

Hospitality beyond the Status Quo

“Radical Hospitality” is a common ambition among churches hoping reverse decline and grow again. Most church leaders, however, make the mistake of assuming that “radical hospitality” is just the old “hospitality” performed more aggressively: *firmer* handshakes, *bigger* smiles, *longer* passing of the peace, and *real cream* in the coffee. I have often said that every dying church in North America considers itself a friendly congregation . . . and this is true even if they really are a friendly congregation! “Radical Hospitality” is something way beyond the status quo of our traditional behavior.

It all begins with the right attitude. Normal hospitality assumes that members are more important than visitors. They get the best parking and seating, more “face time” with the pastor, and are first in line for refreshments. Occasionally a church dares to give equal status to visitors (designating a handful of parking placed near the door, reserving the rear pew, getting equal “face time” with the pastor, and creating two lines for refreshments). Growing churches, however, are more radical. They assume that visitors *are more important than members*. They get *all* the best parking and *all* the best seats; the *most* “face time” with the pastor, and don’t even have to wait in line because someone serves them.

“Radical Hospitality” has a completely different goal than normal hospitality. Ask anyone in a dying church about the purpose of hospitality, and they will say that it is to welcome people and help visitors feel right at home. The goal of “Radical Hospitality” is quite different. The hospitality goal in growing churches *is to facilitate significant conversations*. What is a “significant conversation”? It is a conversation between seekers and disciples, or between visitors and members, about healing, hope, acceptance, virtue, personal growth, and positive change. It’s not a conversation about sports, weather, the pastor’s joke, the cute kids in the children’s sermon, or your pet peeve this week.

You can tell the difference between normal hospitality and “Radical Hospitality” by measuring outcomes. The outcome of normal hospitality is that members catch up with each other, visitors feel comfortable, leaders are reminded of the coming committee meeting, and everybody goes happily home to lunch. The outcome of “Radical Hospitality” is that innumerable significant conversations are erupting before, during, and after worship . . . and everyone is encouraged to participate in a small group or engage in daily spiritual disciplines over the coming week. People go home having shared something, learned something, celebrated something, or been challenged by something relevant to spiritual growth and Christian mission. “Radical Hospitality” introduces seekers to Jesus, not the church; feeds their souls with hope, not just their stomachs with sugar; and excites them with stories of Christian life and mission, not caffeine. Visitors leave thinking they have just connected with the Kingdom of God, not just another service club at prayer.

If the goal is different, then the strategy is different. The most obvious sign of “Radical Hospitality” is that it goes on before, during, and after worship. There are teams greeting people as they come in; supporting people as they worship; feeding people after they worship; and waving goodbye as they drive away.

- Pre-Worship greeters and ushers are in the parking lot or be the street corner; and at every entrance. Their welcome is effusive, especially toward people they don’t know. They ask pointed questions like: *Is there any way I can pray for you this week? Would you like me to introduce you to one of our spiritual leaders? Have you heard about our small group and mission opportunities?*
- During-Worship support teams are in the sanctuary intentionally observing people who might be moved by the service, struggling with little kids or aging parents, or touched by the Holy Spirit. They are ready to follow them out of the sanctuary, or sit beside them to help. They offer a Kleenex for tears, prayer in silent companionship, guidance to the washroom or kitchen, and assistance to find a song, follow the liturgy, or even change a baby’s diaper. Afterwards they forego their own coffee to sit and talk with a seeker who stays behind.
- After-Worship refreshment teams are in the hall serving great food, sugar and sugarless, at designated serving stations. They not only serve the line, but they bring refreshments directly to newcomers (as well as seniors, young mothers, and the disabled). And they not only serve food, but they deliberately engage people in significant conversation: *Did you experience the nearness of God this week? Can I share a*

personal celebration with the pastor? Is there any way I can pray for you in the week to come? They even take the time to write a note to themselves so they won't forget.

- After-Church greeters are at every exit, and even in the parking lot. They are busy collecting prayer requests, holding umbrellas, escorting families to their vehicles, reminding people of small group and mission opportunities, and giving a parting gift to newcomers. Yes, they even collect business cards, write down email addresses, and promise to stop by the house or the hospital later that week.

Yes, there are a few visitors who are shy about all that attention. Most visitors, however, appreciate not only the welcome, but being *taken seriously* as thoughtful, burdened, valuable human beings who deserve to be recognized and heard. You will find that most of the people who worry about offending shy people are church members who are primarily worried that they don't have anything significant to say about hope.

