

Living Into Community

Christian practices that sustain us

2016 Church Wide Retreat

“So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” Romans 14:19



SANTIAGO COMMUNITY CHURCH

Although contemporary followers of Jesus often say that we long for richer experiences of Christian community, we often struggle with the practices that build up and tear apart our common life. For a number of reasons, we have failed to cultivate the skills and practices that make community life good and sustainable.

This retreat will explore four practices that are at the heart of Christian community: Keeping the Sabbath holy, Expressing Gratitude, Living and Speaking Truthfully and Extending Hospitality. We will consider the characteristics of contemporary culture that undermine them, and explore ways in which we can strengthen these practices for our own SCC community's health and service.

The ideas in this retreat are based primarily in the writings of three contemporary thought leaders in the protestant church: Dorothy Bass, Brian McClaren, and Christine Pohl.

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Session 1, What is a Christian Practice?

Asked to interview Dr Peter Senge, one of the creators of Organic Systems Theory of organizations, Brian McLaren found himself and the 500 pastors at the conference he was leading being asked a question: **Why are more people interested in books about Buddhism than Christianity?** McLaren punted the question back to him and Senge answered: **"Because, I think, Buddhism presents itself as a way of life while Christianity presents itself as a system of beliefs."**

He continues: "So I would want to get Christian ministers to thinking about how to rediscover their own faith as a way of life because that's what people are searching for today. That's what they need most."

Well this last bit may be contested. Despite` what people may "feel" they need, what they really need most is a saving relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I am not arguing this point and neither is McLaren. He goes on to say:

"The issue, of course, isn't either/or, but both/and; it's hard to deny that too many of us have lost the "way" of our faith. **Without a coherent and compelling way of life, formed in community and expressed in mission, some of us begin losing interest in the system of belief, or we begin holding it grimly, even meanly, driving more and more people away from our faith rather than attracting them toward it.**"

Christianity as a Way of Life, can be translated into certain practices that help to keep us focused on our beliefs, witness to the life changing power of the gospel and make a make an impact on our world in anticipation of the coming kingdom of God.

Wikipedia defines a spiritual practice as "the regular or full-time performance of actions and activities undertaken for the purpose of cultivating spiritual development."

But these practices are not only or primarily about our individual, spiritual development. Rather, our individual spiritual growth as Christian disciples is for the purpose of engaging in the outward

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work of the kingdom of God. And this effort is not primarily an individual one but undertaken by the combined efforts of other Christians as a part of the body of Christ, the Church.

Let's take a look in a bit more detail at what we mean when we speak about Christian Practices. (I then showed an edited version of the following Brian McLaren slide show.)

<http://www.slideshare.net/brianmclaren/christian-faith-as-a-way-of-life>

While the idea of faith as a Way of Life versus a system of belief, is found in other religions, every distinctly Christian practice also intersects with the two practices of prayer and the study of scripture. Therefore, as we engage you in conversation and discernment around this topic today we invite you to open your hearts in prayer and your bibles to hear the Word of God during this retreat.

Our aim, in this retreat, is to begin to develop an approach to our life as a congregation based in the rediscovery and adaptive reuse of resources from the ancient past – to restore, as Brian McLaren puts it, “a kind of sacred normalcy to the rhythms of life—

To examine the practices of and to understand their close connection to the character and practices of God. (While Pohl names Promise Keeping as the fourth key community sustaining practice, we have substituted the practice of Sabbath keeping since we are spending our Spring sermon series and Sunday school lessons focusing on the importance of making and keeping promises.)

To recognize ways in which these practices (and their deformations of, Imbalance, grumbling/envy, deception, and exclusion) are often at the heart of the strengths as well as the difficulties in congregational and congregational life.

To build our capacity to identify and strengthen the role of these practices in undergirding relationships and in moving through communal disagreements.

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Rejoin your small group for the remainder of the hour, report back what you heard from the other person in your pair and discuss with the rest..

Use the final 10 minutes of your time together to read (or say) the prayers you wrote earlier, including any additional thoughts or concerns which came to you during your conversations

Session 2, Keeping Sabbath

(From Resource: Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life Small Group Guide: “Keeping Sabbath” (LifelongFaith Associates))

In an essay, “Whatever Happened to Sunday, Wayne Muller writes:

“ ‘I am so busy.’ We say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy, our ability to withstand stress a mark of real character. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others. To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset (or even to know that the sun has set at all), to whiz through our obligations without time for a single mindful breath—this has become the model of a successful life. Because we do not rest, we lose our way. . . . Poisoned by the hypnotic belief that good things come only through tireless effort, we never truly rest. And for want of rest, our lives are in danger. How have we allowed this to happen? This was not our intention; this is not the world we dreamed of when we were young and life seemed full of possibility and promise. How did we get so terribly rushed in a world saturated with work and responsibility, yet somehow bereft of joy and delight?”

As I considered which of our four practices should be the first to be addressed it struck me that we should begin where God began. In the book of Genesis where we read about God’s creation of the

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world, we find the description of how God took 6 days to create everything and on the 7th day He rested. In Genesis, chapter 2, verses 2-3: “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”

If we are to get some idea about our own practice of a balanced life, we can do no better for an example than our own creator in whose image we have been made.

While it was only later, with the receipt of the commandments on Mt. Sinai that the Hebrews were commanded to keep this 7th day holy, but we can see that right from the beginning of creation, there was something built into our nature, that requires it, quite apart from any other covenantal promise of obedience.

Let’s consult the scriptures.

Exodus 20:8-11

8 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

12 “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. 15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty

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hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Exodus 23 Sabbath Laws

10 “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops,¹¹ but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.

