



Chapter Two

The Practice of Radical Hospitality

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35)

A young woman stands awkwardly in the church's foyer with her toddler, looking around at all the people she does not know. An acquaintance at work casually mentioned how she loved the praise band at her church and invited the woman to visit, but now she is not so sure this was a good idea. She is self-conscious about the fussiness of her little one, unsure where the bathroom is, too timid to ask directions, doubting whether this is the right worship service for her, or whether this is even the right church. Except for a funeral and a couple of weddings, she's never been inside a church. Where is she to sit, what is it going to feel like to sit alone with her child, and what if her baby makes too much noise? She feels the need for prayer, for some connection with others, and for something to lift her above the daily grind of her job, the unending bills, the conflicts with her ex-husband, and her worries for her child, but visiting a church for the first time feels daunting. Being the stranger among people who already know one another is unnerving.

Now, imagine what would happen if the people of the congregation took Jesus's words seriously when he said, "I was a stranger and you

welcomed me . . .” They would see this woman and the whole bundle of hopes and anxieties, desires and discomforts that she carries, and think, “She belongs to Jesus’s family, and Jesus wants us to treat her as we would treat Jesus himself if he were here.” With this in mind, what would be the quality of the welcome, the efforts to ease the awkwardness? What would be the eagerness to listen to her and learn about the life she lives and the things that matter most to her? What would be the enthusiasm to help, to serve, to graciously encourage her? Taking Jesus seriously leads us to practice radical hospitality.

Christian Hospitality

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Radical Hospitality. Out of genuine love for Christ and for others, they take the initiative to invite, welcome, and include newcomers and help them grow in faith as they become part of the body of Christ. They focus on those beyond their congregation with as much passion as they attend to the nurture and growth of those who already feel connected, and they apply their utmost creativity, energy, and effectiveness to the task, exceeding all expectations.

The roots of the word *hospitality* originally meant serving as a good host as well as being a good guest. The Latin *hospes* meant both *host* and *guest*, and is derived from *hosti*, which means *enemy* (think hostile!) and *poi*, which means *people*. Whether you were a guest among strangers or were welcoming a stranger as a guest in your space, hospitality came to mean engaging strangers with goodwill, overcoming the estrangement, the distance, the unknown with a receiving, open spirit.

Christian hospitality reveals a genuine love for others, an outward focus, a reaching out to those not yet known, a grace that motivates people to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviors to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of newcomers. It describes the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ. Hospitality brings the heart of God into view through us.

Hospitality also describes the yearning to be *sent* by Christ into the lives of others to share the gracious love of Christ in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. Radical hospitality respects the dignity of others, and expresses God's initiating and inviting love for every person. It is a mark of Christian discipleship, a quality of Christian community, a concrete expression of commitment to grow in Christ-likeness by seeing ourselves as belonging to the community of faith "not to be served but to serve" (Matthew 20:28). As we practice hospitality, we become part of God's invitation to abundant life. It is Christ's welcome, not merely our own, that we offer others.

Grounded in Christ

Hospitality streams through scripture, with both its attractional and missional aspects, and it's grounded in God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

In Deuteronomy, God reminds the people of Israel to welcome the stranger, the sojourner, the wanderer. Why? "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19).

We, too, were once estranged from God, strangers to the faith, residing outside the community where we now find rich resources of meaning, grace, hope, friendship, and service. We belong to the body of Christ because of someone's hospitality. Someone invited us or reached out to us, encouraged us, offered us the embrace of Christ. Someone—a parent, a spouse, a friend, a pastor, or even a stranger—helped us feel that we belonged to God. We were engrafted into the body of Christ. If we had not felt accepted, loved, welcomed, and supported in some measure, we would not have remained connected.

At every turn, the disciples seem ready to draw boundaries and distinctions that keep people at a distance from Jesus. They have a thousand reasons to ignore, avoid, and thwart the approach of people, reminding Jesus that some of these people are too young, too sick, too sinful, too Roman, too blind, or too Gentile to deserve his attention. Jesus teaches, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matthew

18:5). In every instance, Jesus radically challenges the disciples' expectations by overstepping boundaries to invite people toward him.

Jesus not only invited people into his life, he also lived with such authentic compassion that people invited him into their places. He dined with tax collectors and sinners, whom everyone else avoided. He approached the woman at the well with such grace that she did not turn away. Rather, she talked with him and listened to him. Jesus stepped toward people others stepped away from: the blind, the sick, the paralyzed, the grieving, those with unclean spirits. He didn't wait for people to find him; he searched for and found them, and accepted their hospitality while offering his own. He entered into their lives, and then into their hearts. He welcomed strangers, and became the stranger welcomed into households, dinner parties, wedding feasts, and everyday conversations.

Christian hospitality has us seeing people as Jesus sees them and seeing Jesus in the people God brings us into contact with.

Biblical Hospitality and the Early Church

The Apostle Paul implores the followers of Christ to practice an active hospitality. "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7). The grace received in Christ places upon Christians the joyful gift and challenging task of offering others the same welcome they themselves have received in Christ.

The Letter to the Hebrews cautions, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). The people we befriend often prove to be those through whom God graces us. Churches change when they form relationships with newcomers and accept their spiritual gifts and faith experiences. Ministry expands. God uses newcomers to breathe new life into communities of faith.

Paul allowed himself to be shaped and formed by the communities he reached with God's grace. "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9: 22). He did not disguise

who he really was. But he was willing to adapt himself to varying contexts to listen, learn, and appreciate those who did not feel they belonged to God's family.

