

Candour



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NEWS AND VIEWS FOR MINISTERS

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The Art of Welcoming



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Contents

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Contributions on this topic are welcome, and can be sent to the editor loisandbob@xtra.co.nz.

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We Got Comp'ny

Stuart Vogel, Northern Presbytery

In a scene in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, six year old Scout laughs at Walter Cunningham, a boy from a poor family who is visiting for lunch. Walter pours molasses over his meat and vegetables. Calpurnia, the family cook, scolds Scout:

"There's some folks who don't eat like us," she whispered fiercely, "but you ain't called on to contradict 'em at the table when they don't. That boy's yo' comp'ny and if he wants to eat up the table cloth you let him, you hear?"

"He ain't company, Cal, he's just a Cunningham."

"Hush your mouth! Don't matter who they are, anybody sets foot in this house's yo' comp'ny, and don't you let me catch you remarkin' on their ways like you was so high and mighty! Yo' folks might be better'n the Cunninghams but it don't count for nothin' the way you're disgracin' 'em – if you can't act fit to eat at the table you can just set here and eat in the kitchen!"

Calpurnia sent me through the swinging door to the dining room with a stinging smack.

Calpurnia's scolding remark, you got comp'ny, reminds us that it is the host, not the guest, who has to act fit to eat at the table. As we look at the art of welcoming others in this edition of *Candour*, and what it means to be hospitable, there lurks a deeply demanding challenge. There is far more here than simply being nice to people. Each article explores that challenge of understanding and acceptance of others from a different angle. Our hope is that we will become a more hospitable, insightfully welcoming, Christian community.

Hospitality: bread and salt

The dictionary definition of hospitality is a cordial and generous reception of or disposition toward guests. The word hospitality derives from the Latin word *hospes*, which means guest or stranger. From there we get our words, hospital, hospice, hotel and hostel. Originally a hospital was a kind of hostel, not for the sick, but for pilgrims on a journey to a holy place. Strangely, another related word, to *host*, comes from the Latin *hostis*, which means an enemy of the state. From there, we derive the words hostage and hostile. Hosting others with hospitality contains within it therefore an inherent tension, challenge and even danger. The New Testament Greek word keeps the tension tight. *Philoxenia* means specifically love of the stranger. Hospitality is at its most genuine when it is shown to those who are strange to us, or who are even our enemy. Christian hospitality to one another is – or should be – a given when we are one in Christ. However, the parable of the Good Samaritan is the timeless example of genuine hospitality which is directed at the good, in all the meanings of that word, of the other who is not like us.

The Russian word for hospitality translates literally as *bread-salt*. Bread is a basic, staple, daily food. The first essential act of hospitality is to offer that which is essential to and sustains human life. Salt on the other hand adds flavour to food. Hospitality *adds* that elusive element that makes life worth living. Jesus in Mark 10:13 says, "...salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other." In the Book of Leviticus 2:13, salt was a sign of reconciliation and that an agreement had been ratified. "Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings". Hospitality creates peace, justice and reconciliation with God and each other. It is a gift, ministry and mission and even at times an intensely political act.

2 Kings 4: 8-17: The hidden dynamics of hospitality

When Elisha visits the town of Shunem, a rich woman offers him hospitality. She provides him with a meal and has a room for him built on her roof, with a bed, table and lamp, when he can relax whenever he comes to town. Hospitality creates relationships, provides food, shelter, a place to rest, personal space and time to reflect. Henri Nouwen wrote, "Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines."

Elisha appreciates her kindness and wants to do something for her in return. In verse 13, he asks her what he can do for her. There is no sense that he feels *obliged* in any way to do something for her, or that it is culturally or spiritually appropriate for him to do so. There is no suggestion that God *tells* him to do so. Elisha simply *wants* to return hospitality to her. Hospitality is far from a burden for the giver or receiver. It is a gift offered and received with the greatest of pleasure.

The woman's answer however appears rather strange at first sight, "I have a home among my own people". She is surprised, taken aback, shocked, rather lost for words and perhaps even a little offended. She does not want, seek or need anything, least of all wealth – she has already been blessed with more than sufficient money. The act of supporting Elisha is its own blessing. True hospitality is in itself intensely satisfying and sufficient. It does not occur to her to want or seek in return. Here the modern so-called 'prosperity doctrine' perhaps is mistaken. God is intimately present in the act of offering and not in the expectation of blessing for having offered hospitality.

Nevertheless, Elisha finds the one thing that she desperately wants and her money can not buy. Her husband is old and any hope of a child has gone. Elisha promises her that God will bless her with a son. The offer touches a nerve and the Shummenite woman *begs* him not to get her hopes up unfairly. "No, my Lord, do not mislead your servant, O man of God!" A year later however her deepest hope is fulfilled and she gives birth to a son. Hospitality is about relationships, hopes, all manner of miracles and the creation of happiness and fulfillment.

Christian table talk

Calpurnia's challenge to act fit to eat at the table mirrors the Apostle Paul's stinging words in 1 Corinthians 11:20-21, a passage which we rarely read, just before the famous words of the institution of Holy Communion. "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat, for as you eat, everyone goes ahead without waiting for anyone else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk." Maybe there aren't a lot of drunks at communion in your church, but Paul has a wider point. Loving, welcoming, gracious table talk is a vital part of the experience of coming to Holy Communion.

I will never forget my first meal with the Lin family with whom I stayed in the small Hakka Chinese Taiwanese town of Gungguan. The family was made up of three families and 20 people - grandma, grandpa and the families of their four children. As a 10 year old, I would have loved being part of this family. There were absolutely no table manners at all that I could spot. You could talk with your mouth full, get up and walk around without asking permission, call out to others across the table, reach out for food without asking politely and spit bones out on the table cloth. As for kids being seen and not heard, well, forget that. Grandpa, who was a top businessman in the county, had to put his hand up wherever he wanted to say anything.

