

**Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:
RADICAL HOSPITALITY**

**Romans 15:7
2 Corinthians 5:17-22**

Excellent churches welcome people well.

A sermon preached by
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Do you ever pay attention to the expiration dates on food you buy at the grocery store? I'll admit, I have been known to bypass the expiration date on occasion. If it doesn't smell bad or have mold growing on it, it must be OK to eat, right? This is not an opinion shared by the ladies in my house. If it's expired, it's gone—no questions asked.

There are implicit expiration dates on lots of things. Technology is only good for a short time until the next newest thing comes out. Anybody carrying your Palm Pilot or Blackberry today?

Ideas, programs, and philosophies about all kinds of things expire after a while. If you're in business, you can pick up the latest, greatest idea in any airport bookstore, and it will be good until the next bestseller comes out. Books for first-time parents fly off the shelves, some never to be read. Did you ever notice they don't write books for raising your second child?

Pastors and churches are no different. There are always people coming up with ideas on how to make your church more effective, more efficient, larger, and better. I get several a week. Some of them I pay attention to, and a few are helpful.

Seven years ago, Robert Schnase, who was the United Methodist bishop in Missouri at the time, published a very helpful book called *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*.¹ He had discovered five things in common for effective churches, whether they were large or small, urban, rural, mainline or non-denominational. These five practices would make any congregation attractive to people looking for a church: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. The idea was to make the church as excellent as possible, and people would want to come. It's what we call an *attractional* model.

Unfortunately, then the 21st century happened. Church attendance was radically altered by technology, affluence, and the erosion of cultural support. Nobody protects Sunday any more. Many people quit looking for a church to attend. Young people in particular developed a disregard and even disdain for organized religion. Many see the church—any church—as hypocritical, judgmental, political, homophobic, old-fashioned and boring.² We can make ourselves as pretty as we please; they do not want to dance with us.

So this year, Schnase, now a bishop in south Texas, revised and updated his book. Apparently its expiration date had passed. The five practices are still relevant, but the attractional model doesn't work so well anymore. For a church to be fruitful, effective, healthy and growing nowadays, we have to be more *missional*. If we want to introduce people to Jesus, we have to reach out to them. We have to get outside the walls of the church and go to where people are. We have to engage and build relationships before people will trust us enough to come inside our buildings.

So in addition to being attractional, we also want to be missional. It's not an either/or choice. It's both/and. Schnase points out that the two types of invitations Jesus gave to people were both attractional and missional. Many times he said, "Come and see." Come and see what God is doing here. But many times he also said, "Go and do." Go and tell; go and heal; go and make disciples. We want to reach out to people who need Jesus, whether they know it or not, and we want to provide a place where those deep needs of the human soul can be met.

Why is this important? Why is it crucial for us to develop a fruitful ministry at First United Methodist Church? Why can't we just go with the flow and let things happen and see how it all turns out?

As I said, the 21st century happened. The church is swimming upstream in our culture today. We are competing against all the other weekend activities in the world and an attitude that that church has reached its expiration date. But we know better. We have received the grace of God, and we know that a relationship with Jesus Christ is the best thing in the world. Our sins are forgiven, and we know life abundant and eternal. We believe people matter to God, and everybody needs to know Jesus. We believe we are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ and to support the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God.

That's why we are interested in the best practices for creating a fruitful congregation and why we are going to talk about it for a few weeks.

Today we want to talk about **HOSPITALITY**. That's such a friendly word. Hospitality is the ministry of inviting and welcoming people who might be a part of our fellowship and ministry. Partly it's about evangelism—introducing people to Jesus. Partly it's about making people feel like they belong to the church family. Hospitality means caring for the

outsiders and making them insiders. It's more than entertaining. Hospitality is related to words like hospital and hospice. It's a way we care for people who are hurting, people who need help, people who have sin-sick souls. It's a way we offer rest and peace and comfort and love on behalf of Christ.

Hospitality is a sign and an act of grace. I'll never forget a mission trip I went on to Juarez, Mexico, a few years ago. We built a little *casita* for a family, 800 square feet of concrete block with no running water. You would have thought we had built those people a mansion. On the last day, the family invited our mission team to eat with them in their new home. The food was prepared in a kitchen whose walls were cardboard and packing crates attached to the old house. It was laid on boards inside the new house that was not yet quite finished. We were hesitant to eat it, though it smelled really good, until our *maestro* told us that the woman had spent probably a month's income for her family to buy this food. Suddenly we didn't care if the health department had inspected her kitchen. That food was a sign of gratitude, love, and hospitality that we could not refuse. And it was good!

One of the Biblical commands for hospitality is found in Paul's Letter to the Romans. It simply says, "*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*"³ The context of this statement is the tension between Christians who were Jews and Christians who were Gentiles. In the early church, the Jews had a hard time accepting the Gentiles into the fellowship. Paul said the whole point of the ministry of Christ was to open up the grace of God to all people regardless of their background. Christ welcomes us all, so we should welcome one another the same way.

The welcome of Christ is unconditional, like God's love. It doesn't matter who you are, what you do, what you have done, how much or how little you have, or who your *momma* was. You are welcomed by Christ. Jesus already knows you deeply; he wants you to know him in a deeply personal way. And the welcome of Christ never ends. The life he offers is eternal life, starting the moment you enter into a relationship of faith with him and lasting forever.

