Lives that Welcome: How a Non-Western Understanding of Hospitality Can Revitalize the American Church's Fellowship and Outreach

JESSICA A. UDALL

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Jessica Udall *(PhD) is a professor of Intercultural Studies at the Evangelical Theological College in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and an adjunct professor of Intercultural Studies at Columbia International University.*

There is an epidemic of loneliness in America today (Cigna 2018), and evangelical churches are not immune (Linneman 2018). Even as the world becomes more technologically advanced and interconnected, many feel disconnected from others emotionally and mental health issues among Americans are on the rise (Twenge 2017, 153). Many American churches are acknowledging lack of community as a problem and are seeking to address the problem by starting initiatives like small groups. Though small groups are helpful, they are still often conducted in a programmatic way and are thus not sufficient to address people's deep and daily lack of connection.

Over lunch in my home, some local friends recently lamented the fact that though they attend the small group of their church, they still desire to connect with people personally in unstructured ways in each others' homes. But their repeated invitations to others in the small group to join them for a meal, while not viewed negatively, are seen as somewhat abnormal. The prevailing mentality in the American Church is that if one is involved in a small or community group, one is "doing community." To do more is seen as being akin to doing something like going on a camping trip or to the beach with another family—it is fun to dream about but it is nearly never followed through on or taken seriously.

Church leadership is often very focused on getting people into small groups as a marker of success, and this focus is often picked up by the congregation as well. My family and I visited a church for several weeks a few years ago and were surprised that every single conversation that we had with others in the pews consisted of them asking us if we had attended one of the church's small groups yet. But not once were we invited to someone's home or to get together with another family personally.

Invitations to small groups are not wrong. Indeed, it is a sign of the health of a church if the congregation is enthusiastic about gathering in smaller groups. In this

paper, my goal is not at all to discredit the idea of small groups, but to argue that viewing them as the single benchmark of whether a church is connected with one another is unwise and in fact can short-circuit true growth in hospitality. There are several reasons for this, all of which are integrally connected to the effectiveness of missionary efforts both at home and abroad.

Small groups are subject to change (groups become large and split up, groups dwindle when people move away or are prevented from attending by circumstances, hosts sometimes need to stop hosting, and locations shift). Any time that dynamics shift, this has the strong potential to leave small group attenders adrift, because they have banked on a certain time and place to do community in a programmatic way. If they have not also developed the muscles of creating community themselves by giving and receiving hospitality with a variety of people, they will be left in isolation until they can join another small group.

Making small groups programmatic and then focusing exclusively on them as the measure of success for a church community means that we are making hospitality something that is only done by the elite (the hosts), thereby excusing others, since there can only be a finite number of small group hosts. If we broaden churches' focus to include encouraging hospitality of all kinds at all times, then small groups become not an end in themselves but a dynamically catalytic springboard.

Viewing programmatic small groups as the single definition of community essentially vaccinates congregations against being characterized by hospitality, because it leaves people in a passive mode, stunted in their capacity to connect with others and create community themselves in a consistent and holistic way. If the muscle of hospitality is left to atrophy and is only exercised by receiving hospitality on a given night of the week or possibly showing hospitality to the same small group of familiar people, we leave so much on the table in terms of how we could use all of our open homes not only in a church-upbuilding sense but in a mission and outreach sense.

Small groups should certainly be a focus of the church, but they should be viewed for what they actually are: a helpful program that can be a springboard for hospitality and community beyond a weekly meeting and beyond the bounds of the small group. Lives characterized by hospitality and fellowship should be the goal, and small groups are one expression of that, but not the only expression or even the most important one. Church leaders should encourage their congregations not only to join a small group but to cultivate community in their lives in a variety of ways.

Non-programmatic hospitality is one of the church's greatest tools in effective outreach to nearly every group they are seeking to reach. Cultivating a hospitable openness in our daily lives will provide opportunities to be a gospel presence in our own post-Christian society, among immigrants from around the world who reside in the US, and among the peoples some of us will encounter when serving as overseas missionaries. To neglect the cultivation of this tool in the American Church is to leave American Christians unprepared and ill-equipped for ministry at home and abroad.