And yet the table literally rocked with laughter, fun and movement, as everyone talked at once, joked, chiming in with what had happened during the day, at school, work and in the market. It was a wonderful, chaotic, vibrant, noisy, all-age, beautiful all-in riot. And yet it was quite the opposite to Corinth. It was great family time. I rather think it was just like what a banquet in heaven is going to be.

The Lins also showed me that there is a sink or swim feeling and an uncomfortable element to hospitality. At that first meal, when I had only just begun to study Hakka, I got absolutely none of the jokes. And even if I wanted to preserve even one little bit of Pakeha table etiquette (not getting elbowed by the person sitting beside me for example) I would have been lost. As the guest, I was also offered the first serving of a well known Hakka dish, *chicken head soup* and, yes, I received the chicken head, crown, beak and eyes intact. I might have preferred the table cloth.

The acceptance of the ministry of hospitality involves challenge and change for both the host and guest. Far from being a rather nice thing to do to welcome others, hospitality is not a task for the faint hearted. It may take us out of comfort zones. As Calpurnia says, there's some folks who don't eat like us. And Calpurnia was right about another thing. What we as Christians can not do at any table is act like we was so high and mighty. There is only one person who is high and mighty, who is the real host and head of the table. The Good News is that Jesus is at the table too, with his hand up, waiting for us to notice that he has something to say. It is up to us to listen and welcome those he chooses to invite to *his table talk*.

Whoever welcomes one such child

Jill Kayser, Kids Friendly Coach

When New Zealanders in their 30s with children were asked about their perceptions of the Church (*Attracting New Zealanders to Spiritual Life. AC Nielsen, 2002*) they said they believed that churches were not places for children. They did not think churches would welcome or be inclusive of their children. None of those interviewed were active members of churches, so it's probably fair to presume that their perceptions were grounded in previous personal experiences as children, or parents of children, or on hearsay.

Perceptions are powerful influencers regardless of whether they are founded on reality or not. And the Church is constantly faced with the challenge of overcoming negative perceptions and stereotypes held by society.

Marketing experts suggest that organisations have 30 seconds to make their first impression, and it is in the first half minute of entering an organisation that an individual decides whether they are going to like it or not. Kiwis are polite people, so if they don't like what they see or experience on first entering our churches, they are unlikely to turn around and walk out, but they probably won't come back. I try to encourage churches to put themselves in the shoes of newcomers (including children) and imagine what it feels like to enter their church on Sunday or any other day.

"Sunday worship is our shop window" says Bishop Cray of the Fresh Expressions movement. Worship is what we do (or should do) best, and hospitality and welcome, role modelled by Jesus, is integral to our sharing the gospel. "And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Matthew 17: 5)

When talking to churches about their Sunday ministry to and with children, I ask them if children are welcomed by name as they enter the church. Invariably I find, if a church is honest, that children are not welcomed effectively to Sunday worship.

Church-led holiday programmes or kids clubs have friendly greeters at the door. Children are welcomed, introduced to leaders and invited to make name tags to ensure they are identified by name throughout the programme. This however, is not the case in churches, where door greeters are often too distracted with handing out notices, books and enquiring about adults' well-being, to get down to a child's level and welcome him or her by name.

"Sunday worship is our shop window"

We suggest that churches erect a Kids Friendly table prominently in the church foyer where friendly greeters welcome children by name and ensure that new children are identified and welcomed with a welcome pack (See our resource *A Kids Friendly Welcome*).

We forget that for many, entering our churches is like crossing the border into a foreign land. What we do in churches (and even the language we speak), can be quite alien for the unchurched, so we need to work hard at making them feel "at home".

Many adults voice a concern that if they do decide to visit a church they are unable to remain anonymous. Churches, seeking to be hospitable, position well meaning greeters at the door ready to pounce on newcomers ensuring they are welcomed. Visiting parents have expressed their relief

at finding a table where the attention can be directed to their children who are more than happy to be welcomed and greeted with a wee gift in their welcome pack.

So now let's enter the church.

When a newcomer enters our church they probably want to sit in an inconspicuous place. Adults with young children are even more likely to choose their seating positions carefully to ensure that in the event of their children becoming unsettled they can escape.

One of our Kids Friendly churches has double doors at the back corner of the church opening onto a lounge with comfy couches, quiet toys and books for adults or children needing a refuge. This is not a designated creche but rather a place parents or children can retreat to if needed. The doors are never closed so free flow between the two spaces is possible. This space is alluded to in the order of service that stresses that the movement and sounds of children are welcomed, but the refuge exists should anyone need it.

When once visiting a large successful church, I was invited to view their new auditorium. The first thing I noticed was a block of chairs at the back of the worship space with a notice posted on a music stand that read, "Children and families sit here". "This is wonderful" I said admiringly of their comfortable and modern worship space, "but please move that notice before I see it!" My guide was astounded, believing that designated seating for children and families was a Kids Friendly gesture.

We need to welcome children as full and valued members of our faith community.

People, especially those new to our church, do not want to be told where to sit. While families accustomed and committed to coming to church should be encouraged to sit near the front so their children can be fully engaged in what is happening, others should be able to sit wherever they feel most comfortable.

Another church I visited had their entry on the side of the sanctuary. "The children and families are directed to sit in the front left pews," explained the session clerk. I explained to him that if I was a new mum bringing my four year old to church for the first time I would rather sit in the pew closest to the door. "Well you can't do that" he said, pointing to typed signs placed across the first pew that read: "elder on duty". I picked up the three elder on duty signs covering the entire pew and nonchalantly tore them up, saying as I plonked myself down: "Now I can sit where I feel most comfortable." Luckily he had a sense of humour.

Another of our churches has a child friendly table at the front door where children are greeted and offered a choice of brightly coloured cushions lovingly made by parishioners. These can either be used to raise themselves on pews or chair seats or for sitting on the floor at the front of the church.

