

# CONTENTS

Introduction: Why hospitality? .....	7
1. Hospitality at the welcome table .....	37
2. Hospitality at the activity table .....	51
3. Hospitality at the Lord's table .....	63
4. Hospitality at the meal table .....	77
5. Hospitality in a Messy home.....	91
6. Hospitality to grow your team .....	101
7. Team training session on hospitality .....	115
8. Learning from the hospitality industry .....	119
9. Boundaries .....	133

## **MESSY CHURCH SESSIONS ON HOSPITALITY**

Abraham and the three visitors .....	141
The meals Jesus ate.....	151
The Last Supper .....	161
The early church.....	169
The heavenly home .....	179
Conclusion: Not shutting the door but opening it .....	187
Bibliography .....	191

# INTRODUCTION



## WHY HOSPITALITY?

Hospitality is where it's at. Hospitality is where God's at. It's the key that opens the door to the kingdom. The more we've thought about this weird thing called hospitality, in our Messy Church team at The Bible Reading Fellowship, and the more we see churches doing it (and doing it so well!), the more convinced we're becoming that hospitality lies quietly at the heart not just of Messy Church but of the whole story of God and his people. It helps us to see the hows and whys of God working when we frame the mindblowing, multidimensional big picture of God at work in terms of ordinary hospitality. This framework informs, comforts and challenges us about huge questions like 'What is the church for?' and 'How can our little ailing, ageing church do mission and evangelism?' and 'How can we ordinary people shine a Christ-light into a dark world?' (or, perhaps more appropriately, 'How can we share that packed lunch with a hungry world?'). If we could crack hospitality, we wouldn't be fretting about church decline; we'd be fretting about what to do when too many people show up. Oh, hang on... we're doing that already.

There is a great deal of good material written on hospitality and you'll find that the book list on pages 191 and 192 makes for fruitful and far more erudite reading than my efforts here. What I want to do is not just to explore the theology of hospitality from a theoretical point of view, but also to enthuse you, as Messy Church leaders, with the belief that investing in hospitality is completely justified from a theological point of view. We can therefore joyfully hurl our Messy eggs into this basket with complete confidence that if a few of them shatter, they're the exceptions that prove the rule.

## **MESSY ORIGINS**

Perhaps Messy Church has earned the right to bring our opinions to this discussion, given that food and hospitality are so bound up with each other, and food is so significant in Messy Church. In fact, it's rather telling that many of the synonyms of 'messy' have their roots in something edible. The word 'mess' itself came into English directly from an Old French word meaning 'a portion of food', and we still talk of an 'officers' mess' where officers eat. If you 'mess with' someone, you eat with them, so 'Don't mess with him!' is actually an order to excommunicate someone from your meal table and thus from your community. 'Hotchpotch', 'hash', 'mishmash' and 'medley' all have their roots in stews and soups and mixtures of edible things.

In the context of theology, the word 'mess' goes further back than its Old French version. It comes originally from the

## Why hospitality?

Latin *missum*, meaning ‘something *put* on a table’: *mittere* is the word for ‘to put’ or ‘to send’.

So ‘mess’ is something *put* on a table—just as animal sacrifices were placed on altars, or just as Communion bread and wine are usually placed on a table. It’s also something *sent* from a kitchen—a place of provision and abundance. It’s ready prepared, just as ‘prepaid’ grace is sent from God’s abundant storehouses to us, his people, who can only receive it gratefully and enjoy it undeservedly.

The same Latin word gives us the English ‘mission’, of course. We ourselves, as God’s people, are *put* as a living sacrifice into the world and *sent* out with God’s good news to people who are hungry for it. These meanings have rich theological resonances—so, greetings from one risotto to another! Come mess with me!

Now for a Messy gallop around the roots of hospitality. Let’s look at three key words: ‘hospitality’, ‘host’ and ‘guest’.

- **Hospitality** comes from the Latin *hospitalitas* (‘friendliness to guests’), which is related to *hospes*, meaning ‘host’ or ‘guest’. A ‘hospital’ originally provided shelter for the needy before the word started to mean a place to heal the sick. The Latin for an inn, *hospitium*, is related to it, as is our word ‘hostel’.
- **Host**, meaning someone who entertains others, is also related to the root-word *hospes*. The same word in English, but from a different Latin root, means an ‘army’ or ‘enemy’. From a different root again, it means

'sacrifice'. Hence 'the hosts of heaven' means armies of angels, and the elevated 'host' means the consecrated bread lifted up by a priest at Holy Communion.

- **Guest** is a surprising word when we look at its roots. It comes from an ancient word meaning 'stranger' or 'enemy'.

So, lurking around the concept of hospitality is a sense of danger and antagonism, of hostility, of both guest and host taking a huge risk in asking for and offering hospitality. It carries hints of sleeping with swords drawn beside the bed, of meals offered in the teeth of hatred and ancient vendettas, and of a wilder time when the cultural rule of honour overcame common sense or individual antagonism.

