

## “Holy Hospitality”

Some years ago we had a guest speaker in the church I was pastoring who made this statement: “Hospitality is one of the most important ethical issues for the church today.” When he said that, my immediate reaction was “Really? With all the other pressing ethical issues we are facing in the church, *hospitality is a major one?*” But the more I’ve thought about it I’ve come to believe he was spot on.

A number of studies have shown that people who visit a church will come back, or eventually join the church, not so much because of the church’s theology, or doctrine, or sermons, but whether or not one perceives the church as being *friendly!* Did the person feel *welcome?*

The word “hospitality” means “receiving or entertaining guests generously and kindly”. In the New Testament, the Greek word for hospitality is “*philonexia*”. It’s comprised of two Greek words, “*philo*” – friendliness/accepting, and “*nexia*” – stranger/outsider. In other words, it’s being friendly and accepting towards someone who is a stranger or outsider.

Hospitality has an important place in the Bible. Romans 12:13 says, “Practice hospitality.” 1 Peter 4:9 tells us, “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” And Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” In the church of the New Testament period one of the requirements for a “bishop” or “overseer” was that this church leader must be hospitable!

*Entertaining strangers as guests was a sacred duty throughout the Mediterranean world, and hospitality was very important for people in the early church.* Traveling in Bible times was not like it is today. There were no Holiday Inns or Comfort Inns, no Crackle Barrels, no Burger Kings or McDonalds. The few inns that existed were often places of ill repute. When traveling, one had to worry about darkness, and robbers. So, Christians were urged to open their homes and welcome one another. Believers on journeys often would seek out other Christians for lodging and protection, as well as for fellowship and worship. Today, of course, things are much different. There are plenty of places to stay and to eat. But I think all the evidence is telling us that *hospitality is still a vital matter for the church!*

As I’ve already indicated, for most people searching for a church home, *feeling a warm and friendly welcome* counts for more than a church’s doctrine or denomination. This is not to suggest that doctrine isn’t important. It is. But *whether or not guests feel a warm welcome* will carry much weight in determining whether or not they come back.

By the way, I prefer using the word “guest” rather than “visitor”. A “visitor” is “one who goes or comes to inspect”, “one who makes a short stay at a place for a particular purpose”. However, a “guest” is “a person to whom hospitality is extended” “a person held in honor who is due special courtesies”. I like that!

*Most churches view themselves as being friendly!* Studies have been done where people in a church are asked to rate themselves on how friendly they are. Then people who came to that church for the first time were asked whether the church was friendly or not. Guess which group

usually sees the church as being more friendly? Right – *those already in the church!* If you ask people in a congregation, “Are you a friendly church?” most will answer, “Oh yes!” But it feels different if you're coming into a church for the first time!

*Do you remember ever visiting church for the first time, what it felt like?* When I "retired" Nancy and I started looking for another church. What an eye-opening experience that was! We visited some churches where no one spoke to us other than the person handing out the bulletin and saying a perfunctory "good morning". Nancy and I went to one church where there was a man and lady serving as greeters in the parking lot. I thought, great idea to have people greet you even before you walked through the door! As we drove up this man and woman were talking to each other. We got out of the car and one of two said a quick good morning to us, then quickly turned back to the other and resumed their conversation, ignoring us.

One morning I went to a church by myself. I got there few minutes late. Since they were praying in the service, a few of us waited in the lobby area. One man was gabbing away to a few others, laughing and joking. I stood by the door, being totally ignored. "Am I invisible?" I thought. When we went into the sanctuary, people were out of their seats greeting one another – I didn't know where to sit, for fear of sitting where someone had been sitting. I felt a strong urge to leave – but didn't. The end result was that I zero desire to go back to that church.

Four months later I was appointed to pastor a church once again, but during that time period in all of the churches we visited, we only went to *several churches* where someone (other than an usher handing us a bulletin) made an effort to talk to us and get acquainted.

You may say, “Harry, you're just too sensitive”. Maybe so. But isn't it up to the *host* to take the initiative and help a guest to feel welcomed? If you have a guest in your home, do you ignore that person? Do you assume it's up to your guest to create conversation and a friendly atmosphere?

Different times I have suggested to those in the congregation who attend regularly that they take a Sunday off and go to another church where they've never been before, just to see how it feels to be walking into a church for the first time. Of course, I always hope that they come back to our church the next Sunday!

*For most of us, being hospitable requires effort.* Notice, the Scripture in Romans 12:13 says *practice* hospitality. Being hospitable is something that needs to be *practiced* if we are to get better at it.

*In most congregations, if there is no plan, if the church is not being intentional about being warm and welcoming, it isn't going to happen.* Why? Because by nature we humans tend to gravitate towards our friends, the people we know well. I have seen it time and time again in the church: church members *before and after worship*, standing around in their own little groups, happily talking with friends. Someone new to the church comes in, and is ignored. I can't tell how many times at church events, like a covered dish supper, people in the church will sit with

their friends, talking away, and someone new to the church winds up sitting alone. There have been numerous times when Nancy and I have been the only ones who will make an effort to sit with this person or family, and talk with them. I see red when this happens!

I realize, some of us by nature are reserved and shy. I'm not one who easily talks to a stranger. I've had to really work at this, but it still doesn't come naturally to me. But the Bible doesn't say, "Practice hospitality *if you're naturally outgoing!*" It just says, "Practice hospitality." We can *all* work at pushing ourselves to go up to someone in church whom we don't know, or don't know well, and say hello, smile, introduce ourselves. If we *practice* being warm and friendly we can get better at it.

