter in the book of Acts, one that arose in a time of conflict between the Christians in Jerusalem and the Gentiles of the Greek world. The Christians in Jerusalem had grown up Jewish, and they had been taught never to associate with uncircumcised, unclean people like the Gentiles. After the apostle Peter allows a number of Gentiles to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, he finds himself on the hot seat in Jerusalem.

“Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ask the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11:3). As was noted earlier in this chapter, it would have been unthinkable for a good Jewish Christian to break God’s purity laws and sit down to share a meal with an unclean Gentile. But Peter reports to them that he has received a vision from God, in which the Lord said, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (v. 9). Peter understood this to mean that God was doing a new thing, and making the unclean clean. By making this change, God was enabling the Gentiles to hear the gospel and join the church—something that Jewish purity laws had previously prohibited. “One of the first lessons the early Church had to learn was how to accept the Samaritan, Gentile, and even eunuch who believed in Jesus Christ as Savior but who brought with this belief a lot of assumptions that were foreign to the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem,” writes M. Craig Barnes, a professor of leadership and ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Our church today is still “learning how to accept the stranger God has chosen to include in the community of Christian faith.”⁹

Peter tells his fellow Christians that he was hit by the full significance of this shift when three Gentiles arrived at the place he was staying and invited him to visit a centurion named Cornelius. The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them and not to make a distinction between Gentiles and Jews. Then, when Peter met face-to-face with Cornelius, he saw the Holy Spirit fall on the Gentiles, just as it had fallen on the apostles. Peter concludes his report to the Christians in Jerusalem by asking the question, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:17).

That’s a great question. Religious purity is the main focus of the Christians in Jerusalem, but Peter sees it doing more evil than good. We have to ask ourselves: If God wants us to change and do a new thing, who are we to hinder God? The tension in the Jerusalem church was between purity

and diversity, a struggle that we are still experiencing today. Around the church, we see some members who are believers in purity, people who want to enforce traditional morality and theological clarity. On the other hand, we see some members who are proponents of diversity, Christians who want to accept a broader range of sexual orientations and theological perspectives. Disagreements are bound to arise in the church over homosexuality, premartial sex, medical ethics, the ordination of women, the morality of war, and the nature of Jesus Christ. Such tensions are tricky because they do not all break down clearly into right and wrong, or good versus evil. The diversity-purity dichotomy is really a balancing act, one that is constantly being performed by both pastors and church members.

Part of the church's job is to be open to new understandings of sexuality and theology, but another part is to be a guardian of traditional truths and dispenser of clear guidance. It is sometimes difficult to know how much to change and how much to preserve. When should we move forward and when should we stand strong? It helps to get a word from the Lord, such as the guidance Peter received. Until then, the church can do no better than follow the example that Jesus set in his own earthly ministry, as he showed his willingness to break established purity laws in order to minister to the outcasts of society. Remember that Jesus healed on the Sabbath, touched menstruating women, put the needs of children before the needs of adults, and preferred the company of sinners over saints. In all these ways, he favored the diversity of God's people over the purity of religious laws. Jesus was never afraid to push for change, even in the face of opposition.

But this is not to say that Jesus was devoted to destruction. No, his mission was to institute a new and better way. What Jesus really did was take an old approach to purity and replace it with a new and better one. First, Isaiah includes foreigners and eunuchs; then Jesus reaches out to outcasts; then the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to the Gentiles. "A purity of law turns into a purity of love," observes Susan Andrews, the former moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). What we are left with is a purity of love, "embodied in the gracious and hospitable ministry of Jesus Christ."¹⁰

Jesus knocks down the old purity of law in order to replace it with a new purity of love. He comes up with a new and better religious system and asks us to move in this new direction with him. He challenges us to get to know the immigrant from Africa who works down the hall, to reach out to the neighborhood teen who is becoming increasingly withdrawn, to adopt the handicapped child who needs specialized care, to support the young woman with the problem pregnancy, to invite young singles to church and make an effort to visit the elderly members who are trapped in their homes. Unless

we look beyond our normal categories of friends and acquaintances, we'll become increasingly isolated in our like-minded Christian communities. And the good news for us is that Christ's purity of love is *already* being shown to us. Our risen Lord Jesus loves us unconditionally and eternally and accepts us as a part of his wonderfully diverse family. Jesus cherishes every one of us as a unique and precious individual, as one of his distinctive disciples—people who just happen to be strong or weak, musical or tone deaf, nimble or clumsy, gay or straight, optimistic or melancholy, male or female, old or young. And if Jesus shows us this kind of purity of love, then our challenge is to love and accept others in the very same way. We may discover, along with Letty Russell, that Christian hospitality is “pointing us to a future that God intends, where riotous difference is welcomed.”¹¹

