

# **EXTEND CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY AND COMMUNITY**

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## The Core of Christian Hospitality

Welcoming people and doing all we can to engender a true experience of community touches people profoundly. We live in a time when people long for connections, but often hesitate to reach out to form new relationships. Families move from place to place more often today than in previous generations, thus displacing them from tight knit family and friends. Individuals frequently do not even know their own neighbors. Even members of the same congregation may know each other only on superficial levels. Moving from discomfort and at times general suspicion of strangers to friendship is a precious blessing prioritized within Christian camp or retreat settings.

What is commonly referred to as “community” in general parlance falls far short of what people yearn for. Definitions of community run the spectrum from simply being in a homogenous group who thinks like me to a collection of homes in the same housing development. Genuine love, however, expands the meaning of community by drawing people together despite their differences. The movement from mere politeness and tolerance to a greater level of care and recognition emerges when a group opens themselves to the Spirit of God. Christ models a wide embrace, including those shunned by others.

In his book, **The Road Less Traveled**, M. Scott Peck gives the following definition of love that births true community.

*I define love thus: The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth. <sup>i</sup>*

This description deserves serious reflection. Community requires that we decide to extend ourselves. It is not just a feeling of good intentions. In fact love can occur even if we don't necessarily feel like it or can't affirm everything about another person. It is a deliberate choice to go beyond fears and barriers. It is the will and self-discipline to put forth energy to reach out to the other, beyond normal distinctions and separations, as a way to honor and support God's presence with and within them.

Such a heartfelt practice requires sensitivity and attentiveness. Only by actually listening and learning will we recognize what will truly build each other up. Getting to know each other by name is just the beginning. Community comes alive through love determined to act on behalf of the spiritual growth (growth in God) for oneself and the other person. This means that we do all we can to create environments of hospitality that inspire people to seek God and to value and encourage one another. It is our privilege and our calling, but it is not always simple and easy. We will have many opportunities to allow God to shape us to

become more loving through the real life situations that arise when we host folks on retreat.

A dedication to this level of love and community helps reveal and screen out other motives that look deceptively like love sometimes, but which really aren't. Some common reasons for extending oneself are: wanting to look good in the eyes of others, satisfying our own insecurities, trying to fix the other person and make them more like us, feeling compelled by guilt or the need to please, wanting to benefit the person so he or she will do the same in return, "doing our job", so the retreat or camp will be deemed successful and people will come again, etc. Motive matters. Sincere community has the potential to occur when we truly have an abiding interest in each other's welfare that reflects God's abiding love.

Courage and faith definitely comes into play to overcome the resistance and lethargy that sometimes holds us back. Community cannot exist without honesty.. This can be difficult but powerful after people grow to appreciate and trust one another. What is best for one's soul at times calls for us to grow in love. At the same time, such depth of mutual care and the beauty of true friendship produce some of the most joyous experiences of people's lives.

Remember that community ultimately comes as a gift of the Spirit. People must engage themselves and we cannot force them. Don't be demoralized if a retreat or camp doesn't always result in the depth of relationships you know is possible. We plant seeds. We graciously encourage groups and our own heart to cooperate with the Spirit of God, thus preparing the conditions from which true community might grow.

In the book, **Catholic America: Self-renewal Centers and Retreats** by Patricia Christian-Mayer, Abbot David Geraets lifts up the importance of this aspect of the retreat experience.

*The best way to communicate a religious experience is in a loving community. Human love is probably the best medium to communicate the Holy Spirit." ii*

### **Sensitivity to People's Needs**

Another important dimension of Christian hospitality is a keen sensitivity to people's true needs. Remarkable hosts and hostesses learn not only to be observant and to listen with attention to their guests, they can actually predict needs even before someone asks. Providing for an expectation or going beyond it before the request is made honors the guest, and this type of hospitality delights not just satisfies. We make all kinds of preparations and predict the wants of those we invite to our own homes, and in the same way this is true of camp and retreat centers dedicated to be a place of God.