Too many churches still equate welcome for children with especially designed play corners. This entails turning the pews around (normally at the back of the church) to create a pen filled with books, toys and drawing materials (not always of the greatest quality). Children entering a church with such a space naturally presume that worship is not for them and therefore congregate in this play area.

For children to feel welcome and know that they belong to the community of faith, they need to be engaged and invited to participate and contribute. The best way to do this is to invite and encourage children and their families to sit up front where they can see, be spoken to and with, and participate. When we use child-appropriate language and give child-friendly explanations to what

is happening in worship we are more likely to engage adults too. Hence the popularity of the well delivered “children’s message”.

If we are intent on helping children to belong and in honouring our baptism promise to share in the responsibility of raising children in the Christian faith, we need to welcome children as full and valued members of our faith community. This means designing the time that children are worshipping together with adults (normally about 20 minutes in most of our churches) to engage and involve them. Children are capable of so much more than “collecting the offering”. In schools they are encouraged in leadership from a young age and in churches too they can minister to us as they participate in our choirs, music groups, dramas, lead us in the call to worship or prayer. (For ideas on involving children in worship see our resource *A Kids Friendly Sunday – worshipping with children*.)

Too many churches still equate welcome for children with especially designed “play corners”.

When we invite and include children to explore what it means to be Christian with the whole faith community, we prepare and empower them for Christian mission in their world. And of course the greatest expression of our hospitality is our welcome of children at the eucharist, the Sacrament of continuing grace and thanksgiving.

Our welcome and hospitality to children extends to Sunday School activities and facilities. Too often the classroom space is not seen or designed as a sacred space, but is a small, unattractive and untidy room (there are many more adjectives I could use to describe the spaces I have seen). Jerome Berryman (Godly Play) talks about the importance of our greeting, aesthetics and ritual in welcoming the child into a sacred place where they can engage with the stories of our faith.

“Let the children come and do not hinder them”. As we seek to respond to this most important directive from Jesus, we need to honestly reflect on what we do and/or don’t do to welcome children as full and valued members of our community of faith.

(Kids Friendly offers many resources and training workshops to help churches welcome, engage and nurture children. For more information see www.kidsfriendly.org.nz).

A Culture of Welcome

Martin Macaulay, Southern Presbytery

Welcoming newcomers and incorporating them into our life and mission together isn't easy. Visitors are all different. Christians who have moved into town often settle into church more easily than people who have come from a nearby church dissatisfied in one way or another. Those who come in off the street on a spiritual quest have different needs to those invited and accompanied by a Christian friend. Yet, hospitality is a key attribute of a healthy missional community. I see three main dimensions to this ministry and want to address them in increasing order of importance: the systems, the culture, and the people.

The Systems

We do have a welcoming team. This team is resourced with some staff hours and they meet regularly for training and encouragement. Members of this team serve each Sunday on a roster to ensure new people are welcomed and given a welcome pack. After attending church a few times, newcomers are visited in their home by pastoral leaders. Regular lunches or coffee and dessert evenings are held for newcomers. These help people meet church leaders, understand what programmes and ministry are available, and provide an appreciation of the overall mission and vision of the church and where their passions and strengths might find their fit. These gatherings also help build relationships. Food and conversations are the relational glue of these events. I am grateful to the hospitality/catering team here who produce delicious food. I don't think some heated up pizza and sausage rolls is good enough for such important first impression events.

Another dimension to the structural, organised dimension of welcoming and incorporation are suitable programmes or ministries that provide entry pathways for people. Things like Mainly Music and the Marriage Course build connections. Alpha not only introduces people to Jesus, but helps them make friends with followers of Jesus. When someone from Alpha comes to church we see them sitting with friends they made on the course. One very fruitful ministry for welcoming people and helping them take exploratory steps of faith has been painting classes, led by an artist in our church. Again, relationships have been the key.

The Culture

Even more important than the valuable work done by ministries and systems, is that the church as a whole has a culture of welcoming and hospitality. Positively the welcoming team contribute to a healthy culture by the example they set, and by the training they have received. Negatively, other people in the church can mistakenly think they don't have a role in welcoming because the welcoming team are on the job. Creating and maintaining a culture of welcome is always a challenge. Let me list some things that have helped us. We seek to tell stories or testimonies of good experiences. When new people enjoy lunch at the home of someone they met at church, we encourage the church people concerned. We try to look out for people doing well and to celebrate and encourage them. From time to time I challenge the whole congregation from the pulpit that we need to be inclusive and welcoming. "Don't let anyone stand alone." Occasionally we have had church-wide Guess Who's Coming to Dinner events to encourage hospitality. As part of our evangelism training we seek to grow people's listening skills.

In discussing the importance of hospitality, Alan Roxburgh comments:

"A missional environment is formed by the practice of hospitality. Members set aside an evening a month to welcome the stranger into their homes. The stranger may be a neighbour or someone within their circle of acquaintance. It is important that they invite someone to their table other than a friend or church member. This may be a neighbour, work associate, or acquaintance from a coffee shop or the children's sports team. Fear of the stranger is so high in this culture that inviting someone far outside the circle of acquaintance is too great a first step. The purpose of such invitation is to treat the stranger as a guest, to experience the gracious table of God. Why is hospitality such an important practice? It requires one to stop a busy, demanding routine for a period of time and focus attention on the stranger for the sake of the stranger." [The Missional Leader p.157]

The People

Writing about the culture of hospitality and incorporation, leads me to talk about the people who make up the church. Healthy disciples of Jesus naturally attract and encourage other healthy disciples. Like so many other areas of church life, the key is keeping the primacy of the great commission to make disciples. Welcoming newcomers begins “out there” over the other six and a half days of the week. Relationship building is hugely important. Trust is what gets many to the door. Mature disciples have boldness and confidence in the Gospel, and yet also grace and sensitivity to recognise when people are ready to be invited to church and when they are ready for further steps to be included. I sometimes think, if a friend of mine who isn’t yet a Christian came to church today, who would I want them sitting beside? Mature disciples are people I can trust not to be weird or inappropriately pushy.

