The hard work of welcoming

By [Teri McDowell Ott](#)
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I have three fantastic student interns this year who are learning about the hard work of welcoming. At our college's Presbyterian House we host a "Dinner and Devotion" program every Sunday that we advertise as "All Students Welcome." Of course, not all students feel welcome attending a religious and spiritual life program, unless you work hard to let them know that you mean it—that they really are *all* welcome.

On their own, my student interns have come up with some great ideas about how to welcome people to the Presbyterian House and help students feel comfortable. Read this post, ["Getting Comfortable"](#) by my student intern Angela to learn more about their great work.

Typically, though, about 20 to 30 students show up at our Presbyterian House each Sunday. My students and I greet everyone at the door as they arrive. We insist on name tags (knowing someone's name is a crucial step in welcoming) and we never relax as the hosts. We are always circling the group, reaching out to students on the margins, making conversation with those who look uncomfortable, introducing students to other students.

After each program we take time to debrief—to discuss what went well and what we could improve upon. This is when the challenge of "all welcome" becomes abundantly clear because the group we have successfully welcomed to the Presbyterian House is diverse. Predominantly, the students who attend are Christian. But we are also excited to have some nonreligious students; students who are questioning; students who are Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish; students who are gay, straight, transgender; students who are conservative, moderate, and liberal. It's an eclectic mix—which offers the potential for great discussions—but also makes the work of welcoming that much more difficult.

Lots of questions arise for us: can our Presbyterian House program be explicitly Christian and yet still be welcoming to students of other religions or no religion? How do we pray without making our nonreligious students uncomfortable? What kind of

food should we serve given different dietary needs? How do we acknowledge and value the perspective of the three or four minority students without singling them out? Honestly, our questions about how to welcome just lead to more questions—which sometimes lead to feeling overwhelmed by the difficulty and complexity of the task.

I think my understanding of the biblical practice of hospitality has been overly nostalgic. The theme of welcoming the stranger, the foreigner, the alien, runs throughout the Bible, giving our scriptures a beautiful "all welcome" feel. Never have I stopped to consider, though, that such beautiful hospitality would, practically speaking, be so difficult. But how could it not? Jews were expected to make space for strangers and share limited resources. Jesus and his disciples relied on the cultural expectation of hospitality as they traveled from town to town. With no way to make call-ahead reservations, just imagine what it took to welcome this unexpected crowd of 13! Practicing hospitality in biblical times meant practicing inconvenience; it involved some serious self-sacrifice. So I'm sure all sorts of questions arose in the first century too about the difficulty and complexity of this task.

But as my social media feeds blow up with haunting images of the refugee crisis, dismissive statements about the #blacklivesmatter movement, and Donald Trump's inflammatory rhetoric about Mexican immigrants, I am reminded that these are questions worth asking. Yes, welcoming others is hard work. It's overwhelming and exhausting. But when I think about the kind of community we are seeking to create at our college's Presbyterian House, and the kind of hospitality we are teaching our students, I cannot help but wish more would commit themselves to this beautiful, biblical practice. I wish we could hang a sign out on the front door of God's house saying, "All are Welcome" and then work hard to let every person know that we mean it.

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