The ability to perceive and predict the requirements and desires of those whom we serve come, in part, from repeated service of thousands of people with varying requests and wants, thus a deepening perception of what takes priority

for the majority of traveler's to our camp and retreat centers. The larger factor comes from compassion and understanding that a need unfulfilled can stall a participant or guest from gaining the most they can receive from the camp or retreat experience. We do all in our power to assist persons to feel at home, so they feel comfortable enough to go further in their own growth and the development of community.

Whether we are serving secular or faith based groups, there are certain necessities important to most people. Loosely based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of need, levels of human need might be described as:

- 1, Sustenance
2. Safety and Shelter
3. Sense of Belonging
4. Sharing Their Contribution
5. Spiritual Expression and Fulfillment

Addressing each of these longings helps to expand and deepen the camp or retreat impact. For example, if a person does not receive food, water and other basic physical requirements to their satisfaction, then it will be hard for them to move to the point where they feel able to focus on relationships that will give them a deeper sense of belonging. These facets might, also, be viewed as a ring in the growth of a tree, expanding the opportunity for ministry and an experience of God's love.

Because of this, all staff persons and volunteers no matter what their role are program staff. The program we offer focuses on giving opportunities for people to experience the love of Christ, to expand their trust in God, and to share their own giftedness by making a contribution to the world that meets true need and adds meaning to the giver's life. It is important for all staff and volunteers to understand basic human need as opportunities for faith formation, and to participate in nurturing persons at as many of these levels as situations allow. All of this is important Christian ministry.

#### Sustenance:

Food service staff and volunteers, by providing the very best food and diet they possibly can, launch people forward in their development, both personal and Spiritual. Let us not underestimate how much food and drink represents the care and concern of God. Recall that Christ chose bread and wine to represent his love, sacrifice and presence. Hagar understood God's love for herself and her child, when God provided a source of water to sustain them. (Genesis 21:15-19) Jesus describes the faithful as those who provide drink for the thirsty, food for the hungry and welcome for the stranger (Matthew 25:34-36). If any persons have the chance to serve in the kitchen and dining area, it is an honor and a tangible expression of Christ's care and concern. Even more, those of us in food service can recognize that we can nourish the soul not just the body through our

interactions, example, and teaching among both staff and guests. An experience of Christ's love sustains people at many levels. (John 6:35)

#### Safety and Shelter:

Individuals and teams providing maintenance, health care, housekeeping, risk management and other dimensions of our programs and procedures that attend to creating safety, protection, shelter and comfort play an essential role in helping persons draw closer to God and to one another, as well. (Psalm 46:1-3), (Matthew 4:23), (Matthew 25:36), (Psalm 23)

Environments where people experience very intentional physical, emotional, and spiritual support and well being are called sanctuaries. The dictionary defines sanctuary as a consecrated place – a place of refuge and protection. Christian Camp and Retreat Centers are indeed dedicated as holy places where our staff and volunteers strive to create environments and facilities where guests feel cared for and where barriers are removed that might otherwise hinder them from participating at a deeper level.

#### Sense of Belonging:

Another essential human longing is the desire to be known, included and valued. From the very first call or email with the office staff, to the strategies by the event and hospitality staff to help participants know one another, to the farewell, it is vital to be conscious of how our interactions either build up or tear down the possibility for community. Because Christian community is founded squarely on expanding relationships of trust and mutuality based on the love of Christ, how we relate matters a great deal in fulfilling our purpose. Whether or not we invite people into a deeper sense of connection with God and each other, and how we express God's acceptance and embrace has a huge impact.