Focusing on a guest rather than chatting with our friends is just as important *after the worship service is over*. Here's the thing: we can talk with our close friends outside of church any time.

Here's an important aside to this whole matter of being hospitable: Of course, the friendliness of the people is of utmost importance. But there are other factors also. In several churches I've had the Visioning Team, or Trustees, or Administrative Board members do a walk through, imagining they are coming to the church for the first time. What's their first impression as they drive up to the building? The parking lot? What do the church grounds look like? Is the grass cut, the shrubbery trimmed? Does the building look rundown, or well maintained? Which door do you enter? What would stand out as people come through the door? Is the lobby area bright and cheerful, or blah and dingy? Is it cluttered with all sorts of things? Is there adequate signage? Where are the restrooms? Where's the church nursery?

What's it like to first walk into the sanctuary? The worship service itself can help person feel welcomed and included, or feel like an outsider. It's good to realize that more and more people have no recollection of church – coming to a worship service is like coming into a foreign country! Is the church bulletin “user friendly”? Even calling it “church bulletin” can be an issue. Perhaps it is more understandable to use the term “program”. Words like prelude, offertory mean nothing to unchurched people. Many no longer know the Lord's Prayer – so it's good to have this printed in the program or put on the screen.

Of course, for families with children, *the church nursery and childcare* are critical areas. Parents who've placed their children in top-notch childcare and preschool care facilities will not settle for unsafe, outdated, poorly equipped church nurseries.

Besides showing hospitality in the church, we can also *practice hospitality in the home*. 2 Kings, chapter 4, tells us about a woman from Shunem who provides hospitality for the prophet Elisha. She sets aside a rooftop chamber, with a bed, table, chair, and lamp. So whenever Elisha came through there, he could have a place to stay – for privacy, prayer, rest. Her home was a comfortable refuge for the visiting prophet.

Back in the frontier days of the 1800's in our country there was a tradition among Evangelical Christians known as “Shunammite households”. Traveling preachers and circuit riders who

braved the rigors of the westward movement lived a rugged and harsh life. Extreme weather, constant travel, bad roads and poor food took their toll. In response to their needs, many homes were designated as “Shunammite households”. Each of these homes would maintain a “prophet’s chamber” – a room always available on a moment’s notice to provide hospitality for these frontier preachers. This was a 19<sup>th</sup> century twist on the New Testament’s instructions to believers to practice hospitality!

What are some of the ways we can practice hospitality in our homes, and give a warm welcome that goes *beyond* the circle of our close friends and family members? *We can invite someone new in the church or neighborhood to dinner.* Early in my ministry I left pastoral ministry and took a job at Fulton Bank in Lancaster. We joined a church in Lancaster, and as new members we had a very nice family in the church serve as our "sponsors". They invited Nancy and me and our young son to a meal in their home. It was a gracious act on their part that we really appreciated.

*Sometimes a host home is needed for a singing group, or some other type group or guest speaker staying in the area.* Providing an overnight stay or meal can be an act of hospitality.

*We might host a small group, or a neighborhood Bible study group in our home.* Invite people in our neighborhood, especially if they don’t have a church home. This can provide a warm atmosphere where they can sense God’s love through us.

*In almost every church there are people who are living alone, or people going through a rough time, who might welcome an invitation into our home for a meal, or an evening of fun or Christian fellowship.* In one church we served a lady had recently lost her husband. We invited Virginia to join us for Christmas dinner, and she accepted. I'm not sure what it did for her, but our holiday was enriched by having her there.

A mail carrier from Oregon and his wife had to travel to a distant city, where the wife required special medical care in a hospital. The only persons they knew were a young professor and his wife who had come to their church for a brief time 5 years before they moved to that city. The professor and his wife got them connected with other believers. Afterwards the mail carrier said, “During the first week, my wife received good care in the hospital. People we had not known before opened their homes to me so that each of my nights was spent in the warmth of Christian love and fellowship. I stayed in three different homes and had a place to lodge for as long as we were in that city. One woman baked a birthday cake for my wife, though they had never met her until the cake was presented at the hospital.” *Hospitality in our homes!*

Romans 12:13 simply says, “Practice hospitality”. *The reason God’s people are to be hospitable is not just that we should brush up on our social skills! There is a Biblical reason.* In the Old Testament Israel was to welcome the stranger, *because God welcomed them* when they were strangers, and invited them to be His special people. Leviticus 19:34 says, “The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt...”.

In the New Testament, Christians are supposed to practice hospitality *not just to be nice, sociable people, but because God has welcomed us, sinful and undeserving as we are, and invited us into His family and household through Jesus.*

One of the things that set Jesus apart from the religious leaders of His day (such as Pharisees and scribes), was that Jesus welcomed the stranger, the outcast, the misfit, and said God's kingdom was open to them. In the parable of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25), on Judgment Day Jesus says to the one group, "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...*" (Matthew 25:35). They respond, "When, Lord, did we welcome *You*? We don't recall doing that!" Jesus says, when you did it to one of the least of the people around you, you did it to Me.

In graciously welcoming the stranger, the new person on the block, the guest coming to our church for the first time, the man or woman or teenager who recently joined the church – we are providing hospitality to Jesus!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.*  
*Community United Methodist Church*  
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