

# shift 1:

## ***From Fellowship to Hospitality***

*“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”*

Jesus, John 15:12

*“Life is not about stuff we own or accumulate. It is not even about personal accomplishment. Life is about people. We can replace stuff, but we can't replace people!”*

Michael Slaughter, *Momentum for Life*<sup>1</sup>

*“As a school for love, the church becomes a congregation where people learn from one another how to love.”*

Bishop Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*<sup>2</sup>

**Consider the following.** ...It's a familiar story lived out in many congregations across the United States.

Someone is in crisis, a couple has their first child, or a family moves to the area. They decide to attend the church down the street. They don't know anyone, so they arrive late and slip into the back row of seats. Because the bulletin is geared to the congregation, they struggle to keep up with what is going on. During “moments of friendliness,” a few people nod at them but most of the congregation visits with each other. After the service, someone points them in the direction of the Fellowship Hall where there is coffee, but then leaves them. When they go, they end up standing there on their own. It would be no different if they attended a small group or Sunday school class. The people in the church have known each other so long that it would be difficult to break in. They don't know the stories, the history, the people.

How do you react to this story? How does it make you feel? No wonder so few are coming to know the love of Jesus! People are not seeing it lived out, even in the one place that they would expect to find it.

## Observations about Hospitality

Hospitality is more than fellowship with one another. It's about opening our hearts to others and building relationships, plain and simple. Let's consider some observations about hospitality in the local congregation based on current research and my work with congregations in transformation:

- Depending on the study referenced, somewhere between 60–80% of people who visit a congregation come because they were personally invited.
- As a general rule, in most communities, 50% or less of the population is participating in the life of any congregation.
- Most people who visit a congregation decide within the first 10 minutes or less following arrival on the church campus whether or not they will return. This, of course, is long before the pastor preaches and sometimes even before the music starts!
- The driving factor in the decision to return is often the personal connections made by members of the congregation—not the greeters or pastor.
- People are more engaged in the life of the congregation if they have a good friend who is also involved.
- The follow-up with first-time visitors and with those who have missed a couple of consecutive weeks in worship is a key factor in maintaining the relationship.
- Hospitality is a significant dimension of Christian discipleship and can be developed through intentional discipleship training.
- Hospitality is bigger than how one is welcomed to the worship event. It is part of a larger system of discipleship that includes friendships, intentional discipleship relationships, witnessing, and more.
- Hospitality includes both personal and congregational dimensions, and they are interrelated. Each supports the other.

When coaching the local congregation in the area of hospitality, all of these observations come into play. The goal is to help the congregation consider how to increase the relational level of its ministry. But perhaps the first question to consider is why this is even important from a theological perspective.

## A Theology of Hospitality

Before we dig too deeply into the practical matters of moving toward excellence in the ways we offer hospitality, it needs to be clear why the shift from fellowship to hospitality is so important. Why are we to practice hospitality from a theological perspective? Isn't it enough that we gather with people who are like us and whom we like? Aren't we called to love each other, care for each other, and enjoy each other?

The Bible is pretty clear that this isn't enough!

In fact, from the charge of Abram: "I will bless you...and you will be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:2-3), to the charge from Jesus to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them...(Matthew 28:19-20), to the vision offered John in Revelation that "they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God...the old order of things has passed away...I am making everything new" (Revelation 21: 3-5), it is clear that the work of God is not limited to the fellowship of existing believers.

While hospitality in our contemporary culture has taken the form of 'fellowship' where we welcome friends to our table, in the biblical tradition hospitality was focused on welcoming the stranger. This includes those with the physical needs of shelter and nourishment but also those who know the pain of exclusion. Jesus himself modeled this as those who turned to him found welcome and the promise of being included in the Kingdom of God. Not only did he urge his followers to generously welcome those in need, but he also promised that these acts of kindness were personally experienced by the Son of Man himself (Matthew 25).

It's not just about us!

The driving force behind the building of relationships is the expression of God's grace (unmerited love) through the acceptance of all persons as being those God loves and the invitation for all to discover the fullness of that love for themselves. It is a grace that flows from the center of our experience of God's grace and extends to all peoples. People are accepted wherever they are in the flow of God's love and invited to discover the depths of God's love through the growth of relationships with other believers and the growth of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

We love because we have been loved. We welcome others because we have been welcomed. We invite others to discover this grace because of what we have learned about this transforming power of God's love.

This relational dimension is the engine that drives our witness in the community and world, our worship as the body of Christ, and our growth in maturity as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Let's consider a simple diagram to explain the 'big picture' approach to hospitality:

## Dimensions of Hospitality



### INTERPERSONAL HOSPITALITY

Refers to the level and quality of relational connections within the congregation, the people we know.

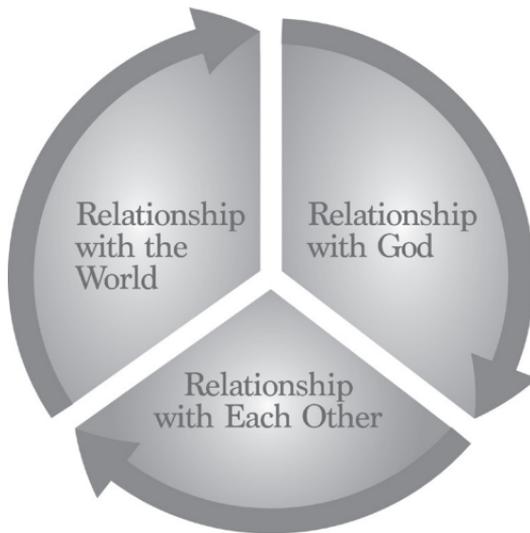
Key to all the dimensions of hospitality is that of Interpersonal Hospitality. This is all about meaningful connections at all points in the discipleship flow of a congregation. For example, I worked with a congregation that had been in crisis mode due to conflict between members and between members and the pastor for a couple of years. The tension in any gathering of the congregation (including worship) was so thick you could cut it with a knife. The amazing thing to me was that this congregation couldn't understand why people who showed up for worship in their beautiful 100-year-old sanctuary didn't seem to ever come back!

