

Hospitality, a practice and a way of life

Christine D. Pohl

Offering welcome is basic to Christian identity and practice. For most of the church's history, faithful believers located their acts of hospitality in a vibrant tradition in which needy strangers, Jesus, and angels were welcomed and through which people were transformed. But for many people today, understandings of hospitality have been reduced to Martha Stewart's latest ideas for entertaining family and friends and to the services of the hotel and restaurant industry. As a result, even Christians miss the significance of hospitality and view it as a mildly pleasant activity if sufficient time is available.

Recognition of the consequences of the loss of this practice has prompted some communities and Christian traditions to attempt

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to recover a fuller understanding of hospitality. In particular, since the 1930s, Catholic Worker communities have made hospitality central to their vision and practice. Benedictine communities, guided by *The Rule of St. Benedict* and anticipating that they might be welcoming Christ, have opened their doors to strangers since the sixth century and have more recently made their wisdom available to the larger church. The emphasis on both hospitality and community among Anabaptists has provided an important resource for many who recognize

that a steady welcome of strangers requires a more communal understanding of the Christian life and its requisite practices.

The Bible is rich with accounts of hospitality and with encouragement toward its practice. Whether we open to the story of Abraham, Sarah, and the angels (Genesis 18) or to the account of the widow of Zarephath and Elijah (1 Kings 17), we cannot miss the blessing and mystery that accompany the practice. When

we turn to the law and the prophets, we frequently encounter exhortations to care for the stranger and to open our hearts, homes, and resources to the vulnerable ones. The very identity of the people of God as sojourners and aliens is a deep reminder of our dependence on God as host and of responsibility to deal graciously with literal aliens in our communities.

A quick review of Jesus' life and ministry finds hospitality at the center. Jesus is both guest and host, dependent on others for welcome and startlingly gracious in his welcome to outsiders, seekers, and sinners. Meals were central to Jesus' ministry and a shared meal soon became the center point of Christian worship. Hospitality is a lens through which we can read and understand much of the gospel, and a practice by which we can welcome Jesus himself.

In ancient times, hospitality was viewed as a pillar on which the moral structure of the world rested. It was a highly valued moral practice, seen as an important expression of kindness, mutual aid, neighborliness, and a response to the life of faith. Hospitality addressed the physical needs of strangers for food, shelter, and protection, but also included recognition of their

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worth and common humanity. It almost always involved shared meals; table fellowship was historically an important way of acknowledging the equal value and dignity of people.

Based on the biblical teachings, and especially on Jesus' identification with the stranger in Matt. 25:35 and his teaching on the necessity of welcoming "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" to our dinner tables (Luke 14:12–14), a distinctive understanding of hospitality emerged in the first centuries of the church. Leaders insisted that although in conventional hospitality people welcomed family, friends, and influential acquaintances, Christian

hospitality ought to focus on welcoming the vulnerable and the poor into one's home and community of faith. Followers of Christ should offer a generous welcome to "the least of these," without

concern for advantage or benefit to the host. Such hospitality would reflect God's greater hospitality that welcomes the undeserving, provides the lonely with a home, and sets a banquet table for the hungry.

Hospitality to needy strangers distinguished the early church from its surrounding environment. Noted as exceptional by Christians and non-Christians alike, offering care to strangers became one of the distinguishing marks of the authenticity of the Christian gospel. Concerns about the needs of strangers and poor people eventually gave rise to hospitals and hospices and these, along with substantial changes in the church itself, eventually resulted in an institutionalization of care which distanced response to basic needs from community. Increasing specialization of care meant that needy people were less frequently incorporated into a local body of believers and more often cared for at a distance by paid workers. Eventually, hospitality came to be understood primarily as welcoming friends and family, the activities of the hospitality industry, and the work of committees that arranged coffee hours at church.

As a result, the best resources that individual Christians and churches have to offer to the most vulnerable people are often least available. Those who are poor, refugees, homeless, have significant disabilities, or are gravely ill are often detached from the connections that give people a safe place in the world. They are without the networks of relations and the various ties to institutions that usually protect us and provide settings in which we can share our gifts.

But the loss of connections need not be so comprehensive to demonstrate the importance of hospitality. Because our society is highly mobile and because families are often deeply fractured, there are many other people who also need welcome into our homes, churches, and communities: elderly people, alienated teens, international students, immigrants, etc. Followers of Jesus have a rich tradition within which to respond, if we could only recognize how important our welcome is.

While concerns about hospitality have implications for public policy, human rights, institutional practices, and social services, the focus of this article will be on home- and church-based hospitality and especially on the characteristics of welcoming

places, gestures that communicate welcome, and the qualities of a good host.

Hospitality as a way of life in the church and the home

Hospitality is not so much a task as it is a way of living our lives and sharing ourselves. Although it involves responsibility and faithful performance of duties, hospitality emerges from a grateful heart; it is first a response of love and gratitude for God's love and welcome to us.

