



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Building a Place
for Hospitality
(*Hospitality*, pp. 27-36)

Suggested Article:

📖 Protecting the Innocents
(*Hospitality*, pp. 64-66)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Building a Place for Hospitality

Hospitality quickly takes on very earthy dimensions – buildings, beds and blankets, pots and pans – as we share our place, make use of what is available, or create new places. How can we sustain personal, small-scale places of welcome along with more institutionalized expressions of care?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 6:1-6

Responsive Reading: (based on Hebrews 13:1-3)

Let mutual love continue.

Let us not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
**for by doing that we may entertain angels
without knowing it.**

Let us remember those who are in prison,
as though we were in prison with them;
those who are being tortured,
as though we ourselves were being tortured.

Reflection

“Hospitality was practically necessary and theologically central” for the first Christians, observes Christine Pohl. They were well grounded in the Old Testament requirements to establish formal, communal ways of caring for strangers and inspired by Jesus’ teaching and many examples of giving and receiving hospitality. “Because Christians traveled to spread the gospel and to escape persecution, hospitality continued to be an important part of their shared life,” Pohl writes. “Because converts came from many backgrounds, shared meals – usually in homes – became an important location for building unity and a new identity, for transcending social differences, and for making sure that the local poor were fed.”

Minimal rules and roles emerged to protect churches from those who would abuse their generous welcome. Travelers were limited to a few days of care and those who claimed to be teachers were held to strict standards (*Didache* 11:1-6, 12:1-5). Deacons were chosen to manage aspects of hospitality (Acts 6:1-6) and letters of reference were written to introduce travelers to other churches (Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1-2; 1 Corinthians 16:3). “These structures were early efforts at making it possible to sustain hospitality over the long term. Encouraging the practice of hospitality while simultaneously protecting the communities from abuse was important in helping faithful Christians avoid becoming grudging or negligent regarding this aspect of discipleship.”

Gregory of Nazianus praised the care given to famine victims in one of the first Christian hospitals (ca. 370) for “combining personal respect with the supply of their necessity, and so giving them a double relief.” The institution was a “new city, a storehouse of piety,” he wrote. Yet in the same era, John Chrysostom warned church members about simply turning hospitality over to special apartments, hospitals, and hospices. If a stranger is fed and housed from common funds, he asked “can that benefit you? If another man prays, does it follow that you are not bound to pray?” He urged



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members to continue in personal hospitality and to maintain respect for the persons they assisted.

“Efforts to make hospitality more widely available and predictable had unintended consequences,” Pohl writes. “The benefits that came with the establishment of hospitals were inseparable from the difficulties created by specialized institutions. In hospitals, those who received assistance were often disconnected from family and community and hidden from public view. Roles were flattened and persons were viewed as either providers or recipients. There was little room for mutuality and little expectation that the recipient had something to contribute. Caregiving eventually became quite anonymous.”

The trend of caring for strangers through formal, impersonal institutions has continued in the Church and society. Since today “we have many large-scale institutions that offer assistance without providing community,” Pohl concludes, we must “be especially attentive to opportunities to reconnect hospitality and community in our homes, congregations, and social ministries.”

Study Questions

1. What large-scale institutions of hospitality do Christians sponsor today? What are the advantages, according to Pohl, of these organized ways of helping others? What are some unintended drawbacks?
2. “In every setting in which hospitality is offered...the character of the persons offering welcome is crucial if hospitality is to be life-giving,” says Pohl. “A combination of discernment, wisdom, flexibility, humility, and generosity is particularly important.” Do you agree? How should one prepare for a leadership role in an institution of hospitality?
3. Discuss Pohl’s ideas about how to reconnect hospitality with personal care and community in our homes, congregations, and church-based social ministries today.
4. How did the Ospedale degli Innocenti, the famous hospital for orphaned children in fifteenth-century Florence, offer a more personal welcome in its institutionalized setting, according to Heidi Hornik?

Departing Hymn: “In Imitation, Lord, of You”

In imitation, Lord, of you,
this solemn service we repeat;
for your example, full of grace,
has made this humble duty sweet.

Renew each sacred spark of love,
and vitalize the holy flame;
may union strong our hearts unite
while this we do in Jesus’ name.

Our great example you shall be,
in washing your disciples’ feet;
and as we follow your command,
make, Lord, our fellowship complete.

William Brickey (c. 1886), alt.