Mature disciples have the character and heart to be outward looking to welcome and involve new people. I rejoice when I see someone excusing themselves from a conversation with their old friends, to walk across the room to greet someone who is standing alone. At our church we feel particularly challenged in this second stage of our welcome. I think we do the initial welcome pretty well, but we continue to wrestle with the steps to people integrating after they have been to church for a while. Those who make some friends and find a place to serve integrate well, but those who don’t, struggle. We might prefer to find a programme we could run for this, and clearly there are some programmes such as Alpha and Network that help, but the key is maturing the people of God.

How we make mature disciples is another whole subject, which I have appreciated Peter Cheyne and others addressing with us, but let me make a couple of comments. One-on-one discipleship helps people catch God’s heart for people. This can begin in a Bible study and is cemented by the experience of welcoming or visiting someone together. Like so many things, a heart for people is more caught than taught. I think Alpha has an important role to play here also, particularly in the intentional way new helpers are trained for the course. People who have been through Alpha frequently end up helping on the next course, either in a small group and praying for people, or serving in hospitality, technology, or some other way. People gain experience in remembering people’s names and what they told you the previous week. That way they can ask, “How did the exam go?” or “How is your back feeling now?” They also grasp the culture of genuine care and friendship with no strings attached. We can be confident that people who are good small group leaders on Alpha will interact with new people very well.

Mature disciples also have a good idea of their spiritual gifts and the areas of ministry they are passionate about. When they are serving in their area of passion in ways they are gifted for, there is an atmosphere of joy, laughter, inclusion, energy, and excitement. This helps new people step into ministries and catch the vision quickly. Three examples that spring to mind are a group for singles called One Only, the hospitality / catering team and music teams.

I’m conscious that I have mentioned systems and programmes throughout this short article. They are helpful but they are not the key. I have been to large churches with programmes for Africa, a café in the foyer, and a special place for newcomers to gather, and yet still not experienced much of a welcome. The most important thing is the people in the church. As they walk closely with Jesus, they demonstrate life, vibrancy and hospitality. Sometimes people claim that small churches are the answer. They are much better at welcoming the stranger. Unfortunately I have visited small churches where no one spoke to me. Healthy disciples are the key.

Running the Gauntlet: an introverts journey to membership

Ross Scott, Wellington Presbytery

One of the most helpful things I have done for myself is to come out as an introvert. I like time out of the limelight, away from the centre of action to nurture myself. This has been a liberating experience for me; I no longer feel guilty when I do not want to go out in the evening. I now trust my feelings and if possible honour them by staying at home. As a result the next day goes a lot better.

When I entered chaplaincy (which involves working in a very extroverted way as I continually meet new people in need each day) I, for the first time since my late teens, was in a position of trying to find a place of worship for my spiritual nurturing. I set sail around the local Methodist and Presbyterian churches. To my frustration I found I was running the gauntlet of door people welcoming me, seeking my name, introducing me to friendly people. All I wanted was the hymn book and order of service. When in some places my name had been given to the minister / worship leader, I would be welcomed by name and encouraged to make a complete fool of myself by standing up. Yes I knew this is what good welcoming is all about according to one of the church growth seminars I attended, but as an introvert, I just needed to sit in my pew, sing the hymns, reflect on the readings and sermon, add my contribution silently to the prayers, appreciate the organ music at the end of the service in peace, and then to leave.

The end result was I did not go back to any of these churches, even though they were being so earnest in welcoming me. One minister when welcoming me during the service expressed his hope that I would bring my children the following week to join the children's church! Both in Hamilton and in Christchurch I joined congregations where to begin with I had very little interaction with the congregation. I slowly got to know those I sat with through the 'passing of the peace' and soon looked forward to meeting them and began to stay on for the cup of tea, choosing which days I wanted this greater level of interaction.

So, if for me, an ordained minister, running the gauntlet put me off a number of congregations, what would it mean for the un-churched introvert seeking a quiet way to start exploring their spirituality?

The key features of the congregations I joined were:

- I was greeted warmly at the door by one person.
- Invited to a cup of tea following the service by minister and door people – not by everyone I met on the way out.
- It was easy to follow the way the service was conducted.
- Easy to see words for hymns and prayers.
- Time for reflection during service either with silence or with musical backing.
- Easy to find information about groups in the church.
- A key person in parish connected with me after a couple of weeks

Belonging

Bob Eyles, Manawatu Wanganui Presbytery

I always seem to have been in the church. My earliest recollection as a very small boy is of my father taking me to an Anglican service in the Ashley Clinton hall in Hawke's Bay to join the congregation, which comprised about four people. Then several years on, to the Presbyterian Church at Ward, south of Blenheim. (Mum was Church of Christ, Dad was Methodist, and Presbyterian was the only similar church within 30 miles.) In the tall pulpit reading the Bible during a morning service, I turned over two pages at once and stopped in confusion until the minister climbed the steps and turned the page back. The people laughed, but in a sympathetic way.

Even in those early years I felt welcome in the church – I felt part of it. As a first year university student at Weir House in Wellington I was one of a group that trekked down the hill to St Andrew's on the Terrace for morning worship on our first Sunday. We were all very impressed at the welcome in the service and at the session clerk and other senior elders taking us on tours of Wellington and then home to lunch. Needless to say we continued to attend St Andrew's. We must have caused Jack Somerville and Warren Schrader headaches by standing up in congregational meetings to argue passionately for changes like the Church School idea that was being discussed in the 1950s.