Perhaps the ambivalent root of 'host', meaning both guest and host, shows us why: someone who is in the powerful position of offering hospitality at a certain time or place might, by the next year or in a different place, be in desperate need of hospitality herself. Ancient societies seem to have grasped a sense of mutuality that goes far beyond a narrow, individualistic understanding of 'myself'; it encompasses something communal that surpasses the individual and the moment. In other words, you offer hospitality today to someone you don't approve of, because one day you will need hospitality from someone who may not want to offer it to you.

## STRANGERS AND CHURCHES

This hint of enmity and threat certainly echoes the way many churches feel about their established services. A church that is thinking about hospitality, in terms of doing more than just vaguely expecting new people to come one day, might well feel anxious about some of the following 'stranger or enemy' behaviours:

- Potential damage to our building ('They'll get paint on the chairs!')
- Ways of behaving that don't comply with ours ('They just don't know how to be quiet!')
- Exploitation of our resources ('They're just consumers! When are they going to start giving?')
- Mockery of our customs ('They went out for a cigarette during the song!')

Only recently, an established member of a Sunday congregation, when challenged that newcomers did not find her church a particularly welcoming place, declared, 'Of course it is' but went on to say that 'they [the newcomers] need to learn our ways if they want to stay. They need to fit in with us.' True hospitality means risk: the host opens the door to find a stranger and enemy there and *still* welcomes them in. It means a readiness to change oneself, not just to expect the outsider to conform completely to the patterns and habits of the church. It implies a level of humility and graciousness that, to be honest, is way beyond what many local congregations are prepared to exhibit.

This is why Messy Churches have needed to start not during the 'main' church service time but at a different time and day. That way, the inherited congregation isn't faced with the apparently impossible challenge of meeting Christ in the stranger at 10.30 on a Sunday morning, when everything is going 'just as we like it'. Is our attitude one of 'They need to learn our ways' or the more hospitable one of 'We welcome you and delight in you just as you are'?

## **OUTSIDERS AND CHURCHES**

On a more fundamental level, perhaps hospitality involves considering our attitude to people who traditionally feel rejected by the church. What about our welcome when someone arrives who is a member of a different 'tribe' from our own, with very different language, relationships, clothing or behaviour? Do we expect them to fit in with us and behave as we do in as short a time as possible? What is our attitude to a child, a teenager, a single person, an elderly person, a person with disabilities, a person of a different gender or, perhaps, of no discernible gender? What do we expect of people from different races or cultures? People in relationships we find unusual? Families who are so far from the mythical 'mum, dad and 2.4 children' model that we find it hard to apply the word 'family' to them?

What if we *never* see people who are in any way different from ourselves? What if they don't even come through the door? Why don't they feel they can come that far? Is our hospitality so non-existent that it doesn't occur to them that they might be welcome?

## **WHAT IS JESUS' ROLE?**

Don't read any further for a moment. Ah, sorry. Read this question, *then* don't read any further. What do you think: is Jesus host or guest?

(You can carry on reading now.) It's a fascinating question, isn't it? Especially given that the word 'host' now has sacramental overtones in some Christian circles. I want to wallow in this paradox for a moment because it's important to understand the dynamic dance between the roles of host and guest, roles that can be played by the church and by the families coming to Messy Church. This will be the foundation for our view and practice of hospitality in church.

### **A HOST AND A GUEST**

Here are some traits or characteristics of a host (and I speak as one who has been blessed to encounter many marvellous hosts on my travels in the UK and overseas). Hosts have a certain wealth. They provide from a position of comparative strength. They give food, shelter and safety in their own property, according to their own means and their own house rules. They belong there; they are in possession; they have authority. They are generous, gracious and in control. They may help a guest to find a way of belonging, even temporarily, to their household. They have a dignity, a confidence and a power that comes from being in their own home.



Here are some traits of a guest (and again, my travelling role has placed me in this position many times). Guests are often—either physically, spiritually or emotionally—travellers. They don't belong to the community where they find themselves. They have no rights, and they have few possessions: they may be carrying their world in a suitcase or backpack. They may not speak the local language or they may be voiceless for other reasons; they may not know the rules. They may never have encountered this sort of house, bed or food before. They are vulnerable and dependent, in a position of needing to receive. They are aliens with a history that no one there knows, far from any place, people or possessions that help them feel at home. Sojourning and being temporary are all elements of being a guest.

## **HOSPITALITY IN THE BIBLE**

The virtue of hospitality is a thread running brightly through the Old and New Testaments. There isn't space here to explore the strong theme of what 'home' itself means as a reality and as a symbol in the Bible, but underlying our understanding of hospitality should be the ancient understanding of God's people as 'strangers and sojourners' (see, for example, Psalm 39:12, KJV) rather than people who are completely at home on earth. This idea is found all the way through the Bible, from the moment when Adam and Eve leave Eden. The acceptance that we're only here on a temporary basis affects our view of 'our' belongings, 'our' homes and 'our' status. It's paradoxical, because we're also called to be firmly contextualised and to minister where God has placed us. We

## Why hospitality?

need to feel completely 'at home' where God has placed us while knowing that it's not our ultimate home. (As an aside, this might mean deciding to get involved with an 'ordinary' local church, rather than travelling long distances to find one which seems to boast more exciting children's work, teaching or sung worship. Perhaps we can take on the responsibility to change things for the better, where we are.)