Listening to the Pain of Others

So how do we replace purity of law with purity of love, and begin to see people around us as brothers and sisters in Christ? At Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Maryland, the “focus is on following Jesus, living as a Christian community, and making a difference in the world,” says a staff member. “We want to experience the kingdom of God right here.” Letty Russell encourages us to “begin from the outsider’s perspective” and then “develop the practice of listening to the pain of others and responding to their initiatives.”¹² Saddleback already does this in many ways, with an active recovery ministry and a focus on healing in thousands of small groups. Rick Warren says that “Saddleback is the church where people want to grow. If you are already perfect, go to another church.” Members are encouraged to listen to the pain of others and to participate in small groups in which people search together for healing within the Christian community. At Saddleback, you are not allowed to lead a small group that is focused on healing unless you have struggled with the particular brokenness being addressed by the group. To lead a group of alcoholics, you must be a recovering alcoholic. To help women who are healing from the trauma of abortion, you must have had an abortion. Members of Saddleback know that the treasure of Jesus Christ is found in fragile clay jars, so that—in the words of the Apostle Paul—“it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor. 4:7).

But is life as a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person an illness that calls for healing? Rick listed “same-sex attraction” as an ongoing human struggle as he launched his 2009 sermon series on healing, and the

Saddleback Family Web site has said that “because membership in a church is an outgrowth of accepting the Lordship and leadership of Jesus in one’s life, someone unwilling to repent of their homosexual lifestyle would not be accepted as a member of Saddleback Church.” But perspectives may be changing. This prohibition has now been removed from the Saddleback Family Web site, and Rick has gone on CNN’s *Larry King Live* to apologize for his support of Proposition 8, saying he has “never been and never will be” an “anti-gay or anti-gay marriage activist.” He also said he has apologized to his homosexual friends for his comments about Proposition 8.¹³

The biblical movement toward inclusiveness continues today, and the full acceptance of LGBTs in Christian churches remains a challenge for us in both evangelical and mainline denominations. Writes George Taylor, a retired Presbyterian minister: “for me, after 36 years in parish ministry, [ministry] has got to be an inclusive and unconditional love gospel or no gospel at all. There is nothing in between for me. I have seen too much human suffering from the exclusive kind of Christianity that for me is not gospel.” After attending a teaching by the Dalai Lama in British Columbia, George observed, “he teaches compassion and love and teaches that we are not going to make it as a human race unless this is practiced and lived in a much greater way than it is now. That, for me, was the message and life of Jesus. It is not what I hear coming out of Saddleback Church, no matter how friendly they are and what kind of good signage and parking lots they have.”¹⁴

The challenge of inclusiveness at Saddleback is focused today, as it is in so many churches, on persons from the LGBT community. But as a church that was founded as “a church for the unchurched,” with members that have significant experience in listening to the pain of others, this congregation may be uniquely positioned to learn from and incorporate people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. There is no barrier to membership at Saddleback based on sexual orientation, at least according to the Saddleback Family Web site as of October 19, 2009—becoming a member at Saddleback requires becoming a follower of Jesus Christ through salvation and baptism, embracing a life of purpose through the Great Commandment and Great Commission, living life together in the context of a small group, offering time and resources to others, nurturing relationships within the community by sharing faith in Christ, and growing in spiritual health.¹⁵ And there is no reason that a person from the LGBT community could not rise to the challenge of each of these requirements of membership. In fact, many have done so throughout the worldwide Christian church.

The only barrier to full incorporation at Saddleback is biblical interpretation, and the question of whether Rick and the Saddleback Community will

perceive the Bible as an unfolding story of ever-increasing inclusiveness or as a moral guidebook with certain timeless prohibitions, such as “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Lev. 18:22). This is an enormously divisive question in the church today, splitting congregations and denominations around the world. And the Christian community is still debating the ethics of same-sex relationships in the life of the church. But the practice of true hospitality may enable churches like Saddleback to go where biblical and theological debates cannot take us—toward a community in which all people are embraced with God’s love and grace, and gays and straights will grow together as they listen to each other’s pain and search for healing in community. Saddleback already has wonderful *sites* for people of all backgrounds to meet, guest-friendly *worship*, opportunities to share *meals*, numerous *small groups* in which personal relationships can develop, and strong programs for *reconciliation* and *outreach*—all of the best practices of Christian hospitality.