12 “Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed.

Exodus 31 The Sabbath

12 Then the Lord said to Moses, 13 “Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy.

14 “Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it is to be put to death; those who do any work on that day must be cut off from their people. 15 For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a day of Sabbath rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day is to be put to death.¹⁶ The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. 17 It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”

The Jewish Practice of Keeping Sabbath Shabbat (from MyJewishLearning.com)

The Sabbath (in Hebrew, Shabbat, pronounced shah-BAHT—or in some communities, Shabbos, “SHAH-bis”) may be Judaism’s most distinctive and characteristic practice, as well as one of its most pervasive and long-lasting gifts to Western civilization. A weekly 25 hour observance, from just before sundown each Friday

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through the completion of nightfall on Saturday, Shabbat 3 is more than just a day off from labor. It is a day of physical and spiritual delights that is meant to illuminate certain key concepts in the traditional Jewish perception of the world. Themes and Theology: Shabbat is portrayed in the Bible as the pinnacle of the creation of the universe, and its observance can be seen as a reminder of the purposefulness of the world and the role of human beings in it. Shabbat also serves as a memorial to God's act of rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt by setting aside a day for personal autonomy and freedom from the harsh demands of labor.

Reflection of the Christian Practice of Sabbath (from an essay by Robert Kruschwitz)

The story of how Christians came to see Sunday as a day of rest in fulfillment of the Sabbath law is very long and complex. The lesson highlights three ways that Christians through the fourth century related Sabbath to Sunday worship:

- (1) an early practice of adding Sunday worship to the keeping of Jewish Sabbath on Saturday,
- (2) a practice of other Christians to worship on Sunday but not observe the Jewish Sabbath, and
- (3) A later practice of combining Sabbath rest with Christian worship on Sunday. The latter practice became widespread only after Sunday was declared a day for rest from commerce in the Roman Empire.

Jesus' resurrection on Sunday was the catalyst for "**the eighth day**" **innovation** in the early church. The early Christians now were convinced that God's creative activity extended beyond the seven-day week, and so the first day, Sunday, was also the **eighth day** of God's work. Their dedication of Sunday for gathering and worship grew out of the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord. "These provided not only the proof of the resurrection (for alternative explanations for the empty tomb already were emerging)," David Capes notes, "**but also the lively**

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expectation that the risen Jesus would be present with Christians as they gathered.” The initial resurrection appearances of Jesus took place on “the first day of the week.”

On Sunday, first the women, then other men disciples, discovered that Jesus’ tomb was empty (Luke 24:1-12; cf. Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; John 20:1, 11-18). Two disciples journeying to Emmaus from Jerusalem “on that same day” recognized their risen Lord when he broke bread for them to eat. Later that evening the two disciples returned to Jerusalem to share their story only to hear that the Lord had appeared to Simon, too (Luke 24:13-35). That evening, as they celebrated the good news, Jesus appeared before the entire group and commissioned them to preach repentance and forgiveness to all nations (Luke 24:36-49; cf. John 20:19-23). The gospel of John records that because Thomas was not present at this meeting, the Lord appeared at their gathering “a week later” (on Sunday) to remove that disciple’s doubts (20:24-29). As they gathered in homes and at the Temple (Acts 2:46; 5:42) on “the first day of the week” (e.g., Acts 20:7-12; 1 Corinthians 16:2), the disciples broke bread, prayed, interpreted Scripture, rehearsed the good news, and prepared for ministry.

By the end of the first century the designation “**the first day of the week,**” which reflects a Jewish way of reckoning time, was replaced by a uniquely Christian term, “**the Lord’s Day**” (Revelation 1:10). The *Didache* (c. A.D. 50-150) instructs, “**Every Lord’s day, gather together, eat a meal, and give thanks after having first confessed your sins, that your sacrifice may be pure** (14.1, Ivan Lewis translation).

These Sunday gatherings probably began early among Palestinian Jewish Christians and became common practice throughout the church by the mid-second century. Paul warned Gentile believers in Colossae not to let others force them to keep the Jewish Sabbath, since it is only a shadow of things to come, while the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). Apparently, he expected Jewish Christians to continue observing

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the Sabbath regulations, but he did not require the same of Gentiles who entered the church.

Emperor Constantine decreed in A.D. 321 that workers should rest on the venerable day of the Sun. Over the next centuries, Christian believers began resting on Sunday and referring to the Lord's Day as "the Sabbath," attaching to the eighth day the significance that is given to the seventh day in the Decalogue.

Discuss the following questions:

- How does this Sabbath requirement of no work or commerce honor God and respect human needs?
- How is keeping Sabbath more than just attending church worship?

In the case of each of the practices that sustain Christian Community, Pohl refers to what she calls 'deformations' of each practice. Deformations are not just a failure to perform the practice (i.e. not keeping the Sabbath holy) but rather they are the antithesis of the practice which undermine community.

- What would you recognize as a deformation of the practice of Sabbath Keeping?

Keeping Sabbath: Small Groups (20 minutes in each place)

1. Labyrinth Meditation

In silence, find the labyrinth in the designated place outside. Walk to the center and stand (or sit) there as you focus on taking each step intentionally and sitting intentionally. Observe your breathing in and out. Observe your body relaxing as you open yourself to the life-giving presence of God's Holy Spirit flowing around and into your body, caressing and supporting you, connecting you to all living things and the people around you. When the time-keeper calls, please move directly from where you are in the labyrinth to your next assigned small group activity.

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2. My Sundays

Use the following questions to discuss your experience of Sabbath. This is a storytelling experience so be sure to give each person time to share his or her story without interruptions or discussion. Remembering Sunday

- What do you remember from childhood about Sunday activities?
- What does Sunday look like in your household today?

