Welcoming the stranger: The practice of hospitality

by L. Gregory Jones in the January 19, 2000 issue

Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition, by Christine Pohl

My wife and I were visiting some old friends, a couple in their 80s whose health had been failing. At the time of our visit, the husband was confined to a wheelchair and was struggling with dementia. He was only intermittently able to participate in conversation, and he often had difficulty recognizing his wife. Her health was much better, though she has been showing signs of wearing down from her years of giving faithful, ongoing care to her husband.

We reflected with the wife on the countless ways in which they had shown hospitality to Duke students over the years, particularly international students. For example, they had sponsored a weekly game of badminton for international students. Every Friday night for over 30 years, the wife told us, they had gathered in the East Campus gym to play badminton. Over the years, she estimated, they had welcomed over 3,000 international students to those games. The couple had invited many of those folks to their homes for meals, and the wife told us that a surprising number of them continued to write from all over the world.

My wife and I had heard stories about the couple leading Bible studies for German prisoners of war in England, but we had never heard the stories directly. I asked the wife to tell us about their time in England during World War II. She told us about the Bible studies, and how moving it had been to read scripture together in the midst of war.

We also learned that their hospitality had been even more extensive than leading Bible studies. They took a portion of their rations each week and gave them to others in need, especially to the POWs. As word got around that they were offering their rations to others, townspeople began to bring food to the couple to help them get through the week. As we listened to her talk, we realized the continuities in this couple’s generous, hospitable life—whether it was with German POWs and other

townspeople, Duke students far from their homes, or good friends.

Even so, I was not prepared for the closing words the husband offered to us as we prepared to leave. He had not spoken much during our visit, and when he had it was often unclear whether he was really following the conversation. Yet he spoke with confidence and warmth. “Come and visit us again when you can,” he said. “And, remember, if you ever need food or anything else, we will gladly offer you whatever we have on the stove or in the refrigerator. You always have a home here.”

What could we say? Here was a man confined to a wheelchair, unable to get in and out of bed without assistance, only intermittently able even to recall how many children he has, nonetheless offering us hospitality, as if we were the ones in need.

Yet his offer seemed entirely natural. Hospitality had become so much a part of this couple’s way of living as Christians that such gestures had become second nature. The husband literally did not need to think about what to do—his offer was an expression of what he and his wife had become through the years. They had cultivated habits of hospitality.

I thought of these friends as I read Christine Pohl’s book, *Making Room*. “We become proficient in a skill by performing it regularly, and by learning from persons who are masters of it,” she says at the outset. “Hospitality is a skill and a gift, but it is also a practice which flourishes as multiple skills are developed, as particular commitments and values are nurtured, and as certain settings are cultivated. In addition to theological and historical discussions of the practice of hospitality, we need contemporary models from whom we can learn what hospitality to strangers might look like today.”

Pohl provides such contemporary models to learn from, focusing not so much on individual masters as on communities of Christians for whom hospitality is a way of life. Some of the communities she visited and learned from are well known: the Catholic Worker, L’Arche, Benedictine monasteries, the Open Door Community. Others may be less well known, but their ministries bear a powerful witness: Good Works, Inc., Jubilee Partners, L’Abri Fellowship, Annunciation House.

These communities are expressive of Christian identity and are nourished by rich spiritual practices. Their lives and activities are shaped by “the kinds of guests they welcome, the types of spaces they inhabit, and the theological traditions on which they draw.” For some, the guests are predominantly the urban poor. For others, the

guests are persons with disabilities, students and seekers, homeless people, or refugees. Some operate in rural areas, others in urban settings; some are linked physically to large church spaces, others exist as homes or monasteries. Some of the communities are rooted in the evangelical tradition, some mainline Protestant, some Roman Catholic, some ecumenical.

Pohl displays the diverse convictions that undergird these communities, the practices that shape them, and the hopes and struggles they face. They serve as a touchstone and an inspiration, enabling readers to gain a sense of just what Pohl means when she describes hospitality as a way of life that embraces both skill and gift.

Yet the stories of these communities are not the conceptual heart of Pohl's book. Indeed, in many ways they serve as a counterpoint to the focus of her investigation. How is it, Pohl wonders, that the practice of hospitality—a practice that was central to Christian identity for so much of the church's history—has been largely eclipsed in the modern period?

