

## Radical Hospitality & Compassionate Care

<b>Description:</b>	This session explains why radical hospitality is a vital stance for Christian work, outlines how to recognize and respond to spiritual trauma, and sketches how holistic spiritual care can be done in a community context.
<b>Key Terms:</b>	hospitality, entertaining, personal agency, radical hospitality, spiritual trauma

### Biblical Reflection

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah is speaking to the assembly of Israelites whom Cyrus the Great had allowed to return from exile to rebuild Jerusalem. They were a traumatized community, still under considerable threat, characterized internally by grave disparities in wealth and status – but who were nevertheless sincerely pious and assuming that prayer and fasting would convince God to secure their future. As with all the prophets, Isaiah’s message brings with it an invitation to discomforting practices of justice that lead to greater intimacy with God and others, especially those who have been pushed to the edge of society.

#### Isaiah 58: 9-12 (*The Message*)

“If you get rid of unfair practices,  
quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people’s sins,  
If you are generous with the hungry  
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,  
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,  
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.  
I will always show you where to go.  
I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—  
firm muscles, strong bones.  
You’ll be like a well-watered garden,  
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.  
You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,  
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.  
You’ll be known as those who can fix anything,  
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,  
make the community livable again.

In this session we will consider what it means to open our spaces and our lives to the hungry or the down and out, people whom the Bible says have been “crushed” by society’s systems and prejudices. Even more basically, we will begin to explore what biblical hospitality has to do with giving and receiving God’s reconciling, restorative grace.

### Hospitality 101

The term *hospitality* comes from the Latin *hospes*, meaning “host,” “guest,” or “stranger”: three words that in English are related yet distinct, rather than being held in a single concept. We’ll come back to this tension in a moment.

At church, perhaps the most common use of the word is for the “hospitality committee” that is responsible for greeting people on Sundays, especially visitors, making everyone feel welcome, perhaps handing them bulletins, generally directing them to where they need to be, and ensuring the coffee and cookies are ready before and/or after the service.

Our culture most often defines **hospitality as an industry** – an industry whose business model typically requires workers to accept low wages, irregular hours, and seasonal jobs – hotels, restaurants, resorts, cruise ships, and tourist attractions seeking to feed, accommodate, and entertain paying customers.

We also use the term **entertaining** when we have family, friends, or new acquaintances in our home. When we entertain, we subtly (or not so subtly) put on a show and . Think of all the glossy magazines in the checkout lines at your grocery store, showcasing eye candy for your next game-day BBQ or holiday meal. Unless they are dear friends or close family – or, say, our employer – guests come into our space with little **personal agency**. Not wishing to offend or be overly assertive, they are not quite at home and able to relax. They look to us for cues about acceptable behaviour and expectations; guests “know their place.” Hosts only open their doors when prepared, having tidied up, brought out the best dishes, and politest selves. We are often trying to impress and gain (or maintain) social standing. There is often an expectation that the gesture will be repaid with a return invitation or a future favor.

This dynamic of indebting the guest and leveraging meals to reinforce status is what powered the patronage system around which the Greco-Roman culture of the New Testament era revolved. Jesus warns in Luke 14 that the Kingdom of Heaven works directly opposite: “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (vv13-14)<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, giving and receiving hospitality in the name of God is one of the most central themes of Scripture. There is nothing unusual about this – many cultures around the world and throughout history have held that offering food, drink, and safe harbour to the stranger is a sacred duty. Yet in recent decades, Christian theologians have been re-examining the Bible and the church’s two thousand years of history to draw out the radical implications that Christ-like hospitality has for discipling people into their full humanity and for communal flourishing.

## Radical Hospitality

The term **radical** comes from the Latin *radix*, meaning “root”; so to be radical is to get to the bottom of a thing and transform it from there up. Biblical hospitality is radical because it turns upside down how we normally perceive and treat strangers – especially those who have been pushed to the bottom of society by injustice, prejudice, calamity, and the brokenness of the world.

Hospitality always involves risk. The risk we typically feel when encountering a stranger, especially one who is visibly very different from us, is visceral. It’s often an instinctual response, but our modern culture heightens it. Many of us were warned as small children not to talk to strangers. Even as adults, we might initially recoil from someone whose mental health challenges, brain injury,

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<sup>1</sup> New International Version

personality disorder, addiction, or lack of housing and sleep gives them poor hygiene, rough and rude speech, or unpredictable behaviour. Individuals with such challenges often symbolize much we have been trained to avoid (**See Mental Health Module**).



Studies have shown that experiences with *individuals* from other groups can influence our opinions and behaviour towards their whole *group*.

- If positive, an interaction with one person can reduce our prejudice toward the group.
- If the interaction (or story we hear) is negative, our prejudice and fear can grow.
- Sadly, one negative experience can undermine many positive interactions.

