

# Reflections on hospitality and the missional church

Robert J. Suderman

## **S**cene #1

The day of the family Christmas gathering has finally arrived. After weeks of preparation, grandmother and grandfather are eagerly anticipating the arrival of their guests. The house will be abuzz with activity. Children and grandchildren are coming. Aunts and uncles, cousins and in-laws have also been invited. Some of the younger folks will surely bring special friends, and the family is ready to warmly embrace them as well. This year will include something else. A refugee family, confused and lonely, has connected with the family. They have been invited today, too, and their gratitude will add a note of celebration and meaning to the day.

The smells are predictable. Soups, chicken dinner, fresh garden salads, and lots of pies and other delicious desserts add to the homey and comfortable feeling in the home. Christmas lights are on, the fireplace crackles in the corner. The wind and snow outside only enhance the warmth, comfort, and anticipation inside. All express their gratitude to the hosts, and wish them much joy in their generous acts of hospitality.

## **Scene #2**

In the confusion of civil war, massacres, and unthinkable atrocities, a church community declares its modest facilities a safe haven for all, a sanctuary where those in danger can come to find food, safety, rest, and a listening ear. When the fugitive is a member of one of the guerrilla movements, the military sees the offer of refuge as abetting the enemy. When the fugitive is a member of the military, the guerrillas understand the offer as abetting the oppressor. When the fugitive is a member of the paramilitary movement, the church is labeled a target of war by all sides.

A fugitive cautiously enters the church building. The pastor welcomes him but asks no questions. The man's clothes, weapons, and bearing provide enough hints to enable the pastor's experienced and discerning eye to peg the man's probable allegiance. Despite angry shouting outside, the pastor's attention remains resolutely focused on the stranger. He offers soup, simmering in the kitchen. Bread and water help quiet the visitor's anxiety. Over a cup of coffee, he begins to unravel his complex story as the pastor listens.

The pastor extends an invitation to sleep in the pews that night. Food and warmth will be provided. The church community will gather in a few hours to worship, to sing, and to discern Scripture together in their weekly meeting.

The next day, the guerrilla commanders knock on the door of the church. They tell the pastor that if the church community persists in its offer of sanctuary to the members of the paramilitary groups, the pastor and his family will be killed, and the building will be destroyed. The pastor asks for an opportunity to visit the guerrilla camp, to converse with the leaders about the church's understanding of sanctuary. They accept his offer. He travels a whole day, and talks with the commanders. They begin to see him not as an enemy but as a sincere person dedicated to helping people in need. For the moment they withdraw their threats.

At their regular meeting that week, congregational members hear the stories of sanctuary activities for that month. They are encouraged by the pastor's testimonies. The presence of the fugitive only serves to strengthen the community's resolve to continue its sanctuary ministry. They determine to extend hospitality to the many others seeking refuge. They pray for the safety of all the members, the pastor, and especially for the many fugitives in search of refuge.

### **Hospitality: A closer look**

As Canadians and Americans, we use the word hospitality primarily in the sense revealed by the first scene. Hospitality is the careful art of hosting. It means providing warmth, embrace, and pleasant surroundings to friends and relatives. It is making acquaintances feel at home not only in our place but in our presence. Hospitality is observing Martha Stewart's exacting

standards for entertaining. It is the art of properly hosting colleagues, at times in more formal settings, at times in informal get-togethers.

Even a cursory glance at the word *hospitality* will indicate that this common understanding is missing something. The root word of hospitality is hospital. A hospital is an establishment for healing. When something is broken and in need of repair, when we are ill and require therapeutic treatment, we go the hospital. A hospital is a place of restoration, a place for reconciling what is with what is meant to be. Hospitality also has the same root as hospice, a word that, in common use, means accompanying someone to death's door. Hospice workers commit themselves to hospitality as they accompany a dying person as far as they can

**The usual meaning of hospitality in our context is far from the rich possibilities it embraces in its original language, and from its biblical meanings.**

**Hospitality is the provision of safe spaces for strangers and enemies to learn from each other.**

humanly go. Hospice care also involves carefully and deliberately allowing death to come. It means making people as comfortable as possible even as they move inevitably towards death.