3. Developing a Sabbath Plan

In Silence, take 5 minutes to individually consider elements which you feel led to exclude or include in a plan for keeping he Sabbath.

Step 1. Saying “No”—What To Exclude

Individually, work through the process of discerning what you need to exclude from your Sabbath using the worksheet, **“Developing a Sabbath Practice.”**

Respond to the three questions.

Step 2. Saying “Yes”—What To Include

Individually, work through the process of discerning what you need to include in your Sabbath. Review the **“Practices for a Simple Sabbath”** on the resource sheet below, for ideas that can help. Using the worksheet, “Developing a Sabbath Practice”, respond to the 3 questions.

In conversation with other group members, share several of the things you need to include and exclude in your Sabbath practice.

Step 3. Sunday Worship

Together as a group identify reasons why participating in Sunday worship regularly is an important element of keeping Sabbath. Refl the following two questions:

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- How can you overcome the obstacles to attending church on Sunday?
- How can you prepare for Sunday worship or extend Sunday worship in your home?

Share with your group several of the ways you do (or could) make Sunday worship an integral element of your Sabbath practice.

Step 4. Write Your Sabbath “Script”

In silence, take several minutes to individually decide on which Sabbath strategies you will adopt to strengthen your practice of Keeping Sabbath. Then “script” your Sabbath practice **for a month** complete with activities (or lack of activities).

In group conversation, share several ideas from your Sabbath “script” with the members of your group. After everyone in the group has completed their “script” discuss the following questions:

- If you keep Sabbath, how will the rest of your week need to change?
- What will you need to prepare beforehand in order to have a restful Sabbath?
- How might ceasing from work one day a week reshape your life and attitudes on the other six?

(Throughout the coming month use the handout, “A Month of Sundays” as a way to reflect on your “new” practice of Sabbath. Weekly, you can review your experience and seek ways to strengthen your Sabbath practice.)

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RESOURCES

Developing a Sabbath Practice

Saying “No” – What to Exclude

You can begin shaping your Sabbath practice by deciding what should be excluded from this day and what should be included. There are three categories of things that we do well to exclude from our Sabbath.

1. **Work:** What constitutes work for us? We must commit ourselves to not doing these things on the Sabbath. We need to identify the challenge and temptations related to our work and establish clear boundaries to protect Sabbath time.

How can you say “No” to work on the Sabbath?

2. **Buying and selling:** If we are out buying, selling and engaging in the world of commerce, it means someone has to work and we are contributing to it. It feeds our consumerism, an aspect of life in our culture that needs rest on the Sabbath.

How can you say “No” to buying and selling on the Sabbath?

3. **Worry:** The Sabbath is an invitation to rest emotionally and mentally from things that cause worry and stress, such as budgets, major decisions, and planning the week ahead. If we observe Sabbath on Sunday, perhaps Sunday evening after dinner is a time when, from a place of rest, we can engage in some of the decision-making that needs to be done.

How can you say “No” to worry on the Sabbath?

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- **Suggestion:** Prepare a “Sabbath box” or “Sabbath basket.” Each Saturday evening, put all the things you don’t need in order to observe the Sabbath into the box or basket. This might include cell phones, credit cards, pagers, and so on. Put work projects and homework in the box, as well; you can take them out again on Sunday evening.

2. Saying “Yes” – What to Include

What is to replace all that we are excluding from our Sabbath practice? The simple answer is, whatever delights you and replenishes you. Consider the following three things to include in your Sabbath practice.

1. ***Resting the body.*** What are the activities that rest and replenish your body? The invitation of Sabbath time is to replace the time you would normally spend working with activities that you find restorative, such as a walk or other physical exercise, eating your favorite foods, reading, and listening to music.

How can you say “Yes” to resting the body on the Sabbath? What types of activities can you do?

2. ***Replenishing the spirit.*** Another invitation of the Sabbath is to pay attention to what replenishes the spirit, and choose only those activities that renew you and bring you joy. Find personal activities that replenish the spirit: silence, reading, dancing, and listening to music. Find activities for the whole family that replenish the spirit: a special meal, recreation, games, sharing stories, gathering with relatives and friends.

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How can you say “Yes” to replenishing the spirit on the Sabbath?
What types of activities can you do?

1. ***Restoring the soul.*** Perhaps the deepest refreshment is the invitation to renew the soul through worship and quiet reflection. This is the part of us that gets most lost during the workweek, which is governed almost completely by the value of productivity. In addition to personal activities, such as silence and prayer, identify rituals or shared activities that create a spirit of reverence for God on this day such as a special meal with a Scripture reading and time to go around the table and talk about where God seemed particularly present with you during the week. Light a candle to mark the Sabbath day.

How can you say “Yes” to restoring the soul on the Sabbath?
What types of activities can you do?