Suggested Tunes: CANONBURY or WINCHESTER NEW

Building a Place for Hospitality

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To see the need for and the advantages of institutionalized ways of caring for strangers.
2. To examine the unintended problems of these institutionalized forms of hospitality.
3. To discuss how to reconnect hospitality with personal care and community in our homes, congregations, and social ministries.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Hospitality (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “In Imitation, Lord, of You” locate the familiar tune CANONBURY or WINCHESTER NEW in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

Commenting on how Christians’ approach to caring for strangers changed during the Middle Ages, Christine Pohl writes: “Over the centuries, expectations decreased that congregational gatherings would be sites of hospitality. Although service might be provided by church leaders or godly lay people, it was increasingly disconnected from the life-giving bonds of congregational life and from the personal warmth of household-based care.

“One of the important distinctives of the earliest Christian practice of hospitality was its location—within the overlap of household and church, a place that was personal without being private. In this setting, expressions of hospitality strengthened community bonds, guest/host roles could be fluid, and persons of different rank and status were received into the same place” (*Hospitality*, 32).

Has the quality and spirit of Christian hospitality been compromised over the centuries? If so, how do we recover it in our homes, congregations, and social ministries today?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give the group discernment and love to offer faithful Christian hospitality in their homes, congregation, and social ministries.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 6:1-6 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This study examines the trend of building specialized institutions of hospitality. The ancient practice of hospitality was very risky for hosts and dangerously uneven for guests, especially when the care of strangers was spotty, disorganized, or too preferential. The early Christians minimized these risks to hosts and guests

through more ordered and communal responses to the needs around them. At first they organized their efforts through minimal rules and roles, but over the centuries they developed specific institutions – such as hospitals, hospices, schools, orphanages, and guest apartments – and corresponding positions of caregiving. Today government authorities and for-profit companies manage many of these institutions.

While institutionalized hospitality is more efficient, safe, and fair, it can make caregiving less personal and respectful. Encourage members to discuss how we can reconnect hospitality with personal care and community in our homes, congregations, and social ministries.

Study Questions

1. Congregations, religious orders, and denominations sponsor a variety of schools and universities, hospitals and specialized healthcare institutions, camps and retreat centers, urban shelters, training programs for immigrants, adoption and childcare services, and so on.

Pohl notes many advantages of institutionalizing hospitality: it increases safety for hosts, makes care more predictable and fair for guests, and lets caregiving be more specialized and efficient. “The historic move toward more anonymous and institutionalized assistance was partly an effort to avoid the humiliation that can be associated with dependence on certain forms of personal generosity or largesse,” she writes. Some drawbacks are “increasing levels of bureaucracy, regulations, and rules” and subjecting “recipients to more and more scrutiny before providing welcome or assistance.” As hospitality becomes more specialized, we tend to define recipients according to their need and disconnect caregiving from their places and communities. The “emphasis on roles and qualifications has made ordinary Christians feel inadequate and fearful about offering hospitality to strangers in need.”

Members might discuss how ownership and management by government and (more recently) private corporations are reshaping institutions of hospitality.

2. Brainstorm some examples that show the value of each virtue – discernment, wisdom, flexibility, humility, and generosity – when you offer hospitality in the home, a congregation, or a social ministry. How would these traits inform what we offer and how we offer it to our guests in these contexts? Do members think there are other important virtues for hosts – e.g., sensitivity in listening, or interest in others?

Consider how a leader (for example, a person who directs a congregational ministry, leads a retreat center, or works in a hospital) develops these virtues. Are these traits learned in school or developed through practice? How can we encourage them in young people? What roles do worship and Scripture study play in developing these qualities?

3. To reduce stress and expense *in the household*, Pohl suggests shifting the focus from “entertaining” to “welcoming people into the ordinary parts of our lives.” “Making a place for a neighbor recovering from surgery, international students, alienated teens, or refugee families can be wonderfully life-giving. Sharing meals and holiday celebrations with those who are usually overlooked is an important part of extending hospitality.” *In congregations* “sharing meals...can break down some of the boundaries between private and public space and create threshold places where relationships among strangers can begin.” More intentional focus on Communion or Eucharist can train our hearts to welcome others. *In congregationally-based social ministries...*we sometimes overlook our own best resources. Welcoming people into our lives, communities, and friendship networks, as we meet particular needs, transforms ordinary spaces into places of hospitality and transformation.”
4. The hospital served “newborns and foundlings...abandoned by their parents for a variety of reasons, including war, high grain prices, destitution, or illness,” Hornik says. Yet typically these children were not “victims of brutality and abandoned knowingly.” To maintain a home-like context of care, there “were *commessi*, or married couples, who vowed to serve the institution and its children for life and to transfer their property to it.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.