The tenth chapter of Acts describes the conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile, who follows a vision from God by welcoming Peter into his home. More important, the story details a conversion for Peter, his opening himself to possibilities he never before imagined. Peter steps into Cornelius's house, full of strangers that religious law restricts Peter from mixing with, and he eats with them, converses with them, listens to their dreams. The Holy Spirit works through Peter and he realizes that these persons, Gentile and unclean, are worthy of his focus and time, and that they, too, are recipients of God's redeeming love. Peter sees his hosts differently, and this mutual hospitality, offered and received, changes the course of Christianity.

Hospitality and Early Methodism

John Wesley and the early Methodists practiced hospitality in ways so radical in their day that many traditional church leaders found their activities offensive. Wesley preached to thousands on roadsides and in open fields in order to reach coal miners, field laborers, factory workers, the underclass, and the poorest of the poor. He invited them into a way of life and nurtured in them a strong sense of belonging as he organized societies and classes for mutual accountability, support, and care. Wesley taught of God's prevenient grace: the preceding, preparing grace that opens people to God.

According to Wesley, before people ever consciously come to faith, they have inner desires for relationship to God that are stifled, forgotten, neglected, ignored, or denied. By the grace that precedes awareness or decision, God creates readiness for faith and fosters the nascent eagerness to please God. By God's grace, people may be more ready than we realize to accept the initiative of Christ. Just as God's prevenient grace enables people to move closer to God, so also God's grace works through the church to offer relationships with others and with God. God's grace

activates interest and eagerness for relationship in the individual just as God's grace uses the invitational posture and outward focus of faith communities to reach out in love.

Wesley broke out of the constraints of the institution of the church when he experimented with preaching outdoors to the crowds gathering before and after work instead of confining himself to the pulpits of churches. His emerging awareness of God's call resulted not merely in a change of heart, but of location, of place, as he opened himself to being sent. He stepped away from the academic cloisters and the Church of England pulpits into the open fields. He moved beyond the homes of priests and professors and into the homes of the poor. He crossed social and economic borders to learn about the daily lives of people who did not enjoy his privilege and status. Because of this, God helped Wesley see the world differently. He realized the mission field was changing, and a singular focus on parish churches would no longer be sufficient. He trained his eyes to willfully observe the people whom the established church barely noticed.

Communities of faith that practice radical hospitality willfully see people most churches barely notice. Ministries based on missional assumptions rescue us from preoccupation with ourselves and reorient us toward our neighbor and toward the transformation of the world. An outward focus appropriately highlights the "sentness" of Christian disciples, and reaffirms that God uses us as ambassadors of Christ, making his appeal through us. Radical hospitality means little when we only practice it for an hour each week to welcome newcomers to our worship services if we don't even know the people who live next door to us and fail to practice the hospitality of Christ in our daily encounters.

The Learning Congregation

Leaders of a congregation wanted to deepen their understanding of hospitality, growing beyond the practical steps recommended by books on church growth. They had the techniques right—helpful signage, accessible parking, trained greeters, and a system for following up with guests. Now they sought a culture of hospitality that extended into all disciple-

ship classes, mission projects, music teams, and youth ministries. The pastor invited ten people to a series of lunches for in-depth study and reflection on welcoming people into the body of Christ. These people loved the church, lived the faith, and were those whom others naturally followed. They arranged their work schedules and family responsibilities to attend for an hour and a half, once a week, for six weeks.

In the first session, they shared how each of them had come to be a part of the body of Christ. They discussed questions such as, “Who first invited us or brought us to church? Who reached out to us and made the life of faith appealing? How did we become more involved, and what ministry did we first participate in? What made us feel like we belonged? What difficulties did we have to overcome?” They talked about people, places, services, relationships, pastors, and studies that God used to draw them in and form them into disciples. Some remembered making attempts to enter faith communities where they felt resistance, obstacles, coldness. Next, they talked about what had brought each one into relationship with the church to which they currently belonged. How had they first heard about the church? What was their first experience like? What made them feel welcome, or what made it hard to connect? Many were surprised to hear how difficult it had been for some people to feel warmly embraced. Others reminisced about particular people who encouraged them. It was an honest and profoundly moving conversation, intermingling the experiences of long-term members with those who had recently become part of the faith community.

During another session, the leaders delved into the theological meaning of the church as the body of Christ and the “why” of hospitality. They discussed the purpose for which the church exists—to draw people into relationship with God through Jesus Christ—and how this changes lives. To live in community with others is part of God’s plan. A faith community is *a school for love*, the place where God’s Spirit forms us and where we learn to give love to and receive love from friends, neighbors, and strangers. The church is the presence of Christ in the world, the means by which God knits us into community in order to transform our lives and the lives of those around us.

Later, they talked honestly about the great gifts they had received through belonging to a community of faith and from their relationship with Christ. People described how the faith community had helped them rear their children, and they recounted tender moments of grace that had sustained them during seasons of grief. They gave God thanks for close friendships that had shaped their lives and given them insight for dealing with life's challenges. Moreover, the leaders considered honestly, and with humility, what they thought had been the greatest contribution each of them had made to building the body of Christ. Some talked about mentoring students about the faith, others about mission projects they had led, and others about financial gifts they had given. They concluded that the greatest contribution they can make to the body of Christ is to offer love or help a newcomer feel genuinely welcome so that she or he receives what each one of them had received.

