

Practicing God's Radical Hospitality Reflecting on Difference, Change and Leadership Through the Spiritual Discipline of Hospitality

"So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory."
Rm 15:7

The PW Purpose

Forgiven and freed by God in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves.....

- *to build an inclusive, caring community of women that strengthens the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and witnesses to the promise of God's kingdom.*

Paul Writes to Rome

Paul's letter to the church in Rome is a familiar and beloved part of scripture for many Christians, as it powerfully proclaims the promises of the gospel—God's amazing, limitless love for the human family and extravagant gift of salvation and reconciliation through Jesus Christ. God acts with power and grace, extending mercy to all who believe. It is a powerful message of hope—and a call to transformation, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Scholars have offered different theories about the purpose of this letter. It differs from Paul's other letters in a number of ways. It is longer, and is written more as a systematic theology, in contrast to the Corinthian letters, Galatians and Philippians, that address specific conflicts in the community and are written with a more polemical tone. It is also the only letter Paul writes to a church where he was not the founder.

When Paul writes to the church in Rome that is caught in a Jewish-Gentile conflict. Jewish Christians, expelled from Rome by an earlier emperor and only recently been allowed to return to Rome find themselves in a situation where a large predominantly Gentile church had grown. Returning Jewish leaders may have assumed they would resume places of leadership, while the Gentiles may have seen no reason to change things as they were. There may not have been a particular conflict raging within the church when Paul wrote, but as someone who has been working in cross-cultural settings, he would see the potential for conflict arising out of the differences between these two groups.

Different Gifts, One Body

In his systematic summation of the gospel, Paul does two things—he identifies himself to this Christian community that does not know him, by proclaiming what he holds to be essential. And, he outlines for this community—divided as "circumcised and uncircumcised", what he believes to hold them together, their unity in Christ. The differences of culture and tradition need not divide them, but they are not irrelevant. Indeed, he points out the strengths that each group brings to this new Christian community by virtue of who they are.

In Chapter 14, Paul writes about the strong and the weak—the differences are around food and tradition. The “strong,” claiming their new liberty in Christ, believe they may eat anything and the “weak” believe that they must abstain from certain foods, especially those identified as unclean under Jewish dietary laws. We should not assume that this difference follows a clear Jew/Gentile divide. Many who continued to observe Jewish dietary laws would have been Jews, but there would have been some who were Gentile converts who found the discipline helpful in their new faith. The terms “strong” and “weak” may reflect a value judgment on Paul’s part, or simply indicate where his own position on the matter was, but he is adamant that *all people belong to God*. Despite his own beliefs, he argues that believers should not act in ways that would be hurtful or offensive to others— in other words, those who do not observe dietary restrictions should, nevertheless, honor the needs of those who do. In this sense, the terms ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ may indicate who Paul thinks bears the greater responsibility to adapt their behavior to extend welcome to the other. Ultimately, he maintains, we are each accountable *only* to God, who knows both our deeds and the intentions of our hearts.

Paul is not making the case for polite tolerance of differences. He appeals to his fellow Christians to model their behavior after Jesus, who is both “a servant of the circumcised” (Rm 15:8) and the one in whom “the Gentiles shall hope” (Rm 15:12). To welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us means we have to do more than put out the welcome mat or dust off the “*mi casa es su casa*” plaque above the door. It requires that we actively seek to know the other—what’s important to them? How does their life experience and cultural perspective inform their faith and their theology? What gifts do they bring? What questions, concerns or needs do they bring?

Practicing God’s Hospitality

Welcoming one another as Christ has welcomed us requires that we pay attention not only to the differences among us that we have labels for—age, race, culture, gender, class, etc., but that we pay attention to things like power and privilege and the way systems can perpetuate disparities even when we don’t intend to do that. Practicing God’s hospitality—creating community across our differences, requires that we learn to create community rooted in justice, equity and mutuality, community that creates the space for everyone to contribute and nurtures the gifts of all God’s people. Letty Russell calls this “just hospitality”. Just hospitality works to dismantle the barriers that divide us and reconcile the differences that separate and alienate us from each other and from God. Creating welcome with equity may require more than just adding a few more chairs at the back of the room. It may require that we rearrange the seating completely, or maybe even move to another space! God’s hospitality begins when those of us with privilege within the church—whether created by our own social standings or created by our deep roots within the traditions of the church—are willing to examine that privilege and question the barriers it creates for others. God’s hospitality begins when we are able to acknowledge that “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rm 14:8).