In the Latin roots of the word we find additional meaning. Hospitality (L. *hostia*, *hostis*, *hoste*, *hospit*, *hospes*) implies relationships with strangers and enemies. It can be related to the host of the Eucharist and, by extension, to suffering for friends, strangers, and enemies. When related to numbers (an army as a host), it usually implies a hostile environment, a potential clash of enemies. The Latin word for guests

also suggests that the guests may be strangers or even enemies of the host.

When we look at the Greek New Testament, we begin to see an even deeper level of meaning. The words most often translated as hospitality come from roots of *filo-xenia* (literally: love of strangers). On closer examination, however, it is clear that the word for stranger (*xenia*) in a number of contexts has a stronger meaning. It refers to a stranger who represents danger, an enemy (Acts 17:18; Matt. 25:35, 38). It can also refer to the host (Rom. 16:23) and the guest (Philem. 22). It is a rich concept: first, because guest and host are somehow interchangeable; second,

because guest and hosts are strangers to each other; and third, because these strangers could inject danger into the relationship. Love of strangers is therefore openness to enemies. As guest and as host, we have a reciprocal mission to each other. When Jesus broke bread with the disciples he met on the Emmaus road, in their lodging, he actually became the host and they the guests.

This demonstrates another aspect of *xenia*: unexpected and

**When we see that God wants us to be a hospitable people, we understand this in the sense of introducing new alternatives, new possibilities, into our relationships with strangers and enemies.**

surprising things may happen, because when guest and host connect, often as strangers, sometimes as enemies, we cannot predict the results.

We do not need to go further in examining the word itself. Suffice it to say, the usual meaning of hospitality in our context (see scene #1) is far from the rich possibilities it embraces in its original language, and from its biblical meanings. Hospitality is the provision of safe spaces for strangers and enemies to learn from each other. It is similar to the Old

Testament provision for sanctuary, a holy space (L. *sanctus*). This is a safe place commissioned by God for all who seek refuge and safety. It is not difficult to see that this sense of hospitality underlies scene #2 above. And when we see that God wants us to be a hospitable people, we understand this in the sense of introducing new alternatives, new possibilities, into our relationships with strangers and enemies. God's people demonstrate what incarnation means: injecting divine substance into the same darkness that rejects it. The Word comes to its own, though its own do not receive it (John 1:11). Hospitality suggests moving into darkness with life-giving alternatives even when that darkness rejects this presence.

### **The missional church**

How is hospitality thus understood related to the broader vision for a missional church? The connections are not difficult to make.

At the heart of missional ecclesiology is the extraordinary affirmation that transcendence has become immanent, that God has surrendered divine purpose to human hospitality. God has not only moved into enemy territory, God has won over a remnant of

the enemy with sacrificial love and has enlisted this remnant as co-workers in the divine plan for healing, restoring, and reconciling the enemy. This process subverts the intentions of the enemies. While the norm in our world seems to be hostility to God's purposes, refusal to extend human hospitality to God's presence (e.g., the manger and the cross), God's intentions are not thwarted. As divine guest in our midst, God becomes the host, inviting strangers and enemies into the alternative camp. God is recruiting for healing and saving purposes. And God has invited and empowered a chosen people to participate in recruiting others into this healing alternative.

This recruitment is not simply one of inviting people into someone else's reality. It is an invitation to enter, to experience, and then to extend the hospitality of God's community. This invitation injects light into darkness; it is a willingness to remain hospitable within a context of hostility and rejection.

