



Practicing Hospitality

The Essential Practices Toolkit for Hospitality

introduction

Imagine you've recently moved to a new town and it's time to find a new faith community. You begin with a local church, not far from your home. A little nervous, you make your way to the front doors not knowing what to expect on the other side. Then you open the door and enter the building. Can you see yourself? How do you feel in that moment? What would make you feel welcome? A greeter at the door handing you an order of worship? A friendly person inviting you to sit next to them? Delicious coffee and homemade treats at coffee hour? Educational offerings that speak to real life concerns, not just flowery language? A room full of people from diverse backgrounds—ethnicity, age, gender, ability, etc., who are worshipping and fellowshiping together? Without a doubt, feeling welcomed will mean different things to different people, but what is for sure, is that hospitality is a practice that invites us all into God's work in the world.

“Hospitality is extending an authentic and communal welcome to all, treating strangers and friends alike.”

Hospitality is a Sabbath practice that culminates in the gathered community, but also extends into our weekly rhythms. When we enter God's Sabbath time, we create an environment that is different from our ordinary space and pace of life. The practice of hospitality is not just a “nice touch,” but a necessary act of reconciliation that invites us into an experience of paradise. This practice involves giving attention to those things that add warmth, welcome, and a sense of community to our life together.

why hospitality matters

When we participate in the practice of hospitality, we are affirming the worth of all of God's people. Taking time to look people in the eye, to create welcoming space, to offer delicious food and loving care affirms that each person is beloved—not just to God, but to all those who follow Jesus Christ.

When we participate in the practice of hospitality, we are putting the stories of Jesus into action for our own time. Jesus judged worth not on status or wealth, but on willingness and openness to step-out in faith, and the church is at its best when it does the same.

When we participate in the practice of hospitality, we are allowing all of God's people to share their gifts (sometimes overlooked or undervalued) with the wider church. Those who cannot build a house but can have a warm and delicious meal waiting for the workers, for example, are furthering the Kingdom of God in ways that align their gifts with the needs of the community. The practice of hospitality is one way that we can affirm those gifts.

When we participate in the practice of hospitality, we are creating friendly and welcoming spaces to give people a degree of safety to enter into deeper relationship and community. When we are present and open with others, we are reminded that church is a safe place where people care.

When we participate in the practice of hospitality, we remember that we too were once strangers, and might likely be strangers again. Extending and receiving hospitality allows us to reach beyond ourselves to break barriers and build bridges.

hospitality in scripture

Consider these passages as you prepare to lead others in this practice:

Jesus Visits Martha and Mary—Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Like Martha, we can get caught up in tasks, distracted by what we think might be our "more important" work, only to later realize that we missed something great. The passage starts so well, with the words, "Martha welcomed him into her home", and yet, two verses later, she is already distracted. How often do we get distracted by the quest for perfection, and neglect to simply be present?

Anointing and washing of feet—John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17

There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. (12:1-8)

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. (13:1-17)

These texts look at two meals that Jesus shared with his disciples in his final week. In the first, we see a disciple, Mary, anointing Jesus' feet with costly oil. In the second, we now see the situation reversed; Jesus is the servant washing the feet of his disciples. In each case, however, the intimate and generous deed is criticized or rebuked. Yet Jesus affirms the power of these actions, noting in both that the act is an important way for the relationship between the Lord and his disciples to be sealed and secured, knowing that he would not be with them for much longer.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan—Luke 10:25-37

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Perhaps one of the most well-known stories of Scripture, this parable demonstrates the heart of the practice of hospitality. Jesus was clear in his message to love the stranger and to redefine who we think of as our neighbor. In saying, "Go and do likewise," the story becomes not just a lesson, but a command based in God's love for us.

Additional Passages

Hospitality to strangers is a recurring theme in the Bible. We see references to the mandate to extend welcome to strangers throughout the whole of the Bible including:

Exodus 23:9 *You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.*

Deuteronomy 10:19 *You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Matthew 25:35 *for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me*

Romans 12:12-13 *Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

Hebrews 13:2 *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

The cumulative effects of these texts send a clear message—hospitality to strangers is God’s mandate. It is easy to welcome our friends and family and those like us, but the practice of hospitality is so much more. Sabbath hospitality pushes us to the edges of our comfort zones and asks us to treat strangers as friends and share with them that same welcome.

hospitality in action

For the most part, hospitality is something churches try to do well. We have greeters at the door. We offer welcome packs. We have a coffee hour. We’re already wired to offer welcome to others. The good news is that this means that we don’t have to spend too much time teaching people why they need to be hospitable. How we put hospitality into action, however, is much more challenging. Consider these ideas to boost how you show welcome to others.