The fruit of the learning experience was multiplied as each of those who participated initiated similar conversations in the ministries and groups to which they belonged until the culture of the church started to shift.

Our Actual Neighbors

Many people, despite our prayerful encouragement and invitation, will never visit a church facility or attend a worship service with us. To offer the grace of Christ, we have to do as Jesus did and engage people where they are rather than expecting them to come to us.

Some faith communities have used *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door*, by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, to shift the culture toward more outward-focused thinking (Baker Books, 2012). The book uses a diagram and an exercise to deepen our understanding of hospitality with those who live closest to us. The diagram has nine boxes, three across and stacked three high. We're asked to write our home address in the middle box. This box represents where we live, our own home or apartment. The eight empty boxes around it represent the households of the people who live nearest us.

In an exercise I find personally convicting, the book asks us to answer three questions about the people who live in each of those houses represented by those eight boxes.

First, write the names of the people who live in the house represented by the box.

Second, write down some relevant information about the people who live in each of the eight houses, some data or facts that you couldn't learn just by standing in your driveway and looking at their home.

Third, write down something more you know about them because you've shared a conversation or experience with them (paraphrased from *The Art of Neighboring*, p. 37).

Ray Altman, pastor of Leander United Methodist Church in Leander, Texas, preached a sermon series based on the *Art of Neighboring* and led a well-attended discussion group along with it. The conversations helped people see their neighborhoods as places God has sent them, and to view their neighbors as people to intentionally meet and get to know. The focus on neighboring resulted in countless stories of people relating to their neighbors more intentionally and prayerfully, meeting and forming relationships that led to meaningful conversations and connections.

Ben Trammell, pastor of University United Methodist Church, San Antonio, used *The Art of Neighboring* with leadership teams and in a sermon series at churches earlier in his ministry. "Instead of accidents of geography, neighbors become the reason we live where we live," he says. "People made a playful contest out of it. People received points for each box they filled out on the chart as they learned more about the people who lived around them or had a meal with a neighbor. Those already naturally inclined to throw a block party came to see such activities as having a kingdom impact, which led to longer conversations about how the ordinary and everyday part of our life can be the very thing God calls us to use for the cause of Christ."

Even those of us who have learned to love our neighbors through many years of belonging to a church find it difficult to muster the courage to knock on a door of an unknown neighbor and introduce ourselves. It feels risky, awkward, uncomfortable. It's easier to welcome the stranger

than to become the stranger. We feel vulnerable. It feels a bit radical! God's grace frequently pushes us to places outside our comfort zone where we would never go if left to our own inclinations. Becoming the stranger in another person's space requires humility.

Some churches have adapted the chart with the nine boxes for use by people sitting in their seats while attending worship, with the boxes referring to people sitting in front of them, beside them, or behind them. Do we know their names, or anything about them? Have we ever shared with them a conversation or experience?

Congregational studies, sermon series, and shared readings help a church learn. These conversations foster a hospitality we carry with us wherever we live and work and play. They teach tangible ways for mission to become a way of life for Christians.

WHO ARE OUR NEIGHBORS?

Many children's sermons include lines like "Are the children of Africa our neighbors?" Everyone shouts, "Yes!" "Are the children of Asia our neighbors?" "Yes!" This rightly fosters a sense of relationship with people everywhere. However, it's easier to love a neighbor in general than a person in particular. Jesus tells the story of a wealthy person who loved God, and even loved his neighbors in general. But he never noticed Lazarus, suffering outside his own front gate (Luke 16:17-31). What if Jesus intended for us to love our actual neighbors, the people who live their lives in the same spaces we do?

Why Do People Need Our Church?

What do people need that churches offer? In *Leading Beyond the Walls* (Abingdon Press, 2002), Adam Hamilton reminds us (p. 21) that every church should be clear about the answers to the questions, "Why do peo-

ple need Christ? Why do people need the church? And why do people need this particular congregation?" Is it too presumptuous, self-righteous, or arrogant to perceive a responsibility, or even a calling, to connect with others or invite others so that they may receive what we have received?

What do those of us who belong to a community of faith receive that our neighbors need? Theologically, the answer may be "a relationship to God through Jesus Christ." This is too abstract for most, and for many it feels heavy-laden with negative experiences of aggressive evangelistic styles. But the question persists. How do we express with integrity and clarity what we hope others receive by belonging to a faith community?

People need to know God loves them, that they are of value. They want to live a life that matters, and to belong to a community that makes a difference. People need to know that they are not alone; that when they face difficulties, they are surrounded by a community of grace; and that they do not have to figure out entirely for themselves how to cope with family tensions, self-doubts, periods of despair, economic reversal, and the behaviors that hurt themselves or others. People need to know the peace that runs deeper than an absence of conflict, the hope that sustains them even through painful periods of grief, the sense of belonging that blesses them and stretches them and lifts them out of their own preoccupations. People need to learn how to offer and accept forgiveness, how to serve and be served, how to love and be loved. They need relationships that remind them that life is not having something to live on but something to live for, that life comes not from taking for oneself but by giving of oneself. People need a sustaining sense of purpose.

