

Hospitality

More than warm and friendly



Hospitality is more than being warm and friendly to others. It is a transforming way of life that opens our hearts not only to see Christ in the other, but also to move us to make room, make ready, and be available to those in need.

The dictionary defines hospitality as: 1. the friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers. 2. the quality or disposition of receiving and treating guests and strangers in a warm, friendly, generous way.

In these days of home makeovers and gourmet cooking, we feel pressure to be fabulous hosts. This commercial view of hospitality has seeped into our attitudes about hospitality and is expressed in our actions.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, too often we have limited the practice of hospitality to hosting fellowship hour, welcoming visitors to worship, and serving meals. What's more, hospitality has usually been assigned to the women of the congregation. When this practice becomes entrenched without thought or examining why and how, it erodes into a churchy form of social entertainment—we get caught up in a party-store mentality, where the host is busy coordinating the colors of the napkins and calling the caterer.

In this sort of social entertaining, the focus is on the *host*. She prepares. She puts her best foot forward to make a good impression. Only when everything is *just right* do the perfect people come together for the perfect event. The host controls who comes, what is shared, and when. Among all the pressures on the host to arrange everything perfectly, the needs of the guests are least important.

How to use this resource

This resource was designed for individual study as well as group settings. It should take about 60 minutes. You may expand it by allowing further time for reflection and discussion.

Participants will need a copy of this resource, a Bible, a pen, and paper. Allow time for participants to reflect on the questions before beginning discussion. If you break your larger group into small groups for discussion, limit these to three or four. Make sure there is time for the full group to hear a few thoughts from each of the small groups at the end of your time together.

Whether studying in a group or alone, begin and end with prayer.

For additional resources on hospitality and how to fully welcome people, visit the Women of the ELCA Web site at www.womenoftheelca.org.

Let's look now at another definition of hospitality:

1. a spiritual gift. 2. the act of making room, making ready, and being available for the needs of others.
3. the spiritual practice that calls the disciple to see Christ in the other.

For Jesus and those who follow him, hospitality is a daily practice that transforms and opens the heart. Once Jesus' first disciples got over the shock of preparing a quick meal for 5,000 or allowing kids into the VIP section to see Jesus, they discovered that hospitality meant more than being warm and friendly (Matthew 14:13–21; Luke 18:15–17). Hospitality changes our hearts and actions so that we are available to meet the needs of others.

Practicing hospitality with this understanding shifts the focus from the host who is in control, to the Holy Spirit who guides us as willing partners ready to serve. When disciples embody spiritual hospitality, the pressure to be perfect is lifted and the focus shifts to the Holy Spirit, who transforms both guest and host. This transformation gives a new image to hospitality, moving beyond the traditional images of serving in church kitchens and basements (which, sadly, so often come with a lack of joy or mindfulness on the server's part).

Exploring this definition of hospitality through Scripture will provide examples of this spiritual practice that may lead to a new way of thinking and acting.

The process

Hospitality is more than being warm and friendly to others as you choose. It is a transforming way of life that opens the heart of the disciple to not only see Christ in the other but propels her to make room, make ready, and be available for those in need.

Ultimately, this daily practice of Jesus that transformed and opened the hearts of his disciples will change our hearts and actions to being available to meet the needs of the other. The process of changing the heart occurs with each encounter and every act of hospitality. The process, although described in steps, is a seamless action that happens unconsciously, like breathing.

Once you have reflected on each of the steps—making room, making ready, and being available—think of this as a seamless process and reflect on how each step is essential to the whole.

Making room

To make room is more than emptying a dresser drawer so the guest has a place to put her things. Hospitality begins with the host making room mentally, emotionally, and spiritually for the other.

The process begins with a mental checklist to examine oneself for any internal agendas or personal motives. The checklist includes a scan of one's feelings—joy, sorrow, fear, love, hate, anxiety—and



how conscious the self is of those feelings. Consider how those might affect our experience with the guest.

Once we've gone through this checklist, the next step is making a spiritual connection—drawing a connection between ourselves and the work of the Holy Spirit. In this step, the Holy Spirit does the work of opening and transforming the heart, making room in it for the other. Now, the host is ready to give over the room to the other for as long as she or he needs it.

Biblical reflection

The Shunammite woman is described as well-to-do. She not only makes a physical room for Elisha, but in doing so without any selfish motives, provided God the opportunity to bless her beyond anything she could imagine. On the surface, some would say “She could afford to share” or “She’s well-to-do; what could she need?” Some room.

READ the story of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4:8–17.

How did the woman know what and who to prepare for?

What are you making room for?

Ponder the question Elisha asked the woman in verse 13 “...what may be done for you?”

Making ready

To make ready is more than physically preparing for guests. The process continues with a willing and transformed heart ready to serve the other. Now our mental checklist contains new questions that guide us to the heart of the guest: Who is our guest? How are we connected? What are her needs? What more should we do to show hospitality? Have we properly prepared?

Many hosts are disappointed when they fail to ask themselves these questions and find out later that their hospitality was received with less than the desired response. Hospitality is an age-old relationship-builder. A large part of making ready is discerning how hospitality is best offered.

Hospitality is not synonymous with charity—with “helping the less fortunate.” Compassion and empathy are important, but they are draining and can only sustain hospitality for a short time. Hospitality is a mutual exchange and the work of the Holy Spirit. We must be ready to receive the gifts our guest has to offer as well.

Biblical reflection

Martha, sister of Mary, was more than a short-order cook for Jesus and the fellows whenever they passed through Bethany. Jesus and Martha were friends. During the years that Martha opened her home to him, Jesus was teaching Martha how to trust in him. The death and raising of her brother Lazarus was the ultimate test. Martha learned how to put the cooking, cleaning, and serving aside. She moved from being a woman too busy to talk with Jesus to one transformed by his message.

READ Luke 10:38–42 and John 11:17–27.

Describe a time when you spent more time preparing for a guest than you spent actually being present with that guest.



What keeps you too busy to sit and talk with Jesus?

Ponder the question Jesus asked Martha in verse John 11:26: “. . . everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Paul’s broad view helps us today to move past *physical needs* as being the first and only concern we have when we serve to meet the needs of the other.

READ Romans 12:9–21

Is verse 13 (“Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.”) an option or suggestion for the faith community? Why or why not?

Ponder how the Purpose Statement of Women of the ELCA can help you practice hospitality.

Being available

This is the final step in the process. Making room and making ready for the other are only preparation for our guest’s arrival, without being available for the action. It is time to *be available*. It is possible to say “Yes” and not move. Taking action is essential to hospitality. But recall from Martha’s example that being available is not about being busy. Being available is being fully present with the other—connected and engaged.

Biblical reflection

Romans 12:13 is a powerful directive to the Romans that would shape their actions through a broader conversation about love. And like love, as Paul describes it, we cannot practice hospitality outside of community. Because hospitality is a spiritual gift and practice, it is not an isolated action. It is how the body of Christ works together to respond to the need(s) of the other.

Women of the ELCA Purpose Statement

As a community of women,
 created in the image of God,
 called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and
 empowered by the Holy Spirit,
 we commit ourselves to
 grow in faith,
 affirm our gifts,
 support one another in our callings,
 engage in ministry and action, and
 promote healing and wholeness
 in the church,
 the society, and
 the world.

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