- ✦ **When the community gathers, allow time for the building up of God’s people.** In different contexts, this will take different forms, but start by asking the question, “How can we build a culture where people feel as though they are an integral part of this community?” Things as simple as making time for joys and concerns at meetings and gatherings, praying for people by name, offering name tags at large events, providing gluten free bread at communion, and an embrace of wiggly toddlers in worship all send the message: “God’s abundant love is for you, too!”
- ✦ **Look for ways to connect to your local community and show appreciation.** Could your congregation bring treats to local first responders as thanks for their work? If your church partners with a school or other community organization, could congregants send hand-written notes of thanks to their staff or leadership? Whose quiet work might you notice and celebrate?
- ✦ **Remember to do mission with others and not just for others.** If you have a meal-based ministry, sit with your guests as friends and not just serve them from the other side of a partition. Listen to their stories and share your own as well.
- ✦ **Go beyond general human kindness. Ask, what would Jesus do?** Do you pray as you make a meal for a sick church member? Do you step out of your comfort zone in greeting a visitor standing alone, knowing that by doing so, you are showing not just good manners, but a Christ-centered welcome?

- ✦ **Consider how your church offers the use of its building beyond your congregation.** Support groups, scout packs, space for concerts, election day polling places, and community gardens are just a few of the ways that a church can use its physical space to offer hospitality to neighbors.
- ✦ **Talk to your congregation about what genuine welcome might look like.** Are members encouraged to share words of greeting to visitors at events and in worship? Do they look for new faces and greet them warmly? Invite your congregation to relationally embrace others in worship and other church gatherings. Encourage your congregation to invite visitors and new attendees out to lunch or to their homes for a meal. Biblical hospitality goes beyond the boundaries of the church doors.

notes

hospitality resources

Books

The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality by Henry G. Brinton. Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

Stone Soup by Marcia Brown. Aladdin, 1997.

Everybody Bakes Bread by Norah Dooley. First Avenue Editions, 1995.

Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church by Jessica Krey Duckworth. Fortress Press, 2013.

Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition by Christine D Pohl. Eerdmans, 1999.

Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love, 2nd edition by Lonni Collins Pratt. Paraclete Press, 2011.

Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference by Letty M Russell. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations by Robert Schnase. Abingdon Press, 2007.

Crocodile's Crossing: A Search for Home by Yoeri Slegers. Flyaway Books, 2020.

Curriculum

[*Eating and Drinking with Jesus: Table Manners for Peacemakers.*](#) Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Mission Agency, 1999.

[*Faith Practices: Giving and Receiving Hospitality.*](#) The Pilgrim Press.

[*Welcoming the Stranger: Hospitality for Leaders*](#) by Nancy Ferguson. The Thoughtful Christian, 2011.

[*Living the Gospel of Peace: Tools for Building More Inclusive Community.*](#) Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Mission Agency.

[*Hospitality: Loving the Stranger.*](#) by David Otto. The Thoughtful Christian, 2007.

[*A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic and Hopeful Spiritual Community, Expanded Edition with Study Guide*](#) by John Pavlovitz. Westminster John Knox Press, 2020.

[*Practicing God's Radical Hospitality*](#) by Teresa Chavez Saucedo. Presbyterian Women, 2013.

Online Resources

["Hospitality Matters: What does your church look like through the eyes of a first-time guest?"](#) by Greg Atkinson. Christianity Today, 2016.

["Building a Neighborhood Together: An Intergenerational Peacemaking Project from Family Communications."](#) Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Mission Agency.

["Hospitality."](#) Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

["Hospitality Resources."](#) Association of Presbyterian Church Educators.

["Implementing Hospitality."](#) by Richard J. Krejcir. Richard J. Institute of Church Leadership Development.

["Lead with your Best Welcome."](#) Association of Presbyterian Church Educators, 2018.

[Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.](#) Family Communications, WQED.

["Practicing Radical Hospitality."](#) Metropolitan Council of MN.

["Refugees Welcome: Boundless Hospitality Across Cultures."](#) Association of Presbyterian Church Educators, 2018.

["We Choose Welcome."](#) Presbyterian Mission Agency.