Having said that, the last thing anyone wants is to be told by someone else what they need! Inviting people into Christ does not involve pounding people with "oughts" and "shoulds." Some people recognize a yearning or a curiosity, and they search for meaning, for relationship, and for God. But most people discover their need for God's grace and for the love of Christ through the experience of receiving it. Countless people do not know how hungry they are for genuine community until they experience it, never know they need the connection to God that worship fosters until they regularly practice it, and sense something missing from their lives and

don't know what it is until they immerse themselves in service to others. When we connect with people through a Bible study, a Dinner Church, a Christian support group, a prayer ministry, a praise team, a service project, or while serving at a food bank, we put ourselves in the most advantageous place to be shaped by the Spirit of God. By such ministries, the Spirit fills the empty spaces in our lives, and God's initiating grace calls us out of ourselves and into the world of Christ's service. The power of a conversation or an invitation to change a person's life must never be underestimated! Perhaps that is how God changed each one of us.

WHEREVER HE WENT

Whenever Rev. Cornelius Henderson shared a meal with friends in a restaurant, he would say to the server after all the orders were taken, "When you bring the food, we're going to have a moment of prayer. If there's anything you'd like us to pray for, let me know." Almost always, the server would ask for prayers for a child, a friend, or a parent. Most were touched by the offer. Often servers would speak with Rev. Henderson as he was leaving, and ask, "How did you know that I needed prayer?" Rev. Henderson, later Bishop Henderson, didn't wait for people to show up at church in order for him to share the grace of God. He carried it with him wherever he went.

Interlaced by Grace

When I worked in a clergy-training program at a hospital, I was called to the emergency room to support an older man whose wife had been brought to the hospital by ambulance. The couple had started their morning with no idea how events would unfold that day. After shopping, they stopped at a restaurant, and while she was eating, she suffered a heart attack and was rushed to the hospital. Shortly after I arrived in the small consultation room with the husband, a doctor approached him to an-

nounce that his wife had died. The doctor handed me an envelope that contained her wedding ring, her necklace, and her eyeglasses to give to him. Needless to say, the man was stunned with grief. After a few minutes together, I offered to call his pastor. He did not have a pastor because they belonged to no faith community. I asked if I could call a relative to take him home, and he told me his family was scattered across the country, living many hundreds of miles away. I asked if I could call a coworker to be with him, and he told me he had retired years before from work in another city. What about a neighbor I could call? He told me that he and his wife didn't know the names of the other residents in the apartment since they'd only lived there three years. I helped him with the paperwork, offered a prayer as I held his hands in mine, handed him the envelope that contained the jewelry and glasses, accompanied him to the exit, and watched him walk away alone to cope with the shocking news of the day and to grasp its meaning for himself all on his own.

Life is not meant to be that way. God intends for people to live their lives interlaced by the grace of God with others, to know the gift and task of community from birth to death, to have the interpretive structures of faith to sustain them through times of joy and periods of desperate agony, to have the perspective of eternity, and to "take hold of the life that really is life" (1 Timothy 6:19).

In most communities, 40 to 60 percent of people have no relationship to a church. A majority of our neighbors on the streets where we live do not know the name of a pastor to call when they face unexpected grief. Most of our coworkers have a few close friends and a circle of acquaintances but do not know the sustaining grace that a faith community offers. Most of the families we sit alongside at our children's soccer tournaments and band concerts, most of the students we meet from the university, and most of the people who repair our cars and serve us in restaurants do not have a community where they learn peace, justice, genuine repentance, forgiveness, love, and unmerited grace. Most of those browsing in the businesses where we shop and sitting behind us at baseball games do not know what it's like to join their voices with others in song and how this lifts the spirit. Most of those who share our benches at bus stops, who sit

across from us in waiting rooms, who take their children to the school down the block from us do not have a community that prompts them to serve, to take risks for others, and to practice generosity.

BABY GREETER

A church in South Texas developed a "Baby Greeter" ministry. Each week, a woman would welcome guests with infants to show them the nursery, introduce them to the people who would be caring for their children, teach them the security and paging processes, and tell them which restrooms have changing tables. She showed them the comfortable rocking chairs for parents of infants, the cry room, and the crayons and coloring books for young children. She gave them a copy of the childcare policies. Most important, she learned the name of every baby who came through the door.

"We're such a friendly church. We do fine with hospitality." Sometimes the greatest strength of faith communities is also their greatest weakness. Those who already belong grow to love one another so much that their lives and interests become intertwined. These tight-knit friendships become impenetrable to others, cliquish with a closeness that closes out new people. Those on the inside don't even notice; they feel content because their own needs are met. The church becomes inward-focused, blind to the guests who feel like outsiders, and oblivious to the people who live in the immediate neighborhood.

We offer people a way to connect to that mysteriously sustaining community that finds its purpose in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the life he lived—the lessons he taught, the people he touched, the healing he offered, the forgiveness he gave, the love he showed, and the sacrifice he made—is the life that really is life.

Hospitality means we pray, plan, prepare, and work toward the purpose of helping others receive what we have received in Christ.

Radical Hospitality?

If the biblical quality of hospitality includes all these things, why intensify it with the word *radical*? What is Radical Hospitality?

Radical describes practices that are rooted in the life of Christ and that radiate into the lives of others. *Radical* means “drastically different from ordinary practice, outside the normal,” and so it provokes practices that exceed expectations, that go the second mile, that take welcoming the stranger to surprising new levels. By *radical*, I don’t mean wild-eyed, out of control, or in your face. I mean people offering the absolute utmost of themselves, their creativity, their abilities, and their energy to offer the gracious embrace of Christ to others.