How we treat each other also shows up in the way others perceive our connection with them.

At the heart of the Christian faith journey is the idea of authentic relationships.

- We are called to be in relationship with God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)
- We are called to be in relationship with each other (modeling the relationship in which our Trinitarian God lives)
- We are called to be in relationship with those outside of the church

Graphically, these concepts are represented by three parts of the same whole:



As each portion is strengthened, so is the next and so also is the whole.

I want to suggest five benefits of strong interpersonal hospitality:

- Synergy: power and energy that comes from spiritual friendships
- Motivation: challenge and influence to keep growing
- Encouragement: bringing comfort, consolation, and counsel to one another
- Accountability: objective counsel and helpful challenge
- Support: people to come alongside and help us keep going

In John 17:20–23, Jesus offers this prayer for believers:

*I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

There are several themes present in just these three verses. For example:

1. that to “be one, just as you are in me and I am in you” reflects on the unity of the Trinity,
2. that as we grow in relationship with God (“be in us”), the world will come to believe in Jesus,
3. that we (believers) can in fact become one with each other as fully as the Trinity is one,
4. that it is Jesus’ prayer that we experience unity as believers, and
5. that our witness to the world depends on the kind of relationships we build.

Some practical considerations when it comes to living in authentic relationship with each other as disciples of Jesus include:

**Forgiveness:** Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9). Paul said, “As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). How do you relate to people with whom you do not agree or who have hurt you? Jesus said that even sinners are nice to those who like and affirm them. “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44). “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:28). Make peace with those who have hurt you. Our culture is strong on individual rights, on stressing what we deserve, and on what we are entitled to in relationships. Jesus turned much of this upside down and said to those for whom he died ‘while we were yet sinners,’ “Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

**Acceptance:** How do you relate to and welcome those who are different from you? In nature, “birds of a feather flock together.”

But in the Kingdom of God, everyone is welcomed. This was hard for the early church to hear. The Holy Spirit expanded the early church's understanding of the inclusiveness of the Kingdom story by story, as if a bulldozer were knocking down every cultural barrier that kept people apart. Could sinners be welcomed? Could tax collectors and prostitutes? Could Greek-speaking Jews? Could Gentile God-fearers? Could Roman soldiers? Could godless Gentiles? Could those who had been worshiping foreign gods? The answer repeatedly was, "yes!" God's welcome includes even them. And the early church struggled to welcome all these different people into their table fellowship. Who might not feel welcomed by you into your small group or kneeling beside you taking communion? Jesus seemed purposefully to hang out with people who were not like him. What's more, they seemed to be drawn to his company. When you hang out with people not like you, are they drawn to you?

**Accountability:** The Apostle Paul scatters throughout his letters the "one anothers" that provide insight into how we are to do life together. A central theme in these "one anothers" is that of accountability, expressed in a variety of ways: submit to one another, encourage one another, admonish one another, bear with one another, agree with one another, live in harmony with one another, to name a few. Life as a disciple of Jesus Christ is lived in accountable relationships. This idea is also at the heart of the Methodist Movement begun by John Wesley. Community and authentic relationships were supported through class meetings by a high level of accountability using a Covenant of Discipleship.

Congregations that develop a strong sense of interpersonal hospitality help create safe places and safe people. Unlike "abandoners" who start a relationship but can't finish it; "critics" who take on a parental role, telling others what to do; or "irresponsibles" who don't take care of themselves or follow through on their commitments, safe people are trustworthy. In their book, *Safe People*, Cloud and Townsend describe a safe relationship as one that does three things:

- Draws us closer to God (Matthew 22:37–38)
- Draws us closer to others (Matthew 22:39)
- Helps us become the real person God created us to be (Ephesians 2:10).<sup>3</sup>

The following are some suggestions for developing safe places and safe people in your congregation:

*Make small group ministries a centerpiece of congregational life.* Moving people from the relative anonymity of sitting in the pews for worship to engaging others in a small group setting is probably the most significant thing a congregation can do to foster the development of strong interpersonal hospitality. Small groups foster the development of deep friendships, invite us to engage our faith journey more fully, encourage maturity in our spiritual journey, and provide what may be the best forum for caring for the needs of one another.

*Teach the “one anothers.”* The New Testament is full of instruction in the form of “one another” statements, about how to live in right relationship with one another, or the practice of interpersonal hospitality. A listing of these is found in Appendix A of this volume. An excellent resource for small group study around this theme is Jim Van Yperen’s *Authentic Community* curriculum based on the “one another” statements. (See suggested resources.)

*Train the congregation in appropriate ways to deal with conflict.* Conflict is an inevitable part of being in community. People will always have differing opinions and perspectives, their own agendas, and issues of control and power. How we deal with those is what makes Christian community unique. There are several resources to assist the local congregation in dealing with conflict in a biblical manner. I want to suggest two that I have found helpful:

- *Peacemaker Ministries*: provides a variety of small group training materials. This organization also trains persons in conflict coaching, mediation, and conflict resolution. (See suggested resources.)
- *Making Peace Ministry*: provides a variety of small group training materials and has trained coaches and mediators available to work with congregations in conflict situations. (See suggested resources.)