I was on the staff of Victoria University in Wellington when I felt a persistent call to the Presbyterian ministry. It took all of 1981 to be accepted as a student for the ministry. During that year probably 10 geography students – all of whom I had taught for several years – came to my office to share personal issues, this on knowing that I was stepping off the academic treadmill. As I tried to welcome and help these students I was being the 'church' to them and my call into fulltime ministry was being confirmed. After ordination, I felt at home and loved in my Invercargill, Havelock North and Levin parishes. As a parish minister I found that I could set a welcoming and accepting tone in the parish by regular pastoral visiting and encouraging elders and others to visit – particularly new people. I discovered, too, that I could maintain relationships with people of firmly held theological views that differed from mine, by offering friendship and pastoral care during illness or death.

Welcoming "hiccups"

But, of course, there have been hiccups. I once shook the hand of a man at the end of a service in my first parish and asked, "Are you a visitor?" He reddened and responded tersely, "I have been a member of this church for 25 years." Clearly, our notions of membership differed greatly. I should have said, "Well, if you came to Sunday worship more often, I would recognise you!" But didn't have the courage.

Now, retired in the parish in which I was last minister, I find that I can accept change in the new approaches and technologies our new (and younger) ministers are bringing to the parish life. I can also, somewhat to my surprise, accept without distress, the theological emphases they bring that are different to mine. A number of people cannot cope with the changes and either leave or attend on Sunday out of a sense of duty. Visiting these people is crucial to help them see that as Christians we are members of God's family and not just of a particular denomination or parish.

A couple more hiccups to illustrate how not to welcome people

Recently I preached at a city Presbyterian church – a church I had often been in during my time on presbytery, but one in which I had never attended a Sunday service. After appropriate consultation, the secretary produced an excellent order of service. People were very friendly before and after the service, but worship was marred by glitches. A lit candle was carried in with the Bible to begin the service. But the Sunday School girl didn't know what to do with it when we got to the chancel; there seemed nowhere for me to sit, even no seat in the pulpit; at the end of the service I walked out without realising that the pattern was for people to stay seated and to listen to the organ voluntary.

Small things, but things I found unsettling. The reason for the glitches, I think, is that this particular church has a strong and stable ministry and a number of retired ministers in the congregation – seldom does a rank outsider conduct a service. Of course, I was also at fault by becoming distracted. I have since preached in the same church without glitches and enjoyed the warm and worshipful atmosphere.

Of more consequence is my experience on the first Sunday of my retirement in March 2004. My wife had died 10 days earlier after a short illness and so I was carrying both the grief of her loss and the end of my parish ministry. The local vicar had been of huge help during Hellen's illness and so I went to his church on that Sunday. The pastoral assistant met me at the door and said: "We have our own seats in this service so you can't just sit where you like. I know, I'll put you beside a vestryman who can help you". She escorted me to the seat, the vestryman saw me and said just one thing, "Seen the light, have you?" Not helpful.

Groups to link members

Most well-functioning parishes have a network of small groups linking members. I have felt closest to people and to the 'Christ in people' in such groups, and these ranged from church choirs to house groups, prayer groups, study groups, alpha groups and even a few people meeting for breakfast at the church. New people find the path to parish involvement easier through a small group than through a large Sunday service. It is easier to share real concerns and ask the simple and profound questions we are often embarrassed about, in the company of just a few people.

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Whose Hospitality?

By Graham Redding, Principal, Knox Centre for Leadership and Ministry, Dunedin

A church can view hospitality in two ways: organisationally and theologically.

An organisational perspective will focus on making people feel welcome and integrating newcomers into the life of the church. It will consider strategies and practices that serve these purposes including; welcoming rosters, pew leaflets, user-friendly worship, café-quality coffee and food, follow-up phone calls and pastoral visits, social events and lunches for visitors. It will tailor these practices to serve particular constituencies such as children and families, youth, the elderly and ethnic-specific groups. It will give some thought not only to what happens when someone enters the premises, but also to how the church presents itself to the community through such things as signage, architecture and a range of community services and activities. I've often thought that many churches would benefit from a "hospitality audit". It would help them to be more intentional about what they do and to think about new dimensions of hospitality.

As beneficial as all this might be, however, there are a couple of risks. The first risk is treating people like consumers whose needs, tastes and preferences must be catered for. The second risk is viewing hospitality as a means to an end, namely as a strategy for church growth. In both these cases, despite the very best intentions, people are treated more as objects of our attention than as people. And some people, usually the ones who are most like us or the ones we are keen to have join our church, are deemed to be more worthy of our hospitable attention than others. When this happens, the church becomes a kind of club, embracing those who are most likely to fit its criteria for belonging and neglecting (and in some cases actively shunning) those who aren't.

What happens, then, when we view hospitality theologically, not just organisationally?

These criteria for belonging are usually implicit rather than explicit, but they often fall along theological, ethnic and socio-economic lines. Take, for example, a church that promotes itself as 'Bible-believing' – who is it implying is welcome, and who is not welcome? Or a church that defines itself in relation to a particular ethnic group? Or a church that identifies material success with divine blessing? Or a church that equates authenticity with a particular manifestation of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues? Examples are not hard to come by. In each case, ask yourself, "What's the sub-text? Who's welcome here, and who's not?"

The fact is, left to ourselves all of us operate with filters of acceptability and non-acceptability through which we judge other people and extend hospitality to some but not to others. And we religious people are often most prone to doing this. Like many Jewish Christians in the Apostle Paul's day, our boundaries of welcome and hospitality are often narrowly prescribed.

What happens, then, when we view hospitality theologically, not just organisationally? Jesus' ministry is instructive here. I recall some years ago reading a commentary on Luke's Gospel called *Lord of the Banquet*. The author noted the extent to which meals feature in Luke's portrayal of Jesus' teaching and ministry. For much of the Gospel he is portrayed as a travelling guest, dining in various homes and telling parables that depict the Kingdom of God in terms of a meal of hospitality. And then, in the Last Supper and on the road to Emmaus, the travelling guest becomes the host.