Churches characterized by Radical Hospitality are not just friendly and courteous, passively receiving guests warmly. Instead, they exhibit a restlessness, an unsettling awareness of those who stand in need of grace. They are genuinely curious about and interested in forming relationships with people outside the faith community. They are eager to carry Christ’s initiating love with them into their daily lives.

Faith communities practicing Radical Hospitality offer a surprising and unexpected quality of depth and authenticity in their caring for the stranger. People intuitively sense that “these people really care about me. They genuinely want the best for me. I’m not just a number, a customer, a target in their strategy to grow their church. I’m welcomed along with them into the body of Christ.” This is Radical Hospitality. Such faith communities surprise people with a glimpse of the unmerited gracious love of God that they see in Christ.

Radical Hospitality Changes Everything

Radical Hospitality shapes the work of everyone who offers Christian service and leadership in the faith community. Everyone prays, plans, and works so that their specific ministries with children, missions, the facility, worship, music, outreach, and study are done with excellence and with

special attention to newcomers and to reaching out to others wherever they are. *Radical* intensifies expectations and magnifies the central importance of this relational element of our life together in Christ. Radical Hospitality means we offer our utmost and highest, and we do it joyfully and authentically, not grudgingly or superficially, because our initiative represents the initiating love of Christ.

All churches offer some form of hospitality, but Radical Hospitality describes faith communities that exceed expectations. Congregations that practice Radical Hospitality do not settle for mediocrity; they strive for excellence.

Two examples illustrate the difference Radical Hospitality makes: summer programs for children and the leadership team responsible for property and facilities.

Many churches offer vacation Bible school or some other discipleship activity for children during the summer. If we asked some churches, "What's the purpose of this program?" we might receive the answer, "For our children to have a fun experience while school is out." If the purpose of the summer ministry is simply for children to have fun, then why not load them into a van, take them to the movies, and let them spend time with their friends? Such a purpose cannot sustain a children's ministry with integrity.

Other congregations answer, "The purpose is so that *our children and grandchildren* hear about God and learn the stories of the faith through songs, crafts, drama, and other enjoyable activities." The ministry now serves a higher purpose. Clearly stating this purpose guides the leaders in selecting people to serve as teachers, choosing curriculum, and planning communications. If someone brings a friend, leaders view it as an added delight, a good opportunity to warmly welcome a guest. This attitude is basic Christian attractational hospitality.

Now imagine a church that takes this further: "The purpose of our summer children's ministry is so that our children and grandchildren *and the children of the neighborhood* hear about God and learn the stories of the faith so that more families experience Christ's love through a genuine faith community." Radical Hospitality makes an obvious difference. To focus programs, not just on the children of those who already belong but also

upon those who have never attended church, guides planners to use other forms of communications about the event—posters in local businesses, flyers on bulletin boards in Laundromats, signs on the church lawn, hand-outs to parents at a public playground, banners and yard signs in the neighborhood. To be driven by this purpose means that planners might change the location, dates, and times of the children's ministry, perhaps holding activities in a park or cooperating with a neighborhood school close to concentrations of younger families, even if that location is a considerable distance from the church facility. The desire to reach children of families who do not already belong to the congregation might mean that the planners invite leadership differently, particularly choosing teachers and musicians who have a gift for making newcomers feel at home. It might mean offering aspects of the ministry in another language. An outward focus inspires planners to gather information on each child who participates so that leaders can follow up with families. Planners would evaluate success not just by how many of their own children participate in the ministry, but by how many new families the church forms relationships with and how many people move toward greater involvement.

With the Spirit's prompting, there is no end to how far a congregation might go. Some churches offer Sidewalk Sunday school, sending vans full of teachers into neighborhoods full of kids in areas beyond the usual range of the church's outreach, where they provide for an hour of stories, singing, crafts, and teaching close to where the children live and play.

Growing churches say *yes* to ideas that declining churches say *no* to. They are willing to do things other churches are unwilling to try.

Let's look at another example. Most committees tasked with oversight of the church facilities assure that buildings are properly insured, the air-conditioning works, and the roof doesn't leak. In many churches, they simply deal with the crises that arise, and they focus primarily on property, not people. They practice basic hospitality, seeing that people are safe and moderately comfortable while they participate in services and ministries.

Imagine a facilities team that practices Radical Hospitality, viewing their work as a ministry that makes certain that the buildings themselves communicate hospitality, an unmistakable sense of welcome, and complete

accessibility: "Our purpose is to ensure that these buildings serve the highest purposes of ministry in Christ's name, and we dedicate ourselves to making the facilities as useful, inviting, friendly, and open as possible."

Such a team continually searches for ways to make the facilities look fresh, appealing, inviting, easy to navigate, safe, clean, and attractive. They don't settle with anything less than the best, and they take immediate action when they notice messy restrooms, peeling paint, musty carpets, inadequate lighting, potholes in parking lots, distracting and inadequate sound systems, or playgrounds overgrown with weeds. People don't allow their houses to fall into disrepair, and they never send their own grandchildren into an unkempt backyard full of unsafe play equipment. Why do they let God's house fall into such disrepair? Facilities speak a message about what the church thinks of itself, how importantly it takes its mission, how confidently it sees its future. Our buildings tell the world what our faith community thinks about children, senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and guests.

Facilities work against our witness if guests struggle to figure out confusing and outdated signs, convoluted hallways, and staircases that insiders have grown accustomed to but which overwhelm newcomers. Radical Hospitality pushes facilities teams beyond discussing merely insurance and leaky roofs.

