

## ***Hospitality at Grace***

Between September 2007 and January 2008, the Grace community explored the Christian practice of hospitality. We devoted three services to the topic, the book group has read *Making Room* by Christine Pohl, and we have discussed hospitality at the annual Grace weekend and at meetings of the planning group.

Someone suggested adding hospitality to our list of ethos words, but we thought this was unnecessary, since it is a value implicit in each of the words we have already;

- **create.** Creativity only emerges when we empower people to contribute their gifts to the community, and this is at heart a hospitable action.
- **participate.** Our commitment to breaking down the barriers between ‘leaders’ and ‘congregation’ models hospitality.
- **engage.** “Grace offers hospitality...”
- **risk.** Welcoming people outside the group risks that we might be changed by the encounter. Thus without a commitment to risk-taking we could not be hospitable.

So hospitality isn’t an additional ethos word, but it is at the core of who we are and what we do. The following is a summary of what we have learned.

## **Hospitality then and now**

Hospitality today is commonly understood in two senses;

1. opening one’s home to friends, neighbours and family, often in the expectation that we will be invited back,
2. the hospitality ‘industry’; restaurants, hotels etc.

Early Christians would recognise neither of these as hospitality. Hospitality was not associated with benefit, reciprocity or monetary gain, and was offered not to people we know, but towards the stranger, the traveller, the weak and the poor. This challenges our idea of our homes as private space, and raises issues of the safety of inviting strangers into the home. But it is a challenge for us to offer hospitality that is costly because it leads us to encounter people who are unlike us, and to treat them with dignity as our equals.

Large houses in the middle east of Jesus’ day would usually have a central area that was a place of work, commerce and entertainment. Thus it was semi-public space that could be used for hospitality without taking strangers into the private recesses of the home. Such spaces are architecturally and socially absent from our homes, but perhaps the church and café play a similar function for the Grace community; there we can meet people on fairly safe, neutral territory, offer refreshment, and try to ensure that no-one is marginalised or excluded. Grace socials can also provide semi-public space. We advertise socials widely through website, newsletter and email, and are committed to holding socials in public spaces as well as in homes, so that some are easily accessible to those who consider themselves ‘strangers’.

## **Guests become Hosts**

Soup kitchens offer vital care to the poor and homeless, but they rarely provide an opportunity for the hosts to sit and eat with the guests, thus reinforcing distinct roles. In contrast, hospitality should begin to erode the differences between hosts and guests by

treating guests with dignity, and by inviting them to begin to take on some of the roles of a host.

In Grace we try to do this by providing multiple entry points to the community. These could include;

1. Helping to run the café.
2. Attending a meeting in a pub where the community tells stories about Grace.
3. Helping to set up before a service.
4. Attending a Saturday workshop to plan, organise and run a Grace service 'from scratch'.
5. Attending all or part of the annual Grace weekend.
6. Joining the group to plan a particular service.
7. Participating the service itself.
8. Attending monthly planning group meetings

We should be more explicit about the ways in which people can participate in Grace, perhaps by including the above list in the newsletter occasionally.

We can also make it easier for newcomers to get involved by inviting newcomers or those on the edge of the community to get involved in a service 'on the night', for example by doing a reading.

## **Permeable Boundaries**

When guests become hosts in this way, they can bring new energy and ideas to a group. This can be creative, but it can also be threatening to existing members. As Pohl says, 'by welcoming strangers the community's identity is always being challenged and revised, if only slightly. While this is often enriching, it can occasionally stretch a place beyond recognition.' We have experienced a little of this at Grace in the last year, as new people have nudged the community in new directions.

Strangers don't share the identity of a group, and so they may challenge and change that identity. Existing members must protect what they consider is essential to the identity of the group, whilst hospitality requires that they remain flexible enough to allow the group to change somewhat as strangers join it.

In Grace we have a clearly-defined ethos that is both strong and short. It is helpful to us, since it is a useful summary of the things we consider non-negotiable when newcomers join. And it is hospitable to newcomers for the same reason. However, there is more to the group identity of Grace than just our ethos. What other non-negotiables are an unstated part of our group identity? theology? leadership style? musical taste? They are things that we hold dear because we consider Grace to be, in some sense, 'home' for us. When a newcomer unwittingly challenges an unspoken part of our group identity, the resulting tension can make it difficult for newcomers to cross the boundary from being a stranger to being a host.

Thus we feel a tension between our commitment and desire to welcome newcomers, and our desire to preserve the essential identity of the Grace community. This tension would be eased if we were more aware of, and explicit about, what constitutes this identity. In turn, it will be easier to cross the boundary between newcomer and 'member'.

## **Universalising the Neighbour, Personalising the Stranger**

When a Jew asked Jesus ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Jesus responded with the parable of the good Samaritan, making it plain that everyone is our neighbour. Christine Pohl points out that Christians can very easily say that everyone is their neighbour without actually *being* neighbourly to anyone. She suggests that as well as universalising the neighbour, we must also recognise particular strangers as neighbours, and offer them hospitality.

This raises the question of who the strangers are in the Ealing area. The book group suggested two ‘strangers’;

- Polish (and other eastern European) migrant workers. A national newspaper interviewed Poles recently, who characterised the British as Polite and nice, but stand-offish, and offering no chance to socialise. Perhaps Grace could reach out to migrants in the area.
- Hundreds of international students arrive in Ealing each October and March to begin their studies. Dean has begun to establish ways of connecting with some of them when they arrive. Could members of Grace be involved in this?

## **Summary and Action Points**

1. Maintain a calendar of regular social events, and publicise them beyond the community via the web site and email list. Strike a balance between socials in peoples’ houses and socials held in public space.
2. Expand the list of entry points to the community, especially ‘easy’ points.
3. Reflect on the group identity of Grace. What unspoken aspects of our life do we consider central to who we are? How could we be more explicit about these things, especially to newcomers?
4. Include a ‘how to get involved’ piece in the newsletter and on the website from time to time.
5. Publicise planning meetings in the newsletter and on the website.
6. Publicise who is curating the service next month, so that people can contact the curator if they want to join the planning team.
7. Run a ‘service from scratch’ day.
8. Tell the story(ies) of Grace in a pub.
9. Offer hospitality to migrant workers and international students in Ealing.
10. Complete a ‘History of Grace’ on the website.

POHL, C., *Making room; recovering hospitality as a Christian tradition*. Grand Rapids: 1999.