If we want the Gospel to inspire reconciliation and justice, we need to start with naming and challenging how our own social location, bad experiences, fears, prejudices, and hostilities prevent us from seeing and serving Christ in the other<sup>2</sup>. When people talk to strangers, especially in a setting like a shared community meal, positive interactions can nurture curiosity, understanding, and tolerance. When we connect with a person who is different from us (even if only temporarily), we are more likely to empathize with their emotional and physical states and attempt to see the world as they experience it.

Our willingness to help others is also impacted by our personalities and beliefs. We are impacted by local culture, the specific situation, how much of a hurry we are in, income inequity (greater gaps lead to less willingness to help a stranger), crime levels (increase in crime leads to increase in willingness to help), and population density<sup>3</sup>.

So biblical, radical hospitality demands that we create receptive space for the stranger, in at least two senses, or with two postures.

- Space emerges first in our **hearts** as we acknowledge what causes us to be risk-averse and hostile toward the “other.”
- Then, once our hearts are open, we are free to invite strangers into **relationship** that has no agenda beyond mutual discovery and companionship.

Connections made over a shared meal, at an overnight shelter, or when chatting with someone on the street may lead to opportunities to support and advocate for change (**See Advocacy Module**), but that cannot be our agenda.



We cannot change the world by a new plan, project, or idea. We cannot even change other people by our convictions, stories, advice, and proposals, but we can offer a space where people are encouraged to disarm themselves, to lay aside their occupations and preoccupations and to listen with attention and care to the voices speaking in their own center.<sup>4</sup>

## Hospitality Requires Confrontation

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 25

<sup>3</sup> Stark, K. (2016). *When strangers meet: How people you don't know can transform you*.

<sup>4</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (p. 76)

# Communities of Care Training



To host like Christ is to bring our whole self to the table, to naturally reflect the beauty and love and promise of the Father as we *commune-icate* with our guests. We do not need to turn the conversation to “higher things”, we need only respond in the moment as people who have been profoundly changed while being led along the Way of Christ. Where there is trust and mutuality, the deep matters of life surface when the guest is ready.

[S]pace can only be a welcoming space when there are clear boundaries .... When we want to be really hospitable, we not only have to receive strangers but also to confront them by an unambiguous presence, not hiding behind neutrality but showing our ideas, opinions and lifestyle clearly and distinctly. No real dialogue is possible between somebody and a nobody. We can enter into communication with the other only when our own life choices, attitudes, and viewpoints offer the boundaries that challenge strangers to become aware of their own position and to explore it critically<sup>5</sup>.

From this perspective, “house rules” are less about enforcing behaviour than about signalling what kind of people we are open to becoming together. For more on how setting clear boundaries keeps us and our guests safe, generating trust that can yield mutual transformation, **see the Boundaries Module.**



## Spiritual Trauma

We all need at least two basic things: **safety** and **connection**. When the person or group we rely on for these does something that violates us or crosses a personal boundary, it hurts. When we continue in relationship with the person or group who is no longer safe – for instance, when we do not have power to leave, or we are too emotionally entangled, or there is no other source for basic needs such as shelter and food, or because the alternatives are worse – then lasting harm or trauma results.

**Spiritual trauma** occurs when the harm (physical, psychological, or social) is done by a spiritual mentor, in a religious context, or in the name of God. Religious settings (i.e., a church facility), language, music, or other symbols can trigger strong emotional and behavioural reactions. Spiritual trauma, like other forms of trauma, stem from *and* reinforce disorienting feelings of guilt (*I did something bad*), shame (*I am bad*), depression, unworthiness, and disconnection.

Many people we host from the margins have endured significant spiritual trauma. This is particularly true of Indigenous Peoples, who are far more likely than the general population to experience poverty, homelessness, or addiction. Much of this is a result of generations of colonization in the name of Christ. Other, non-Indigenous, people will have grown up in Christian subcultures that were oppressive in more subtle ways. Still others will be deeply resentful of chronically suffering through religious services and evangelistic conversation just to access needed food and shelter.

In this light, it is all the more noteworthy that the majority of Jesus’s miracle healings restored the person not just to health but to the community “of the righteous” because their illness had rendered them unclean and/or was seen as divine punishment.

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<sup>5</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (p. 98)

It takes perspective, guidance, and healing to recognize the harm we have experienced (or caused!), and many corrective experiences of radical hospitality for a faith community to become places of safety and connection. See the **Mental Health Module** for more on how trauma manifests and an introduction to trauma informed care.