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Practices for a Simple Sabbath

- **Light a candle.** Set aside sacred time for a family meal, for prayer or meditation or quiet reading. Set a candle before you, offer a simple blessing and let the world fall away.
- **Practice thanksgiving.** Give thanks before meals, upon rising, when going to sleep. On Sabbath, we are less concerned with what is missing and more grateful for what has been given.
- **Bless your children.** Place your hand gently on their heads and offer your blessing: do you most wish for them? Self-knowledge, courage, safety, joy? Let them hear your prayers for their happiness.
- **Invite a Sabbath pause.** Choose one common act—touching a doorknob, turning a faucet or hearing the phone ring. Throughout the day when this occurs, stop and take silent, mindful breaths. Then go on.
- **Take a walk.** Stroll slowly to nowhere in particular for 30 minutes. Let your senses guide you. Stop and observe deeply whatever attracts you—a tree, a stone, a flower. Breathe.
- **Pamper your body.** Take a guilt-free nap. Take a leisurely bath with music, special candles. Make love with your spouse. Walk barefoot in the grass. The Sabbath is a delight.
- **Create a Sabbath box.** Put your to-do list, your keys, your wallet—anything you do not want in Sabbath time—into the box. Or write down a particular worry or concern and drop it in for now, let it go.
- **Turn off the telephone.** Or the computer, the TV, the washer and dryer. Create a period of time when you will not be disturbed or seduced by what our technologies demand of us.
- **Prepare a Sabbath meal**—or a Sabbath cup of tea. Even if you are alone, you can savor foods you love, put flowers on the table, take time to enjoy every dish, give thanks for the bounty of the earth.
- **Seek companionship.** One of the most precious gifts we can offer is to be a place of refuge, a Sabbath for one another. Ask for companionship when you lose your way. Create quiet time and attention to others.
- **Reset your inner compass.** Make a list of the values and principles that guide you, both those you follow and those you would like to follow. Speak them aloud, alone or to loved ones.
- **Surrender a problem.** The Sabbath reminds us that God is at work healing the world. Imagine that He already knows how to solve your problem. Turn it over to God's care.

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A Month of Sundays

Reflecting on Your Sabbath Practice

First Sunday

Take time at the end of the day to record your individual and / or family activities for the day.

- Which activities fit in the “exclude” category?
- Which fit in the “include” category?
- Resolve:
 - .. to attend Sunday worship for the next three Sundays
 - .. to eliminate one activity from your “exclude” list for next Sunday
 - .. to add one activity from the “include” list for next Sunday

Second Sunday

Reflect on your activities today.

- What activities remain in the “exclude” category?
- How did the changes in your activities enhance your well-being?
- What activity from the “include” list will you add for next Sunday?
- How will these choices help you adopt a Sabbath attitude that helps keep your life in balance?

Third Sunday

Reflect on your activities today.

- What remains to be excluded?
- What activity will you add or enhance to complete the “include” list next week?

Fourth Sunday

After observing a month of Sundays in Sabbath attitude.

- Have your changes allowed for rest and renewal of body, mind, spirit?
- How has your spiritual life grown?
- How have your changes brought you to a new understanding of

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Sabbath?

- What changes will you resolve to make a permanent part of your life?

Session 3 Expressing Gratitude Sources: Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us by Christine D. Pohl, Ask, Thank, Tell: Improving Stewardship Ministry in Your Congregation, Charles R. Lane.

Gratitude is the heartbeat of Christian Community. One wise teacher once said that if the only prayer we ever said was “Thank You”, we would have said all that is necessary.

The theologian Karl Barth wrote that if the essence of God is grace, then the essence of human beings as God’s people is our gratitude. Gratitude belongs at the center of our worship and also at the center of our life together. He said, “Gratitude follows grace as thunder follows lightening.” **“If the essence of God is grace, Barth explained, then the essence of human beings as God’s people is our gratitude or thanks.”** (Pohl, p17)

According to Dr. Christine Pohl, Associate Provost and Professor of Church and Society/Christian Ethics, all the other practices of the Christian faith find their roots in gratitude to God for the costly gifts of creation and redemption. The practice that undergirds other practices, even holds them together, is gratitude. Grace and gratitude are central to our relationship with God as well as life together as congregations, **but mostly we’ve overlooked the nurturing and expressing of this gratitude as a practice for community life.**

In his little book, Ask, Thank, Tell, Charles Lane writes that “There are few things that will build up a congregation more than having a culture of thanksgiving. By this I mean a culture in which people feel comfortable and natural expressing their thanks to one another.” (p104).

When gratitude shapes our lives, fidelity is more likely to be joy filled, truth is life-giving, and hospitality is offered with generosity and joy. Similarly, gratitude flourishes when the other practices are vibrant.” (Pohl, p.57) Communities that practice gratitude are life-

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giving and beautiful, but the practice of gratitude is often overlooked or squeezed out by other concerns.

Deformations

Like each of the practices we will address this weekend, in the case of expressing gratitude, there are deformations that undermine Christian community. These deformations of gratitude take the form of entitlement, envy, and grumbling or complaint.

According to Pohl, these are community killers. It is therefore crucial to be intentional about how we can strengthen our individual and corporate practice by addressing our all-to-human tendency to smother the natural flow of gratitude.

Since our economic system depends on us always being dissatisfied, always wanting more and better, it leads to an attitude of entitlement. Because so many of our relationships are contractual we tend not to feel appreciative when someone has provided the service for which we have paid them. As a consequence, this attitude often flows into other relationships.

Pohl states: **“Part of the recent emphasis on gratitude or giving thanks is surely a response to the epidemic of complaint, envy, presumption and dissatisfaction that undermines human relationships and plagues many communities. These forms of ingratitude are deadly; they kill community by chipping away at it until participants long to be just about anywhere else. While gratitude gives life to communities, ingratitude that has become established sucks out everything good, until life itself shrivels and discouragement and discontent take over”** (p.18)

“Gratitude and ingratitude are closely tied to what we notice, and once we start focusing on flaws in a community, they quickly dominate our attention. There are always things about a community or congregation that will disappoint us, and because our expectations for the church are high, disappointment and frustration can run very deep.” (p.19)

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“The practice of gratitude becomes more central to our communities when we stop feeding the cycles of complaint and orient our lives around praise, testimony, and thanks. Our communities flourish when we regularly tell stories of God’s faithfulness and goodness and when we find opportunities to express gratitude and celebrate the gifts we have received.” (p.51)

Complications

Of course there are complications for any community that would seek to intentionally increase its expressions of gratitude.