Non-Programmatic Hospitality As a Vital Ministry in the Post-Christian West

The average American unbeliever is unlikely to attend a church's small group meeting as their first contact with the Christian community. The structured nature is intimidating to someone on the outside; indeed small groups can be intimidating even to church-going people who are considering joining a new one in a new church. There is a hesitancy because it's uncertain what will be happening. But informal hospitality is not like that. Everyone knows what will happen: talking, eating, getting to know one another, and becoming better friends.

Rosaria Butterfield was converted from a life of atheism through the faithful, persevering informal hospitality of a local pastor and his wife. If they had repeatedly invited her to their church's small group as their first contact with her, it seems unlikely she would have ever come, much less opened her heart to the message of Christ (Olasky 2013). But they instead invited her into their home and into their lives, creating the context for her to find new life herself, including eventually getting involved in their church and the small group that met in their home.

Butterfield is now an author and speaker encouraging other Christians to open their homes, saying: "We forget hospitality isn't a nice add-on you do when you happen to have a spare Saturday afternoon. It's the bridge that God is going to use to solve the biggest problems in people's lives (Carlson 2018). In her book, *The Gospel Comes with A Housekey: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World*, Butterfield employs the term "radically ordinary hospitality" to denote a welcoming openness that is a lifestyle and is not confined to programs or set times. She pulls no punches: "Our lack of Christian hospitality is a violent neglect of [people's] souls" (Butterfield 2018, 71). Conversely, "Practicing radically ordinary hospitality is [our] street credibility with [our] post-Christian neighbors" (Butterfield 2018, 40).

Non-Programmatic Hospitality As a Vital Ministry Among Immigrants

In their excellent resource, *Who Is My Neighbor: Reaching Internationals in North America*, Philip and Kandace Connor write: "Many internationals have never been invited into a local home . . . The cultures of many internationals who come to North America elevate so highly the gift of hospitality, that many are astonished to find North American life so individualized" (2008, 69). In my experience, the most common answer that non-western immigrants give when asked what the hardest thing has been about their move to the USA is social isolation and lack of community. Though exact statistics vary, upwards of seventy percent of international students have never entered an American home (International Students, Inc. 2020). To take the liberty of extrapolating, it seems likely that based upon this statistic, the majority of immigrants, in general, have not been invited into American homes, which is a tragically missed opportunity to demonstrate the welcoming love of God in a tangible way.

Though it may feel uncomfortable to show hospitality to those who are very different, missiologist Scott Hagley reminds believers that

> Love is not the intimacy of a nuclear family safe at home around the fireplace, but rather the response of the family to an uninvited knock at the door . . . The love of God . . . is formed in response to the presence of another. It is not safe but risky. It is not only about intimacy, but also hospitality (2019, 100).

When befriending those from non-western cultures, it is common to come to a point where one's own commitment to relationships, in general, is called into question by way of comparison. Shawn Smucker encountered this when considering writing a book about getting to know a Syrian refugee named Mohammed:

> "I don't know if I want to write this book," I tell [my wife] quietly. "I don't know if I'll even be disappointed if the book doesn't happen."
>
> "Really? Why?"
>
> I pause. "To be honest, I know I'm not a great friend. if I have the choice between hanging out and staying home, you know I choose home almost every time. I don't like it when other people depend on me, because that requires something . . . I'll have to be a good friend to Mohammad, a better

> friend than I've ever been to anyone else, not only while I'm writing the book but even after I'm finished. That's why I don't know if I should write it. I don't know if I can enter into this kind of commitment."
>
> "Maybe that's why you should write it," she says (2018, 46-47).

Eventually, Smucker decides to write the book, and his work is predicated on the question: "What would my life look like if I made friendship a priority?" (2008, 54).

Friendship does not come naturally to Westerners. We are "known for being friendly" but take a "no-strings approach" (Livermore 2009, 74). In many cultures, however, "a relationship without any strings attached is no relationship" (Livermore 2009, 75). Perhaps we would do well to ask whether there is a correlation between our desire for autonomy and our gnawing loneliness.