*Provide training in caring for one another.* Many congregations are training leaders, small group leaders, and pastoral care teams in the basic skills of caring for others in a variety of life situations. An excellent resource for this training is *Stephen Ministries*, which provides 50 hours of training to equip people to provide care to those experiencing difficult life situations. (See suggested resources.)

*Build a congregational behavioral covenant.* A behavioral covenant is an agreement built to clarify how members and leaders of a congregation will behave toward one another. It is a fairly common practice for leadership teams to develop a behavioral covenant for their work together, and it is becoming more common for congregations to follow this practice as well.

The key to a behavioral covenant is that it specifies the actual behaviors or ways that people will treat each other. For example: rather than saying “we will respect each other,” the behavior might be “we will show respect for each other by listening to and seeking to understand the other person’s point of view.”

The behavioral covenant becomes the standard by which we do life together.

### **Questions for Leaders and Coaches Related to Interpersonal Hospitality:**

- How are relationships encouraged and supported?
- What is the system for engaging participants in small groups or other discipleship partnering relationships (e.g. mentoring, coaching, spiritual friends)? What is the track record in the congregation for moving people from worship to connections with small groups or other forms of discipleship?
- What is the level of conflict within the congregation? What type of training is made available to encourage healthy conflict management?
- How do members of this congregation provide care for one another? How might they be encouraged to do so?
- What is the system for following up with regular worshipers who have been absent for two or more weeks?

### INTENTIONAL HOSPITALITY

Refers to the practices of members and the congregation in making relational connections with people they don’t know who are visiting and/or returning.

Intentional hospitality has two primary objectives: 1) to provide relational connections when newcomers join in worship and 2) to set an example for disciples in the way they might live beyond the church walls.

I attended a church a while back that has become very intentional about extending hospitality to those who come for the first time. When I arrived at the front door of the church I was welcomed by a greeter who shook my hand. Then an usher welcomed me and handed me a bulletin for worship. During the morning announcements welcome was extended by the pastor, and visitors were asked to stand, introduce themselves, and be welcomed by the congregation. An usher came and handed me a welcome packet with information about the congregation, a visitor information card, and a visitor nametag to wear. During the “greeting” time, several people shook my hand and said “welcome to worship.” Following the worship service the pastor shook my hand as I exited the sanctuary. And, in the week following my visit to this church, I received a form letter from the pastor thanking me for visiting and expressing the hope that I would return.

My experience describes the more typical approaches of congregations in welcoming visitors or “guests,” which is a term I prefer. To be perfectly blunt, these are what I call “platform level” practices. If they are missing (i.e., greeters or ushers, etc.) it is a red flag for guests. These things are expected as standard practice. Doing them doesn’t make people feel welcome, but not doing them can make people feel unwelcome. Some of these standard practices actually work against us. For example, a vast majority of people has indicated that they would prefer not to be publicly recognized (read: are embarrassed) by having to stand and/or introduce themselves.

When people show up for the first time in worship, an overarching question is: “Do I fit in here?” or “Did people like me?”

There are a variety of factors at play in how people get the answer to that question. For example: in a congregation on the east coast of Florida, all the standard intentional hospitality expressions are in place (greeters, ushers, pastoral welcome), but this congregation goes beyond these “platform” expressions. Regular participants in the congregational life who have the gift of hospitality (hosts/hostesses) seek out newcomers and engage them in conversation, seeking to learn about them and their needs. If appropriate, they sit with the newcomer/family during worship. Following worship, these hosts/hostesses invite their new friends to join them at the hospitality center for refreshments and conversation. At the hospitality center the new friends are introduced to other regulars, appropriate staff, and the pastor. This expression of hospitality was already exceptional in our experience, and then they did something completely unexpected. The host/hostess invited their new friends to join them as their guests at a local restaurant for lunch and the opportunity to get to know them better!

As you might imagine, most people immediately felt like they fit in quite well.

I mentioned a hospitality center in the example above. It is one of the key ways that a church can support the making of connections. The hospitality center needs to be in a prominent location (not over in the fellowship hall) and have refreshments available for people as they gather to connect. Having people trained to invite newcomers to join them for some refreshments is important, as is having them introduce newcomers to other regular attenders, staff, and the pastor. It is also important to get the names of those who are guests so that follow-up may be accomplished.

In the previous example, the host/hostess invited guests to lunch to get to know them better. More common, but still exceptional, is the approach of taking a “welcome gift” (bread, pie, homemade jellies, etc.) to the home of a newcomer within 24 hours of their visit. This is a “cold call” visit just to drop off the gift and express a warm welcome. Doug Anderson, quoting Herb Miller, suggests: “be brief, be bright (positive), and be gone.”<sup>4</sup> Opportunities to “sell” the church will come at another time. The timing of this visit is important. Waiting longer than 24 hours dramatically reduces the impact.

For follow-up visits to be accomplished, the church must have the name of those who visit. Getting this information can be accomplished in several ways: 1) have members write the name down as part of their conversation with newcomers, 2) have visitors complete a connect card or sign in on pew pads (this only works if members also complete this information), 3) review checks placed in the offering for names of those who are not regular attenders.

Another key for intentional hospitality is a connecting interview with newcomers. This is arranged after the second visit and is usually done by the pastor. The pastor should call to set up a time (45 minutes) to meet in the home of the newcomer. The purpose of the visit is to get to know them. This is a time to get accurate information about the family/individual (spelling of names, ages of children, schools attended, occupation, etc.). But even more important is the opportunity to discover how newcomers might be connected to existing small groups or to opportunities for service. The pastor does not make these connections (“sell” the church) but passes along information to group and ministry leaders. I cannot stress enough the importance of this “get to know you” session.