What Saddleback needs is a new perception of God’s inclusive love. This may come from stepping into the biblical story of Mary and Martha and being more like the contemplative Mary than the hospitable Martha. After all, Saddleback has already mastered the Martha part—welcoming people warmly and preparing hospitable places and meals, to the point of being distracted by “many tasks” (Luke 10:40). Mary, on the other hand, sits at the Lord’s feet and listens to what he is saying, and Jesus commends her by saying, “there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (v. 42). The time has come to listen to what Jesus says about the nature of loving and faithful relationships and to reflect on the simplicity and difficulty of his command to “love the Lord your God” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37, 39). Since people of different sexual orientations can accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, follow the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, and honor God in faithful and loving relationships, I do not believe that there is really any reason that LGBTs should be barred from membership at Saddleback or any other church. If LGBTs are welcomed with purity of love and true hospitality, churches will find themselves one step closer to being the “house of prayer for all peoples” that Isaiah spoke of and that the apostles worked so hard to create.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do you see a focus on purity in your congregation? What evidence can you find for acceptance of diversity?

2. “From beginning to end, the Bible is an account of an ever-changing relationship with God, containing new perceptions of God’s will for human life.” True or false? Discuss.
3. How would you define appropriate barriers to inclusion in your congregation? What are the standards for acceptable behavior? Do you see them changing?
4. Where does your church strike a balance between new understandings and traditional truths? Give examples.
5. What is the specific challenge of inclusiveness in your congregation? Where do you see opportunities for listening, learning, and growing in purity of love?

Action Plan

Develop a partnership with a church of a different denomination, racial makeup, political leaning, or view on sexual orientation. Begin with a “pulpit exchange,” in which your pastor preaches to their congregation and their pastor preaches to yours. Have a team of church members participate in worship at the other congregation and encourage them to send a team to you. Then invite the members of the other church to join you for a fellowship meal, with time for conversation around tables. Encourage participants to share a brief story of what brought them to their church and what keeps them there. Identify an outreach project that the two congregations can embark on together, with opportunities for members of both churches to work side-by-side so that strangers will become friends.

Preaching Suggestion

Offer a dramatic retelling of Peter’s report to the church at Jerusalem, including the discovery that if God gave Gentiles “the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:1–18). Explore the gifts that God gives people of a variety of backgrounds. Confess the ways that we “hinder God” by building barriers and excluding people. Proclaim the good news that God is moving us from a purity of law to a purity of love.

Conclusion: Embracing All People

*T*he Church of the Epiphany was built in 1844 and has the distinction of being the only original pre-Civil War church building still in use in Washington, DC. Founded as a Protestant Episcopal mission in the downtown area, it tried to reach out to all people by offering free pews as well as rented pews with space for whites and blacks, rich and poor. But Epiphany knew the pain of division from the day it was founded. Located in a neighborhood of strong Southern sympathies, a number of U.S. Senators lived in the area, including future Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who was a member of the church during his time in the Senate prior to the war. Epiphany's rector balanced his sympathy toward the South with loyalty to the Union, and he made such a persuasive case for loyalty that the Secretary of War began to attend services at Epiphany, followed by a number of Union generals. In March 1862, President Abraham Lincoln attended the funeral of a general at Epiphany, and later that year the church was converted into a hospital for Union troops, with planks laid on top of pews to make a platform for the beds. Clearly, the Church of the Epiphany knows how to be an uncommon Christian community, having done ministry in a time that was even more fractured and polarized than today.

Christian hospitality is offered to anyone who comes to Epiphany, beginning with a warm welcome from a well-trained greeter at the door. Introductions are made at the beginning of the worship service, and the congregation's high-church liturgy is made accessible by a clear and comprehensive worship bulletin. At a service in August 2009, I find about one hundred people in worship—blacks, whites, homeless people, immigrants. A young white woman sitting behind me tells me that she has found the church to be very welcoming since she began to attend several months earlier. The guest preacher moves out of the pulpit and delivers her sermon from the floor of the church, front and center, and does a good job of talking about current events in light of the

gospel—laying out a fundamental Christian concern for health care for all, without making political policy pronouncements. The service concludes with Holy Communion, and the bulletin gives detailed instructions about how to receive the sacrament while stating plainly that “all are invited to receive Communion.”

Of course, no congregation practices a perfect form of hospitality, and I am reminded at Epiphany that welcoming congregations are always a work in progress. I make my way to coffee hour after the service and listen as church leaders take a moment to say Happy Birthday to everyone who is celebrating an August birthday. But no one reaches out to welcome me or engage me in conversation, despite the fact that I say hello to several people around the social hall. As is true in most congregations, including my own, church members are drawn to their friends and want to use the time to converse with people they know and serve alongside in the life of the church. The stranger love (*philoxenia*) that lies at the heart of hospitality is an attitude that runs against human nature and is an orientation that must be embraced and practiced in an intentional and active way. In the early days at Saddleback, the congregation practiced a “three-minute rule” to compel members to welcome guests. The rule was that they would not talk to anyone they knew for the first three minutes after the end of the worship service.

