

## Practice Hospitality

When I was serving as outreach minister at Plymouth Heights CRC (Grand Rapids, Mich.), our ministry staff spent a day with the staff from Harderwyk Ministries (Holland, Mich.) to learn from their experiences around worship, discipleship, congregational care, church leadership, and outreach. One of the first questions Wayne Brouwer, then the lead pastor at Harderwyk, asked us was this: “How does a first-grader in your [Kids Hope USA](#) program [a mentoring program we coordinated with our local public school] become an elder in your church?”

The precision of that question cut through all the technical “how to’s” and moved us to the heart of the matter. Could we imagine being a church in which the people we engaged with in our neighborhood could become our church’s spiritual leaders? And, practically, what in our culture and structures would help or hinder that type of formation?

Brouwer’s question is also at the heart of hospitality. Will we live in such a way that people who are strangers to us and to the gospel of Jesus Christ can become leaders in our churches, Christian communities, and the body of Christ more broadly?

### What Is Hospitality?

The biblical notion of hospitality is focused on how we will live as God’s people in relationship with people who are different from us. The New Testament word for “hospitality” is usually *philoxenia*, which literally means “love of strangers.” This loving posture contrasts with another word related to strangers: *xenophobia*, or “fear of strangers.” In this light, hospitality (*philoxenia*) welcomes strangers in; whereas *xenophobia* keeps strangers at a distance. So when Paul calls the early church in Rome to practice hospitality, the Spirit is teaching God’s people “to pursue loving strangers.”

In the culture of Paul’s day, a “stranger” was anyone who was not a family member, and it even included people who were enemies. The practice often involved three things: food, lodging (or being welcomed into a family space), and protection. Hospitality’s elements of food, welcome into family space, and protection are found throughout the biblical narrative, including in descriptions of creation, redemption, and new creation.

**Creation:** Genesis 1-2 reveals ways in which hospitality is at the heart of God’s creation of humanity. God provides food for humanity (Gen. 1:29). God also places humanity within God’s newly made garden, providing a particular place for them while also opening up all of God’s creation to them (Gen. 1:28). Additionally, God provides for the safety of humanity by warning them not to eat from one of the trees at the center of the garden (Gen. 2:15-17) and by creating human companionship and partnership in the work that God created for them (Gen. 2:18-25).

**Redemption:** While different in appearance, the same three elements of hospitality are expressed in our redemption story. Jesus provides food in the form of the Last Supper, by which

he introduces a new covenant (Luke 22:14-20). Jesus welcomes his disciples into his family space by taking the role of a servant and washing the disciples' feet (John 13:1-17) and by telling them he is going ahead of them to prepare a place for them in his Father's house (John 14:1-4). Jesus also extends hospitality by seeking to protect his disciples by laying down his own life for them (John 10:14-18) and by promising them the Spirit, who will guide them into all truth (John 15-16).

**New Creation:** The biblical narrative culminates with a picture of hospitality as well. The tree of life grows alongside the great river in the city of God, bearing twelve crops of fruit each year, and its leaves are given for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:1-5). God also extends hospitality by making God's home and our home the same (Rev. 21:1-5). Moreover, God welcomes the kings of the world and their splendor into the new Jerusalem, indicating that the gates of the city will never be shut (Rev. 21:22-27). And in this new city, all threat to the flourishing of God's people and God's creation has been removed; all fear is gone (Rev. 22:15).

### **So How Do We Practice Hospitality Today?**

While it certainly is an act of kindness to invite friends and family over for coffee, food, and games, we can very easily see these friendly gestures as fulfilling our call to extend hospitality. The challenge is that the biblical language and examples of hospitality call us to not neglect family *and* strangers. In fact, we're called to extend hospitality to strangers as if they were already part of our family. That leads me to questions like these:

- How are we making room in our lives for people who are different from us in race, education, economics, language, politics, and even faith commitments?
- With whom are we sharing our food and resources?
- How are our family spaces and routines becoming places of welcome for strangers?
- Are we spending ourselves to protect our neighbors and even our enemies from harm?

More specifically, in our current contexts, welcoming strangers into family places would also include our social media and online engagements. Do the memes and posts we share throughout the week extend hospitality to strangers? Does our online presence demonstrate a concern for the dignity of people with whom we disagree or who are in some way visibly different from us?

As you consider what practicing hospitality can look like in your context, you are invited to check out the Faith Practices Project's hospitality resources. These resources are designed to help you imagine different, practical ways of extending God's welcoming character to the people you encounter. As you experiment with the practice of hospitality, we'd love to learn alongside you. Share your practices with #CRCFaithPractices and tag us on Twitter (@crc\_ffm), Facebook (@faithformationCRC), and Instagram (@crcfaithformation).