We can be excellent at various tasks we have to do, and it end up all for naught if we estrange people by our lack of sensitivity, patience, interest in their lives, and compassion. Community cannot happen when people are afraid to reveal themselves. Every staff person and volunteer has nurturing a healthy sense of belonging as a primary part of their responsibilities and vocation at the center, regardless of what their other duties may include. We do so by growing in our ability to embody love and by encouraging others in doing the same. It seems important to note here that it will be immensely difficult to extend this kind of community to others, if we maintain divisions among ourselves as volunteers and staff. (Ephesians 4:1-3 and Section B below)

#### Sharing Their Contribution:

We are also in the ministry of helping persons discover their giftedness, then to recognize and celebrate that divine image within themselves and others.

We believe that every person has traits, passions and abilities that can enrich life around them. God has designed life in such a way that no individual can even come close to doing it all. No one is self sufficient, not anyone. God reinforces our oneness in Christ by distributing personalities, activities, ways to serve, abilities and other gifts so that we are literally interdependent (this same truth plays out in the whole creation – the interdependency of all of life).

As spiritual leaders, therefore, our ideal is not to do or be everything, but to rally people to give to the common good within the group and beyond it where there is need. We help people discover and appreciate their own uniqueness and then facilitate opportunities and ways for people to make a difference large or small that benefits the current community or the wider world. We inspire members of groups to appreciate and honor each other, especially those who may not be appreciated enough. Finally, we encourage persons with greater experience and skill to teach others. For all this, we give thanks often, both publicly and privately. (Exodus 35: 20-29)

### Spiritual Purpose and Self-Expression:

Camps and retreats can be an avenue for people to explore the ultimate meaning of their lives or a way for them to live out their deepest values. What is their legacy? What is their purpose? What is their vocation? These are the kind of questions some of our guests come with, when their lives are unfulfilling or when they are in the midst of transition. A potent driving force that reenergizes and gives direction is identifying a significant dream or a goal that moves them toward something that they themselves recognize to be meaningful – something yet undone or yet to experience that touches their core. Camp and retreat centers can provide the environment where people can delve deeply into these premier concerns and hopes.

Sometimes camp and retreat leadership or participation sparks a new direction that can even become an extended vocation. Their purpose becomes clearer because of what arises while at camp or on retreat. Perhaps a leader may even ask if they have ever considered a particular vocation or direction that seems to match with their gifts and graces. A vocation is a calling to a long term course of action that coincides with what one perceives God really wants him or her to do. It is something the person gains great meaning from, whether they do it for pay or as a volunteer.

Helping persons to consider the greater purpose of their lives involves helping them to draw it forth by seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit while reviewing their lives, their values, their circumstance, and their passions for clues about their future direction. Spiritual direction, Christian conversation, themes and resources that help people pray and focus on this issue are some ways we might assist persons with this deep longing to live a life with greater purpose that matters not just to others, but to themselves – a life in harmony with God's will for them and what inspires joy for them. Such a life or endeavor may not be easy, but it is full of meaning for the person. (Paul describes his purpose – Philippians 3:7-15), (Esther's calling – 4:12-16)

Every person we serve whether from faith based groups or secular non profit groups have these great needs. Our approach may be different depending on the focus of the group or individuals we are serving, but Christian hospitality and community continues to extend love and welcome in all these areas of human longing.

## **Scriptural and Theological Exploration** **For Camp and Retreat Leaders**

### **A. Welcome the Stranger – Extend Holy Hospitality**

**Deuteronomy 10:17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, 18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. 19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.**

**Matthew 25: 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'**

**Hebrews 13:1 Let mutual love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.**

**Leviticus 19:33 When a newcomer resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the newcomer. 34 The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.**

Frequently, camps and retreats bring people together who are strangers to us and to one another. Some persons we will have never met before. Persons who even attend the same congregation often arrive with little familiarity of one another beyond surface introductions. They may not even know each other's names. Christian camps and retreats are sacred times of living in temporary Christian community 24 hours per day together. They are meaningful opportunities for strangers to become friends. This process takes time and happens through shared experiences and reflection by the group. Retreats and camps provide magnificent and sometimes rare chances to join with people from different backgrounds, religions, races and nationalities, too, in the love of Christ.