In a coaching call with a pastor serving a church about a year old, the pastor described a gathering of 40-50 for worship on a regular basis. But his description was of a congregation that changed every week. New people would come and might return weeks or months later, and some might never return.

If all the people who visited off-and-on were there on a more regular basis, the weekly worship attendance would be nearly double the current average.

What questions might you ask this pastor? Take a moment to note them below:

As I explored the regular practices with the pastor, it became clear that while a gift was delivered following worship (although typically 4–5 days later) and the guests were greeted by the pastor following worship, there was no real connection made with the congregation. There was also no “get to know you” type of conversation, so people had to figure out how to get connected on their own. In fact, the next step was a newcomers’ (read: membership) class.

A tweaking of regular practices with an emphasis on the pastor making a real connection through an extended conversation immediately began to turn this situation around.

The end goal of hospitality is that people become disciples of Jesus and engaged in the life of the congregation. I recommend that this engagement take place at three points in the congregational life: worship, a small group or other accountable relationship, and some form of service.

The vital point here is that regular attenders of the congregation engage those who are newcomers in ways that make them feel really welcomed. Notice that I am saying “regular attenders” and not the pastor. It is meaningful when regular people make the effort to welcome others. Not so much for the pastor—he/she gets paid to do that! Some excellent resources are available for training your church in how to be a welcoming congregation through the ReThink Church materials. (See suggested resources.)

### ***Questions for Leaders and Coaches Related to Intentional Hospitality:***

- How does this congregation recognize visitors?
- What form of hospitality center does this congregation offer? Is there a place for people to gather and make connections? Are refreshments offered to facilitate this process? How is sensitivity to families with children demonstrated in the welcoming process?
- How does this congregation encourage regular participants to engage visitors? What form of training is provided? How is this monitored?
- What is the demographic mix of the congregation? How does this compare to the demographics of the surrounding community?
- What is the process for following up with first-time visitors? What is the role of the pastor?
- What is the system for connecting regular participants with first-time visitors to help them learn about congregational opportunities?
- Does this congregation offer an informational meeting to connect with visitors? Who has responsibility for this?
- What is the state of the congregation's facilities? Are they clean and inviting—especially the nursery and women's restroom?
- Is there adequate signage to assist newcomers?
- Describe the quality and variety of communication tools utilized by this congregation. Are they up-to-date? User-friendly? Do they avoid the use of "insider" and "churchy" language?

#### INVITATIONAL HOSPITALITY

Refers to the connections made by the congregation with people they don't know who are out in the community.

These connections usually take one of five forms. The following are brief descriptions of each:

## **Networking**

This refers to the intentional building of relationships by the pastor and key lay leadership with those out in the community. I have seen over and over again the importance of these relationships forged with community leaders (Mayors, Police/Fire Chiefs, Home Owner Association Leaders, School Principals, etc.), local business owners, and social service organizations. I also recommend that pastors participate in the local Chamber of Commerce and organizations like Kiwanis and Rotary as ways to make connections.

This is important on three fronts: 1) the relationships forged will provide valuable insights into the workings of the community, 2) these relationships will provide further connections in the community, and 3) these relationships model for the congregation the kind of witness that each disciple can provide in their own circle of influence. Another benefit to these kinds of relationships is that through them the congregation will understand their own reputation within the community, which is important to know for future relationship-building and ministry opportunities.

A pastor I coach in the Northeast, following one of our coaching conversations, began to network and have conversations with some people he knew of who were influencers in the community. Not all were immediately receptive, but a conversation with one of them yielded so many additional contacts that the pastor was having trouble getting to all of them. This pastor has begun to encourage his core leadership to follow a similar pattern, and amazing connections are being made throughout the community.

## **Attractional Ministries**

This refers to the types of events that serve to “attract” people to a congregation through providing visibility and interactions with the local community. Oftentimes these are identified as “outreach,” but I believe this is a misnomer since most of them are done on church properties.

These events include things like Fall Festivals, Trunk ‘R Treats (a Halloween gathering in the parking lot with candy distributed from decorated car trunks), Vacation Bible School, Pumpkin Patch, Christmas tree sales, block parties, concerts, yard sales, and the like. Sometimes these events get a bad rap and are discouraged. I don’t feel like there is anything wrong with them—just that they are not a substitute for actually going out into the community. It’s a “both-and” deal. The real value of any of these events (other than raising money) is that they are an opportunity for the building of relationships. By this I do not mean handing out church brochures. If the church is going to host an attractional event, there should be significant thought given to how the event could build contacts for the congregation

(get names and addresses) and how the regular attenders will be encouraged to engage those who come from the community.

A word of caution is in order here: it is often the case that congregations get worn out and distracted doing event after event. The result is that they don't have the time or energy to actually go into the community and make a difference. I recommend that such activities be very limited (1–2 per year) to make space for more ministry of engagement.

My colleague Kim Shockley (a ministry coach and wife of a church planter/pastor) learned as part of a church planting team that it was essential to do these types of attractional ministries so that they could make the church name more visible in the community. One of the best opportunities was when they partnered with some stores during the late Christmas shopping season, setting up free gift-wrapping to wrap packages immediately after purchase. They had plenty of time to chat with the customers during the wrapping process and to invite them to attend the Christmas Eve services. Notice that this congregation moved away from the church grounds to do these “attractional” events.