Interestingly, the root meaning of the Hebrew word for salvation is "to make space for" or "to be roomy". Bringing into a more spacious place confers the idea of deliverance, as in the Exodus narrative. Relating this to Jesus' ministry, one's mind immediately turns to John 14, where Jesus

declares that in his Father's house there are many dwelling places. It's an evocative spatial metaphor, consistent with a major thrust of Jesus' ministry, which could be described in terms of making space for those were denied space by the moral, political and religious systems of their day. I was reminded of this a few years ago when I heard Dave Dobbyn's song, *Welcome Home*, which includes a wonderful line, as he alludes to the settling of immigrants in this country: "See, I've made a space for you now".

For whom should we make space? At the Last Supper Jesus makes space for the one who will betray him, the one who will deny him and all those who will abandon him. There is something profoundly expansive and transformative about his hospitality.

Following this logic, an integral part of hospitality is about making the stranger feel welcome, making space for those who are not like us. Indeed it even goes so far as to include the notion of being reconciled to those from whom we may have been estranged. The Apostle Paul made this a recurring theme in his correspondence to fledgling Christian communities – e.g., Galatians 3:28. It's not just that Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free, all have their place – a form of peaceful co-existence as it were – but rather, the very things that divide them, allowing one ethnic group or class of people to dominate another, dissolve, and in their absence a new reconciled and reconciling humanity has been born.

It is this radical, transformative dimension to God's hospitality, on display every time Christians gather around the Lord's Table, which sets the church apart from every other organisation.

It is this radical, transformative dimension to God's hospitality, on display every time Christians gather around the Lord's Table, which sets the church apart from every other organisation. Other community groups may surpass the church in their ability to welcome newcomers and provide fellowship, but every time Christians gather for worship and receive the "holy bread of heaven which gives us life" (John Calvin), they are reminded of a deeper and more profound dimension to hospitality – a dimension that originates in God and overflows from the throne of Grace, overcoming sin, binding people together in a reconciling embrace and serving as a sign of God's intention for the world.

Understood in this way, exploring ways of becoming more hospitable will involve more than adding a café experience to church attendance. In her remarkable book, *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles describes the experience of early one morning in San Francisco, for no earthly reason, wandering into a church, receiving communion, and finding herself transformed – embracing a faith she had once scorned. Before long, she turned the bread she ate at communion into tons of groceries, piled at the foot of the church's communion table to be given away. Within a few years, she and the people she served had started nearly a dozen food pantries in the poorest parts of their city. Her story graphically illustrates the missional potential of Eucharistic hospitality. For those who feel confused or overwhelmed by all the talk around being a missional church, I would say, concentrate first on being a hospitable church. Properly understood, this will not make your church inward looking; rather, it will sharpen you for witness and mission.

Is Membership Meaningless?

Peter Cheyne

In many churches membership has been de-emphasised. Our culture has an aversion to commitment and accountability. Mission in our secular world is difficult and we do not want to put impediments in the way of people joining the church – especially given the pressure to show that we can grow a church. Some will say that there is no biblical requirement to ‘sign on the dotted line’. Keeping a roll seems too institutional. Some churches have no formal membership and if people attend they are assumed to be part of the church.

Where the concept of membership has been abandoned or has been stripped of any real significance, it might well be that membership is meaningless. And where it is meaningless, why would anyone want it? People in our society are busy and are less inclined towards membership of any organisation. They are almost certainly not going to be attracted to a membership that is meaningless. They will choose something that seems to be worth their investment.

I want to argue for raising our view of membership

In a church, there are often various levels of membership. My concern is with membership that reflects a significant commitment to the church. We used to call that ‘communicant membership’, indicating that the member was qualified to receive communion. That meant that the individual had professed faith in Jesus Christ and was believed to be in a state of grace. If my historical understanding is correct, in Presbyterian churches, communion cards replaced tokens that were delivered by the elder prior to communion, having enquired into the person’s state of grace.

In other words, membership implied responsibilities and benefits. The member had placed him/herself under the discipline of the local church but also received the care of the church and was able to receive the Sacrament. The fact that membership was generally entered via baptism, or confirmation of baptism, indicates that a prerequisite was publicly acknowledged faith in Jesus. The membership vows commonly included a profession of faith in Jesus, a commitment to Christian living and a commitment to involvement in the life of the church.

The early church required ‘catechumens’ to prepare for two or three years, in a one-to-one mentoring relationship, before being received into church membership.

Of course, the church could also take away membership - a person could be excommunicated which would be a terrible and shameful thing. We can all possibly think of stories of excesses in terms of the church’s intrusion into a person’s life but the traditional model demonstrates that membership did mean something. In fact, it meant a great deal and contrasts with current practices in some churches that mean that a person might become a member with few requirements; might not even be a Christian; will not be accountable for their life and might be expected to do no more than attend occasionally. It used to be that people who didn’t attend at least once a year might have their membership questioned by the elders. What sort of commitment is that? Now even that might not be required. Some churches still have on their roll people who have shifted away or maybe died. Some will certainly still list people who show no evidence of Christian faith. That kind of membership is meaningless.

We might go further back and recall that the early church required 'catechumens' to prepare for two or three years, in a one-to-one mentoring relationship, before being received into church membership.

Membership is, after all, a profoundly biblical concept. Even the word 'member' i.e. a limb or organ is derived from the biblical concept of the body. So much of New Testament Christianity assumes a Christian to be a committed part of a local church. It is impossible, for example, to obey the various 'one another' commands otherwise. We are said to "belong to one another" (Rom 7:4) and to be "members of one another" (Rom 12:5)

What if we go back even further? In many places, there seems to be a serious disconnect between church membership and the requirements Jesus expressed for Christian disciples. Shouldn't they be the same? When we talk about church members are we or are we not talking about Christian discipleship? For example, Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he/she must deny him/herself and take up his/her cross and follow me." (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; c.f. Lk 14:25-27)

If we see Jesus' call to the fishermen (e.g. Mt 4:19) as defining discipleship, including the discipleship we are also called to...