Building on its own history of creating space for women to have a voice and express their leadership within the Presbyterian Church, Presbyterian Women has made a strong commitment to becoming a diverse, welcoming organization itself--in which all women of the

church have a voice and an active presence, where their gifts are nurtured, where their leadership is valued and makes a difference.

“Recognizing that issues are varied and real, we need to keep sharing them when we come together. We also need to understand that some are cultural issues and need to be addressed from that perspective. We are still in a learning stage.”

Eveline Steele, 2007 Racial Ethnic Dialogue participant

An organization that values difference and thrives on the gifts of diversity is a learning community—one where people are able to continue to learn about themselves and about others. Learning to work effectively across differences, to build community that thrives on difference, takes time. And just as we see in the work of the apostle Paul, it takes a deep commitment—the kind of commitment that keeps you in the struggle even when it gets hard or messy or uncomfortable. Sometimes the biggest barrier is fear – fear of change, fear of the unknown and unfamiliar. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome, we must learn to trust each other in faith and trust the Holy Spirit at work among us—whether it’s opening ourselves to younger leadership or learning from the faith experience of new immigrants. Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor, as He has loved us, so that “. . . your joy will be complete (Jn 15:11b).”

Good News

Several years ago, while working on the national staff of the PC(USA) as Associate for Racial Justice & Advocacy, I was working with a team exploring ways to promote antiracism work in the seminaries. I had invited a colleague to spend a couple of hours with us to think about how we might use the internet to support the project. At the end of our time, my colleague leaned back in her chair and said, “I know you have other work to do and I have work to get back to, but you are such a fun group I wish I could stay longer. I don’t know what I expected but it wasn’t this.” It has been my experience that when a group of people commit to building relationships together by dismantling the differences that normally divide us, it is life-affirming and joy-giving, *even* when there have been moments that are painful.

The good news is that we can learn, like Paul, to work effectively in cross-cultural contexts, to work constructively with the differences in our own context, whatever those might be. And as we learn to adapt positively to difference in one area, we become more adept at recognizing and responding constructively to other types of difference. It is a learning process, but it all takes commitment and vision. A culturally proficient leader learns to examine their own readiness for change, and the readiness of their organization. They also recognize that the process of change is fluid. We can be very culturally proficient in some things and still do or say things that are not consistent with our vision. In those instances, we don’t give up—we keep learning and keep moving forward.

A culturally proficient leader recognizes both the power of a group’s internal culture and the importance of culture and identity for those who differ from that norm. They also recognize that each person is an individual, not a set of stereotypes or generalizations. Much has been written about how the cultural experience and perspectives of young Millennials today is

different from that of the Baby Boomers and older generations. This is a critical concern across the church as we seek to keep young people in our churches and to develop new leadership for the church. We can't expect young women to want exactly the same organization that served their mothers and grandmothers, but we can't ignore the needs of older women in the organization either. Effective leadership requires learning to recognize the internal culture of a group, how it serves those who are there and how it might need to change to better serve a wider circle of women. It also recognizes the gifts that each can bring and seeks to find ways to make room for both.

Resistance to change is part of the human condition, I think, and in any organization that is intentionally trying to change, learning to recognize the barriers, the places of resistance, is a critical part of the process.

In Romans, Paul not only names the differences—the 'strong' and the 'weak', the circumcised and the uncircumcised. He identifies what each has to gain from the other, and he proclaims the vision – their unity in Christ. Resistance to change is to be expected, but it is not impossible to overcome.

Paul went from being the defender of traditional Judaism to one the greatest Christian evangelists in all church history. He clearly was a person of great passion who devoted everything he had to what he believed in, but those two roles required very different skills. We can learn the skills we need to lead in a rapidly changing world. We can also learn to build those skills in the membership and the culture of our churches and organizations. Each of us can make a difference in our lives and the places where we share our faith and minister to others, so that we might welcome others as Christ has welcomed us.

Personal Reflection/Group Activity

Draw a *Diversity Lifeline*.

Think about your life. How have you been affected by difference? What differences have been significant in your identity and life experience? When and how did you become aware of particular differences (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, class, age)?

Draw a timeline and mark significant turning points or learning points on your timeline.

If you are doing this as a group activity, allow at least 20 minutes for people to make their timelines. If possible, have people put them up on a wall as they finish. In small groups (6-8 people), invite participants to share their timelines.

Debrief with the group: What questions did you have as you started the exercise? What did you notice or learn about yourself in this process? What did you learn as you listened to other group members? What did you learn about differences? How will you use what you have learned?

(adapted from Lindsey, et al. *Cultural Proficiency for School Leaders*, p. 27–28.)

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