



[BOOK EXCERPT]

# RADICAL *Hospitality*

THE FIRST PRACTICE OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS

By Bishop Robert Schnase

**V**ibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice radical hospitality. Christian hospitality is the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ.

Churches that practice radical hospitality sense a calling and responsibility to pray, plan, and work to invite others and to help them feel welcome and to support them in their faith journeys. Out of genuine love for Christ and for others, their members, staff and pastors take the initiative to invite, welcome, include, and support newcomers and help them grow in faith as they become part of the body of Christ.

It's easy to focus on what we expect from the church rather than what the church expects from us, just as it's easy to expect God to do for us what God created us to do for God. We are here in the spirit of Jesus, "not to be served, but to serve." How are we doing in our churches? Do we focus only on how our needs are met, or do we open ourselves to the possibility that our needs are best met when we place ourselves in service to others in Christ's name?

## ***What Is Radical Hospitality?***

*Radical* means "drastically different from ordinary practice, outside the norm," and so it provokes practices that exceed expectations, that go the second mile, that take welcoming the

stranger to the max. By *radical*, don't think wild-eyed, out of control, or in your face. Instead, imagine people offering the absolute utmost of themselves, their creativity, their abilities, and their energy to offer the gracious invitation and reception of Christ to others.

Aspiring to radical hospitality, following Jesus' example of gathering people into the body of Christ, inviting them to the banquet of God's gracious love requires intentional focus on those outside the community of faith. Jesus' example of hospitality demands an unceasingly invitational posture that we carry with us into our world of work and leisure and into our practice of neighborliness and community service. It involves seeing ourselves as sent out by Christ and going out of our way, even at the risk of a sense of awkwardness and inconvenience, to invite people into some aspect of the church's ministry.

Sometimes members forget that churches offer something people need. What do people need that congregations offer?

People need to know God loves them, that they are of supreme value, and that their life has significance. People need to know that they are not alone; that when they face life's difficulties, they are surrounded by a community of grace; and that they do not have to figure out entirely for themselves how to cope with family tensions, self-doubts, periods of despair, economic reversal, and the temptations that hurt themselves or others. People need to know the peace that runs deeper than an absence of conflict, the hope that sustains them even through the most

painful periods of grief, the sense of belonging that blesses them and stretches them and lifts them out of their own preoccupations. People need to learn how to offer and accept forgiveness and how to serve and be served. As a school for love, the church becomes a congregation where people learn from one another how to love. People need to know that life is not having something to live on but something to live for, that life comes not from taking for oneself but by giving of oneself. People need a sustaining sense of purpose.

Having said that, the last thing people want is to be told by someone else what they need! Inviting people into Christ does not involve pounding people with “oughts” and “shoulds.” Some people recognize their needs, and they search for meaning, for others, and for God. But most people discover their need for God’s grace and for the love of Christ through the experience of receiving it.

### *What Can We Do?*

To become a vibrant, fruitful, growing congregation requires a change of attitudes, practices, and values. Good intentions are not enough. Too many churches want more young people as long as they act like old people, more newcomers as long as they act like old-timers, more children as long as they are as quiet as adults, more ethnic families as long as they act like the majority in the congregation.

We can do better. It takes practicing radical hospitality—and all the redirecting of energy and resources and volunteer time that comes with this. Church leaders can’t keep doing things the way they have always done them. Little changes have big effects.

If every ministry changed a little toward welcoming younger people, the cumulative effect might change the direction of the church. From safe and easily supportable new initiatives, such as Parents’ Night Out programs for young families or Brown Bag Bible Studies in workplace cafeterias, to more edgy ministries, such as alternative services in strip malls for the “tattoos and piercings” crowd, churches can let the Radical Hospitality they see in Christ lead them in creative directions.

Churches marked by this quality work hard to figure out how best to anticipate others’ needs and to make them feel at home in their ministries. All churches offer some form of hospitality, but radical hospitality describes churches that strive without ceasing to exceed expectations to accommodate and include others. A congregation marked by such hospitality adopts an invitational posture that changes everything it does. Members work with a heightened awareness of the person who is not present, the neighbors, friends, and co-workers who have no church home. With every ministry, they consider how to reach those who do not yet know Christ.

The willingness to risk something new creates a buzz and a stir in the community that strengthens participation in all other ministries of the church. In ways no one understands, when the contemporary service begins to welcome new people in a manner that exceeds expectations, often the traditional Sunday school class for older members grows as well. Word-of-mouth is still the most important form of human communication, and when people talk about congregations as places that make people feel welcome and loved, then the church thrives.

### *What Difference Will This Make?*

A woman was going through a rough time in her personal and professional life; and in her search for connections, hope, and direction, she began to visit a few churches. After her first two worship experiences to which she came alone, sat alone, and left alone without anyone speaking to her or greeting her, her prayer for her next visit to another church service was simply, “I only pray that someone speaks to me today.”

Wow! What an indictment. Could that really happen to visitors in our congregations? How many of us have had that experience? Have you ever arrived at a church, entered the hallways and despite your obvious “lostness” and active searching for signs and directions, passed by forty or fifty people without anyone even nodding at you or offering to help you find your way? And we’ve all experienced the ushers or greeters who offer perfunctory handshakes without even looking us in the eye, who hand us a bulletin and push us along without any personal engagement or warmth. We can do better.

Bishop Sally Dyck once said that for the visitor or the person who is searching for spiritual help, “This Sunday is the only Sunday that counts.” In the same way stores sometimes employ agencies to provide “secret shoppers” to test the responsiveness of their salespersons and employees, perhaps churches should consider working with a few conscientious members of another congregation, asking them to show up for worship and provide a “secret visitor” analysis.

Churches aspiring to Radical Hospitality must regularly ask: How are we doing at inviting guests and at teaching people to invite others? How are we doing at genuinely and authentically welcoming people? How can we offer the Radical Hospitality we see in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ? And how can we do better?

A congregation changes its culture one person at a time. Radical hospitality begins with a single heart, a growing openness, a prayerful desire for the highest good of a stranger. It begins when one person treats another respectfully and loves the stranger enough to overcome the internal hesitations to invite that person into the life of Christ’s church.

Churches that practice radical hospitality do not look only at the numbers, corraling people through processes to get them to join. Instead, they genuinely engage people, listen to them, and help them feel accepted, respected, connected, needed, involved, and loved. They focus on the ultimate goal of helping newcomers grow into the body of Christ’s people.

Radical hospitality. People are searching for churches that make them feel welcome and loved, needed, and accepted. By repeating, deepening, and improving on the practices of investing in and welcoming people, fruitful congregations share the gracious love of God in Christ. □



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