Hospitality will not occur in any significant way in our lives, homes, or churches unless we give it deliberate attention. Because the practice has been mostly forgotten and because it conflicts with a number of contemporary values, we must intentionally nurture a commitment to hospitality. It must also be nurtured because its blessings and benefits are not always immediately apparent. Because hospitality is a way of life, it must be cultivated over a lifetime. We do not become good at hospitality in an instant; we learn it in small increments of daily faithfulness.

Many people who practice hospitality describe it as the best and hardest thing they have ever done. In their experience, its difficulty and its joys lie close together. They find it to be the best thing because of how often they sense God's presence in the practice, because it is filled with unexpected blessings, because it is richly satisfying, and because of the opportunities it provides to become friends with so many different kinds of people.

Hospitality is difficult because it involves hard work. People wear out and struggle with limits. Our society places a high value on control, planning, and efficiency, but hospitality is unpredictable and often inefficient. We insist on measurable results and completed tasks, but the results of hospitality are impossible to quantify and the work of hospitality is rarely finished. Hospitality is also difficult today because of our overwhelming busyness. With already overburdened schedules, trying to offer substantial hospitality can drive us to despair. Most of us have significant responsibilities and hospitality cannot simply be added onto already impossible agendas. To offer hospitality, we will need to rethink and reshape our priorities.

Understanding the church as God's household has significant implications for hospitality. More than anywhere else, when we

gather as church our practice of hospitality should reflect God's gracious welcome. God is our host, and we are all guests of God's grace. However, in individual churches, we also have opportunities to act as hosts who welcome others, making a place for strangers and sojourners.

Churches are crucial settings for nurturing a life of hospitality. In some churches, expanding the hospitality that members offer to one another would be an important first step. Churches that have not nurtured a common life among members will find hospitality to strangers difficult. But churches that do have a rich common life can sometimes overlook strangers in their attention to and care for one another.

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Congregations committed to ministering to people in need sometimes overlook their own greatest resource, the fellowship of believers. Churches have generally done better with offering food programs and providing clothing closets than with welcoming into worship people significantly different from their congregations. Because we are unaware of the significance of our friendship and fellowship, our best resources often remain inaccessible to strangers.

Churches, like families, need to eat together to sustain their identity as a community. The table is central to the practice of hospitality in home and church. The nourishment we gain there is physical, spiritual, and social. Whether we gather around the table for the Lord's Supper or for a church potluck dinner, we are strengthened as a community. Meals shared together in church provide opportunities to sustain relationships and build new ones. They establish a space that is personal without being private, an excellent setting in which to begin friendships with strangers.

Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities, writes that "Welcome is one of the signs that a community is 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." He also offers an important warning: "A community which refuses to welcome—

whether through fear, weariness, insecurity, a desire to cling to comfort, or just because it is fed up with visitors—is dying spiritually.”¹

Families shaped by deep Christian faith and strong love for one another can offer an extraordinary gift in welcoming people into their homes. In living their lives in front of their guests, they provide a model of a healthy family, warts and all. They allow people to see what the Christian life looks like in the daily give and take of loving and forgiving. Around a dinner table, family and guests share food and life, and talk of that which gives meaning to their lives.

Similarly, single people who live together in intentional community have important opportunities to welcome those who need a safe place and room for friendships to grow. A household can be modest, with little space and few amenities, but it can be the site for wonderful hospitality. Welcome does not require many resources; it does require a willingness to share what we have, whether food, time, space, or money.

Characteristics of hospitable places

Welcoming places are comfortable and lived in. Even under difficult circumstances, they are settings in which people flourish. Although not necessarily beautifully maintained or decorated, they are cared for. Such places provide the people that inhabit them with shelter and sanctuary in the deepest sense of these words, not only with the shelter of physical buildings but also with the shelter of relationships.

In such places life is celebrated, yet the environment also has room for brokenness and deep disappointments. These places make faith and a hospitable way of life seem natural, not forced. Hospitable settings are often enhanced by the simple beauty of creation, where body and spirit are fed by attention to small details such as attractively prepared and good-tasting food, or flowers from a nearby garden. Hospitable places allow room for friendships to grow. Food, shelter, and companionship are all interrelated in these settings. In such environments, weary and lonely people can be restored to life.

When we have opportunities to design or to construct physical environments, it is important to choose the types of architecture

and physical arrangements that enable hospitality to occur. Inviting entrances, accessible facilities, comfortable furnishings, and adequate lighting communicate a sense of welcome. Designing layouts that are somewhat public yet encourage personal conversation can foster easier interactions among strangers.

Gestures that communicate welcome

Besides sharing food and drink with someone, which is central to almost every act of hospitality, the most important practice of welcome is giving a person our full attention. It is impossible to overstate the significance of paying attention, listening to people's stories, and taking time to talk with them. For those of us who feel that time is our scarcest resource, often this requires slowing ourselves down sufficiently to be present to the person. It means that we view individuals as human beings rather than as embodied needs or interruptions.

Hospitality can be inconvenient and we must be careful not to be grudging in our welcome. It is possible to invite someone in but also to communicate to them "in a thousand small ways" that we have other things we need to be doing, or that we are making a substantial sacrifice to be with them.² Obviously we cannot give any one person unlimited amounts of undivided attention, but often we are distracted and some of us pride ourselves on the number of things we can do simultaneously.