In the light of this question, the exemplary communities she describes are powerful precisely as a contrast not only to the presumptions of modern American capitalism, which has a "hospitality industry," but also to the presumptions of mainstream American church culture, in which "hospitality committees" are charged with providing coffee and doughnuts after church. Most Americans aspire to have the resources that will enable them not to be dependent on the hospitality of strangers for food, shelter and safety. We organize our lives to protect ourselves from vulnerability.

Pohl emphasizes that "hospitality is central to the meaning of the gospel." Jesus's ministry and proclamation of the kingdom are inexplicable apart from issues of hospitality; Paul urges fellow disciples to welcome one another as Christ had welcomed them; the writer to the Hebrews enjoins readers not to neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for like Abraham and Sarah they may be entertaining angels unawares; and the letter of James offers a powerful critique of showing partiality to the rich at the expense of the poor.

This emphasis on the centrality of hospitality continues in Christian tradition, and the first part of Pohl's book, "Remembering Our Heritage," retrieves that tradition. She describes the ways in which Christians often appealed to their practices of

hospitality as key components of the credibility of the gospel; hospitality was a criterion for leadership in the Christian communities; and leaders such as John Chrysostom emphasized hospitality throughout their preaching. Over time, Christians began to establish institutions to care for pilgrims and the poor, institutions that supplemented home- and church-based hospitality. Monastic communities became key carriers of the tradition of hospitality through the Middle Ages. Hospitality involved attending to the physical, social and spiritual needs of strangers; it meant not only offering food and shelter, but recognizing strangers as persons of equal worth and dignity. It also was a key practice in transcending national and ethnic distinctions in the church.

Pohl argues that in many parts of the Western church hospitality got lost in the 18th century. As early as the 16th and 17th centuries, theologians and social critics were mourning the loss of a vital practice of hospitality. Pohl quotes Samuel Johnson's response to James Boswell's question about "how far he thought wealth should be employed in hospitality." Johnson observes of his 18th-century world: "In a commercial country, a busy country, time becomes precious, and therefore hospitality is not so much valued. No doubt there is still room for a certain degree of it; and a man has a satisfaction in seeing his friends eating and drinking around him. But promiscuous hospitality is not the way to gain real influence."

Pohl believes that hospitality has faded as a significant and coherent moral practice. Attention is still paid to the needs of strangers and the poor, but that attention is diffuse, located in specialized institutions, and severed from the language and practice of hospitality as it appears in the gospel. In short, the rich theological and practical significance of hospitality as a way of life has been eclipsed.

Pohl recognizes that we cannot address that eclipse by calling for a wholesale, indiscriminate recovery of an ancient and premodern practice. For one thing, it would not be possible simply to recover it, given significant socioeconomic, ecclesial, political and cultural changes. Furthermore, some aspects of the Christian tradition of hospitality are "deeply disturbing"; she notes that "only honest and serious attention to the failures, omissions, and tragedies in the story will allow us to make use of its strengths."

She confronts that challenge in the second part of the book, "Reconsidering the Tradition." She discusses the challenge of understanding the "power of recognition" and its often inequitable exercise; difficulties in maintaining distinctions in a

community without allowing them to become barriers; struggles to understand the different kinds of strangers whom we encounter—including those closest to us from whom we have become estranged; and issues of power, possessions and marginality. Pohl beautifully weaves together her experiences in contemporary Christian communities and her appreciative yet critical engagements with sources from the Christian tradition. The result is an illuminating analysis of the intersection of theological, moral, political, economic and cultural issues in the struggle to practice hospitality.

The third and final part of the book, “Recovering the Practice,” offers suggestions for retrieving the tradition of Christian hospitality. Critically drawing on the wisdom of the past, illuminated by significant attention to some contemporary countercultural attempts at engaging the practice, Pohl explores the theological and moral significance of hospitality as a way of life. She attends to the changed dynamics of modernity, recognizing that we now confront strangers on a massive scale. Pohl does not shy away from addressing a full spectrum of issues: the particularity of others that each person encounters and the broad structural questions of immigration, refugees and poverty. Obviously, she cannot address this range of issues in their complexity, but it is crucial that she recognizes that hospitality embraces local, translocal and global issues.

