

HOSPITALITY

The dictionary definition of hospitality is a very benign one: "a friendly and generous reception of guests and strangers." Yet it has with it baggage that prevents us from accepting it as something we Christians should embrace wholeheartedly. Firstly, the word most often refers to the food and beverage industry. Secondly, it implies that it is a job that we better 'do.' Thus we shy away because a) we aren't in the liquor business and b) we are way too shy and don't know what to say—and will surely forget their name anyway?

Scripture abounds with examples of hospitality. To the woman at the well, a class of person seldom spoken to, Christ related directly. Through her / his message was given to the whole town, in her voice and in her language. Similarly, he related to the woman with no voice, one who could only touch his garment. The poor and marginalized call to us in varying ways saying, "I am speaking to you, please listen."

The deeper you get into hospitality and welcoming the more the giver and receiver get mixed up. Is it Christ that is present in the down trodden as they enter my world, or is it me that offers Him to the stranger, in the tattered clothes or with the criminal record? Perhaps I am the hungry one that needs feeding or the thirsty one that needs the drink of living water.

The problem is not all on their shoulders. It is us who have the difficulty with the hearing and understanding. The language of the convict and of the downtrodden is different from ours, nevertheless it is a language, which we are required to have an understanding.

Breaking out of our comfort zone of talking to our friends is difficult. We have to step outside of our social circles as well as the economic barriers that isolate us. One person in our evangelism group thought that she would like to dress up as a bag lady and come late to church. She wondered openly how she would be received. Hopefully someone, perhaps Bill or Mary, would slip quietly in beside her and give her a smile of welcome.

Hospitality causes us to look outside of ourselves. We are way too preoccupied with what we think others are saying about us. Being an evangelist wherever we are puts us in the shoes of the other person. Try wearing the boots of someone who has entered the door of your church for the first time. Add to that the fear of the unknown, burdens of grief, violence, separation, or poverty. Such people have a hunger for acceptance, or at least a smile that says, "Hi, glad to see you. You are welcome here."

An important thing to recognize is that you need not be alone. Team up with someone else. Ecclesiastes 4:9 speaks of two being better than one, and a rope

with more than one strand not being easily broken. It is much more effective if two people standing side by side, alternately speak, and listen. Especially listen.

Another benefit accrues from team evangelism. If there are two of you that welcome and make someone feel part of the body, but you are not there next Sunday, they need not start over.

Who are the marginalized? Misfortune is a description that tags along with them. Less than what they could be is another. Misfortune befalls all of us, but particularly those who have been born on the "wrong side of the track. About 3% of Canadians go to church-sometimes. Isn't it a wonder that we should be the ones blessed with that privilege? How about having enough to eat, a place to sleep, or a country where you can express yourself.

Not many of us will ever cross oceans or learn any new languages in preparation for the mission field. Neither will we spend the large amounts of money required to get there. There is a secret however. Missionary work can happen at the front door of your church. Or in a coffee shop, or in the pew sitting next to someone you don't know. It can also happen to the person who catches your eye and is in desperate need of a smile.

Try it. Be a missionary!

By Ralph Jorgensen