## ***Servant Evangelism***

This concept was made popular by Steve Sjogren of the Vineyard Church. The basic model is that regular attenders of the congregation engage the local community through service projects. Steve describes servant evangelism as winning the heart before confronting the mind. In a great article, “94 Community Servant Evangelism Ideas for Your Church,” he identifies some simple projects any congregation can engage. For example:

- Coffee Giveaways
- Bottled Water Giveaways
- Popcorn Giveaways
- Umbrella Escorts
- Trash Pick-Up
- Shoe Shines
- Surf Wax for surfers at the beach
- Clean Up at Food Courts
- Leaf Raking
- Tree Limb Trimming<sup>5</sup>

The opportunities for servant evangelism abound. It is an effective witness to God's love. One the most effective servant activities Kim's church

experienced was taking boxes of donuts to fire stations, nursing homes, and other businesses where people had to work on Christmas Eve. The folks took the boxes with them to drop off on their way home from the worship services.

### ***Ministries of Engagement***

Often overlooked in the realm of hospitality is the impact of really making a difference in the community and inviting people to engage with the church. This is particularly true for our young adults, who often enter into a relationship with the church through service.

Ministries of engagement will be discussed further in the chapter on Service. For now, let's just say that they are long-term, sacrificial, and needs-focused acts of service to the community. Sometimes the people being served by these impactful ministries will be drawn to the congregational life. Sometimes people with a heart for making a difference will be drawn to the service being offered and then to the community offering it. Sometimes both will happen.

### ***Marketing***

This is discussed last because it is the least effective of all the invitational hospitality concepts presented here.

Typical approaches include newspaper advertisements, yellow book advertisements, direct mailing, telephone soliciting, and electronic media, including the website.

As a general rule, newspaper and phone book advertisements are relatively ineffective. Direct mail yields results in the range of one response for every 200 mailers or about ½ of 1% and is fairly expensive. Telephone soliciting is usually seen as an annoyance today.

The website of the church is today's equivalent of an advertisement in the yellow pages a decade or two ago. It is a "must do" and "must do well." Websites must be easy to navigate, invitational, and full of pictures, stories, and white space.

Current research indicates that as many as 90% of people will visit a church's website before making a decision to attend. That's huge! If the website is going to be such a primary tool for extending hospitality, it is important that the site represent the church well. The following are some suggestions about providing a welcoming site:

- Invest the resources to create a professional-looking site. The quality of your website is considered a reflection of the excellence with which you do ministry.

- Keep the website current. I worked with a church a couple of years ago that had a pastor's message from the previous pastor who had moved two years earlier.
- Have worship times clearly identified with a description of the style of worship included.
- Provide clear directions to your church location. Many websites now include a link to Google Directions.
- Provide information about childcare; without this you may lose young families.
- Include information about your staff. The best sites even include a personal statement from staff members.
- Include a place to listen to current messages from worship services.
- Share stories about lives that are changed and the difference the church is making in the community.

Many sites I have visited actually include an itinerary for newcomers through the website. Information is provided about attire for the service selected, availability and location of childcare, and a time frame for activities the newcomer could experience.

### ***Questions for Leaders and Coaches Related to Invitational Hospitality:***

- What kind of networking (building of relationships) takes place by the leadership of this congregation out in the community?
- What types of activities are provided to engage the community and promote visibility?
- What types of services are offered through the church to support the needs of those living in the community?
- How is this congregation involved in direct service to the community?
- How are regular participants in the congregation equipped to share their faith and engage those beyond the church?
- How does this congregation support community events?
- How does the congregation see participation in the life of the community as a ministry of the congregation?
- What types of marketing tools are employed by this congregation?
- How does the church website reflect a posture of hospitality?

## INCARNATIONAL HOSPITALITY

Refers to the personal engagement by regular participants in the congregation in building relationships with those we know outside the church in order to be Christ to the unchurched.

People come to a relationship with Jesus through a relationship with other people. I hope this doesn't come as a surprise to you.

Some people are drawn to a relationship with Jesus through the witness of our lives—how we treat others, the honest way we do business, the priorities we live by, the giving of ourselves to others. They may seek to get to know us and discover how those dimensions of our lives have been developed.

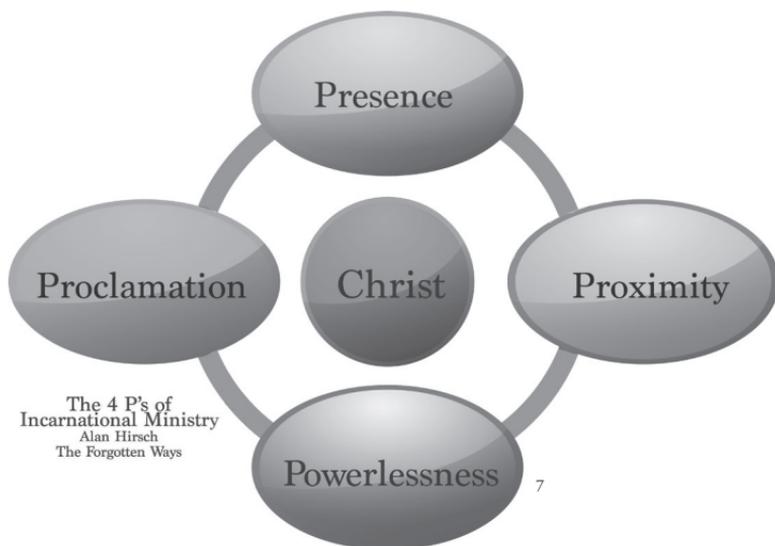
More commonly we are the ones building relationships with those outside the church in order to be Christ in their lives. The scope of possibilities for this is almost endless. One new church pastor I know began her congregation by building relationships with young mothers as they had play time at the parks and “mom” time in each others' homes. The relationships she fostered developed into friendships and ultimately into relationships with Jesus. It is the perfect witness to the Emmaus Walk (a spiritual formation retreat sponsored by the Upper Room, General Board of Discipleship) teaching: *Make a Friend, Be a Friend, Bring a Friend to Christ.*<sup>6</sup>

Christians believe that life finds its meaning in a relationship with Jesus. Since that is true, it becomes the responsibility of every disciple to not only be in that relationship, but to help others discover the relationship as well.