Pohl believes that “because hospitality is basic to who we are as followers of Jesus, every aspect of our lives can be touched by its practice.” She then asks: “If we use hospitality as a lens through which to examine our homes, churches, jobs, schools, health care, and politics, might we see them differently? Can we make the places which shape our lives and in which we spend our days more hospitable? Do current practices within these settings distort hospitality or shut out strangers?” Such simple yet powerful questions can compel us to make changes in our lives—changes that on one level may be the equivalent of small gestures but which, if cultivated over time, have the potential to reshape us and our communities.

To be sure, Pohl’s book raises as many new issues as it proposes solutions, and she recognizes as much. There is much to be learned from the ways other cultures and some American subcultures have practiced hospitality more vibrantly than has mainstream Western culture. And there are significant historical and contemporary issues about the relationship between economics, culture, morality and theology that Pohl’s analysis illumines but cannot adequately address.

It appears that the practice of hospitality depends on the vitality of other practices. As the quotation from Samuel Johnson suggests, one of the enemies of hospitality is commodified time. A sense of keeping the sabbath, or what Dorothy Bass calls "Receiving the Day," may be necessary to reshaping our commitment to offering and receiving hospitality. Another enemy of hospitality is acquisitiveness, the disordering of desires that leads us to think that we need more and more of everything. In this sense, perhaps we need a more critical sense of what it means to practice "saying yes and saying no," reshaping our desire more in the direction of the knowledge and love of God manifested in communion with diverse others and less in the misguided hope that "whoever dies with the most toys wins."

Hospitality is also bound up with issues of forgiveness and the ordering of communities, and leads us to consider questions about boundaries and barriers. How do we sustain a sense of boundaries, of restrictions, of the guidelines and standards necessary for rightly ordering communities while also sustaining an unambiguous welcoming of strangers? How do we understand the very description of "strangers" when it has been so significantly altered by the landscape of modernity?

As hospitality depends on other practices for its sustenance, so it also requires and occasions the cultivation of specific virtues such as patience, courage, truthfulness, generosity and hope. But when poorly understood or practiced, the language of "hospitality" also can tempt us to distortions and corruptions that generate sentimentality or cynicism.

Part of the power of Pohl's analysis is that she confronts the difficulties and challenges involved in practicing hospitality, even as she compellingly describes the ways in which it can reshape communities and lives. She shows how the practice of hospitality opens us to other practices and virtues, enabling us more profoundly to welcome Christ into our midst.

Pohl writes, "Offering hospitality in a world distorted by sin, injustice, and brokenness will rarely be easy. We need a combination of grace and wisdom. Substantial hospitality to strangers involves spiritual and moral intuition, prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit, the accumulated wisdom of a tradition, and a pragmatic assessment of each situation." I would emphasize that the "intuition" Pohl refers to is actually something that must be shaped and formed by habits and virtues, lest we invite the contemporary "intuitionism" that appeals to largely unformed impulses and "gut feelings." But given the shape of Pohl's attention to

hospitality as a habit, a practice and a way of life, I suspect that there is not a significant difference in our understanding of the gift and skill of discernment necessary for practicing hospitality well.

On one level, Pohl's book is a relatively straightforward call to think about one's own home, work, church and community from the perspective of Christ's welcoming grace, and to take some concrete steps to practice hospitality in authentically Christian ways. On another level, Pohl's analysis suggests that those initial concrete steps may occasion more radical transformation of our lives and our character, as we discover that becoming hospitable people also invites and requires us to attend to other practices and virtues.

It is probably no accident that those whom we lift up as saints, both those officially recognized and those whom we hold close to our hearts, are typically people who embody powerful habits of hospitality. Pohl's instructive and insightful book shows, through its engagement with scripture and tradition as well as in its powerful evocation of contemporary communities, how lives can be shaped by practices such as hospitality and the habits developed through those practices. As my wife and I discovered afresh in our conversation with our friends, it is a powerful experience to behold the holy glow of people who not only have practiced hospitality, but who have become hospitable people.