

Hospitality in Youth and Young Adult Ministry

Hospitality with Children: a checklist

Christine's Story: Welcoming a Child with Autism

Alpha, Beginnings and Living the Questions

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Christine Ball



The gift of hospitality has deep biblical roots stretching back to our ancestor Abraham entertaining visitors. It is grounded firmly in Hebraic and Near Eastern culture, where the gift of hospitality could literally make the difference between life and death. Jesus clearly shared these expectations of hospitality. He said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35). The radical hospitality of the early church was part of this ongoing tradition of welcoming all. It is clear that God intends us to reach out to the stranger, the alienated, the poor and the powerless without judgement. Our offering of hospitality marks us as Christ's followers and is in direct response to who we are as Jesus' disciples.

It seems strange to talk about the youth and young adults of our churches needing to receive hospitality. How could reaching out to them possibly be considered a radical act of hospitality? They are not strangers or aliens...yet we often overlook

the barriers that separate us from young persons in our midst and fail to address their needs.

The Open Table: an example of hospitality with young adults

Last fall, I took my turn sitting at The Open Table information booth during the University of Ottawa's orientation week. September is a time of great excitement and activity on the university campus. It marks the return of friends and the arrival of first-year students eager and nervous about their new academic adventures. In addition to their enthusiasm, many students also wonder if they will fit in and make new friends. Local congregations asked, "How could we help students feel welcome during these very important years?" By asking students that very question, we developed The Open Table, an ecumenical effort to reach out to young adults and

university students, offering hospitality and community by the congregations in and around the University of Ottawa.

The Open Table information booth had prime real estate, situated in close proximity to the long line for the bookstore. Our advantage was that the bored and captive audience was easy to engage in conversation.

Our first strategy was to offer an unexpected gift. “Can I offer you a homemade cookie?”

Our next step was to offer an invitation of a relationship. “May I give you this postcard? It is an invitation to The Open Table. We gather the last Sunday of every month for a meal. It’s free!”

Each month, local congregations prepare a nutritious home-style meal and host the students at a local church. Outside of the building, an enthusiastic group of volunteers barbeque up more food and invite young adult passersby to enter into the church for a warm welcome along with a meal. The students and young adults have the opportunity to meet others and enjoy good conversation. Central to the evening is announcement time. Congregations and students promote events, studies and other opportunities that might be of interest to the students. The information is also shared through a website. Following the meal, an optional program is offered. We have participated in a drumming circle, held a Christmas carol sing-a-long, walked a labyrinth and enjoyed other spirituality activities, shared the stories of a mission trip, and watched the Olympic Canadian gold medal winning hockey game together.

Sitting at The Open Table information booth last fall, I was struck by the uniqueness of the hospitality we were offering. The students and faculty were often surprised. The curious wondered what they had to do to get a free meal. Some thought our congregations had a wonderful idea. Some questioned why strangers would care. A few directly challenged us: “Who are you?”

I would say, “I’m a parent of two university students. I worry when they are away from home. Are they eating well? Have they a place to be welcomed? I can do little to help my children from a distance, but I can provide a meal and a listening ear to another parent’s child who is living in my neighbourhood.” I do this knowing that others are doing the same for my children as they continue to experience the welcome and care of Christian community.

Prayer Partners: an example of hospitality with youth

Several years ago I asked a youth group two questions. “How did you first come to worship in this congregation?” and “Why did you stay?” Their responses surprised me.

The youth initially came by the invitation of their friends or with their grandparents. Most of them had walked to church that morning, without their parents.

Why did they stay? The consensus was that “they” (the adult members of the congregation) sing Happy Birthday to them on their special day and because “they” pray for them.

I was surprised. There was no mention of the awesome youth room, the cool youth minister and the fun programs. It was because of a meaningful welcome and the compassion of the adult members of the church!

In this church, the youth were each connected with an adult prayer partner who was committed to praying for their youth partner daily. There was no further obligation or responsibility on the adult partner. As you can imagine though, having made such a commitment, the adult prayer partners needed to build relationships with their youth partners in order to know how to pray for them. Sharing a few words over coffee hour fellowship provided an opportunity to connect. “How is school?” and “What would you like me to pray for this week?” helped them become connected.

What does Prayer Partners have to do with hospitality? It has everything to do with valuing the guest, inviting someone into a meaningful relationship, and meeting the needs of someone else. The youth of this congregation experienced acceptance and welcome as the members of the congregation knew their names, knew their birthdays and prayed for them daily.

The Open Table and Prayer Partners are each an example of ways churches have responded to the directive to be hospitable with the youth and young adults of their community. Each project began with the question, “How can we welcome someone and meet a need?” By answering that question, we allow ourselves the opportunity to put aside our own needs and meet the needs of others as Christ invites us to do.