This applies to every Christian (If *anyone*) and it is compulsory (he/she must). Luke quotes Jesus as saying that without this a person cannot be a disciple.

Let us not miss the weight of Jesus' words. Self-denial, the taking up of a cross, and following all talk of death to self, of sacrifice. Jesus talked about the need to hate one's own family, of holding to his teachings, of giving up everything we have, of loving one another and of producing fruit, as necessary requirements of or distinguishing marks of a disciple.

I suspect not many churches tell potential members that they are required to do these things. That suggests that when we talk about church membership we really are talking about something other than the discipleship Jesus taught. Is it possible that the fruit of that is declining churches (since membership is not significant enough for people to commit too) filled with baby-like, unproductive people (since nothing much is required of them)?

The New Testament teaching on spiritual growth suggests that God is looking for two things: maturity and mission. God is looking for people who are growing in Christ-likeness and who are serving where serving means more than manning a stall at the church fair or cleaning the church. God is looking for people who will be involved in the mission of Jesus.

If we see Jesus' call to the fishermen (e.g. Mt 4:19) as defining discipleship, including the discipleship we are also called to, it is about:

- Following Jesus ("Come, follow me")
- Being changed by Jesus ("and I will make you")
- Being involved in the mission of Jesus ("fishers of people")

If we used that as a framework for understanding membership, our requirements, the preparation, the vows and the subsequent nurturing of the person's faith and service, would incorporate those three aspects. If there was a commitment to conversion, transformation and mission, membership would certainly mean something.

And what benefits might this new member expect? The ability to vote. Is that all? And even that privilege is observed less and less. Increasingly, anyone can vote – and that might include people who have no faith and no spiritual discernment to vote on spiritual matters.

Communion is very freely available. That is a good thing but it also means that there is less awareness of the spiritual state of our own people and less significance in membership. Pastoral care is available to anyone and there is a general belief that everyone will be saved anyway. If membership makes no difference, again it becomes meaningless.

I believe we should raise the membership bar, not lower it. By raising it, we are more faithful to the biblical teaching and we make it something that some will see as so worthwhile they will be willing to sacrifice for it.

In my early years at Calvin Church, Gore, we used an 18-week course (called 'To Serve') as a prerequisite for membership. That might have been excessive but it did mean that:

- People understood the commitment they were making.
- People had a common understanding of faith, of how to continue growing, of the mission of the church and of their place in that (i.e. it produced unity).
- People then moved into ministry teams with the expectation of living out what they had learnt.

Seasons change in the life of a church and we moved from that to a three-week membership course which we later compressed into a single evening. In that we taught that there were two requirements for membership: a commitment to Jesus and a commitment to this local church. As well as teaching about what it meant to be a Christian we explained our church's mission, values, beliefs, structure, so that those who chose to join did so with their eyes open.

For us, explaining membership meant that many people who had been in the church for years, and not become members, realised that membership was important and something they could commit to. Raising the bar encouraged people to take membership seriously.

An 18-week course might have been excessive but, on reflection, I think we lost something, in terms of basic discipling, when we stopped using it.

To my mind, we would benefit from re-thinking membership:

- What membership means.
- The requirements for becoming a member (and therefore the preparation provided).
- The requirements of members (and therefore the involvement of the member in the life and mission of the church).
- The benefits of membership.

At Calvin we said that only members would be put into leadership positions. That wasn't always popular but it did indicate that we valued the commitment that members had made. What organisation allows people who are not committed to it to become its leaders? That is a bizarre concept and yet, in churches, we so often feel we have to have no standards.

I do not believe the church (or the Kingdom) really benefits when we lower our standards. If church membership is the outward expression of having come to faith in Jesus Christ and wanting to serve him as part of his body, it is perhaps the most meaningful commitment of our lives.

At Calvin we said that only members would be put into leadership positions.

I Walk to The Assembly Office Most Days

Martin Baker

Dear Colleagues

I walk to the Assembly Office most days. Past 15 cafes, two multiplex cinemas, two beggars, a brothel and a flower shop. At 7.15 am its pretty quiet on the way to work, but by 6 pm, on the way home, things have started to become a bit more lively. The cafes are busy, cinema audiences coming-and-going, and the two young-ish women in front of Mermaids always smile at me as they hand out their discount vouchers. I always take one - and discard it a few meters down Courtney Place. Each time, I reflect on the things we do to be polite or show good manners – a bit like remembering my grandma’s instruction to “eat everything on your plate”.

Until late last year I had a nodding acquaintance with Wellington’s best known street person, ‘Blanket Man’ or Ben Hana, as I finally discovered was his real name. Often to be found lying naked on the edge of the footpath in front of the Courtney Place National Bank. He died in January at 54, just a couple of years older than me. Malnutrition and alcohol got the best of him, but he was well known; someone created a Facebook page for him and another a website. Flowers and written tributes were left on the wall of the bank for days after his death. According to Wikipedia, Hana was a self-proclaimed devotee of the Maori sun god Tama-nui-te-rā, and claimed this required he wear as few items of clothing as possible, as an act of religious observance.

There is that quote by George Macleod, which I just can’t get out of my head, as I walk past the prostitutes and beggars and the policy analysts – the latter in cafes drinking their low-fat soya milk lattes:

“I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the centre of the market place as well as on the steeple of the church, I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek ... and at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died, and that is what he died about? And that is where Christ’s people ought to be, and what church people ought to be about.”