Congregations that do incarnational hospitality well help their members discover ways to connect with people in times when they are most open to an expression of God's love for them. For example, people going through major life transitions are often open to support (e.g. marriage, birth of a child, moving to a new community or a new job). People who are going through crises in life (divorce, grief, loss of property, aging, health issues, etc.) also tend to be open to the loving support offered by disciples.

The key to incarnational hospitality is that we are building relationships beyond the walls of the church. However, in my work with churches around the country, I have found focus in this area to be lacking; in fact, just the opposite is generally true. The longer people are involved in the church, the fewer people they are in relationship with outside the church... by a long shot!

Alan Hirsch, in his book *The Forgotten Ways*, provides one of the best descriptions of incarnational hospitality I have come across:



**Presence** refers to the act of actually being with people. It is what Jesus did when he came into our world. As noted in John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (The Message). Henri Nouwen, in his focus on hospitality, notes:

“It is a privilege to have the time to practice this simple ministry of presence. Still, it is not as simple as it seems...I wonder more and more if the first thing shouldn't be to know people by name, to eat and drink with them, to listen to their stories and tell your own, and to let them know...that you do not simply like them—but truly love them.”<sup>8</sup>

**Proximity** refers to becoming meaningfully involved in the lives of those being served. There is a significant shift that takes place between the ideas of presence and proximity. In the former, we are close and involved enough to be in a casual relationship; in the latter, we are engaged in ways that make a difference in people's lives.

For example, in the second congregation I served, we offered a meal each week for the homeless, lonely, and hungry in the community. At first the focus was on getting people (including leadership) involved in preparing, serving, setting up, and cleaning up. We greeted people and got to know many by name. We were practicing the ministry of presence.

A decision was made that some of the volunteers would not be involved in cooking and serving the meal, but would actually eat the meal that was

being served and sit with the people the meal was designed to be in ministry to. This immediately opened the door to significant relationships, a deeper understanding of needs, and more opportunities to be in service. That was a ministry of proximity.

**Powerlessness** refers to the understanding that we are servants. Way too often we approach our ministries from a position of power (“fix,” “help,” “change”). The powerlessness dimension of incarnational hospitality focuses on the servant nature of Christ through us that empowers others.

**Proclamation** of course refers to the ability and willingness to share the gospel message. As Peter put it: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

Proclamation comes last for a reason.

People are most open to the gospel message when we have built a relationship with them, when they know we care about them, and when they understand that we are most concerned with empowering them rather than having power over them. Then we can share, with integrity, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Since we also understand that people are encouraged in their faith journeys as they are nurtured in Christian community, these relationships formed outside of the church become the bridge to engaging people in the larger community of faith.

It’s no secret. Most churches (somewhere around 80%) are plateaued or in decline when it comes to participation in worship. Leadership teams all across the country sit and bemoan the fact that fewer people, and certainly fewer younger people and fewer non-Christian people, are coming to church. They often ask, “What can we do to turn this around?”

My first question is, “Who have you asked to come to church with you in the last month?” For some reason leadership teams are often surprised by the question. It never occurred to them that this is a responsibility of *every disciple*.

Current research indicates that for those who are unchurched, somewhere between 60–80% responded that they would come to church if someone invited them.

However, the church has a role in supporting the regular attenders in inviting their friends, relatives, associates (work), and neighbors. Some churches provide members with business cards that include the worship times and directions to the church. Many churches provide postcards

with information about a new sermon series or seasonal focus that regular attenders can use to invite friends.

Doug Anderson, in his book *The Race to Reach Out*, shares a seasonal focus approach used by Joe Harding:

- A few weeks before the invitational focus of the season, 3x5 cards are distributed to the congregation.
- Each participant is asked to write down the names of 5 people they would like to see come to worship.
- Participants are encouraged to take the cards home and display them in a prominent place where they would be reminded to pray daily for the people named on the cards.
- A couple of weeks prior to the invitational focus event, participants are encouraged to extend an invitation.
- In worship the participants are asked to, by a show of hands, be accountable for praying for and making the invitation.

The result was an increase of 50% on these invitational Sundays and a congregation that experienced significant long-term growth.<sup>9</sup>

The key to personal invitations is that they are personal—face-to-face if possible—and focused on “come with” rather than “come sometime.”

### ***Questions for Leaders and Coaches Related to Incarnational Hospitality:***

- How are people encouraged and supported in the building of relationships beyond the church?
- How are these relationships recognized and celebrated by the pastor and/or congregation?
- What types of personal acts of service/mission are being performed by regular participants of this congregation?
- How does this congregation use the connecting points of servant evangelism, needs-based evangelism, and ministries of engagement to build relationships in the community and invite participation in congregational life?

## **Diagnosing the Level of Hospitality**

In addition to the coaching questions presented for the dimensions of hospitality, there are a variety of tools that the coach may find helpful. The

following is a brief description of a sampling of these tools and where one might find more information:

***Professions of Faith:*** The goal of hospitality is to pave the way for those outside of the church to discover the love of God through a relationship with Jesus Christ. A standard measure of the effectiveness of our hospitality is the trend of the congregation in the area of professions of faith. This information is readily available in most congregations.

***Communication Tools:*** The website, church newsletters, bulletins, and other printed materials utilized by the congregation can provide great insight into the culture of hospitality for a congregation.