When freedom increases, social ties decrease. When social ties increase, freedom decreases. There is no way around this: humans cannot have it all. But perhaps we can learn from immigrant friends that moving towards a middle ground that includes more relationships is a healthier way to live. We can condition ourselves to stop fearing increasing obligations and instead begin viewing them as evidence that our social network is getting stronger.

Non-Programmatic Hospitality As a Vital Ministry in the Majority World

Non-programmatic hospitality is also an essential practice for Americans who plan to move to non-western cultures to engage in missionary work. Too many American missionaries are viewed as cold and overly-driven when they fly in with a tightly-scheduled agenda that does not make room for relationships. Unfortunately, a task-oriented understanding of evangelism and church ministry has often been ingrained in these missionaries in their home churches in America, where non-programmatic hospitality was not given the emphasis it deserved.

As such, western missionaries cannot be blamed for the blindspot many of them have when it comes to the importance of a lifestyle of hospitality, but the fact remains that it will likely have dire consequences for their ministry efforts in a non-western setting (Davis 2015, 76-92). As with many aspects of missionary training, an emphasis on a lifestyle of hospitality is best cultivated when the missionary candidate is still at

home, not when they are in the throes of adjusting to a new culture, especially because hospitality is a universal command of Scripture, not simply a cultural feature.

Growing in Hospitality Through Learning from Non-Westerners

When there is a sincere desire to cultivate community, the idea of lifestyle hospitality is often undervalued or misunderstood by the American church, and these misunderstandings create roadblocks to effective fellowship and outreach. This paper will now take time to examine some of the common roadblocks caused by the misunderstanding of hospitality, and will suggest practical ways forward towards the building of connection through community by means of hospitality in a 21st-century American context, learning from the example of and drawing insights from the non-western world.

There is much to be learned, but it must be acknowledged that all too often, westerners are affected by a legacy of centuries of a subtle superiority complex which believes there is nothing to be learned from those from less developed countries. Scott Hagley explains that the modern western missionary mindset's "emphasis on obedient, strategic, world-changing action [creates] structures . . . [that] are created primarily for one-way traffic . . . It is not necessarily designed for cooperation, partnership, or mutual learning between groups" (2019, 158). Westerners can also tend to suffer from a malady which could be referred to as *resource righteousness*—that is, believing that the culture that has more money, infrastructure, or material resources must be the culture whose members have more valuable insights to share.

It is very difficult to change a centuries-long cultural bias and an unconscious sense of resource righteousness, but desperate times do indeed call for desperate measures, and the loneliness epidemic in America is indeed becoming more desperate by the day. Perhaps there will be a tipping point when Americans decide that our skyrocketing mental health issues and plummeting quality of life assessments have got to change, and then they will be open to looking for answers. This article proposes that life-giving answers can be found in observing and adopting the ancient rhythms of hospitality still kept alive and practiced in many non-western cultures.

It is necessary to pause before continuing further in order to make clear it is not the goal of this work to set up non-western cultures as being inherently holy or pristine. For example, tribalism is sometimes an unintended byproduct of tight-knit communities. There is much to criticize about any culture, and of course, there is great variety

between the many cultures broadly described as non-western. Additionally and unfortunately, there are trends towards disconnection in the non-western world as they follow the West's example. At least at this point in history, however, non-westerners tend to retain a certain amount of an ancient, biblically congruent wisdom that westerners have all but entirely lost with regard to the understanding that community is of crucial importance and must be cultivated in order to live wisely and well.

When watching the rhythms of the non-western world to gain insight, one quickly concludes that community is cultivated not primarily through participating in programs but through living lives which value hospitality. Many non-western cultures more closely mirror the cultural norms of biblical times than western culture does, and therefore there are some biblical concepts (such as hospitality) that non-western cultures seem to inherently understand and practice which those in the West struggle to understand and practice (Udall 2022). Speaking of African cultures, missionary Carolyn Butler observes that "the language of the Bible and the culture of the Middle East fit very well with African culture as it still is today. Although tourism will dominate any internet search for 'hospitality' and 'Africa,' and although urbanisation presents its complexities, hospitality is still an everyday part of African world-views" (2013, 67).