Randolph Charles, the rector of Epiphany, tells me that the church must “be vigilant in offering a safe and respectful community.” He looks forward to a renovation of the building that will improve its hospitable sites, including an “open arms” handicap ramp at the front of the church, larger restrooms, and an elevator. He continues to support the Welcome Table program that offers Bible study, Eucharist, and breakfast to the homeless and that encourages parishioners and staff to sit with the homeless, tell stories, and know one another by name. In addition, Randolph is excited by new programs such as “Breaking Bread for Justice,” in which parishioners sit down for lunch with the homeless and downtown poor and talk about their passions and needs, as well as what social justice projects they might work on together. The work of being a welcoming congregation is never finished but must continually focus on training people in practices of hospitality and looking for new ways to embrace people and include them in the life of the church.

The good news is that God has given us an unlimited supply of love and grace, treasures that we can share as we make an effort to reach out to others through hospitable sites, worship services, meals, and small groups. All of these practices reflect the gracious hospitality of Jesus and bear the good fruit of reconciliation, outreach, and new perceptions of God’s inclusive love. The demand for welcoming congregations is greater now than ever given that

we, “like the early church,” observes Christine Pohl, “find ourselves in a fragmented and multicultural society that yearns for relationships, identity, and meaning.”¹ Our fractured society is hungry for the good food that we can serve—the nourishment of relationships around tables, the discovery that we are all precious children of God, and the meaning and purpose that come from being a follower of Christ. The challenge for us is to keep all of these elements of hospitality tied closely to the ministry of Jesus and to begin to look at the entire gospel through the lens of hospitality. To embrace all people with God’s love and grace is not an aspect of the gospel—it *is* the gospel. In fact, the central truth of the Christian faith is that God has welcomed and included us in the family of faith, with unconditional love and unlimited grace.

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Isa. 56:7

The Truth of Hospitality

“What is truth?” That’s the question that Pontius Pilate asks Jesus before sentencing him to death. Jesus has been brought to Pilate, the Roman governor, because only the Roman Empire can perform an execution. The Jewish priests want Jesus to die, but they don’t have the authority to kill him—so they drag him to Pilate. The governor asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (John 18:33). This is the only thing that Pilate cares about, because a Jewish king would be a threat to Roman authority. If Jesus says yes, then he’ll be convicted of treason against the Roman emperor and given an instant death sentence. But Jesus is way too smart to respond with a simple yea or nay. Like an experienced trial lawyer, Jesus says, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” (v. 34). He wants to know if Pilate has personal knowledge of his kingship or if he is relying on the hearsay evidence of the Jewish priests. His response serves to undermine the validity of Pilate’s question.

The governor replies with an edge in his voice: “I am not a Jew, am I?” (v. 35). Pilate wants to distance himself from this whole messy affair and stand above the squabbles of the bothersome Jewish inhabitants of the land. This is a Jewish problem, he seems to be saying—nothing that he wants to get involved in. And yet his job as governor requires him to administer justice. “What have you done?” he asks Jesus (v. 35). Once again, Jesus refuses to give a straight answer. “My kingdom is not from this world,” he explains. “If

my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here” (v. 36). Jesus hints that he may be a king, since he speaks of his kingdom, but he does not describe a kingdom that would fit any Roman understanding. There are no soldiers, armies, or lawyers fighting for his freedom, which would certainly be the case if he were the head of an earthly kingdom. In the Roman world, kingdoms were defined by armies and laws, and justice was enforced by the exercise of power.

Pilate hears part of what Jesus is saying, the part about his kingdom. “So you are a king?” he asks him. But Jesus dodges again. “You say that I am a king,” he says. “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (v. 37). Although most kings would describe their mission as leading armies, collecting taxes, punishing criminals, and expanding the economy, Jesus says that he has come to “testify to the truth.” And while most kings expect their subjects to obey their commands, Jesus describes his followers as those people who belong to the truth and listen to his voice. Jesus has not come to take the world by force. Instead, he has come to invite people to enter into a relationship with him, by listening to his voice and belonging to the truth. All of which leads to the obvious question from Pilate, “What is truth?” (v. 38).

I think this is an honest question. Sure, Pilate is getting fed up with Jesus, but he is enough of a Roman philosopher to wonder about the nature of truth. He really wants to know, “What is truth? Tell me, Jesus.” And what does Jesus say? Nothing. He just stands there. I think his silence is his answer to the question. He is saying to Pilate, “Look at me. *I* am truth. I am the way, the truth, and the life. Follow me, and I’ll show you the path to abundant life.” But Pilate doesn’t get it. Sadly, he turns away and goes in another direction. The wheels of Roman justice continue to turn, and Jesus is flogged, mocked, and put to death on a cross.