It is easier to create a culture of hospitality in a physical space that itself communicates welcome.

Most people work in newer buildings with modern lighting, contemporary colors, and fire security systems that make them feel safe. They eat at restaurants and sleep in hotels and attend movies that meet high standards. They are accustomed to quality and cleanliness in restrooms, and they come with high expectations about the safety of the nursery for their children. They feel like they've traveled back in time when they see 1950s institutional green paint, rusty exposed piping and cramped toilets, dim lights in hallways, no windows on the doors of children's classrooms, and no smoke detectors. We can do better.

I visited a church that had changed the time of its worship services and had moved the pastor's office to the former youth room. Two years after these changes, outdoor signs still had the old worship schedule, and

the panel on the pastor's office still described it as the youth room. The incident sounds quaint, and members found the delay in updating signs amusing, like a self-deprecating family joke. But they might as well hang a sign that says "For Insiders Only" on the front of the church. Nothing about the facility said, "Welcome. We want you to feel at home here."

Every faith community says that it warmly welcomes people who use wheelchairs or walkers. Our physical spaces speak a different message: "Sure we embrace people with disabilities . . . as long as they can climb up the stairs and slide into the pews just like everyone else!" We can do better.

Radical Hospitality pulls out of us our utmost creativity for the purposes of Christ.

CAFÉ EN LA CALLE

Volunteers from a congregation in Miami arise early on Monday mornings to serve coffee and donuts from a table set up near a street corner where day laborers congregate to connect with people offering short-term jobs. They form relationships, offer prayer, and simply demonstrate the hospitality of Christ. Café en la Calle provides a moment of connection across language, cultural, ethnic, and income divides. The utter simplicity of the ministry replicates the basic connections Jesus asked of his disciples: "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. . . ."

Let's Get Practical

Looking for some simple ways to make guests feel welcome?

- o Update the church website.
- o Seriously. Update the website! And keep it up to date. Without a website, you do not exist to people looking for a church. Nobody

can find you. With a poor quality, out-of-date website, what they discover about you does not help.

- Use social media, Facebook, Instagram, and other means to share video trailers, photos, and information about upcoming events. Tell stories about changed lives.
- Upgrade the video streaming of worship services. An ever-increasing number of people “attend” online three or more times before showing up in person. It’s a low-risk way to see what’s going on. Video streaming helps *immobile* members participate (those who cannot get to church any longer) and *mobile* people to stay connected (those who travel frequently).
- Clean, update, light, or repaint all signage—street signs, entry and welcome signs, and indoor directional signs.
- Repaint and repair outdoor playground equipment.
- Teach ushers and greeters to escort people to the place they are asking for rather than merely pointing the way. Make people feel at ease, take note of names, introduce guests to the pastor. Seek to understand the perspective of the newcomer. Anticipate their needs.
- Welcome everyone of any age, marital status, sexual orientation, income level, ethnicity, or language preference with utmost graciousness. Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you!
- Don’t pounce on younger guests because of your desperation for young people. Give them space. Don’t squeeze them into your mold.
- Do a nursery makeover. Let young parents make the design and safety choices.
- Provide free child care at every event, worship service, and church activity.

- Require all persons who serve with young or vulnerable people to be safe sanctuary certified with complete background checks. No exceptions. None. Ever.
- Mark parking spaces for visitors, the handicapped, and parents with infants.
- Remove or shorten a pew or change up the seating in the worship space to make room for wheelchairs (and not just on the last row!).
- Offer a tour of the facilities after services. Talk about ministries and not just buildings.
- Stay available before worship. Foster mixing and mingling. Provide a coffee bar.
- Get the names of guests. Collect contact information in a fun, nonthreatening way.
- Start each service with a warm welcome.
- Offer a monthly lunch with the pastor for people who want to know more about the ministries.
- Remove insider jargon and acronyms from announcements and instructions. Make communications “guest friendly.”
- Make Christian invitation and welcome a vital part of the culture, an expectation of everyone and of every small group, music team, and serving ministry. Invest serious time to plan, pray for, invite, and receive newcomers, and to teach people to practice biblical hospitality in their personal lives.
- Don't coast the week after Easter and Christmas. Contact every guest who attended. Thank them for being with you. Plan interesting or provocative ministries or sermon series in the weeks after to attract them back.
- Measure the retention rate of first-time guests. How many return? Twenty percent? Thirty percent? Work to increase the percentage. Notice trends.

- Invite small groups to adopt spaces within the church to offer welcome to guests so that they take ownership of their “mission field.” Encourage them to form relationships and invite guests to lunch.
- Form teams to greet everyone each week who sits in a particular section in the sanctuary.
- Contact first-time guests within thirty-six hours by email, phone, or with a gift.
- Ask someone from another congregation that excels in hospitality to speak to your leadership. Send people to visit another church that does well with reaching people who have little or no faith experience. Listen and learn.
- Start a “Reading with the Pastor” book study for the core leadership team. Focus on strategies for reaching people and learn about cultural trends related to faith. Learn about next generations.
- Study the demographics of the neighborhood and compare the age, ethnicity, and income trends for people who participate in your church. Ask, “Why has God placed us here?”
- Become a community meeting place for organizations consistent with your mission.
- Remodel the main entryway to make it open, well lit, warm, appealing, and easy to navigate.
- If yours is a strong, vibrant, growing congregation, start a second site to reach a different area or constituency.
- Give people a way to be hospitable in their daily lives. Bee Creek United Methodist Church (near Austin, Texas) gave rosemary plants in the shape of Christmas trees to everyone in worship with cards that read “God loves you, and so do we.” People carried these with them and gave them to people where they worked or shopped or dined.

