Building a Place for Hospitality

BY CHRISTINE D. POHL

Hospitality quickly takes on earthy dimensions—buildings, beds and blankets, pots and pans—as we share our place, make use of what is available, or create new places. How can we sustain personal, small-scale places of welcome along with more institutionalized expressions of care?

Because hospitality involves sharing food, shelter, protection, recognition, and conversation, it usually also involves particular places. Unless understood exclusively as a sentiment or an attitude, hospitality has very earthy dimensions—buildings, beds and blankets, pots and pans. In offering welcome, we share our place, make use of what is available, or create new places.

Often when we think of hospitality, homes or households immediately come to mind. Throughout history they have been the primary location for offering welcome. Before inns, hotels, and restaurants, every stranger needed someone's hospitality. Whether or not they had resources, when people were away from home, they were dependent on the kindness and generosity of others, often strangers.

Because of this, hospitality was viewed as a central virtue and practice in most cultures and, at times, even as one of the pillars of morality on which society was built. Hospitality was understood as a form of mutual aid, often rigorously observed, and usually associated with caring for the needs of strangers.

BIBLICAL ROOTS

Most ancient understandings of hospitality suggest that it was viewed as important, but also as episodic and occasional—providing food and shel-

ter for a few days to those passing through a region or a community. The biblical texts reflect this understanding in numerous places, but particularly in the account of Abraham and Sarah offering hospitality from their home to the three strangers who turned out to be angels (Genesis 18:1-16).

Another dimension of caring for strangers is evident in the Old Testament. Sojourners and resident aliens were offered protection and provision under Israelite law (e.g., Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 24:14-15). Hospitality was expressed through the laws about gleaning and by making the triennial tithe available to resident aliens along with the Israelite poor (e.g., Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:11-13). These arrangements are early indications of a for-

> New structures that encouraged hospitality while protecting the communities from abuse helped early Christians avoid becoming grudging or negligent regarding this aspect of discipleship.

malized, communal provision for strangers. But this provision was tied to personal expressions of hospitality in that faithful Israelites were also instructed to make a place for sojourners within their families when they celebrated holidays (Deuteronomy 16:9-15).

Much of Jesus' life and many of his activities were tied to giving and receiving hospitality. He came as a stranger into the world, vulnerable to the welcome and rejection of people (e.g., Luke 9:51-53; John 1). He was a guest in many different homes and at numerous meals (e.g., Luke 4:38-39, 5:29-32, 7:36-39, 10:38-42, 11:37, 14:1-14, 19:1-10). Although without a place of his own, he acted as a host to individuals, small groups, and huge crowds, making use of places that were available to him (e.g. Luke 9:12-17, 18:15-17, 22:7-23). Sometimes an encounter began with Jesus as a guest, but he later became the host (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus' practices of hospitality were often brief, intense, personal, and countercultural.

In a setting in which Jesus was a guest at a dinner party, he pushed conventional understandings of home-based hospitality outward when he challenged the host by saying:

> When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14:12-14)

And in Matthew 25:31-46, when Jesus identified the care offered to the "least of these" with care given to himself, he again challenged followers

to put their focus on those who do not appear to have much to offer. He identified responses to the most vulnerable ones (those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, sick, or in prison) with responses to his own needs. In this extraordinary passage, he did not identify a specific place for hospitality, but opened up the possibility that, in every setting, his followers might see an opportunity for offering hospitality to those ordinarily overlooked or undervalued.

As the early Church grew in size and influence, hospitality remained a central practice (Romans 12:13, 15:7; Hebrews 13:2). Because Christians traveled to spread the gospel and to escape persecution, hospitality continued to be an important part of their shared life. Christians regularly received others into their homes (e.g., Acts 2:44-47, 16:15; Romans 16:23; 3 John 1:1-8). Early gatherings for worship were often household-based, and the image of the church as the household of God had powerful resonance (e.g., Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 3:15). Because converts came from many backgrounds, shared meals—usually in homes—became an important location for building unity and a new identity, for transcending social differences, and for making sure that the local poor were fed (e.g., Acts 2:46; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). Hospitality was practically necessary and theologically central.

