The Welcoming Congregation

Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality

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Contents

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.