What we are left with is the question, “What is truth?” This passage from the Gospel of John teaches us that truth is not a statement, a proposition, a concept, or a school of thought—that’s the kind of truth that a Roman philosopher would understand. Instead, truth is a person, a person named Jesus, and we are all invited to enter into a relationship with this Jesus who is the truth. For Jesus, truth is never merely something that is thought; instead it is felt, acted out, and embraced in all of life. This is the kind of truth that you don’t just think about, you belong to it. It is a way of life. That’s why Jesus says, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” So what is this truth that we are invited to belong to?

Earlier in the Gospel of John, Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, turning water into wine so that the wedding celebration can continue (John 2:1–11). At its most basic level, what Jesus does in Cana is perform a miracle of hospitality. Jesus goes on to feed crowds of five thousand and four thousand (John 6:1–14, Mark 8:1–10), nourishing people both physically and spiritually. He washes the feet of his disciples (John 13:1–20), institutes the Lord’s Supper (Mark 14:22–25), and cooks a fish breakfast for his disciples (John 21:1–24). Jesus teaches us to care for neighbors in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), welcomes little children in spite of his disciples’ objections (Mark 10:13–16), and instructs his followers in the nature of hospitality with the words, “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (Luke 14:13).

So, what is truth? In a word, the truth of Jesus is “hospitality.” It’s embracing all people with God’s love and grace. Historian Garry Wills reminds us that many of Jesus’ miracles are worked for outsiders, especially people considered to be unclean by the religious people of the day—lepers, prostitutes, the crippled, the reviled, the uncircumcised. These miracles teach lessons about the kingdom of God, one of which is that “people should not be separated into classes of the clean and unclean, the worthy and the unworthy, the respectable and the unrespectable.”² Jesus understands that God embraces all people with love and grace, and because of this his hospitality is often directed to persons on the margins of society. Such an approach is controversial, of course, and causes him to be criticized repeatedly for eating and drinking with undesirable people: “Look,” say his opponents, “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Luke 7:34).

Jesus practices a powerful hospitality, one that stands up to opposition and abuse. This is not punch-and-cookies hospitality, it is muscular hospitality. Notice how Jesus never allows criticism to disrupt his table fellowship with those who need to hear his message. When the Pharisees ask Jesus why he eats with tax collectors and sinners, he responds, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matt. 9:11–12). He allows a sinful woman to kiss his feet and anoint them while he is having dinner with a Pharisee, and because of her faith he forgives her (Luke 7:36–50). He calls out to a notorious tax collector named Zacchaeus and invites himself to dinner (Luke 19:1–10).

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus enters into the lives of people who are on the margins of society, struggling with hunger, shame, disease, and homelessness. He does this out of deep compassion for them, but also because he shares their experience of being a homeless stranger, with no place to lay his head (Matt. 8:20). His own experience of homelessness, hunger, thirst, and

nakedness shapes his empathy for the distressed of this world and motivates him to heal and to save those who are in the greatest need.³ In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus says that anyone who feeds the hungry and welcomes strangers is really feeding and welcoming him, he is not exaggerating; he knows this deprivation firsthand (Matt. 25:34–35). So if we are going to model our congregations on the ministry of Jesus, we need to enter into the lives of our distressed neighbors and practice hospitality in the same way that Jesus did.

So, what is truth? It is to practice the hospitality of Jesus and to welcome all people with God's love and grace. This is a truth that must be put into action, and Letty Russell promises us that "when we welcome those who come from different contexts and life experiences, we do learn from them, and one of the things we learn is that there are many ways to understand and live out our unity in Christ."⁴ Remember, the truth is not an idea but a way of life. Jesus says, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." We practice hospitality when we host the homeless in our church buildings on cold winter nights, when we gather as church members around tables for fellowship meals, when we open our homes for small-group discussions. We show that we want to be welcoming congregations when we join Reconciliation Parish in hosting meetings between offenders and their victims, when we imitate Saddleback Church in participating in Christian-Muslim picnics, and when we follow the examples of the Iona Community and Washington National Cathedral in making worship accessible to strangers. These practices bring us closer to our neighbors, but also to our Lord, because Jesus has promised us that "whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (Matt. 10:40). The truth of Christianity is a welcoming way of life, following the Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life. Our challenge is to belong to this truth.