Not surprisingly, difficulties accompanied the generous practice of hospitality. Some people took advantage of the welcome offered by the early Christians, and communities could become weary with the practice (1 Peter 4:9). Christian leaders struggled to balance teaching and mentoring new believers with the numerous responsibilities included in hospitality (Acts 6:1-6). Quickly some minimal rules and roles were developed. Most travelers could count on welcome for a few days; those who claimed to be prophets or teachers were held to fairly rigorous tests—they revealed themselves as false if they asked the communities for money or if they stayed too long without sharing in the work (Acts 20:32-35; 2 Corinthians 11:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; *Didache* 11:1-6, 12:1-5). Deacons took over some of the practical aspects of providing hospitality, and letters of reference were used to introduce people as they moved from one community to another (Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1-2; 1 Corinthians 16:3; Philippians 2:29-30).

These structures were early efforts at making it possible to sustain hospitality over the long term. Encouraging the practice of hospitality while simultaneously protecting the communities from abuse was important in helping faithful Christians avoid becoming grudging or negligent regarding this aspect of discipleship.

ANCIENT CHURCH STRUCTURES

The early congregations distinguished themselves as communities that cared for poor people and strangers, especially strangers who were sick or destitute. In an early second-century defense of the Christian faith to unbelievers, Aristedes commended the Christians on the basis of their lives:

> They love one another, and from widows they do not turn away
> their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him
> harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boast-
> ing. And when they see a stranger, they take him into their homes
> and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them
> brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God.[1]

In another defense of the faith from the second century, Justin Martyr de-
scribed the Christian community's weekly practice of collecting offerings
and depositing them with the leader who "succours the orphans and wid-
ows, and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and
those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a
word takes care of all who are in need."[2]

Pressures increased on the congregations as the gospel spread and as
the numbers of converts, access to resources, and needs of the general popu-
lation grew. Christian communities became known for their care for strang-
ers, and so needy strangers came to them for assistance. When persecutions
ceased and Christianity was more favorably recognized by the governmen-
tal authorities, those authorities turned to Christian communities to provide
more organized, predictable care for those in need.

The comments of a pagan emperor from the fourth century suggest how
widely recognized Christian practices of hospitality had become. In an effort
to reestablish Hellenic religion in the Roman Empire in 362, Julian instruct-
ed the high priest of the Hellenic faith to imitate the Christian concern for
strangers and poor people. Referring to Christianity as atheism, he asked,
"Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care
for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that
have done most to increase atheism?" He instructed the priest that hostels
in every city should be established for strangers and ordered a distribution
of food for the poor, strangers, and beggars. He wrote: "For it is disgraceful
that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [Christians]
support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our peo-
ple lack aid from us. Teach those of the Hellenic faith to contribute to public
service of this sort."[3]

This early description of Christian hospitality as "public service" sug-
gests an important development in the provision of hospitality. It is in the
fourth century that we see significant growth of hospitals and other insti-
tutions, which over the next centuries become increasingly specialized. In
addition to the more specialized roles and tasks that emerge during this
period, there are also separate buildings established for the purpose of
caring for those in need.

A glowing description of one of the first hospitals to be established by
Christians in approximately 370 is found within a document celebrating the
life and work of Basil, bishop of Caesarea. In response to terrible suffering

caused by a severe famine, Basil had gathered victims of the famine and what food he was able to collect, "combining personal respect with the supply of their necessity, and so giving them a double relief."[4] Gregory Nazianzen described the hospital as a "new city, a storehouse of piety" and went on to declare that it was the finest wonder of the world. He rejoiced that a place had been established where those decimated by disease could have a city of their own, no longer objects of hatred and exclusion because of their infirmities.[5] During his lifetime, Basil developed a variety of institutions to provide care for the sick, travelers, and poor people.

Also from the fourth century, John Chrysostom provides us with important insight into the tensions that are associated with corporate, organized responses to need. In addressing his parishioners' claims that the church was able to provide hospitality through special apartments, hospitals, and hospices, Chrysostom argued that it also remained a personal, individual responsibility. Even if the stranger could be fed from common funds, he asked, "can that benefit you? If another man prays, does it follow that you are not bound to pray?" He instructed his parishioners to make a guest chamber in their own houses to respond to the needs of strangers and to experience the blessings connected with offering hospitality. During his lifetime, he helped to establish numerous specialized institutions of hospitality, but continued to urge believers to offer hospitality personally, with their own hands, and from within their own homes. For him, hospitality was an essential part of Christian identity, a wonderful conduit of blessing and transformation, and a practical necessity.[6]

John Chrysostom was sensitive, however, to the ways individual and corporate provision of care could demean recipients. He wrote at length on the importance of maintaining respect for persons as they were given assistance. He insisted that the administrators in the newly formed institutions of hospitality needed discernment, generosity, sensitivity, and graciousness in responding to those in need.[7]