You have probably realized by now that "Radical Hospitality" is no small thing, done by a few untrained extroverts. It is a major ministry done by trained teams. These teams meet during the week as small groups who pray for the people they met last Sunday and for the people with whom God will connect them next week. They support one another; learn new things about demographic sensitivity; and prepare for significant conversation by reading the scriptures for the coming worship service. Normal hospitality relies on a task group for dutiful ushers who show up unprepared 15 minutes ahead of time ... and disappear after the service. Or it relies on dutiful kitchen helpers (usually older women) who keep the coffee urns filled and refer every inquiry to the church office. "Radical Hospitality" is definitely *not normal*

Radical Hospitality is perhaps the most "seeker sensitive" ministry of a "seeker sensitive" church. Among the 60+ lifestyle segments in North America, different groups of people value different kinds of food, environments, and relationships. Just observe how the food court at the mall is designed the clientele at each booth differs by age, education, dress, taste, tattoos, a multitude of other lifestyle markers. If you really want to make people welcome, and go further to engage them in significant conversation, then you have connect with them on their terms ... *not yours!*

There are four basic kinds of seeker sensitive hospitality strategies. Which one connects with the particular group of Macedonians who keep you up at night?

The Basics:

A hearty welcome, solid pew, simple snacks, and lots of coffee from a big metal urn are enough. Provide some stackable chairs and a few tables (decorated by stray crayons from a generation of Sunday school kids) is sufficient to get them talking. They will share their life struggles and spiritual victories without much prompting, and go out of their way to talk to strangers without being asked. Many of the lifestyle segments that have been the backbone of established churches are satisfied with this.

Multiple Choices:

The diversity of the public drives diversity in hospitality. One size doesn't fit all. Multi-generational greeters welcome people in different ways. People select the chair that fits, the refreshment that satisfies and the tablecloth with their favorite color, and the background music that suits their mood. They open up when the environment is congenial and the time is right. Many of the lifestyle segments in the emerging multi-cultural world aren't ready to talk unless the treated with respect.

Healthy Choices:

A growing number of lifestyle segments have made holistic health and balanced living major ambitions. They count calories, gravitate to fruit and fiber, avoid sugar and caffeine, and prefer to stand in natural light and breathe fresh air. They respect people who are respectful, honor the natural environment, and avoid spreading germs by refusing to shake hands. More and more lifestyle segments are literally, as well as metaphorically, allergic to the church and only linger in safe places.

Take Out:

People are on the move. Their conversations move seamlessly from face-to-face, to email, twitter, and text. The conversation that started at the front door of the church continues by cell phone and iPad on the way home. The coffee needs to be in a travel mug, and the food carried out in a plastic bag. For lifestyle segments that include students, dual career families, amateur sports Dads ... and the desperately poor, homeless, and unemployed Moms ... the food from church needs to last all day. The talk on the go.

“Radical Hospitality” means covering all the bases and reaching all the lifestyle expectations. Whatever it takes, whatever the expense, growing churches spend the money on hospitality so that they can make significant conversations happen.

There are two ways to test how “radical” your so-called “radical hospitality” really is.

The first test is more sophisticated. Many denominations and middle judicatories now have subscriptions to www.MissionInsite.com. Identify the three or four largest lifestyle segments, and proportionate representation, in your zip code or mission area. Then compare the proportions of lifestyle segments in your mission field to the proportions represented in your church on Sunday morning. Truly radical hospitality means that the proportions inside and outside your church are roughly the same. If some group isn't connecting with your church, you need to wonder why.

The second test is quite simple. All you need to do is appoint two or three members to exercise their spiritual gift of lurking on Sunday morning. Watch people enter and leave; watch people spontaneously interact during worship in the sanctuary, the narthex, and the rest of the building; and especially watch the conversations during coffee hour. Give every lurker a little “clicker” with which to count. Whenever they see a “significant conversation” ... click! You don't have to overhear it. You can tell by the body language, eye contact, concentration, and animation when something significant is going on. Do this every Sunday for 3 months and chart the results. Is the trend going up or down? A declining church may record less than five conversations for every 100 people, and the number will be much the same every Sunday. A growing church may record 30 conversations for every 100 people, and the number will grow over time.

How radical is your “Radical Hospitality”?