Gratitude in Hard Times

How do we reconcile gratitude and the tougher times of community life?

People are often afraid of expressing gratitude because it seems like you’re dismissing the heartache. Just like in the Psalms, we should feel free to express lament along with gratitude. They’re not mutually exclusive.

A capacity to be thankful in the midst of hard times requires acknowledging that we do not know the whole story, that we are living before it is complete, and we are thankful for the presence of God and faithful persons in our lives. Gratitude is a crucial way in which death and destruction do not have the final word, and cannot finally define us.” (p.26)

People who work and live in the hard places often express the deepest gratitude. Gratitude is a way death and destruction do not have the final word. The whole story of the Christian faith is holding it all together, the death and the gratitude.

Gratitude involves knowing that we are held secure by a loving God, and that the God we worship is trustworthy despite the nearly unbearable sorrow we might encounter along the way (

¹⁸ In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” 1 Thessalonians 5:18

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Too Busy to Say Thanks:

“Gratitude and wonder are squeezed out when our lives are packed full with busyness and responsibilities. There is simply no room, no time to notice. We experience God’s gifts when we pause long enough to notice them, suggesting important but overlooked connections between Sabbath and gratitude. (Pohl, p.30)

Fairness

“Volunteers become discouraged and feel unappreciated when other church members never take their turn at fixing a common meal or cleaning up afterwards, or when some folks always take more than their share of food.” (Pohl, pp.34-35)

Offering thanks and recognizing individual contributions or sacrifices within the community can also be awkward because someone might be overlooked. This is especially the case with quiet, undramatic, or long-term contributions. The risks are reduced when we become more attentive to how community work gets done and when we create a culture of gratitude.

Nevertheless, how we recognize exceptional individual contributions- when everyone has given something- can be tricky. It is especially complex when working with staff and volunteers in church” (Pohl, p.35)

Nurturing the feeling and expression of gratitude has its complications, but the benefits to our community life are more than worth the effort and the risks.

Expressing Gratitude -- Small Group Activities -- 60 minutes

Pohl says that: “If gratitude is thankfulness to God for the benefits received, praise could be defined as the acknowledgment of the excellency of God’s attributes, and most especially God’s holiness.” (p.25)

Read the following passages of Scripture and discuss how gratitude is the heart of worship and how it builds our community of faith.

- Psalms 100, 105, 106, 111 • 1 Chronicles 16 • Ps. 13

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Also, Philippians 1:3-5 “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of you sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (From Pohl, pg. 206)

1. What rituals or rhythms of gratitude could we establish that would keep us mindful of its importance?
2. Which complications of gratitude (see above) are most troublesome within community?
3. How have we addressed them effectively: What else could be done?
4. What attitudes and assumptions in our lives, congregation, or community support ingratitude and dissatisfaction?
5. In what ways are we addressing personal and communal inclinations toward envy and grumbling?
6. What are we doing in church, family, or community that we could build on to deepen the practice of gratitude? (see **suggestion list below, p.21**).

During the last 10 minutes of your time together, each person offers a prayer asking God’s guidance to rid your heart of all those deformations of gratitude (i.e., envy, covetousness, entitlement, grumbling, complaint) and to fill your heart with thankfulness for: our world, your life, the gospel the church and some special attribute or action related to the person sitting to your right in the group.

Some suggestions for “how we might strengthen the practice of gratitude in our communities and congregations and lives.”

- 1.) Make gratitude “frame the day.” “Start the day by expressing gratitude to God. End the day by recalling the instances of God’s grace.
- 2.) Catch people in the act of being a gift, and then recognize and celebrate them.

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- 3.) "Begin each day with an expression of gratitude to God and to those around us and end the day recounting moments of grace and goodness would frame our daily experiences with thanksgiving. (Pohl, p.52)
- 4.) Having rituals of exit like we have for entrance or beginnings is important to communities. In a context of fidelity and covenantal commitments, leaving a community can be very difficult, and finding ways to show our gratitude to one another can reduce the pain of changing or ending relationships." (Pohl, p.53)
- 5.) Gratitude and Celebration: "We tend to think of celebrations as enjoyable but not central. Communities and congregations that last, however, especially in difficult settings, practice and embody gratitude and celebration" (Pohl, p.56)
- 6.) "Being attentive to practicing Sabbath- and to rest as an expression of gratitude- also allows us time to notice what is good. Sabbath is both a response of gratitude and a context for gratitude (Pohl, p.57)
- 7.) "Follow the Apostle Paul's lead and thank God for the ways people in the congregation have lived out their faith and used their gifts." (Lane, p.105)
- 8.) "Have a petition each week in the prayers of the people that thanks God for the specific lives and work of one or two people in the congregation." (Lane, p.105)
- 9.) Pass along the gratitude letters to the entire congregation when they come from ministries supported by the church

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Session 4, Truthfulness (Resource: Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us, by Christine D. Pohl)

In his book, Telling the Truth, Fredrick Buechner, he says, “Christianity has taken many forms throughout the centuries. It has been the moral support for the status quo, a crusading empire, waging war against the heathen, the solace of troubled and dying souls and the hope of the out-cast and oppressed. But before and beyond all these things, regardless how right or wrong they were, those who follow Christ are **People of The Truth. People who know The Truth, People who tell the truth and People who live the truth.**”

This segment is about living and loving the truth and addressing the difficulties (deception, denial and fear of lost relationships), that interfere with and undermine its practice.