A Relationship with the Truth

On my way to Saddleback Church, I stopped at a Starbucks in Calabasas, California, for coffee with Brad Johnson, a pastor who describes himself as "Midwesterner by birth, Californian by choice." He certainly looks the part, with spiky hair, casual clothes, a quick smile, and a laid-back attitude. Brad served as international missions pastor at Saddleback and then became a senior pastor at a California church, but personal crisis and divorce caused him to leave the ministry for a time. He now feels called to new church development and is working in Calabasas to launch LifeChange Community Church,

a congregation that is based on the principle of acceptance. Its gatherings are designed to be closer to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings than to church services. The church's Web site says, "Jesus modeled a community for us where everyone's welcome. He would welcome, love, accept, embrace, and include anybody who came toward Him (and He pursued the others). It didn't matter—morally confused, culturally diverse, corrupt, pagan, weak, poor and others." At LifeChange, "everybody is welcomed, nobody's perfect, anything's possible, and you can come *just as you are*."⁵

Brad wants LifeChange to be a church where God meets seeking people who are far from perfect, a congregation that welcomes anyone—no matter where they are on their spiritual journey. Like AA, the church accepts anyone in need of healing and new life. Over coffee he tells me that "the role of the church in community is to introduce people to the truth and to develop a relationship with this truth." Brad believes in the truthfulness of God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit, and he trusts that Word and Spirit will change people as they seek God together and experience Christian community. He tells me that this process begins with "intentional conversations with people who walk in the door," conversations marked by "attentive listening." Meeting people in threshold places with love and a willingness to listen is "irresistible," says Brad, and he has found that arguments against the Christian faith are often defused by attentive listening. "People want to have their stereotypes confirmed," he tells me, whether they are expecting to find conservatives or liberals when they walk into church. "They are surprised when they are not."

LifeChange is currently meeting for worship on Sunday mornings at the Edwards Grand Palace Theater in Calabasas, and an ad for the church runs before movies at the theater through the week. Worship includes praise music and a biblical message, but because the congregation is "full of people in process," Brad also wants to include the stories of people coming to Christ. "Kindness, acceptance, and listening [are] what [bring] people to Christ," he says, and he wants this process to be a central part of the life of the church. He is convinced that "faith stories can create a culture of welcome." He tells me that the typical model for entry into the Christian community in America has begun with *believing*, progressed to *behaving*, and concluded with *belonging*. Christian hospitality demands a different approach, however, one that turns this process around: Brad believes that we should begin with *belonging*, and then move into *believing* and *behaving*. "We have to begin with grace," he says. "Belief and behavior are shaped by the experience of acceptance and belonging." A relationship with the truth begins with an experience of the welcome of Jesus Christ, one that includes unconditional love and unlimited

grace. Only after receiving this embrace can a person make a statement of belief in Christ and begin to behave like one of his disciples.

Roots: Practicing God's Welcome

This book has made clear that Christian hospitality requires practice, because none of us can immediately master the art of embracing all people with God's love and grace. If we could, welcoming congregations would be *common* Christian communities instead of *uncommon* Christian communities. But there is no more important goal for the church today, because "if we want the church to matter in the twenty-first century," writes Letty Russell, "it must become a community that practices God's Welcome and hospitality in a world of difference and danger."⁶ Practicing God's welcome is the key to helping people to belong, to believe, and to behave as Christians. It is the path on which people enter into a relationship with the truth that is embodied in Jesus Christ. It is the approach that helps church members to develop relationships across differences in a diverse, fractured, and polarized society. It is the foundation for safe and secure communities of faith in a dangerous, fearful, and insecure world.

We should always begin by looking for the presence of the holy in the guests who come to our door, much as Abraham and Sarah welcomed three strangers and discovered that they were the Lord (Gen. 18). These guests "can be both gift and challenge," says Ana María Pineda, "human and divine," reminding us that we not only receive unexpected benefits from strangers, but also the complicated challenge of meeting their needs.⁷ We've seen how churches in Virginia open their doors to the homeless on cold winter nights, providing meals and conversation that enrich both hosts and guests. But questions remain about how the problem of chronic homelessness can be solved, and how social services can be provided to address issues of mental illness and employment. Congregations across the country welcome immigrants into the threshold places created by ESL classes and offer these guests the gift of English language instruction, but a storm continues to rage in our country over the status of undocumented workers and the enforcement of immigration laws.

Welcoming congregations discover that receiving guests at physical sites is an essential hospitality practice, but so is making a connection at virtual sites such as church Web sites. The design of a Web site can make a positive first impression and deliver a powerful message of welcome. But after this initial setup, churches must be vigilant about maintaining their Web

sites and testing their functionality, because an inoperable site can easily alienate a visitor. In the fall of 2009, I tried to go on a pilgrimage at the Washington National Cathedral, scheduled for October 3. On September 25, I attempted to register and buy a ticket online. The Web site would not accept my registration but linked me to an e-mail form. I sent an e-mail requesting ticket information and never received a response. I had a similar problem registering for a Benedictine service on October 19, which generated a response saying that I was registered for an October 31 event. Being a determined participant, I simply showed up for the event and had a good experience. But the Cathedral Web site was not very hospitable to me during the registration process, and I am sure that a more timid visitor would have simply given up.