- o Preach a sermon series on Radical Hospitality. Lead discussions on *The Art of Neighboring*. People love to learn. Draw them into the task of discipleship. They may be more eager than you can imagine.
- o Offer ministries at unexpected places for unexpected people—at a bikers weekend, a farmers market, a fishing tournament, the morning after the prom, following football games.
- o Encourage people to host a monthly Neighbor Night, inviting people near where they live to a simple dinner in their homes for no other reason other than to form relationships. Any time we practice hospitality we provide a glimpse of the extravagantly hospitable God. Little gestures become a sermon in action, even if we use no faith language explicitly.
- o Explore Dinner Church, a model of neighborhood dinners followed by faith conversations and prayer.
- o Build anticipation for a special “back to school” focus. Offer prayers of blessing over students’ backpacks. Bring teachers forward to pray for them.
- o Don’t let the fear of failure paralyze you into inaction. Even if only a handful of people gather in Christ’s name, a great harvest is promised.

Faith communities that practice Radical Hospitality do not look only at the numbers, corralling people through perfunctory processes to get them to join. Instead, they genuinely engage people, listen to them, and help them feel accepted, respected, connected, needed, involved, and loved. They form relationships. They help newcomers grow into the body of Christ’s people.

A Change of Attitudes and Practices

Edwards Deming, the genius of organizational systems, observed that “a system produces what it is designed to produce.” In this intentionally

redundant statement, he reminds us that a system is aligned to get the results it is getting, and it will not get any other kind of results unless something changes.

How is your faith community doing? Are ministries touching the lives of a growing number of people or engaging fewer people each year? Is the average age trending older or getting younger with the addition of new people? Are ministries increasing or decreasing? What about the number of initiatives to form Christian community in places other than church facilities? If yours is like most congregations, it is declining in numbers, increasing in expenses, and serving an older average age of people with each passing year. Deming would tell us that if the congregation established a task force and asked it to develop a plan that would cause attendance to fall and the median age to increase, they would return with a plan that looks exactly like what the church is doing now! Congregational systems are perfectly aligned to get the results they are getting, and that means uninterrupted decline for most churches.

Something must change. People getting mad and leaving is not the cause of decline. The faithful simply grow old and die, and no one takes their places. People are not entering into the life of faith at a rate that matches or exceeds the number maturing and dying.

Too many churches want more young people as long as they act like old people, more newcomers as long as they act like old-timers, more children as long as they are as quiet as adults, more ethnic families as long as they act like the majority in the congregation. To become a more fruitful congregation requires a change of attitudes, practices, and values.

Little changes have big effects, and change can happen in a hurry. I've known people who have belonged to a community of faith and continued to grow spiritually for decades, and it all started with a single conversation and an invitation. People have begun a lifetime of following Christ and serving others because of how someone treated them when they first visited or because someone cared enough to reach out to them during a time of grief. Attending to the smallest details changes the culture of the church.

One small church painted their nursery, trained their nursery staff, replaced the playground equipment, and by word-of-mouth carried the

message of their special care for children, and attendance grew from forty-five to fifty-five. And it all started with a paint job! Another church decided to hold one of their Palm Sunday services in a local park. They rented the dance slab, brought in chairs and balloons and bought hundreds of tickets on the mini-train. Pets were welcomed and everyone was invited. The regular congregation invited their friends and many people just walked up and joined in.

A MINISTRY THAT ROCKS!

A rural congregation in Missouri grew over 150 people in attendance. The secret has been an active hospitality that became contagious throughout the congregation. For instance, when a visiting mom felt self-conscious whenever her baby started to fuss during worship, the pastor met with congregational leaders and they decided that they valued having young people so highly that they had to do something to ease the discomfort. To show support for the young mom, they bought a comfortable, well-padded rocking chair and placed it just behind the last pew of the small sanctuary. Word got around, and soon they needed two more rocking chairs to accommodate parents who found this congregation to be the friendliest around! Rocking chairs for moms, an inviting youth room for young people, a new extension that makes the building handicap accessible—the pastor and the congregation use these to help communicate the priority they place on welcoming more and younger people.

Imagine if every serving ministry, music ministry, Bible study, and support group ministry agreed to prayerfully change one practice to develop relationships with younger adults, to serve them and invite them into service. The facilities team might put diaper changing tables in the

restrooms, the music team might prepare a musical for children, an older adult class might pay for child care so young parents can attend Bible study. When every ministry changes a little, the cumulative effect changes the direction of the church.

The willingness to risk something new creates a buzz and a stir in the community that strengthens participation in all other ministries of the church. Word-of-mouth is still the most important form of human communication, and when people talk about the experience they've had of warmth, caring, grace, and love, the work of Christ thrives.

A Single Heart

A faith community changes its culture one person at a time. Radical Hospitality begins with a single heart, a growing openness, a prayerful yearning for the highest good of another person. It starts when one person treats another respectfully and loves the stranger enough to overcome the internal hesitations to form a genuine relationship that reflects the hospitality of Christ.