I attend a lot of worship services. A while back I was abroad at a CWM event listening to the preacher when his cell phone went off. He paused in mid-sentence, answered the phone, carried on a somewhat lengthy and animated conversation which was almost audible to the congregation, hung-up and carried on. Not a blink...from anyone. I hadn’t ever seen that done before. I don’t think I could do it. Mind you, I’ve not seen too many people light up a Marlborough in church either – some things are not done, and somehow we all know this. In fact, I’ve always been conscious that many of our churches are designed to shield people away from the world around. It should be no surprise to us that people wonder what goes on in there. Last week a colleague of mine was describing how someone provided directions to his church where a community meeting was to be held. He overheard a young person telling his mother who had no idea where the church was even in this small town, that it was the building with the plus sign on top.

I went to a terrific church service on Sunday. The sermon was uplifting and real, the music was relevant and thoughtful, the communion liturgy had a real sense of authenticity about it. We heard that the elders, in response to the news that the church building needed expensive and major strengthening, were very positive and excited about looking beyond the present building arrangement at new ways of being the church and wanted to open up the conversation to the whole congregation.

The data for our church is both good and definitely not good. The good part is that for most worshipping in a Presbyterian church the reality is becoming increasingly that of being part of a large, usually multicultural or Pacific or Korean congregation. Some of these congregations are growing and most relatively stable. The big loss and decline for us is found in the majority of our congregations which have become smaller and smaller over the years. This is where the pain and grief from a memory of what used to be, is most profound.

It's going to take vision and courage to make decisions about where to put time and energy. We can expend a lot of resources trying to put together structural solutions that might help address the concerns of the majority of our congregations who have been facing such difficult, and at times, quite heartbreaking realities. But then there is the Mermaid club and Blanket Man and the policy advisors. Macleod's Christology seems to express a special concern for them. Maybe it is my imagination but there always now seems to be someone on the committees that I attend who, when it comes to discussing future directions and different choices, says it's a 'both and' thing. That logic always sounds so reasonable and is a relief to everyone in the room. A hope that we somehow should be 'doing everything'. That all vision has to compromise with the present ways of being. But is there room in leadership from the 'both and' view? Don't we have to make the hard call at some stage about what is most important?

Let's keep the conversation going. And, thanks again for all you do.

Martin

William L Wallace, *Singing the Sacred: Volume 1* (World Library Publications, Franklin Park, IL. 2011); ISBN: 978-1-58459-561-8; 88 pp. \$40

Reviewed by Sheena Dickson, Christchurch Presbytery

Reviewing this collection of Bill Wallace's new hymns *Singing the Sacred* as a non-professional musician may be somewhat unusual, but as a worship leader I am interested in what is sung in worship services and how hymns might deepen spirituality and inculcate a sense of the mysterious aspect of God. In the author's preface, he clearly sets out his belief in the 'oneness' of the cosmic God and the interconnectedness of everything in the universe. He offers these hymns as a doorway – a doorway that invites us to "walk into the unknown with hope, faith and love".

This collection of hymns is alphabetically set out with texts at the beginning and helpful indices at the end. Such attention to details makes this a hymn book that is easy to use. The inclusion of both new and more well-known tunes for many of the hymns offers an opportunity to learn new tunes or to blend new lyrics with traditional tunes, thereby offering the singer the opportunity to focus on the theology that underpins the lyrics instead of being distracted by trying to get the tune right. Happily, though, the newer tunes are easy to pick up. The majority of hymns in the collection are in traditional hymn form or very close to it; this collection could not replace but might supplement more comprehensive – and traditional – hymnals already on the market. My one slight complaint is that the print might have been slightly larger. Perhaps a large print edition would prove popular for those with tired eyes.

An opportunity to use meaningful hymns in a diverse, scientific and postmodern age

Between the texts and the indices one finds several beautifully-crafted quality hymns. The language is modern, perhaps even postmodern. The lack of gender-bias is welcome as is the non-anthropocentric focus. Clearly, the hymns were penned with integrity to reflect the author's own deeply-held theological belief in a God of cosmic proportions. Linger and reflect on any one of the hymns and it will be clear that they have been birthed by a mystic. There is nothing shallow or frothy here; instead, there are intelligent, pastoral, mystical and thought-provoking hymns. Some convey, beautifully and sometimes movingly, the author's own experiences of the cosmic God. Yet

these hymns are for the faith community at worship and they invite us to ponder and reflect on the image of God that resides in us and in all things. They speak powerfully to our experiences of awe and wonder, gratitude and reverence, as well as those of the cosmic Christ with wounds, and the suffering of the world - from rainforests to human affliction.

Whether these hymns will suit one's church will depend on the style of your particular faith community. It may, perhaps, appeal to a congregation whose needs are different rather than a 'by the book' style of worship. However, these hymns will, with judicious use, fit most contemporary worship services where there is a mixture of hymns and songs. Another advantage is that they offer the worship leader an opportunity to use meaningful hymns in a diverse, scientific and postmodern age. Be assured there is no contemporary pop-culture here and this volume appears to be devoid of bouncy-weepy tunes. Neither is there any danger of these hymns sounding like 90s or 2000s clichés to future generations. Rather, I'll hazard a guess to say it will be a long time before they become conspicuously dated. Like fine wine, I believe this collection of hymns will age well.

The lack of gender-bias is welcome as is the non-anthropocentric focus.

There is, however, one caveat: this collection is not for the faint-hearted. Indeed, I might go as far as saying it would take more than a modicum of courage to use it exclusively in a traditional or conservative worship service. If you were to do so, then proceed cautiously, not simply because the theology that birthed and underpins the hymns would require some explanation, but also because few are the folks who would admit to holding "crippling mem'ries". However, this one line is a good example of the pastoral aspect in this hymn: we are urged to "Live like Jesus, moving beyond all fear. Leaving all our crippling mem'ries making space where we can care".

This collection of hymns makes a significant contribution to modern hymnody. I'm encouraged by, and delighted with, Volume 1 of this collection of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. I will enjoy singing them and introducing them, gently, to a wider audience.

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