We have also learned that practicing God's welcome includes ongoing efforts to make worship accessible to guests. In the Iona Abbey, barriers to participation in the services are broken down by the teaching of songs as the service begins; at Saddleback, guests are told that they can expect to enjoy the service and that no one will do anything to embarrass them. In all services, orders of worship should be projected clearly on screens or included in comprehensive printed bulletins that minimize the amount of juggling that a worshiper needs to do, especially in churches that use both hymnals and prayer books. The focus of the service should be on "creating a community for that hour," says Sam Lloyd, dean of the Washington National Cathedral. He stresses that leaders should "pay attention to the accessibility of hymns" and make sure that all elements of the service are user-friendly. Brad Johnson of LifeChange Community Church believes that an explanation of hymns and service elements "adds value for insiders" and also "extends welcome to outsiders." He warns against using insider language in the worship of the church and suggests having an outsider look at the church bulletin so that unclear elements can be identified and removed.

Meals are another essential way of practicing the Lord's welcome and turning strangers into friends, as was explored in chapter 4. Dinners are shared in the new member class at Saddleback; lunch is an important part of the weekly spiritual pilgrimage around the Isle of Iona; breakfast and lunch are served to the homeless at First Christian Church, leading to the development of relationships between church members and homeless guests. At St. Peter's Church (Roman Catholic) in Waldorf, Maryland, Monsignor Bill Parent recently instituted an outdoor coffee hour after masses on summer Sundays, with food and drink provided by the four-thousand-member parish and its various organizations. He is pleased that people who have seen each other for years are now becoming friends, and he senses that their

commitment to parish organizations is growing. The Christian faith is not just assent to certain principles, after all; it is a sharing of table fellowship and life in community.

This practice of gathering for meals is deeply rooted in the ministry of Jesus, who often called people to shared fellowship around a common meal. But these meals were more than a gathering that fed the body; they were ways for Jesus to model leadership for his followers. “Jesus’ routine practice of eating meals with people is a practice for life that Christian leaders should consider,” writes Marty Alan Michelson, an associate professor at Southern Nazarene University. “Too often lunch becomes a lunch meeting and dinner becomes a business dinner. Perhaps Christian leaders can reflect Christ by turning off agendas at mealtime to really encounter people in shared fellowship.”⁸ Congregations that put a Starbucks in their lobby or a McDonald’s in their learning center will not be providing true Christian hospitality if they focus on feeding people physically; these facilities will be doing the work of Christ only if they become sites for shared fellowship and the growth of deep-spirited friendships. In addition, congregations have to take on an attitude of outreach. For example, Fairfax Community Church established a weekly “Pizza Night” so that worshipers could eat together after Saturday night worship, but pastor Rod Stafford discovered that the event turned out to be very inhospitable to visitors, since members tended to gravitate toward people they already knew. Meals are hospitable only if people are intentional about inviting strangers to sit down and eat with them.

Finally, small groups are a necessary root of hospitality, critical to the practice of God’s welcome. Reconciliation Parish brings people together to tell stories, since knowledge about how to live must be taught in community, not in school. At Washington National Cathedral, the Disciples of Christ in Community (DOCC) program starts with a shared meal and includes time for lectures and small-group discussions. Participants have found it to be life changing, with its emphasis on framing an adult faith and building a strong Christian community. The Iona Community gathers once a year on the Isle of Iona, but most of its activity is found in the family groups that meet across the country for intercessory prayer and discussion of contemporary issues in the light of Scripture. And at Cedar Ridge Community Church, small groups gather for “farm parties” in which they work on the church farm and harvest fresh, naturally grown food for local organizations that serve people in need. All these small groups help people to deepen their connections to God and to each other, but most should be given a life cycle of eighteen months to two years, to prevent the groups from becoming inhospitable closed systems. In order for groups to embrace all people with God’s love and grace, they

need to be broken open on a regular basis to allow for the addition of new members.

Fruits: Hospitality as a Way of Life

When God's welcome is practiced in the church, hospitality becomes a way of life, leading to the good fruits of reconciliation, outreach, and new perceptions. Offenders and victims gather in small groups at Reconciliation Parish, where emotions are released in a controlled and productive way. Racial reconciliation is attempted in the small groups of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship on campuses across the country. Dental clinics are established in churches of the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil, ESL classes are offered in parishes across the United States, and unchurched friends are invited to home-based small groups in welcoming congregations from North Carolina to California. Wherever Christian hospitality is practiced, church members gain a new perception of God's inclusive love, one that overcomes barriers and turns strangers into friends.