For example, the website is often the first venue of hospitality experienced by those seeking a church. Does the church have a website? Is it easily navigated? Is it current? Is there information about locating the church and service times and attire?

Or, consider the bulletin. One church I worked with had a big negative statement about the use of cell phones in worship right at the top of the worship bulletin. That's probably not the first thing you want people to see! As a general rule, churches should avoid negative signage in any form (e.g. keep off the grass, no drinks in the Sanctuary, etc.). Churches also use a lot of "churchy" language with the expectation that everyone knows what it means. If you are going to use the Gloria Patri, print or project the text! If you are going to use the Lord's Prayer, print or project the version you use so there is no confusion about "trespasses" or "sins."

***Readiness 360:*** This unique online survey ([www.readiness360.org](http://www.readiness360.org)) measures the spiritual intensity, missional alignment, dynamic relationships, and cultural openness of your congregation. Designed to serve as an indicator for readiness to multiply, this is a great resource for measuring church health.<sup>10</sup>

***Mystery Visitors:*** It is easy and inexpensive to have someone from outside the church visit the normal worship experience and then report on how they were welcomed and engaged. Excellence in Ministry Coaching has a simple report form that is available at no cost ([www.emc3coaching.com](http://www.emc3coaching.com)).<sup>11</sup>

***Welcoming Congregation Certification:*** United Methodist Communications provides an assessment and training for becoming certified "welcoming congregations." We recommend participation in this training.<sup>12</sup>

**Real Discipleship Survey:** This tool is designed for both individual use and as a congregational survey. It highlights the maturity level of individuals in several areas of the discipleship journey, including Hospitality. This tool is available from [www.emc3coaching.com](http://www.emc3coaching.com). For congregational use, the survey is taken by a representative group and then averaged in each of the dimensions of discipleship as an indicator of the level of maturity for the congregation as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

**Congregational Survey:** The measurement of hospitality practices as perceived by the congregation is part of a more comprehensive survey of congregational health. This is offered as both a pdf download and in a Survey Monkey format which gives an analysis ([www.emc3coaching.com](http://www.emc3coaching.com)).<sup>14</sup>

**Discovering the Possibilities:** This facilitated congregational workshop includes a variety of insights into the culture of hospitality extended by a congregation through congregational interview, discussion about missional vital signs, facility review, and the Real Discipleship Survey.<sup>15</sup>

**Leadership Team Assessment:** This document (available from [www.emc3coaching.com](http://www.emc3coaching.com)) is a set of questions for local church leadership teams to consider. The practices of hospitality, worship, discipleship, service, and generosity are all included.<sup>16</sup>

Most of these and other tools are available in *Tips, Tools, and Activities for Coaching Church Leaders*, our companion resource for *Shift*. (See [www.emc3coaching.com](http://www.emc3coaching.com).)

## Getting Started: Platform Stuff

In my work with congregations across the country, I have found several practices that are essential to the development of a culture of congregational hospitality. These do not represent the end-goal of hospitality. Instead, these are the foundations upon which a culture of hospitality is built. I call them *Platform Stuff*. In and of themselves they do not produce a culture of hospitality. These are the things that people expect to be in place. If you don't have them, people will notice and likely determine that this congregation doesn't really care about welcoming newcomers. Once these are in place it is possible to develop the practices that create a culture of hospitality.

### **Clean and Inviting Facilities**

It is common practice for most families to clean up their homes (do the dishes, vacuum the floors, pick up the toys, etc.) when they are expecting

guests. I suggest that the same should be true for the family of God as we prepare for guests. The cleanliness of our facilities is a statement about the value we place on guests and the excellence with which we do life together.

The problem is that we who regularly attend worship become so accustomed to things (items collecting in the corner of a hallway, dingy and worn carpets, used bulletins left in the pew racks, peeling paint in the worship center, etc.) that there is a lack of awareness about the way newcomers see these.

It might be helpful to have someone from outside your church walk the facilities with your trustees to point out areas for improvement.

The cleanliness of facilities and quality of landscaping will not attract people to your church as a general rule. However, the lack of it might keep them away.

### ***Attractive and Safe Nursery***

At the top of the list for most churches is having more young families as part of the congregation. At the top of the list for young families is having excellent nursery care. It is critical that these facilities are both attractive and safe.

Young moms, who carefully select a daycare center for their children, will be less than enthusiastic about dropping off the same child to a 15-year-old sitting in a rocking chair while several infants crawl around on a dingy area rug.

Are the facilities clean? Are they well-stocked with toys that are sanitized regularly? Is there some form of training/certification required for nursery workers? Is there an identification system with care instructions for each child? Is there a system for contacting parents in worship should the need arise? Is the nursery located in close proximity to the worship space?

### ***Welcome and Hospitality Center***

Every worshipping congregation should have a welcome and hospitality center. This is a clearly identified space where knowledgeable guides are present to help newcomers find their way around the campus, escort parents and children to the appropriate classrooms, help people locate the restrooms, etc.

The welcome center is also a centralized place where guests can get printed information about the ministries of the congregation. Some congregations use this center as the distribution point for gifts prepared for guests in worship.

It is my belief that this space should also provide a place for people to connect and begin the process of building relationships. Having coffee, juice, and healthy snacks is a good start; having people from the congregation who invite newcomers to join them for refreshments is even better.

It is often a surprise to congregations that having refreshments located in the fellowship hall or a classroom doesn't seem to be very effective in reaching guests. If this really is a hospitality center, it needs to be clearly visible, central, and identified so that people unfamiliar with the campus will make this point of contact.

This space is all about relationship building, which is what hospitality is all about.