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In the ancient Church, the monastic life became an important expression of deep Christian commitment, and many monasteries offered hospitality to strangers as a part of their identity and work. *The Rule of Benedict*, from the sixth century, is particularly attentive to the character of the monks that filled roles associated with hospitality. The guest-master, gatekeeper, and cellarer were expected to be mature, generous, wise, and humble.[8] The

detailed attention to roles and qualifications related to hospitality suggests how central it was to the monastic communities. Many monasteries established hospices and hostels for strangers, pilgrims, the poor, and the sick, while they simultaneously tried to protect a distinctive monastic lifestyle.

Leaders in the churches and monasteries assumed many of the responsibilities of hospitality. Over time, the giving and receiving of hospitality became an important aspect of complex political relationships among bishops, abbots, and the lay aristocracy. Gracious, intimate hospitality was increasingly reserved for those with power and influence, while persons with few resources received minimal assistance at a distance from the community. Over the centuries, expectations decreased that congregational gatherings would be sites of hospitality. Although service might be provided by church leaders or godly lay people, it was increasingly disconnected from the life-giving bonds of congregational life and from the personal warmth of household-based care.

One of the important distinctives of the earliest Christian practice of hospitality was its location—within the overlap of household and church, a place that was personal without being private. In this setting, expressions of hospitality strengthened community bonds, guest/host roles could be fluid, and persons of different rank and status were received into the same place. It was also a setting in which Christian women, whose roles in the public world were constrained, had significant opportunity for ministry.

MODERN INSTITUTIONS

Efforts to make hospitality more widely available and predictable had unintended consequences. The benefits that came with the establishment of hospitals were inseparable from the difficulties created by specialized institutions. In hospitals, those who received assistance were often disconnected from family and community and hidden from public view. Roles were flattened and persons were viewed as either providers or recipients. There was little room for mutuality and little expectation that the recipient had something to contribute. Caregiving eventually became quite anonymous.

During the later Middle Ages in Europe, some hospitals came under municipal control. While godly persons might work in such places, increasingly hospitals were detached from the Church and from their roots in hospitality. Poor relief, originally administered by the Church or its leaders, gradually became a responsibility of the civic community. Its connections to hospitality also became more tenuous.

After the Reformation, some concerns about respecting and protecting strangers that had originally been articulated in the language of hospitality were recast as concerns about human rights. Also in this period we see more widespread use of inns by people who were traveling. Some of these changes were helpful—for example, in broadening the availability and predictability of provision and in distancing assistance from the vagaries of

individual or congregational generosity. But these changes were also implicated in the loss of the earlier associations of hospitality with breaking down social boundaries, forming community, expecting transformation, and welcoming Jesus and angels.

Today few associate hospitality with hospitals, hospice care, human rights, or welfare assistance. Occasionally we might connect it to refugees and immigrants but, generally, hospitality is equated with entertaining family and friends or the hospitality industry of hotels, restaurants, and resorts. If there is a hospitality committee in church, its responsibilities usually include the coffee hour, ushers, and greeters. The church as a primary site for hospitality, and its important connection with the household, is overlooked. Rarely do we consider engaging in a kind of hospitality that helps people recover a place in the world and find healing within community.

We can appreciate the importance of governmental protection of human rights, state provision of benefits, and specialized programs and hospitals without imagining that they adequately capture the various dimensions of hospitality. Ancient accounts of hospitality give us insight into the biblical roots of these concerns, but also help us to challenge contemporary assumptions, practices, and institutions when they have become destructive.

Structured or institutionalized expressions of hospitality remain important for many reasons. For one thing, the numbers of strangers and people in need of welcome or care can wear out individual hosts who want to be generous and gracious. Long-term, substantial expressions of hospitality are impossible apart from community, structures, and guidelines.

Furthermore, the risks involved when strangers or hosts have malevolent intentions are reduced if there are some structures in place and if settings are somewhat public. Places that foster personal relationships but are not completely private or hidden are safer for both hosts and strangers. Having more than one or two persons involved in offering welcome also reduces risk.

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In contexts of significant need, the vagaries of personal hospitality are problematic. Individuals can grow tired or bored and can abandon hospitality, even when persons continue to desperately need welcome. More structured, communal responses limit that kind of unpredictability.