I've written elsewhere (in *Messy Church 2*) about the glorious story from Genesis 18 of Abraham and the three strangers, which still stands as an archetypal example of the way a community expressing generous hospitality can expect to receive unimaginable blessing, a hope and a future. For many churches who have lost touch with any children or young people over the last 70 years or so, it's a story that offers hope particularly through the coming of a child, Isaac, into a previously barren relationship. We rejoice that so many Messy Churches are throwing open their camps, as Abraham and Sarah did, to the strangers in the desert of their communities. These churches give of their best to the strangers, at great personal cost, and in return are slowly (or, by God's grace, speedily) receiving the blessing of a new congregation of children, young people and older ones. They are seeing a hope and a future where once there was no prospect of anything but dwindling and death. This is the power of hospitality.

## **HOSPITALITY SOURED**

Uncomfortably (and when are we ever encouraged to stay comfortable for long?) close to the story of the three

strangers is the grim counterpoint in the story of Sodom, where we see the evils of hospitality gone wrong (Genesis 19). This is echoed later, as a sign that the people of God have reached absolute rock bottom, in the horrific account of the gang rape of the concubine in Judges 19. The latter is a shockingly vivid story. It tells first of the joyful reconciliatory hospitality shown by the concubine's father (vv. 3–9) and the more anxious but still generous hospitality of an old man in Gibeah (vv. 16–21). But these examples contrast with the appalling behaviour of those who should also act as hosts in Gibeah but instead betray every precept of hospitality and decency. They force the old man into an impossible situation and the concubine, the most vulnerable member of the household, is found, poignantly, 'fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold' (v. 27). If we need any further indication that a betrayal of hospitality is a universal sign of godlessness that cannot be ignored, and that hospitality is vital if God's unnamed little people are to be protected, we see the result of this atrocity—brutal civil war and unbearable suffering and the final despairing words of Judges, 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit' (21:25). Good hospitality—unobtrusively working in the background as a 'given', not as an exception—is a sign of society functioning in a godly way. For us, in a post-resurrection world, it is a sign of the kingdom and the means by which we can grow the kingdom.

## **HOSPITALITY IN THE PARABLES OF JESUS**

We'll come to the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels in a minute, but let's first think of Jesus' parables. How can we

## Why hospitality?

understand hospitality from them? See how often a window on hospitality is opened through these punchy stories. In the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), the man from Samaria pays for hospitality for the injured traveller and opens himself to vulnerability on the road too, by stopping to help. In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), the father welcomes his wayward son home by dressing him in fine clothes and throwing a party in his honour. The parable of the great banquet (Matthew 22:1–14) hints that Jesus understands the kingdom to be something like a wedding party with an etiquette and a dress code, where the host is very firmly in control and sets his own (somewhat draconian) house rules for the guests. Similarly, the story of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–15) shows a ‘host’ who is determined to run his household business in the way he wants, not influenced by what the prevailing culture says he should do (here expressed in terms of payment). The parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31–32) features birds—those garden pests—finding hospitality, sanctuary and shelter in the branches of the mustard bush. The parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31–46) shows clearly that the welcome we give to the vulnerable people around us is taken as something of great heavenly significance in the currency of the kingdom.

Hospitality runs through these stories as a godly, wholesome thread, as evidence of kingdom life. Jesus knew how central it is to our attitudes and to the way we live our lives on God’s planet.

**You can purchase this book by visiting your local Christian bookshop, going to [www.brfonline.org.uk](http://www.brfonline.org.uk), or by post using this form.**

ORDER FORM				
REF	TITLE	PRICE	QTY	TOTAL

  

POSTAGE AND PACKING CHARGES			
Order value	UK	Europe	Rest of World
Under £7.00	£1.25	£3.00	£5.50
£7.00-£29.99	£2.25	£5.50	£10.00
£30.00 & over	FREE	Prices on request	

Postage and packing	
Donation	
<b>TOTAL</b>	

Account number \_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_ First name/initials \_\_\_\_\_ Surname \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Total enclosed £ \_\_\_\_\_ (cheques should be made payable to 'BRF')

Please charge my Visa  Mastercard  Maestro  with £ \_\_\_\_\_

Card no.

Expiry date     Security code\*

\*Last 3 digits on the reverse of the card (ESSENTIAL IN ORDER TO PROCESS YOUR ORDER)

Issue no. (Maestro only)

Signature (essential if paying by credit card/Maestro) \_\_\_\_\_

To read our terms and find out about cancelling your order, please visit [www.brfonline.org.uk/terms](http://www.brfonline.org.uk/terms)

Please send me further information about BRF publications.

**Please send your completed order form with appropriate payment to:**

**BRF, 15 The Chambers, Vineyard, Abingdon OX14 3FE**

**Tel. 01865 319700 Fax 01865 319701 Email: [enquiries@brf.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@brf.org.uk)**