We tend to avoid personal responsibility for discipleship by redirecting conversations toward programs and strategies. People point to the pastor, the staff, or a leadership team, and say, "If they would only . . ." Or, "What they should do is . . ." People blame and scapegoat and find fault for why ministries don't thrive, and they deny and ignore their own complicity in the stagnation of their churches. Newcomers feel alone and shunned, even in a crowd of friendly people, because everyone believes someone else must be connecting with them. This won't change until each one of us takes responsibility for practicing Radical Hospitality as obedience to Christ. Disciples mature from "they ought" to "I will."

Come and See

An invitation is not complicated. In the first chapter of John's gospel, Jesus's invitation was simple: "Come and see" (John 1:39). His disciples

then used the same language to invite others. People don't need to know the answers to all the questions of faith to invite someone. They don't need to exaggerate or persuade or say more than is true. They simply and naturally find their own way of saying to those with whom they share common activities, "Come and see."

MULTIPLE BLESSINGS

A large, growing church celebrated the birth of triplets to a couple in the congregation. LeeAnn, the church secretary, believed that the extraordinarily overwhelming task of parenting triplets deserved the prayerful support of the congregation. How could they best minister to parents of multiple births? She contacted the parents of twins she knew in the congregation and asked for their insight. The staff became aware of two other sets of twins, born to families connected to the church day school. A few weeks later, the congregation launched a support group for parents of multiple births, called *Twins and More!* The church provided high-quality childcare, invited a family counselor to lead the first gathering, publicized the ministry to the general public, and then let the parents establish their own agenda for discussions and activities. Soon several families with no relationship to a church began to attend and then get involved. Radical Hospitality involves seeing a need and taking the initiative to help.

The people who do this best do not fill their invitations with "oughts and shoulds." They don't make people feel guilty or nag them incessantly. They pray constantly for the wisdom of right timing, and when it feels natural, they tell an acquaintance about a service project they are working on or a music team that's doing something special this weekend, and they say, "We'd love to have you go with us." On Monday mornings when

coworkers talk about their weekend activities, they're not afraid to say, "I loved working on the Habitat for Humanity project with my church. My back is killing me, but it meant the world to me to be able to help." They find their own voice and say in their own way, "Come and see."

Or when someone new starts work at the office or someone moves into the neighborhood, in addition to the standard gestures of welcome, say, "And if you're looking for a church, we'd love to have you come with us sometime." At other times, when they know someone faces a difficulty in their marriage or suffers the grief of loss, they're not afraid to say, "Something that helped me was talking to my pastor. I know she'd be willing to talk with you, too. If you want her name or would like for me to call her, I'm happy to help."

People have no reluctance telling others where they get their hair cut, where they get their car fixed, where they like to eat. And yet, concerning the most important relationship Christian disciples have—the one to God through Christ's community—they feel hesitant to speak. They don't want to appear pushy or sound fanatically religious. But think of all that relationship to God means, the perspective of faith, the understandings of life, the relationships formed, the sense of meaning and connection and contribution. Why wouldn't we desire these things for the people we share our lives with?

Think of the people we share activities with—parents of other soccer players, people at work, the neighborhood carpool. Pray, and rehearse, and commit yourself to invite them to participate in a ministry or attend a service. Don't be pushy. Do it with integrity. Do it in your own voice. Be faithful to yourself and to God. Practice Radical Hospitality. Do it for Christ's sake.

Go and Do

Jesus also sends us out in his name. To "go and do" does not have to be difficult. Knocking on the door of a neighbor you don't know to invite them for ice cream in your backyard may seem awkward at first, but it's not a complicated task.

Jesus sent his disciples out “to every town and place where he himself intended to go” (Luke 10:1). Imagine how differently we would behave toward our neighbors and those we regularly encounter through our work, leisure activities, and hobbies if we viewed ourselves as being sent by Christ into these spaces and relationships. The neighborhood where you live, the place where you work, and every place you go is a place where Jesus himself intends to go. He’s sending you on his behalf as a disciple, an ambassador, with a message of grace, peace, and reconciliation. The smallest act of everyday discipleship can have a huge impact on the life of another, and on your own. Go, and Do!

CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

How do people hear about your church? In what ways are people encouraged to invite and welcome people? How do people learn to practice hospitality?

Is there a consistent plan for welcoming guests who participate in ministries of the church? How are they invited to further relationship?

Which ministries are the easiest for people to connect with? Why?

What is the one activity you could do, which, if done with excellence and consistency, would have the greatest impact on fostering a culture of Radical Hospitality?

How did you become a part of the congregation to which you belong?
Describe the experiences and people who opened the doors for you.
What obstacles made it difficult to feel like you belonged?

What is one step you are willing to take to practice Radical Hospitality in your own neighborhood?

What routine activities or normal events can you turn into a means of practicing the hospitality of Christ?

GROUP ACTIVITY

Together with others, walk through your church's physical spaces as if visiting for the first time. Talk about what you see, what you smell, what you hear, what you notice that is welcoming and inviting and helpful, and what you find confusing or uninviting or forbidding. Imagine moving through both the indoor and outdoor spaces from the point of view of a child, a teenager, a mother with a baby, and a person with a disability.

With others from your faith community, walk through the neighborhood that surrounds your church. What is the neighborhood like? Are the people who live nearby known to the congregation? How do you suppose they perceive the church?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. What is the mission of a Christian disciple according to this passage? How should that mission shape our lives? Pray about how God might be calling you to improve your own personal ministry of hospitality by forming relationships with neighbors you don't know.