As mentioned above, non-western immigrants tend to cite loneliness and isolation as their biggest struggle in adjusting to their new lives in America. The ubiquity of struggle among immigrants—combined with the statistics on loneliness experienced by locals in the USA—reveals that there is a sense of belonging and community which is markedly missing in this culture that is present in some other cultures. I suggest that the reason for this difference is a differing understanding of the meaning of hospitality.

Could it be that in trading lives of hospitality in pursuit of cultivating our own individual comfort and privacy, we have inadvertently cultivated a loneliness that is corrosive to our souls? There is a better way. Hospitality is more normal, more regular, more everyday than we have been conditioned to think. Moving from a focus on one-time actions (entertaining) to a focus on a day-in-day-out attitude (hospitality) can be humbling, vulnerable, and messy. But each time we reach a guardrail of image management or protection of privacy and go past it, we will be astonished at how unfamiliar yet how beautiful the terrain of a lifestyle of hospitality is.

What an opportunity to partner with non-western believers to bring the return of a sense of belonging in our lonely society or at the very least in our churches. This partnership will require moving beyond the facade of partnership too many have been

fond of that involves those from the West taking the lead while assigning cameo roles to non-westerners who are expected to conform unquestioningly to western ways of doing things.

Missiologists have been fond of saying that the increasing rate of migration in the world is a chance to reach immigrants with the gospel, and this is surely true. But what if the increasing rate of migration is also a chance for us to learn from immigrants what true hospitality and true community looks like? Our humble, control-releasing, learning-posture interactions with non-western believers will likely reveal ways that our culture has misunderstood hospitality—the antidote to loneliness and the precursor to community—in several ways, and may well lead us back to beautifully biblical ancient paths where we will find rest for our souls.

Misunderstanding the *What* of Hospitality

As westerners, we tend to misunderstand *what* hospitality is. We conflate the idea with the idea of festive entertaining. The biblical definition of hospitality is "love of strangers" (Heb 13:3, Tit 1:8) and the Cambridge dictionary definition echoes this idea: "the act of being friendly and welcoming to guests and visitors." The dictionary definition of the word "entertaining," however, is "the act of inviting people to your home and giving them food and drink."

While entertaining is centered on the *action* of the host, hospitality is centered on the *attitude* of the host. While entertaining is a programmatic performance, hospitality is a practice of presence. While entertaining requires planning in advance and providing a certain level of festivity, the practice of hospitality allows for fluidity: it can be spontaneous, does not need to include anything special in terms of menu or venue, and has the focus of simple welcome and togetherness.

Hospitality and entertaining can exist side by side, and entertaining is certainly not wrong if someone finds planning events to be enjoyable. But entertaining is not a biblical command, whereas hospitality is. Unfortunately, western Christians have sometimes let the intimidation factor of entertaining prevent them from engaging in the simple biblical practice of hospitality. Instead of viewing hospitality as planning an event, it should be seen as simply practicing love and welcome and making space for connection. This mentality changes the focus and ratchets down the pressure levels.

Misunderstanding the *When* of Hospitality

When hospitality is mentioned, what typically comes to mind for westerners is the fact that we should plan to invite another family over for dinner in a few weeks. It is something that can be checked off of a list—*invite the Johnsons for dinner*. It is a good thing and should indeed be done! But to truly aspire to adhere to the biblical qualifications for elders (which, most would agree, it would be advisable for all believers to strive towards), one should not only show hospitality but should "be . . . hospitable" (1 Tim 3:2), which conveys the idea of being "fond of guests," "given to hospitality," or "a lover of hospitality" (Blue Letter Bible 2020). This goes beyond an occasional Saturday night get-together—it points to a lifestyle characterized by openness and readiness to receive others.

Missionary Del Chinchen tells the story of a missionary couple who shared with him how disappointed they were that after many years of ministry which included inviting many Africans to their home in an effort to be hospitable, they were never once invited back in the same manner. Chinchen asked them to consider that perhaps they should broaden their understanding of what hospitality is (2000, 472). Though inviting someone two weeks in advance to eat dinner at your home at a predetermined time and date is indeed a valid expression of hospitality, it is not the *only* expression. It is very likely that the missionary couple would have been welcome at any of their African friends' homes at any time but culturally it was not seen as necessary to plan a get-together in advance. Indeed, in some cultures planning in advance implies that there is distance and formality in the relationship, as true friends are expected to just drop by unexpectedly.

