

What the church can learn from Airbnb

By [Ruth Everhart](#)

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I'm a Presbyterian pastor who [often talks about hospitality](#), sometimes in relation to one of my other passions, which is [uncluttering](#).

Last spring my husband and I took the practice of hospitality to a new level when we became [Airbnb](#) hosts. Airbnb is part of the [sharing economy](#).

Many people are curious about the experience of hosting. Why would we want to open up our home to complete strangers? I'll readily say that the propelling reason was to create an income stream. Writing is rewarding in many ways, but not financially. Also, our stage of life fits with hosting since we have unused bedrooms. Owning a home generates costs, so why not let those rooms earn their keep? Here is [our listing](#) (there are two listings, one for each bedroom).

We welcomed our first guest last May; he stayed for a couple of weeks during a job transition. Since then many of our guests have been doctoral students, often from other countries. Only a few of our guests have been from the United States. I speculate that is due to our preoccupation with personal privacy.

I have found it quite interesting to learn to navigate boundaries while there are strangers in the house. Usually it comes down to basic cleanliness, civility, and communication.

We have found some unexpected benefits to being an Airbnb host (besides having become more regular about cleaning our bathrooms!).

We have discovered how quickly strangers can become friends. A chat at the kitchen table over a pot of tea is always pleasant. We have met guests who share our interests in many things: milkweed, the Chesapeake Bay, Buddhism, neuroscience, cats, new technology, the Shenandoah, the Civil War, organic cooking. Conversation has never lagged. At other times we have zero conversation with the guest, which is also fine.

We have the pleasure of being a support to young people who are transitioning to the area. One young woman—upon hearing that I could squeeze her into a busy calendar—cried out: Why are you being so nice to me? I chuckled and said: Because once I was your age, relocating to a city where I didn't know a soul. Upon reflection, I would say that this is the best part of being an Airbnb host: paying hospitality forward. In a world that seems increasingly violent and full of tension, it feels good to add just a few drops of hospitality to the mix, and to ease someone's burden.

We have also been guests a couple of times. When traveling we prefer Airbnb to regular B&Bs (Bed & Breakfast) because they're less costly. Mainly because at Airbnb it's not assumed that the host will provide breakfast. Most Airbnb hosts provide coffee and tea, whereas a typical B&B provides a sumptuous breakfast. (Vacation model vs. budget model.)

As we've gone along, we've added a few rules. We have clarified the issue of friends staying overnight, for example. We ask overnight friends or guests to be registered, for security reasons. Recently I specified that no firearms are allowed in our home. I am fine with letting the rules evolve as we go. Also, I understand that there are regulatory/legal issues in some places; it is not my purpose to respond to those. I am only sharing my personal experience here.

Here are some Airbnb learnings that may have applications to how we do church:

- Guests have different needs and it is possible to adjust to those if the host pays attention.
- A clean, uncluttered environment says, I am ready for your arrival.
- Effective hospitality requires rules, which evolve naturally from the situation and its needs.
- Hospitality is often sweeter when it's unexpected, meaning last-minute or after being caught in a surprise deluge. In fact, crises provide an opening to give and receive a gracious presence.
- Sometimes hospitality is absolutely silent.
- Hospitality is good for the host as well as the guest.
- Most people like cats.

PS: The new logo has generated some talk. I love the video introducing it, even if I agree that the logo has some unfortunate anatomical resonances. What's your reaction?

Originally posted at [Love the Work \(do the work\)](#)