We communicate welcome and our appreciation for people when we remember their names, and when we make sure they are oriented to the practices of the group. When people are easily included in celebrations, when we invite participation in the life of the community, and when there is mutual sharing of lives and life stories, gracious welcome is evident. When we give people time and space, and create an environment that is respectful of them, strangers know they have found a safe place.

We also communicate welcome and respect when we allow guests to be gracious, when we value their contributions and invite them to share their gifts and insights. Henri Nouwen noted that "we will never believe that we have anything to give unless there is someone who is able to receive. Indeed, we discover our gifts in the eyes of the receiver."³

Qualities of a good host

Good hosts sort out priorities regarding time and resources and work through attitudes toward property and possessions. It is hard to open our lives to others if we are not willing to risk loss and damage to the things we value. Sustained hospitality requires a commitment to a simplified lifestyle and a light hold on possessions.

Good hosts also recognize their own frailties and weaknesses. When we offer hospitality, our faults as well as our strengths are open to scrutiny. Hospitality to strangers, especially when practiced in community, has a way of laying bare our lives and

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surfacing our inadequacies. Hosts who recognize the woundedness in themselves and their ongoing need for grace and mercy, and yet continue to open their lives to others, find in God their sufficiency.

Good hosts do not recoil from human suffering; they are willing to be present and share burdens even when they cannot solve problems. They do not insist on quick evidences of success, but rather understand the value of small acts of grace and “little moves against destructiveness.”⁴

People who have never experienced need or marginality, or who are uncomfortable with their own vulnerability, often find it easier to be hosts than guests. But the helper must also be able to receive, especially from those who look as if they have little to offer. Gracious hosts are open to the gifts of others and allow themselves to accept and enjoy their expressions of generosity.

Good hosts are, in some way, marginal to the larger society. Often, they choose to distance themselves from prevailing understandings of power, privilege, status, and possessions. However, they are not loners. They locate themselves within households, churches, or intentional communities that cultivate a countercultural identity that nurtures a distinct way of life and a strong commitment to welcome.

Good hosts often face difficulties posed by limited resources. Energy, space, food, time, identity, and the cohesion of family and

community can be strained when we welcome numbers of guests. In offering hospitality, hosts live between the vision of God's kingdom in which there is enough, even abundance, and the hard realities of human life in which doors are closed and locked, and some people are turned away.

So if we are concerned about the needs of strangers, offering hospitality requires both courage and humility. It involves not only a willingness to take some risks in welcoming others, but it also requires the kind of courage that lives close to our limits, continually pressing against the possible, yet always aware of the incompleteness and the inadequacy of our own responses. At the same time, living so close to the edge of sufficient resources increases our dependence on and our awareness of God's interventions and provision.

When hospitality is not practiced widely in the larger society, or when resources are not distributed fairly or adequately, personal hospitality cannot respond to every need. It can, however, meet some needs; it can be a living demonstration of what is possible when people care.

A welcoming place is rich with stories, rituals, and a history. It is never simply a physical space but a place alive with commitments and relationships—a space bounded by particular values and meanings.

Good hosts resist temptations to use hospitality as a means to another end. To use hospitality instrumentally is antithetical to seeing it as a way of life, as a tangible expression of love. When we use hospitality as a tool, we distort it, and the people we welcome know quickly that they are being used. Because today we worry so much about calculating costs and benefits, we readily apply this orientation to hospitality. We ask,

sometimes as an expression of good stewardship, "What will it accomplish?" "How is it useful?" Hospitality is rich with blessing, but such benefits come as gifts, and even churches must be wary of efforts to turn hospitality into some form of commercial exchange.

Good hosts allow the wideness of God's mercy and the generosity of God's welcome to frame their thinking about limits and boundaries. Nevertheless, they do struggle with the tensions that surface when seeking to sustain a particular identity and to

welcome strangers. A welcoming place is rich with stories, rituals, and a history. It is never simply a physical space but a place alive with commitments and relationships—a space bounded by particular values and meanings. Boundaries help define what a household, family, church, or community holds precious. The practice of hospitality challenges the boundaries of a community while it simultaneously depends on that community’s identity to make a space that nourishes life.

Offering hospitality in a world distorted by sin, injustice, and brokenness will rarely be easy. Good hosts need a combination of grace, spiritual and moral intuition, prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit, the wisdom of a tradition, and skills to assess each situation. Recognizing that their strength and hope come from God and are renewed in community, good hosts are careful to nourish their lives in the Scriptures and in the practices of the church. Good hosts discover the divine mystery in hospitality—that as they welcome strangers, they are themselves beloved guests of God’s grace.

Notes

¹ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Pr., 1989), 266–7.

² *Ibid.*, 267.

³ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 87.

⁴ Philip P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon, and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 85.

About the author

Christine Pohl is a professor of Christian social ethics at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. She has worked in various forms of ministry with refugees, homeless people, students, and seekers. Some portions of this article were taken from her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality As a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Eerdmans has recently released a study guide for the book.