It can be difficult to even imagine what a life that involves friends just dropping by would look like in our overwhelming, bursting-at-the-seams schedules. I am not suggesting a wholesale application of every aspect of hospitality as practiced in non-western cultures because it would not be contextual or realistic, but it is worth considering bending away from some of our cultural extremes in favor of a healthier middle ground informed by other cultures' valid interpretations of what hospitality can look like.

As westerners, we tend to be overly focused on *chronos* time (literal minutes and hours), packing our calendars in a way that theoretically works, but that leaves no room for *kairos* time (God-ordained moments in the spirit of Ephesians 5:16 with the idea of "the right or opportune time"). Non-westerners seem to have more of an understanding of the need to make room for *kairos*, for surprise, for serendipity, for spontaneity.

Interacting with non-westerners can wake us up to the dangers of an over-focus on *chronos* time and give us insights into what making room for *kairos* moments might look like in our actual lives. In his book, *Contact: The Shaping Power of Intentional Interactions*, Tyler White shares that while he worked as a case manager for a refugee resettlement organization, he would often pick up newly arrived refugees for various appointments because they did not have their driver's licenses and would find them not ready to go, but warmly eager to share tea and conversation. While conversations about the importance of timeliness for appointments were in order, White also shares that he wishes he had arrived earlier than necessary in order to be able to accept the refugee families' gracious hospitality (White 2020, 89-90), thereby holding *chronos* and *kairos* time in balance.

Rather than viewing our calendars as a zero-sum game, where the person who packs the most in wins, we should consider learning from the example of our non-western brothers and sisters in order to bring our lives into balance, not by ignoring *chronos* time altogether, but by making room for and protecting margin in our lives so as to create an openness that is ready for *kairos* moments of hospitality, both in our homes and in other locations in which we find ourselves.

Hosting a dinner as an isolated incident can be checked off of a list, but *being hospitable* is not a task. It is merely creating the context in which we can focus on people, who are nearly constantly in a state of messy middle, but with whom we can experience God-appointed *kairos* moments and understand meaning in life that goes beyond the minutes and hours ticking by or to-do list items being completed.

Misunderstanding the *Where* of Hospitality

When hospitality is mentioned, too often our minds go to a space of self-critique. There is too much clutter in our homes. We do not have enough space. We have an embarrassing propensity to order pizza rather than cook after work. Our children's energy level is maniacal. We are not sparkling conversationalists when we are tired. There are so many self-critical reasons for barring our doors so that they cannot open to welcome guests.

Because hospitality is not about entertaining or about image, we can free ourselves from the stranglehold of perfection, recognizing that things will never be perfect enough for us to feel entirely comfortable to open our homes. Opening our homes requires vulnerability and often includes awkwardness. We fear awkwardness because

we have forgotten that awkwardness is the precursor to connection or intimacy of any kind. When we shy away from awkwardness, we are left with loneliness.

In any well-told story, there is a scene where readers or viewers are privy to the moment when acquaintances decide to be friends, friends decide to band together to fight a common enemy or accomplish a goal, or two people begin to fall in love. Almost always, these moments involve some awkwardness, because there's a moment when the questions *Are we all in? Are we moving deeper into relationship with each other?* have been asked, and the answer has not yet been decided. Depending on how this powerful moment is viewed, it can be frightening or exciting! If we view the force of awkwardness as frightening, we will become like the side of a magnet that repels others. Conversely, if we view the force of awkwardness as exciting, we will become like the side of a magnet that is drawn to others. The point of hospitality is to make exciting moments of awkwardness possible, and then to move through them towards the beautiful landscape of deepening relationships on the other side.