**At the heart of missional ecclesiology is the extraordinary affirmation that transcendence has become immanent, that God has surrendered divine purpose to human hospitality.**

In a missional church, ecclesiology is missiological, and all missiology is ecclesial. The essence and character of the church (ecclesiology) are inseparable from the purpose and activity of the church (missiology). The purpose of the church is not divorced from the being of the church.

The church defines its own purpose according to the purposes of God. God's activity is the framework for the purpose of the church.

This means that we need to discern, as well as we can, what God is doing, and how this activity flows out of the very character of God. When we understand this, our purpose as God's people is clarified. Our task is to do what God is doing.

We can identify a number of important characteristics of God, and therefore the church:

***Being missional is being incarnational.*** We have already noted that the extraordinary characteristic of the Christian faith is that our transcendent God enters into human history. In one sense, God is a guest of human history; in another, God is host of this history. As guest, God takes initiatives that are rejected more

often than not; as host, God constantly infuses hope through new alternatives. In both roles, God is often seen as a stranger and sometimes as an enemy. We think we know best, and we often experience God's infusion of alternatives as an unwelcome shock to our preferred way of doing things.

***Being incarnational is being hospitable.*** While God's desire to relate to the enemy is most clearly seen in God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ, we witness this intention in other places as well. The rich text from Romans 5, often used to invite people to an individualistic and internal faith in the saving power of Jesus, is actually a profound statement about how seriously God's incarnational and hospitable intentions are to be understood: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners [enemies] Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

God's initiative does not depend entirely on the hospitality of the human host. While we were sinners God initiated the reconciling work through Christ. Nor did God's initiative ignore human anti-hospitality: Christ died because of the inhospitable reception. Such incarnational hospitality is the foundation of our

**As guest, God takes initiatives that are rejected more often than not; as host, God constantly infuses hope through new alternatives. In both roles, God is often seen as a stranger and sometimes as an enemy.**

purpose as a peace church. It reflects God's character, ethic, and missional purpose.

***Being hospitable is being hopeful.*** The possibility of being a different kind of host and a different kind of guest, in the midst of inhospitable conditions, is the foundation of hope for a broken and weary world. God's sanctuary movement inspires similar sanctuary in the violent country of Colombia (see scene #2 above), and so injects hope into seemingly hopeless situations. Hope continues to be unseen to the naked eye, but is dramatically real to the eye of imagination.

It is so real that the church begins to act according to the potential of what it hopes for. When the church does so, hope take on flesh, it is incarnated, and it becomes a new possibility.

## **Conclusion**

When we actively imagine the possibility of all God's people being incarnational, hospitable, and hopeful in all their activities,

and in the whole world, we begin to see the potential witness of a missional church. God has led and is leading the way. Jesus Christ, as the incarnation of God, demonstrates an alternative road of hospitality to enemies, strangers, the outcast, and family. The vulnerability of God's Word becoming flesh, in the midst of enemies, is the key to the church's understanding of its missional nature. The Holy Spirit provides the discernment and accompaniment for the church to live out its mission of being guest and host in a broken world.

### **For further reading**

- Guder, Darrell L., ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Hershberger, Michele. *A Christian View of Hospitality: Expecting Surprises*. Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 1999.
- Russell, Letty M. "Practicing God's Hospitality in a World of Difference and Danger." J. J. Thiessen lectures, Canadian Mennonite University, October 16–17, 2001.
- Suderman, Robert J. *Calloused Hands, Courageous Souls: Holistic Spirituality of Development and Mission*. Monrovia: MARC, 1998.
- Van Gelder, Craig. *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*. Grand Rapids: Baker Bks., 2000.

### **About the author**

Robert Suderman's extensive experience in Christian education and mission—in schools and seminaries in Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, and Canada—has shaped his understanding of the purpose of the church in the world. He now serves as executive secretary of the Christian Witness Council of Mennonite Church Canada, and has recently guided the denomination's transformation process in the area of Christian witness. He is married to Irene, and they have three children. He holds advanced degrees from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and from Pontificia Universidad Javariana (Bogota, Colombia).