Defined roles allow persons to develop skills that help a community operate smoothly and effectively. Having some individuals responsible for

particular aspects of hospitality can be helpful, as long as a community's practice of hospitality does not become exclusively their responsibility.

When individual hosts have many more resources than their "guests" have, very hierarchical models of dependence and even domination can result. Provision can be offered in ways that assume recipients have only needs, and hospitality can be reduced to a demeaning form of charity. The historic move toward more anonymous and institutionalized assistance was partly an effort to avoid the humiliation that can be associated with dependence on certain forms of personal generosity or largesse.

But structured and institutionalized forms of hospitality can also be problematic. When we move toward formal programs and separate institutions as primary expressions of care and hospitality, there is a tendency to create increasing levels of bureaucracy, regulations, and rules. Especially if we are fearful that some guests or recipients will take advantage of hospitality, or that they might not be "deserving," we subject recipients to more and more scrutiny before providing welcome or assistance. Structures and requirements that address every contingency can be humiliating and can undermine the very purpose behind our efforts. Soup kitchens, assistance programs, and homeless shelters often struggle with these tensions.

In formal, institutional expressions of hospitality, recipients are often defined by their need. Hospitals can lose sight of the person as they treat the disease, and special programs for those with disabilities are often differentiated according to disability. While specialization can be very helpful, people are far more than their needs, and places or communities in which a person's gifts can be noticed, received, and valued are terribly important.

Finally, emphasis on specialization is closely tied to expectations regarding qualifications. In this culture, emphasis on roles and qualifications has made ordinary Christians feel inadequate and fearful about offering hospitality to strangers in need. Nevertheless, human beings, especially when ordinary networks of relationships have failed them, need friendship and community more than anything, and these forms of hospitality do not require a special skill set.

RESTORING PLACES FOR HOSPITALITY

What can we learn from a history of hospitality that suggests that personal, small-scale places of welcome are crucial along with more institutionalized expressions of care?

In every setting in which hospitality is offered, whether personal or institutional, the character of the persons offering welcome is crucial if hospitality is to be life-giving. A combination of discernment, wisdom, flexibility, humility, and generosity is particularly important.

There is blessing and mutuality in hospitality. Both recipients and hosts benefit when gifts are shared. In every form of hospitality, it is important to resist flattening roles to provider and recipient and instead find ways to

nurture and value mutuality in relationships. Assistance and welcome can be provided in ways that value persons and give them a place in the community. Our tendency, even in congregational life, is to move from personal or community-based hospitality to organized programs of helping. But the personal and communal responses are crucial, and if there is a move toward programming, it should be with programs that open into relationships.

Contemporary cultural emphases on efficiency are very powerful, but life-giving hospitality is rarely efficient and often inconvenient. Opportunities for hospitality frequently come to us as "interruptions" in our task-oriented culture. Hospitality is countercultural and requires a rethinking of our priorities.

We cannot eliminate all of the risks that are present in offering and receiving hospitality. People will sometimes misuse generosity. Efforts to protect ourselves and our communities from every possible contingency and risk can result in inhumane rules and demeaning practices.

Finally, because today we have many large-scale institutions that offer assistance without providing community, followers of Jesus can be especially attentive to opportunities to reconnect hospitality and community in our homes, congregations, and social ministries.

Within the household, families often do not recognize how much their welcome can mean to others. Making a place for a neighbor recovering from surgery, international students, alienated teens, or refugee families can be wonderfully life-giving. Sharing meals and holiday celebrations with those who are usually overlooked is an important part of extending hospitality. By welcoming people into the ordinary parts of our lives and communities, we keep hospitality from becoming "entertaining" and reduce the stress and expense often associated with it.

In our congregations, recovering hospitality as a central practice of church life is important for congregation members as well as for strangers or newcomers in need of welcome. Sharing meals in congregational settings can break down some of the boundaries between private and public space and create threshold places where relationships among strangers can begin. Reestablishing closer connections between home and church can recreate that most important place for hospitality. Congregational leaders can become more intentional about connecting hospitality to worship, and especially to communion or Eucharist. The reminder that all of us—members, guests, and strangers—are guests at God's table can powerfully shape our practices of hospitality.

In congregationally based social ministries—as congregations host soup kitchens, clothing closets, or programs for young mothers and children—we sometimes overlook our own best resources. Welcoming people into our lives, communities, and friendship networks, as we meet particular needs, transforms ordinary spaces into places of hospitality and transformation.

NOTES

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