### ***Training the Congregation***

The importance of having people from the congregation connect with guests and start the process of building relationships cannot be overemphasized. This, unfortunately, is not the natural way for people to do church; they need to be trained. The Rethink Church materials make a couple of excellent suggestions for this training:

- 3-minute rule: For three minutes following the close of the worship service, ask regular participants to make a point of engaging in conversation with guests and people they do not know rather than rushing out or talking just with friends. It takes about three minutes for a guest to exit following the worship experience, and this provides a forum for engaging them relationally.
- 10-foot rule: Ask all worship participants to make a point of entering into conversation with everyone within a 10 foot radius of where they are sitting at some point prior to or following worship.<sup>17</sup>

Encourage the conversations described to focus on getting to know what the guest is seeking and how the church might be helpful. Help guests to connect with others from the congregation, particularly the pastor or staff member who might be of assistance to help him/her to make a connection. Gathering at a hospitality center around refreshments is a good way to facilitate this.

### ***Greetings During Worship***

As a general rule, recent studies have indicated that guests in worship prefer not to be asked to stand and identify themselves (or sit while everyone else stands!). They prefer some anonymity or at least the choice to put themselves out there. This is particularly true of those younger than retirement age.

Having said that, there are exceptions to the rule. For those congregations with a large demographic of seasonal participants it is often widely accepted to share who you are and where you are from. This provides a natural

connection between the guest and regular participants from the same area of the country and often initiates the building of relationships.

The most effective greeting is not from the pulpit but from regular people sitting close by who make a point of entering into a conversation. These connections can then be used to get guests to a welcome center where they can find information about the church or be “mugged” (gift of a church mug or other small token).

### ***Informational Meetings***

It is my recommendation that every congregation have regular (monthly at least) informational meetings where guests can learn about the focus of that particular church, opportunities to grow as disciples, and opportunities to engage the local community. This is a great time to get to know the heart of the pastor and the congregation.

Not every church will be a good fit for every person. The informational meetings provide an opportunity for guests to figure out if this is the right place for them. It is also a great way to continue building relationships.

Please note: this is not intended to be a new member class. It is not the place to review the history of the denomination or local church. It's all about connections!

### ***Professional-Quality Communications***

A consideration too often overlooked as impacting hospitality is the quality of our communications. The website for a church is often the first place that people go to begin forming an impression of your congregation. Is the website attractive? Easily negotiated? Current? Helpful?

Is the signage for your facilities adequate to assist people in finding classrooms? Worship center? Restrooms? Is there negative signage: “Don't do this? Don't enter here? Don't walk here?”

Are your bulletins and newsletter attractive, with plenty of “white space,” illustrations, and of course, useful information presented with good grammar and spelling?

If a PowerPoint is used in worship, is it attractive, checked for grammar and spelling, and not overloaded with too much content? Is there an operator who is trained and experienced to make sure that slides and videos are in place on cue?

### ***Guest Follow-Up***

An important part of hospitality is the follow-up done with guests in your worship services. At minimum, there should be a letter from the pastor

(handwritten is best) welcoming them and expressing appreciation for their participation. A more personal call from someone in the congregation is a plus.

Some congregations provide a brief visit (not necessarily even going into the home) to deliver fresh-baked goods or jellies (preferably made by someone in the congregation) and share a welcome. This provides a “personal connect” without being overwhelmed.

## **A Behavioral Covenant**

Finally, back to where we began our discussion around the theme of hospitality. The manner in which people within the congregation treat each other is a significant factor in the level of comfort experienced by guests.

I have found it helpful for congregations to enter into a Behavioral Covenant—a document developed by the congregation that clearly delineates how participants will interact. This document is written around specific behaviors that all agree to engage. This goes a long way toward building positive interpersonal hospitality.

A PowerPoint presentation and script designed to walk a congregational leadership team through the process of developing a behavioral covenant is available through [www.emc3coaching.com](http://www.emc3coaching.com).<sup>18</sup>

## **Suggested Resources for Coaches and Congregations Related to Hospitality:**

- *The Race to Reach Out: Connecting Newcomers to Christ in a New Century*, Douglas T. Anderson and Michael J. Coyner, Abingdon Press, 2004.
- *Right Here, Right Now: Everyday Mission for Everyday People*, Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford, Baker Books, 2011.
- *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Henri J. M. Nouwen, Image Books, 1975.
- *The Inviting Church: a study of new member assimilation*, Roy M. Oswald and Speed B. Leas, Alban Institute, 1987.
- *50 Ways to Build Strength to Welcome New People*, Lewis Center for Church Leadership, [www.churchleadership.com](http://www.churchleadership.com).
- *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*, Martha Grace Reese, Chalice Press, 2008.
- *Peacemaker Ministries*, [www.peacemaker.net](http://www.peacemaker.net)

- *Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict*, Jim Van Yperen, Moody Publishers, 2002.
- *Catch: A Churchwide Program for Invitational Evangelism*, Debi Nixon with Adam Hamilton, Abingdon Press, 2012.
- *United Methodist Welcoming Congregation Certification*, United Methodist Communications, [www.UMCom.org/site/c.mrLZJ9PFKmg/b.6375629/k.B30E/Welcoming\\_Certified\\_Churches.htm](http://www.UMCom.org/site/c.mrLZJ9PFKmg/b.6375629/k.B30E/Welcoming_Certified_Churches.htm).
- *Authentic Community: Practicing the one another commands*, Jim Van Yperen, ChurchSmart Resources, 2008.
- *Stephen Ministries*, [www.stephenministries.org](http://www.stephenministries.org).
- *Get Their Name: Grow Your Church by Building New Relationships*, by Bob Farr, Doug Anderson, and Kay Kotan, Abingdon Press, 2013.