With practice, hospitality can become a way of life, one that helps us to live our beliefs in a way that is faithful to the Christian tradition and open to the future that God is creating for us. The Rule of St. Benedict, written in the sixth century, remains instructive for us in the twenty-first century, as it teaches us about the reception of guests, "Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, because He will say: 'I was a stranger and you took Me in' (Mt 25:35). And let due honor be shown to all, especially to those 'of the household of the faith' (Gal 6:10) and to wayfarers" (Rule of Benedict 53:1). Benedict reminds us that guests should be honored and received "as Christ," with the understanding that any act of hospitality can turn into a *coram Deo* experience, placing us in the presence of God. Since we can never predict the ways in which the Lord will come to us, our best approach is always going to be one that welcomes and includes the strangers who arrive at our doors. Like Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, we will discover that miracles happen when we cross the boundaries of religion, culture, and gender to share a meal and make a connection with one another (1 Kgs. 17:8–16).

The practice of hospitality is what enables the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington to bring Catholics and Muslims together to develop relationships and build understanding; Saddleback Church to reach out to Hispanic pastors and to partner with African American churches; the Iona Community to befriend young offenders in the penal system in Scotland and to act as gatekeepers in Israel/Palestine; or Washington National Cathedral,

located in largely white northeast Washington, to partner with Covenant Baptist Church, in predominantly black southeast Washington. In all these cases, the stranger is not perceived as a vector of hostility and danger, but as a vessel carrying some of the holiness of God. Along with Letty Russell, these organizations have discovered a new kind of “unity that is rooted in our recognition that the growing diversity of the church and the world is a gift of God, rather than a threat to our own comfortable life and faith.”⁹

The challenge of Christian hospitality is to embrace all people with God’s love and grace, welcoming them as unconditionally as God has received us in Christ. This embrace is not a common reaction but requires intentionality and effort in an uncommon Christian community. When we make hospitality a way of life, we focus on creating welcoming sites and training people to receive and include strangers. We craft worship in such a way that it inspires people to invite their friends and neighbors to church. We learn to offer meals where people can gather around tables for conversation and the development of relationships. We form small groups where people can grow in faith and develop deep-spirited friendships. We realize that we ourselves, who were once “strangers to the covenants of promise” (Eph. 2:12), have now been brought near to God in Christ Jesus, and as followers of Christ our job is to “welcome strangers into the heart of God’s transforming love.”¹⁰ Christ is our peace, says Paul to the Ephesians; “in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (2:14).

At the same time, we accept that becoming a welcoming congregation is not an instant fix for the divisions that we face in church and society. Theological debates will continue, racial-ethnic misunderstandings will still vex us, and not all church-based fellowship meals will serve a greater good. There is a struggle within ourselves, observes theologian Miroslav Volf, “in which the will to exclusion often wins and crowds out the will to embrace.”¹¹ We will continue to fall short in our efforts to create “a house of prayer for all peoples,” but we know that doing something—anything—to welcome and include strangers is always better than doing nothing. God will honor our efforts to make hospitality a way of life, and Christ will reward all who serve him by helping the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. We can celebrate the fact that every time people sit down to eat and drink together, there is the possibility that community will grow, people will be reconciled to one another, and we will gain new perceptions of God’s inclusive love. That is good news for a broken, fractured, and polarized world, and a compelling reason to be a welcoming congregation that embraces all people with God’s love and grace.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does your congregation practice hospitality to strangers during and after worship? How can it do a better job?
2. “To embrace all people with God’s love and grace is not an aspect of the gospel—it is the gospel.” How does this statement confirm or contradict your understanding of the gospel (good news) of what God has done in Jesus Christ?
3. What can the “muscular hospitality” of Jesus teach us about performing ministry today? Where are the challenges for today’s church?
4. How could your congregation guide new members through a process that moves from *belonging* to *believing* to *behaving*?
5. Where do you see personal benefits in “practicing God’s welcome”? How is it both a gift and a challenge?

Action Plan

Find a way to incorporate hospitality into the mission statement of your church and challenge each of your committees to find a practical way to become more welcoming in the year to come. Establish concrete expectations. For example, the worship committee might institute a “three-minute rule,” in which members seek out guests for the first three minutes after worship. The fellowship committee could establish monthly potluck dinners. The property committee could set the goal of building a welcome center outside the sanctuary. Make your goals creative and attainable.

Preaching Suggestion

Emphasize that the practice of hospitality is the way that we belong to the truth, listen to Christ’s voice, and break down barriers between groups (John 18:33–38, Eph. 2:11–14). Offer specific ideas about how your congregation can establish hospitality as a way of life by putting down roots in welcoming sites, worship, meals, and small groups. Envision how the good fruits of reconciliation, outreach, and new perceptions will grow and how the risen Christ can be encountered in a welcoming congregation.

Notes

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Hospitality. They discovered that knowledge from books is usually given greater value than knowledge from lived experience, although book knowledge itself is often limited to one phase of history in one part of the world.

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