This is how we are to welcome the stranger and outsider into our fellowship. Our welcome is unconditional, accepting people wherever they are in life or on their spiritual journey. We want to welcome them deeply,

not just in passing, but to develop relationships, friendships with those who come in our doors looking for a spiritual home. What we have to offer them is not just a membership in a really nice civic club. We're more than a positive social organization. We're the church of Jesus Christ, and in our fellowship, a lost, broken, and hurting soul can find peace and rest and the greatest gift of all—eternal life. After the way Christ has welcomed us, why shouldn't we be the most welcoming people on earth?

Most churches today understand the need for ministries of hospitality. Unless you want to get on a downward spiral, there are some things you just have to do. You have to have greeters who will physically welcome people. You have to have a welcome center where guests can find information about the church, again staffed by an outgoing, friendly-type person. You have to make some sort of contact, by mail email or phone, with people who visit your worship service. And every welcoming church has members who wear nametags. This is Christian Hospitality 101.

But today I want to take you a step further. Excellent churches—fruitful congregations—practice **RADICAL HOSPITALITY**. “Radical” means from the root or source, and radical hospitality is an attitude of welcoming that is ingrained in the culture of a congregation. It is in the DNA of fruitful congregations to go out of their way to welcome newcomers. Hospitality doesn't just happen at the front door; it happens in every room on the church campus. The focus of fruitful congregations is on the outsiders, not the insiders. They truly understand that the church is the only organization on the planet that exists for the sake of those who are not yet members. Most churches don't get that, and they struggle to be fruitful. But when they do get it, it's like a fire igniting!

In the last three years, we have made progress in our ministries of hospitality. We recruited greeters to welcome people into the worship services. Dane and I developed a systematic way to contact guests who leave us contact information. We have bags with a gift and information for our newcomers. We stock our restrooms with personal items that people might need and a welcome sign. We have tried to get people to wear nametags. Those are attractional hospitality ministries.

But we have also begun to be more missional in our hospitality. We have gone outside the church to participate in community activities, like First

Tuesdays downtown, trick-or-treating on Garrison, and the Christmas train at Creekmore Park. We have had some men's and women's ministry gatherings in restaurants around town. Last December, Trevor and others had a "Coffee and Carols" night at the Fort Smith Coffee Company. When we were giving out water and doing chalk art on the sidewalk downtown last June, we gave all the parents information about our Vacation Bible School coming up. We identified about 10 children who participated in VBS who would not have come if we had not been out on the street inviting people.

None of these were huge events, but they were missional events. They were intentional ways of reaching out and inviting people and touching lives outside of our walls, without people having to make the effort to come here in order to be welcomed.

We come by radical hospitality pretty honestly. John Wesley, our Methodist founder, drew the criticism and condemnation of the church in his time because he went outside of the church to welcome people and to introduce them to Jesus. Kicked out of his home church in Epworth, he preached in the cemetery standing on his father's tomb. He went to the prisons, the coal mines, and the factories to tell people the good news of salvation. He started schools and medical clinics outside of the organized religion of his day, so he could meet people where their need was, but then draw them into a relationship with Christ. And look what happened: today there are over 40 million Methodists in some type of Wesleyan church in 138 countries.⁴

This is radical hospitality. We want every aspect of our church life to be about welcoming people into the community of faith and into a relationship with Christ: our buildings, our nursery, our teaching, our activities, our advertising, our communications. And every week, we send you out, hundreds of Methodist hospitality agents, to be interacting and building relationships with people, some of whom do not have the most important thing they could ever have—a relationship to God—and you can invite them to a place where they can get it.

Again, let's ask why. Why bother with these sorts of ministries at all? Sounds like a lot of work. (It is.) Why is this important?

Radical hospitality is important because we were once welcomed: *“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you.”*⁵ Jesus took you and me in, warts and all, and in gratitude for his grace, we want to open the door for others.

Radical hospitality is important because we build relationships with some wonderful people. The Letter to the Hebrews says, *“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”*⁶ We have some wonderful people in this church, and when we welcome new people in, we get more wonderful people. I’ll bet most of you can think of a person who has come into this church in the last year or two who is an angel, a blessing and an asset to our fellowship. More is better.

Radical hospitality is important because we represent what God is doing in the world. Paul said, *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.”*⁷ Ambassadors are people who are sent out from their country into a foreign land to represent their home. We are disciples of Jesus, sent out from the church into a secularized, materialistic culture, to represent and show the world that there is a better way in Jesus.

And finally, radical hospitality is important because in being hospitable to people, we welcome a greater Guest. In the last story Jesus told in the Gospel of Matthew, he said that at the end of time, the Son of Man would divide the sheep from the goats, the good people from the bad, and the basis of his judgment would be how they had treated him: *“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”*⁸ The good people ask when it was that they did all these things. And the Son of Man replies, *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*⁹ When we invite, welcome, and provide ministry for any one of God’s children, we are

welcoming the One who established this community with his life on the cross. What greater Guest could we have?

Church, let's do our best to practice radical hospitality. This is our calling. This is the cause of Christ. This is our opportunity to make a difference in the lives of God's children. This is fruit for the Kingdom that has no expiration date.

¹ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018).

² David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unchristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks About The Church* (Baker Books, 2012).

³ Romans 15:7.

⁴ <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/about/member-churches/>.

⁵ Romans 15:7.

⁶ Hebrews 13:2.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:18-20.

⁸ Matthew 25:35f.

⁹ Matthew 25:40.