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Hospitality with Children: a Checklist

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Invite children and their families to your church

- Be intentional in inviting new families to be a part of your church community.
- Train greeters with practical examples of how to be welcoming to young families (i.e., address both children and adults when welcoming families to your worship, know basic details about the children's ministry programs, and show families to the church school or nursery when asked).
- Personally invite and bring new families to fellowship time.

Build relationships with the children of your church

- Be intentional; make time to get to know each other and remember the names of all you meet, especially children.
- Plan to sit with young families new to you when you gather for worship or a congregational meal.
- Learn about the needs and concerns of children and their families.
- Offer programs that meet the needs of children and their families.
- Have child friendly snacks and activities in fellowship time so that everyone can enjoy this time together.
- Take programs, worship and meals outside of the church or onto the church lawn or even to the park where you meet the neighbours.



Include all ages in worship

- Provide bulletins for children.
- Use language that all ages can understand.
- Print responses even if the adults in the congregation have memorized them.
- Provide teaching moments during worship that help to explain why we do things the way we do in worship.
- Provide opportunities for children to participate, lead and contribute in worship.
- Share the gift of awe, wonder and curiosity of children in worship.
- Help families feel comfortable in worship and do not be put off by the typical behaviour one can expect from a child.
- Remind the congregation that the sacraments of baptism and communion are powerful symbols of community gathering as a whole to celebrate God's gifts of grace.
- Be willing, if needed, to move time of worship to better accommodate families.

Look for ways that the church school and nursery can show hospitality

- Maintain the nursery and church school with the same care as the sanctuary.
- Ensure that directions to the church school are clear and visible to all.
- Look at your ministry space through the eyes of a child and ensure that it is accessible, safe and inviting.
- Greet parents and invite them to stay if they would like.
- Welcome all children by name and have an age-appropriate activity for them to begin if they must wait for everyone to arrive.
- Model welcoming to all children in the class and correct unwelcoming behaviour.

- Connect with new families throughout the week to answer any questions and connect with all families regularly.
- Invite parents to help make decisions about the children's ministry program, and take their concerns seriously.

Pray for each other

- Make prayer for others a vital part of all activities of the church. Establish practices such as prayer chains, prayer circles and prayer partners to encourage all to pray for the needs of the congregation.
- Invite children to participate in these prayers.

Model hospitality with children beyond the church building

- When church leaders (ministers, teachers, elders) make pastoral visits, ensure that children as well as adults are visited.
- Invite your children's friends into your home.
- Help your children to act as hosts at home and church.

Understand the needs of others and make them a priority

- Be willing to learn from the children and encourage their participation in the life of the congregation.
- Consider additional ways of making your building welcoming to all ages.

Ensure safety of children and youth and vulnerable adults

- The Presbyterian Church in Canada's Leading with Care policy is about hospitality. It ensures that all are safe while participating in church programs or using the church facilities.

Christine's Story: Welcoming a Child with Special Needs

Jen Geddes



Hospitality is something we at St. Andrew's thought we did well. We have wheelchair accessible entrances in both our buildings. Ushers are placed at every entrance to hand out the bulletins and assist anyone with need. We have assistive listening devices and large print hymnbooks. We were confident that we had done everything possible to be a welcoming and hospitable church to those with special needs. But when a young father came to the lead minister explaining why he had not been attending church, we realized that we still had a ways to go before we could say we were a church welcoming to all.

David is the father of two children, a son, Jeremy, who regularly attends our church school and a daughter, Christine, who had not been to church in at least six years. Many in the congregation had no idea David had a daughter, and others assumed that Christine lived with her mother. Christine had not been attending church school because she has moderate-severe autism and our church school was not equipped with the

resources to teach or care for Christine's needs. Because we were not equipped to welcome Christine, David was unable to bring his whole family to church.

How could we transform our church school into an inviting space, offer an appropriate program which includes children with disabilities and help our church community learn to be welcoming too? This was a new venture for us. We were unaware of what assistance was out there and we had no idea where to begin. Now, two months after David first raised the issue, we have made great strides in helping Christine become a valued part of her church family.

I am not an expert in autism.

This has been as much a learning experience for me as

for all the members of our church community. I now understand that each individual situation is different. What has worked for Christine and our church may not work for another child with autism. Our learning is not complete and we will continue to grow and make changes as we work together with David's family. However, the following are some of the things we have learned along the way and actions we have taken as we seek to make our church school a hospitable place for Christine. I hope these ideas help guide your church as you seek to welcome children with disabilities into your church school.

Contact the local applicable foundation. David gave me the name of the local foundation that had helped his family. It took me a few emails and phone calls to connect with the right person, but once that connection was made, weekly emails and brainstorming sessions helped get us on the right track. Foundation experts can answer questions, provide resources and help find trained volunteers. The particular foundation I contacted also linked me with a local Christian