Choosing truthfulness in a culture of spin and exaggeration is difficult, and yet this practice is central to following Jesus. Learning to speak the truth in love is fundamental to building good communities and relationships, but often we struggle with the particular application of this important practice.

Once again, we turn to the scriptures for a clearer understanding of how to engage this Christian practice.

Ephesians 4:15, 25-26, 29, 31-32

¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up,^[a] as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.^[b]

The apostle Paul is speaking to the Ephesians here about their obligation to tell the truth to those who would seek to shatter the

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unity of the church. But Paul adds a Christian twist in emphasis which is as important to the actual speaking of the truth as to the hoped for results – that is, doing so in love (Vs 15).

I was only 12 or so when my 6th grade teacher and school principal, frustrated with my frequent excuses from his class to go to voice and piano lessons or participate in special club activities, decided to take upon himself the role of confronting me with a bit of what he thought was the truth.

“You’ll never amount to anything”, he told me. “You’ve got too many irons in the fire.”

These words from Mr. Williams were seared into my memory that day at the tender age of 11 or 12.

And while there was perhaps a kernel of truth in the idea that a lack of focus in one’s life can lead to fragmentation of effort and ultimately aimlessness, a case can also be made for allowing a young person to explore a variety of activities so as to discover their true passion for more focused effort later in life.

The problem with Mr. Williams’s remark wasn’t that he didn’t mean well, or that he didn’t have a piece of the truth to convey but rather, that he mixed his truth-telling with insult so that it made it difficult to hear.

Yes, Christians are people of the truth. But as important as truthfulness is to the health of the Christian community, it is never easy. This entire truth telling process is filled with difficulty. **First there is the matter of how we are certain we know the truth, then the matter of knowing that we are confronting the other person for the right reason and finally there is the issue of how we approach the confrontation.**

Truth with a capital “T” is always connected to the person who is speaking as well as the person who is being addressed. It is never a totally one-sided thing. Therefore, we must know as much about our own subjective motivations as we do about the objective facts. That is, we must first discover the truth about ourselves before we can engage in speaking the truth to others.

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This is why the apostle Paul tells us to be sure not to speak out of anger.

One of the ways we know this kind of truth is through introspection and careful spiritual discernment.

The clutter of our noisy spirit hides from us the truth about ourselves and our world. And in so doing it hides from us the One who is the source of all Truth. So speaking the truth involves more silence than speaking as we clarify our own motivations and separate opinion from fact.

In my study of psychology I learned that in most cases where we feel compelled to confront another person about some matter, it is because we have seen in them something we are fearful of about ourselves. This doesn't mean that it isn't true, but only that our approach to confronting them may be colored by our own emotions – that we may not be confronting them entirely for loving reasons or in a loving manner.

An interesting example of discernment and timing comes from John 16:12-13, when Jesus says to his disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." The time would come for the disciples to be told additional truth, but until then, the words would be unbearable. "A word fitly spoken," as Proverbs 25:11 says, "is like apples of gold in a setting of silver."

Creating a culture of truthfulness involves knowing when we should speak, and when it is appropriate to conclude that God is at work and we do not need to say anything. It requires patience and wisdom to know what ought to be borne for a time, and what should be confronted.

A community that loves the truth will understand the wisdom of silence. Speaking truthfully, as Mennonite theologian Alan Kreider notes, does not mean that we will "always say everything we think or know. There is ample room, in the truthful life, for silence, discretion, the keeping of confidences and even the pleasantries that lubricate social interchange. ... But this does mean that we

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are committed to making the words that we utter true words.”
(Pohl)

Timeliness is an important aspect of discernment, however. If we wait too long to address certain difficulties or conflicts in community, they can reach a point where it is too late to repair them. Naming deception early or identifying disagreements quickly helps to keep us from walking down paths from which it is hard to return. A recognition of timeliness also means that we will not store up all our grievances and then dump them in one moment of aggravated “truth-telling.”

One famous proverb says: “we should only speak truth when it will harm no-one and help someone.”

This doesn’t mean that we should never bring pain with our truth-telling. In fact, the pain of confrontation with the truth is the first step toward healing.

We are most effective in speaking to others the truth in love, when we create a situation in which they do most of the talking and we just listen. When we ask the right questions that provoke them to discover their own truth.

But once we have checked our own self-knowledge and discerned the truth that the Spirit is laying on our hearts to speak, we are called to deliver it in Love.

“As we draw closer to the source of truth and live gratefully in response to the one who has taken us from darkness to light, our desires and longings can be reshaped. We can grow into living truthfully and loving truth. While living truthfully involves self-discipline and thoughtful reflection, it is most fully linked to embracing God’s desire for truth in our inward being (Ps. 51:6 KJV).” (Pohl)

Christine Pohl offers the following questions for us to consider as we consider how we might become a congregation that lives out this Christian practice of truthfulness:

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What do we do together that helps members learn to tell “tactful truths instead of reassuring lies”?

How are truthfulness and grace modeled by the leadership?

What structures are in place to help us keep short accounts among ourselves?

Where do we allow ourselves freedom to ask one another hard questions about important dimensions of our lives?”

Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:23-24 challenges us to take individual initiative in repairing damaged relationships by going directly to the other person involved to seek reconciliation.

23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you,
24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

Communities that love truth will make a safe place for the awkwardness of confession, forgiveness, and healing. Where truthfulness and confession are practiced, communities depend on fidelity, the assurance that members won’t abandon one another as they reveal their sins and weaknesses and move toward maturity and holiness.

Truthful communities are communities of encouragement and hospitality. As Miroslav Volf explains, “Without the will to embrace the other there will be no truth *between people*, and without truth between people there will be no peace.”