The antidote to awkwardness is to think about the other person, which incidentally is something a good host always does. In his book, *Adorning the Dark: Thoughts on Community Calling and the Mystery of Making*, Andrew Peterson talks about overcoming his overwhelming feelings of awkwardness during photo shoots. At first, he was understandably very focused on himself—how his clothes fit, where to put his hands, etc. But then a friend told him that if he would simply focus on the person behind the camera and try to connect with them, everything would feel natural and the details would take care of themselves. This wise friend was right: when Peterson focused on having a conversation with the cameraman, he smiled genuinely, stood naturally, looked approachable, and ended up with nice photos. In the same way, if we stop thinking about how our home looks, whether we are sparkling conversationalists, how the food tastes, etc., and focus instead on connecting with our guests, the rest will take care of itself. As Rosaria Butterfield memorably quips: "Hospitality is necessary whether you have cat hair on the couch or not. People will die of chronic loneliness sooner than they will cat hair in the soup" (2018, 111).

Though it is worth saying that our homes do not need to be perfect in order to invite others in, it should also be mentioned that hospitality need not be limited to our homes. Since hospitality is primarily about an attitude (not an action or a location), it can be shown in third spaces and even when one is a guest in another's home. Hospitality is not one-way. To be a good guest requires a kind of hospitality, after all, since "we must learn to pay careful attention, to receive others and receive their norms and ideas"

(Hagley 2019, 27). "For the Christian," says Scott Hagley, "hospitality provides an image of the gospel. We are simultaneously the guest and host of the Triune God. So also, we relate to one another in a fluid interchange between guest and host" (2019, 29).

With immigrants in particular, it can be more hospitable to be a guest in their homes than to invite them to be a guest in ours. When inviting immigrants to our home, we are also expecting them to conform to our norms, eat our kind of food, and follow our agenda. This is not to say inviting immigrants to our home is a bad idea; it should be done, but visiting should be a two-way street. By also enthusiastically becoming a guest in immigrants' homes, we are willingly shouldering the burden of discomfort and accepting the pressure of learning a new way of doing things. Becoming a grateful guest is powerfully communicating to an immigrant friend that we welcome them not just when they are trying hard to conform to our culture's expectations, but also exactly as they are in their own home, living life as they naturally do.

For Further Research

This article has merely scratched the surface of the great potential for the American church to learn from the non-western world in order to broaden its understanding and strengthen its practice of hospitality to be more effective in evangelism, discipleship, and missionary efforts in an increasingly globalized but lonely world.

Many things remain to be researched if this potential will be turned into reality. Questions for further research include:

- How could small groups be promoted in a way that views them as part of a larger ecosystem of hospitable church and home ministry? If it is accepted that small group participation should not be the sole benchmark of the health of a church, what other benchmarks should be considered? What would empowering a congregation to cultivate a lifestyle of hospitality (that includes but it not limited to small group participation) look like?

- What materials exist in non-western cultures which inculcate the value of hospitality? Is this value instilled mostly in upbringing at home or is it reinforced by church teaching? What resources on the value of hospitality are or could be produced by non-western churches both to encourage and instruct western churches and also as a preventative measure for young non-western believers, who are following western trends towards increased isolation?

- How does resource righteousness undermine true partnership between western and non-western believers both in the United States and abroad? How could this often- unconscious attitude be identified and mitigated in church teaching and missionary training efforts in the West? How could non-western believers be empowered to divest themselves of this idea?

- How do non-western people's practice of hospitality change when they leave their home country and settle in the United States? What elements are retained? If it is accepted that a non-western practice of hospitality more closely mirrors the biblical understanding of hospitality, what do the changes tell us about the challenges of contextualization or potential creative adaptations of a non-western practice of hospitality in a western environment?

- Practically speaking, how can an appreciation of *kairos* time be incorporated into a culture which is focused on *chronos* time? How can immigrants be informed about living according to *chronos* time without losing an appreciation of *kairos* time? How can *kairos* and *chronos* time, as well as a focus on task or time and a focus on relationship, be kept in appropriate balance? How can the interaction between different cultures promote this balance?

Jessica Udall *(PhD) is a professor of Intercultural Studies at the Evangelical Theological College in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and an adjunct professor of Intercultural Studies at Columbia International University.*

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