

Welcoming the Stranger



Mark M. Nakagawa

In a society that is becoming increasingly mobile, and where world-wide migration patterns of immigrants and refugees guarantee a constantly changing and diverse society, United Methodist congregations are in the unique position of welcoming newcomers and strangers through a constant ministry of hospitality. John Wesley's claim that "the world is my parish" evokes God's call to be people who welcome friends and strangers alike into the church sanctuary, social hall, and classrooms to receive rest and respite in a turbulent world.

In downtown Los Angeles, where I pastor Centenary United Methodist Church, the ministry of hospitality and welcoming strangers is an important core value of this historically Japanese American congregation. Especially for many of the elder parishioners, it is a value that is deeply imbedded in their historical experience and the institutional memory of the church.

As You Were Once Strangers...

Our older congregants recall their forced evacuations from homes and communities on the west coast over 60

years ago, at the outbreak of America's involvement in World War II, into internment camps that were established in remote, desolate locations across the U.S. With meager resources at their disposal, the Christian internees offered and broke bread with Buddhist and Shinto internees. Christian pastors and laypersons who sympathized with their plight came to them from the communities outside of the camps to offer assistance in various capacities, including as volunteer teachers to the children and youth.

A national network of church-based colleges and universities sponsored students who were already studying in colleges and universities at the time of evacuation and internment. The historic Brother's College, forerunner to the present day campus of Drew University, was a major sponsor of Japanese American students who desired to leave the internment camps to pursue their educations and the hope of a brighter future.

At the conclusion of the war and upon their release from the camps, these internees began the journey back to their communities. As they settled into their communities with no homes to live in or government safety net to provide support, the church was instrumental in providing

hope to a people who felt like strangers in their own homeland.

Christian congregations and other types of Christian communities extended hospitality in a number of ways: providing families with places to live, opening up once-segregated schools to Japanese American children and youths, and assisting people in finding employment. Methodist agencies such as the Home Mission Board gave jobs to young people who were shunned by employers in the private sector. The California Conference, predecessor to the present day California-Nevada Annual Conference, established a fund to assist internees who returned to their pre-war communities and picked up the pieces of their shattered lives.

Japanese Americans in the community of Hood River, Oregon, pass down the story of Christian witness and sacrifice on the part of a Methodist pastor and his wife who shopped in the local grocery store on behalf of former internees to whom the store refused to sell badly-needed food and provisions. Seeing this injustice being played out right before their very eyes, this pastor and spouse took it upon themselves to make several trips to the store each week on behalf of the returning residents

and their families. Where the local townspeople would not display even a modicum of hospitality to their neighbors, this Methodist pastor and spouse did.

...Welcome the Stranger in Your Midst

With these and other powerful memories embedded in their consciences, the members of Centenary United Methodist Church engage in the ministry of hospitality on a daily basis in the urban heart of downtown Los Angeles. They understand better than most God's instructions to the ancient Israelites to welcome the stranger, "since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9 NASB). Their ministry of hospitality is inspired by their own experiences of having received hospitable care from Jesus' followers, at a time when they themselves were made to feel as "aliens and strangers" in their own land.

On Sunday mornings, the congregants welcome residents from nearby homeless shelters who desire Christian worship. These guests (not "visitors") are made to feel welcomed by a team of greeters who are trained in providing hospitality to first-

time and occasional worshipers. A fellowship lunch follows most weekly worship services, and no one is ever turned away; both long-time church members and first-time guests sit next to each other and enjoy table fellowship in the context of Jesus' hospitality, which he extended time and time again throughout the gospels.

Our church is located only three short city blocks from one of the largest homeless populations in North America. When people from nearby "skid row" come by the church during a hot summer day for a cup of cold water to drink or a simple meal to eat, the bounty of the church kitchen is offered to them. At the start of each school year in the fall, students at the only public elementary school in downtown Los Angeles are given their very own school supply kit containing all of the essential materials they need, so that no child will be left behind in her or his studies.

Living close to America's border with Mexico, we witness firsthand the conflicts over Mexican American immigration and the hardship experienced by those seeking welcome in the United States. Since 2001, members of our youth group have reflected Christ and served God by sharing their sweat, time, talents, and labor on week-

long mission trips on an along the Tijuana-California border, as well as on an Apache reservation, and on the urban streets of San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The Advent season that is upon us begins with the prophetic announcement of a child who is coming to bring God's good news of human redemption, of salvation, and of God's extravagant hospitality to all people—strangers and friends alike. Let us open our United Methodist hearts, minds, and doors this Advent season to receive all who will show up on our doorsteps, especially those whom we do not yet know and have yet to meet. In doing so, we will follow in the footsteps of Christ and receive him by warmly receiving the least of these. □



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