If our communities develop the habit of delighting in the truth, we will be in a better position to deal with the inevitable conflicts and disagreements that are part of shared life. As we face conflict, truth-telling should include remembering and rehearsing who we are. We do this in teaching, preaching, and liturgy, reminding ourselves of our identity, to whom we belong, and the common commitments we cherish.

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Addressing generalities can seem safer, but speaking truthfully to one another, whether in the form of affirmation or critique, is most helpful if it involves specifics.

In confrontation, it is generally best to speak about difficult matters face-to-face. Words of affirmation and encouragement can be reread and reinforced when put in writing, but when hard words are recorded, they are often read over and over again with little benefit and with increasingly less context.

A deepened commitment to living truthfully could change our individual character and the quality of our common life. Truthful living in the context of grace, gratitude, fidelity, and hospitality gives powerful testimony to the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.

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Living and Speaking Truthfully – Small Group Activities (60 minutes)

30 minutes:

One half of your group read the story (below) about “Practicing Clear” while the other half of the group reads the example of the Antioch Church

- Then in your group discuss your thoughts about participating in such a process with members of your family, friends at church or work team.
- Re-combine your groups and share what you learned from your two stories.

20 minutes

Discussion Questions

1. **What features of our congregational or community life help us to be truthful?**
2. **What dynamics make it hard for us to be truthful?**
3. **What are we doing to become a truth-shaped community?**
4. **How could we invite our community or congregation into a deeper or more mature level of truthfulness?**
5. **What areas of dishonesty or self-deception do we need to address?**
6. **What structures do we have in place to help us be more truthful about our struggles, situations, needs and relationships?**
7. **What structures could we establish?**

Spend the last 10 minutes in prayer about anything you have felt and learned or might want to propose for the life of the church or someone you feel you need to address concerning some matter that the Holy Spirit is laying on your heart.

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Practicing “Clear”

The Good Works community has developed a ritual that helps staff members address interpersonal tensions before they become major disruptions. They recognize the central importance of walking together in truth and of following Jesus’ teaching about laying our gift at the altar and seeking reconciliation and forgiveness from one another. They call the practice “Clear.”

At their weekly staff meetings, the first question they ask one another after the opening prayer is “Are we clear?” Keith Wasserman explains, “This has now become a code word for ‘Do you have anything you need to say to me about how you and I are doing or about how we are getting along and working out this thing called salvation?’” Is there something that we need to talk about before we “move into the business of the ministry”?

He notes that this practice has deepened trust and established an accountability structure that “forces our lives into the light with one another.” Their approach also recognizes that interpersonal tensions have a great impact on the entire community. “This kind of discipleship nurtures and rewards truth-telling,” he concludes. “What holds our community together must be both truth and love.”

The structure created by Good Works makes room for truthfulness and keeps conflicts from festering. The community has been able to avoid the downward spiral of resentment that is common among coworkers who serve in highly demanding ministries. Because being a whole and holy community is important to them, they allow the time needed for this process. If someone is not “clear,” there is structure and support to work through a biblical framework for reconciliation based on Matthew 5:23-24. (Pohl, pp153-4)

- Would this be something you think might be helpful in your workplace?
At our church? In your family?
- Why? Why not?

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Antioch Church

Chris Rice recalls the advice that their beloved friend and advisor John Alexander gave to the members of the Antioch community about handling their disagreements, tensions, and sins. “One of the foundations of community is knowing that you will sin and be sinned against. It needs to be our daily expectation. But there also needs to be an expectation of forgiving others their sins and being forgiven.” He continued, “Expecting ourselves to be bad can’t be an excuse not to change and grow.” He challenged them further, “You need to learn to confront openly and without apology. But also without dogma, without anger.”

Within congregational life, Jesus also encourages direct and personal interaction, and only when that fails are other “witnesses” to be drawn in.

Read Matthew 18:15-17

¹⁵ “If your brother or sister^[a] sins,^[b] go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’^[c] ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

- Have you ever been in a situation in which inviting a third person helped you find reconciliation with someone you disagreed with?
- How does the realism about our sinfulness provide a context for healthy truth-telling and conflict resolution in the Antioch Church?

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Session 5, Extending Hospitality

In this session we will focus on the grace and challenge of making room and welcoming “otherness” and addressing the difficulties, (fear of loss of identity, exclusion, demonization and “othering” of those who are different), that undermine our practice of hospitality.

One of the more famous scripture passages makes it clear that showing hospitality to strangers is at the heart of the Hebrew and Christian Identity:

Exodus 22:21

"Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.

Continue in brotherly love. 2Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for doing some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3Remember those in prison as if you were bound with them, and those who are mistreated as if you were suffering with them....Hebrews 13:1-3 (Berean Study Bible)

Specifically, the writer of Hebrews could have been referring to the strangers who came to the tent of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham had no idea that they were strangers but offered the most generous hospitality and only later learned that they had been sent by God with the message that Sarah would have a child.

Genesis 18:1-2

Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth,

But there are others. Perhaps the most overlooked is the passage of the strangers who came to Lot in fear for their lives and were taken into his home and provided protection.

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Genesis 19:1

Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground.

In other passages we are given direct instruction regarding what the Lord expects of us.

Isaiah 58:7

"Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"

Matthew 25:35

For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in,

In *The Hospitality of God*, Brendan Byrne, SJ, provides to-the-point commentary on those parts of Luke's Gospel that bring home to people a sense of the extravagance of God's love for them. For Byrne, Luke portrays the life and ministry of Jesus as a divine "visitation" to the world, seeking hospitality. The One who comes as visitor and guest becomes host and offers a hospitality in which the entire world can become truly human, be at home, and know salvation in the depths of their hearts.