Your own welcome of strangers and inspiring them to welcome each other are faith filled acts, because they embody God's love of the stranger. The

Judeo-Christian heritage holds this as a premier value. Providing hospitality includes an inherent humility, too, which acknowledges that we are often in the position of being a stranger ourselves and it is part of the story of the people of God. Not only does hosting express God's love, but the stranger or guest often turns out to be the giver from God and, we, the recipient. Check out just a few of the encounters, when an act of hospitality leads to a revelation from God. (Genesis 18:1-14, Luke 24:28-32, Luke 19:1-10)

The following quote from Henri Nouwen, in his book "**Reaching Out**", unveils the depth and breadth of the practice of hospitality.

*...reaching out to our innermost being can lead to a reaching out to the many strangers whom we meet on our way through life. In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found. Although many, we might even say most, strangers in this world become easily the victim of a fearful hostility, it is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings. The movement from hostility to hospitality is hard and full of difficulties. Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. But still – that is our vocation: to convert the hostis into hospes, the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced. <sup>iii</sup>*

## **B. Covenant to Love One Another and to Share the Fruit of the Spirit:**

**Mark 12:29** Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; **30** you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' **31** The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

**1 John 4: 18** There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. **19** We love because he first loved us. **20** Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. **21** The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

**Galatians 5: 22** By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things...**25** If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

A proactive step in planting the realization that participants help create the experience they seek is to discuss what they need and hope for from one another and the retreat. Doing this up front in a natural, relaxed way allows people to listen and understand each other's expectations. These honest conversations about loving and caring for one another best occur early in the camp or retreat after they have gotten to know each other initially. Introducing the above texts serves as one possible way to launch the topic of what love looks

like. 1 Corinthians 13 is another profound reflection on love. These passages become a catalyst for dialogue about the kind of behaviors and interactions that will truly nurture each other. The group can create a brief covenant (promise to each other and God) in their own words. It can begin something like this: “We promise to love and care for each other by....”

### **C. Live Out Principles of Christian Community:**

**Romans 12:9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

**1 Peter 4:8-11 Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To God belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.**

**Colossians 3:12-15 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.**

Forming a caring community does not mean that we will always be perfect at it. We do sin by taking actions that do harm rather than good. From time to time, situations urge us to step back and examine what is happening, then to decide how to respond so we can get back on track and seek reconciliation. These reminders to the early church remain as applicable today as ever. As camp and retreat ministry leaders, it is important to seek God and to open ourselves to be shaped in ways that we hope the experience will shape guests and participants.

### **D. Give Opportunities to Contribute to the Common Good:**

**1 Corinthians 12:4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in**

**everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.**

Ultimately, for a person to feel truly a part of the retreat or camp community it is important to appreciate the gifts they bring both through their ways of being and their abilities. Sincere recognition and thankfulness for the contributions every person makes to the whole experience honors the manifestation of the Spirit within him or her. Christian hospitality is a little different in this perspective. We not only graciously host our guests, but we invite them to contribute to the common good of each other. This is an important distinction that makes a Christian Camp and Retreat Center or experience different from staying at a typical hotel, for example. We may invite our guests and participants to help each other and to contribute to the common good through a variety of services they do on behalf of the whole. We know this is part of building and becoming a community of faith, which other venues don't always emphasize in their modes of hospitality.

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<sup>i</sup> *The Road Less Traveled* by Scott M. Peck M.D. (Touchstone Book published by Simon and Schuster, New York, 1978), p 81

<sup>ii</sup> *Catholic America: Self-renewal Centers and Retreats* by Patricia Christian-Mayer (John Muir Publications: Santa Fe, 1989), p 27 ISBN 0945465203

<sup>iii</sup> *Reaching Out* by Henri J. M. Nouwen (Image Books Doubleday: New York, 1975), p 65-66 ISBN 0385236824