## Holistic Care

Compassionate Christ-like care also means recognizing and attending to another's needs at different levels. The Indigenous idea of the **medicine wheel** teaches that for wholeness, one's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual selves must be in balance. Abraham Maslow's **hierarchy of needs** suggests that basic needs need to be addressed before psychological and self-fulfillment needs. Jesus teaches us to love with our **heart, mind, and soul**. Any of these will include:

- **Physical Care** – nourishing and satisfying food, access to adequate clothing, shelter, and healthcare; feeling safe in an environment that honors personal space, is not overstimulating, and recognizes our need for beauty and nature
- **Mental and Emotional Care** – supporting a sense of agency that fosters an individual's ability to contribute to their community and speak into decisions (*"nothing about us without us"*); emotional outbursts and harming behaviours are interpreted with understanding, redirection, and containment, rather than punishment
- **Social Care** – when we feel cared for, we move from a focus on ourselves to a focus on service to others, and eventually to kinship; it is social capital, or our network of relationships, that allows us to function and work through challenges
- **Spiritual Care** – we acknowledge, and help others see that spirituality is integral to human flourishing, and transformation happens with a commitment to God, or something larger than oneself; sustained spirituality also takes a supportive faith community, and a culture of gratitude and celebration

## Fashioning Physical Spaces and Practices of Hospitality

With every act of communal hospitality, we must express **gratitude, celebrate** each other, and remind people of the big picture of why we do this. Following are some practical actions for the spaces where we offer hospitality to vulnerable individuals.

- Use clear and inviting **signage** outside and inside, so people know where to go (entering a space like a church or service agency for the first time can be intimidating).
- Station **someone near the entrance** to offer a verbal greeting and answer questions so guests have an early sense of connection and belonging, and to say good-bye as people leave, offering guests a chance to express gratitude or offer suggestions, and not just anonymously disappear.
- Both guests and hosts are probably stepping outside of their comfort zones, so ensure the **space feels safe and accessible**: well lit, tidy, not noisy, not rushed, not filled past 80% capacity.

# Communities of Care Training



- Provide **extra accommodations** for the particularly vulnerable, such as frail elderly and others with limited mobility, social anxiety, children, and women in a predominately male crowd.
- **Beauty** is a core human need – add flowers, table clothes, careful plating and aesthetic food presentation, artwork, music, and other touches of creativity.
- For community meals, be a **dinner party**, not a restaurant. Quality time is more important than efficiency or quantity served.<sup>6</sup>
- Invite guests to **participate in hosting**: setting up the room, cooking and serving the food, cleaning afterward.

Ultimately, we aim to make guests feel at ease and to meet their acute felt needs, so that we may then move to deeper work with them, which often requires referring them to other service providers (**See Advocacy Session**).



## Reflect & Review

1. What phrase in the passage from Isaiah 58 speaks most to you? Why?
2. How is the term *hospitality* used in your church or community? Do you (or could you) think of hospitality as a spiritual discipline? How would that change your practice?
3. What are the two primary postures that biblical hospitality requires? Is one more difficult than the other for you?
4. Imagine a scenario where you are suddenly dependent on the kindness of strangers, but they are the sort of people you normally avoid. What could they do to put you at ease and get you to trust their intentions?

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<sup>6</sup> A Table for All: A toolkit for Christian Community Meals in a framework of food justice (<https://www.ugm.ca/take-action/churches/>)

# Communities of Care Training



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5. Have you – or someone close to you – experienced spiritual trauma? What might be some ways that that pain may be holding you or them back from giving and receiving radical hospitality?
  
6. What is the most meaningful new idea for you in this session? What will you do in the next week to put it into practice?

## Learn More

<b>Read:</b>	Boyle, Greg (2014). <i>Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion</i> . Simon & Schuster. Chester, Tim (2011). <i>A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission Around the Table</i> . Crossway. Nouwen, Henri (1975). <i>Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life</i> . New York: Doubleday. Pohl, Christine (1999). <i>Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition</i> . Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans. Stark, Kio. (2016). <i>When Strangers Meet: How People You Don't Know Can Transform You</i> . New York: Simon & Schuster/TED
<b>Watch:</b>	Axel, Gabriel (1987). <i>Babette's Feast</i> . Nordisk Film.- Available at most libraries Sister Act (1992)- Available on Prime and Disney +
<b>Listen:</b>	Tippett, Krista and Miroslav Volf (2021). "Befriending Reality: Engaging Otherness with Hospitality, Artfulness, and Particularity at Depth." Podcast episode 58. Yale Center for Faith & Culture. <a href="https://faith.yale.edu/media/befriending-reality">https://faith.yale.edu/media/befriending-reality</a>
<b>Do:</b>	Host a meal at your home for people from opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum. Explore "The Guestbook Project": <a href="https://guestbookproject.org/">https://guestbookproject.org/</a>

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