Hospitality is a practice **that builds community and also expands it.**

As Pohl points out, "A community is . . . important for the practice of hospitality. Those who welcome strangers from within a community can find friends with whom to share the work and the blessing help in maintaining perspective, and opportunities for rest and renewal." (P160)

By the fourth century, the churches in Rome were feeding an estimated 20,000 poor people each week. The church at that time

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presented to the world a visible alternative to the prevailing social order. As Georges Florovsky has written in "Empire and Desert: Antinomies of Christian History":

"Christianity entered human history as a new social order or, rather, a new social dimension. From the very beginning, Christianity was not primarily a "doctrine," but exactly a "community." There was not only a "message" to be proclaimed and delivered and "Good News" to be declared, but there was, precisely, a New Community, distinct and peculiar, in the process of growth and formation, to which members were called and recruited. Indeed, "fellowship" ("koinonia") was the basic category of Christian existence."

Challenges

Appreciating the importance of hospitality requires that we also take seriously the **challenges that arise in welcoming people**. We simultaneously seek to offer hospitality and to maintain a valued identity, cultivate community, and deal with limited resources.

In a culture of fear and overwhelming busy-ness, calls to practice hospitality can seem risky and overwhelming. Closing the door can seem safer and more practical.

But the Gospel opens outward, and **learning to use the other practices** in negotiating some of the difficulties **can open up new ways of dealing with the challenges that arise in offering welcome**.

A life of hospitality begins in gratitude and worship. We tend to think of it as a task or duty, but it's first a response of gratitude for God's love for and welcome to us. When we reflect on how Jesus made a place for us, we're asked to **live in response to that welcome**.

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Practicing hospitality isn't easy in the 21st century. It challenges our lifestyles. It **breaks down the distance between those who have resources and those who need them.**

You have to **live truthfully** when you're practicing hospitality. Any big disconnects between what we say and how we live are revealed in hospitality. It stretches us to become bigger.

Hospitality is obviously a huge issue right now with welcoming refugees. You can hear in the conversations all the old 'fear of the stranger.'

"Unless it is rooted in gratitude, the practice of hospitality quickly becomes grudging (I Peter 4:9) Hospitality is not easy, and guests are not always pleasant or grateful. To sustain hospitality over the long term, our gratitude needs to be cultivated in response to the love and grace of God. Fidelity, truthfulness, and gratitude make space for the practice of hospitality. . . . Without some form of Sabbath-keeping, communities burn out very quickly. And the practice of discernment (and truth-telling) becomes crucial because not everyone can be welcomed into every context, and knowing how and when to "close the door" is a requisite for survival." (Pohl p162)

Deformations

There is a temptation to inadvertently "corrupt" hospitality.

"In the church, it can be couched in terms of **stewardship** – **'What will it accomplish?'** **There's a tendency to turn hospitality into a strategy, a means to another end – the latest way of evangelism, toward church growth.**

Pohl poses concerns which often pull us away from the Christian vocation of extending hospitality:

"What if there isn't enough? What if we run out of . . . ?

"Is it wrong to expect guests to be grateful? Some act as if they are entitled to our hospitality. Its hard not to grow increasingly resentful.

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If we welcome strangers into our community, couldn't they threaten our way of life?

The overlap of home and church, such as through small groups and shared meals, continues to be one of the best avenues of hospitality, though not the only one.

We want the best for the people we welcome. More than acceptance – transformation into the image of Christ.

The work of hospitality can be exhausting, unpredictable and wonderful.

As some of you may know, my mother was recently widowed when her late husband died some 5 months ago. As she has struggled to move forward with her life, she is trying to find things to occupy her time. She has been attending a grief counseling group at a large mega church in the area and decided to invite a friend of hers to attend worship there one Sunday.

To her surprise, a few days after her visit she received a phone call from the church office. Apparently the church is doing a self-study on various aspects of its ministry, including how effectively they welcome people. They offered my mother and her friend gift certificates if they would be what in the U.S. is called “secret shoppers”. That is, they wanted my mom and her friend to visit their various services and coffee hour fellowship times and then report back on their impressions! My mom was ecstatic!

She enthusiastically signed up for the job immediately and started making her visits. And what she found was not always good news for the church administrator. On one occasion she was offered no assistance in taking her coffee and snack to a table as she tried to juggle her cane and purse.

In another service she found that even though she stood in the middle of the fellowship room, no one reached out to introduce themselves.

The outcome of this experiment for the church was that they were able to tell these stories to their members and help them become

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more aware that although sometime we think we are hospitable, we really just want to connect with our friends and let the new comers fend for themselves.

Finally, since this is our last session I want to close with these words of reassurance from Christine Pohl:

“We are not saved by our practices or by doing them well. Undoubtedly, paying attention to practices is a poor substitute for a relationship with the living God. And, strangely enough, we can make an idol out of a practice, imagining that if we live hospitably, keep our promises, or speak truthfully, we can define our identity or become good.

If, as a community, we see practices as the next skill set or framework for a program to make congregations work better, we will have missed the point. When we offer welcome or live with gratitude, when we make and keep promises or live truthfully, we are responding to the practices of God. Our experiences of community grow out of the practices through which echo the goodness, grace, and truth we find in Jesus.” (p 175).

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Extending Hospitality

1. Who are strangers in our community that need welcome?
2. When we are offering or enjoying hospitality, which other practices are flourishing?
3. As we think about difficulties we've encountered in offering or receiving hospitality, what other practices (or their deformations) have come into play?

How might we address these difficulties?

4. What are we – in our personal lives, families, congregation, or community – already doing to offer welcome?

What could we build on to strengthen our practice of hospitality?