

## **RADICAL WELCOME**

Material adapted from Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006)

### **Week 1**

#### **The Radical Welcome Journey**

Read “The Radical Welcome Journey” and “Defining Radical Welcome”

1. How would you describe the practice of radical welcome in a congregation or ministry? What happens when individuals and churches practice radical welcome?
2. Have you seen radical welcome in practice? When have you wished it had been practiced?
3. What is *not* radical welcome? Identify some tempting, easy definitions that don't actually capture radical welcome as you understand it.
4. Reflect on the definition of The Other. In what parts of your life are you a target, and where are you a non-target? Who is The Other in your life?
5. When have you been radically welcomed? When have you walked into a place and found your voice, gifts, and culture appreciated and valued and included, perhaps despite your expectations? Reflect on that experience. If you can't recall such an experience, then reflect on how it would feel to be welcomed in this way.
6. When have you felt left out? When have you entered a community or situation only to discover no room for your voice or your identity? Reflect on that experience. If you can't recall such an experience, then reflect on how it would feel to be excluded in this way.



## The Radical Welcome Journey

Come we that love the Lord,  
and let our joys be known;  
Join in a song of sweet accord,  
join in a song of sweet accord,  
And thus surround the throne,  
and thus surround the throne.  
We're marching to Zion,  
beautiful, beautiful Zion,  
We're marching upward to Zion,  
the beautiful city of God.  
"MARCHING TO ZION"

### **A Tale of Two Welcomes**

I will never forget that winter's day, sitting in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, a grand Gothic edifice on New York's Upper West Side. Though I had worshiped on the fringe of the congregation while living, working and writing in the city, this time I had come simply to celebrate a friend's ordination.

Seated at the back of the church, distant from the action at the front of the chancel, I was slowly, inexorably tuning out. And then, with a sharp visceral tug, I tuned back in.

"Lord, I will lift mine eyes to the hills, knowing my help, it comes from you . . ."

Was I hearing right?

"Your peace you give me in times of the storm. You are the source of my strength . . ."

Could it be?

"You are the strength of my life."

Oh my God, that was it!

"I lift my hands in total praise."

Like a giddy child, I turned to my friends on either side, whispering, "Do you hear it? Do you hear it?" They nodded, but they really didn't have a clue.

On the surface, we all heard a magnificent quartet from a local black church singing Richard Smallwood's "Total Praise." What I and perhaps a few others could hear was sweet memory. My mama used to play "Total Praise" on those random Sundays when she would pack me and my brother into the Oldsmobile Omega and cart us to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. Later, I sang in some school-based gospel choirs and cobbled together my own gospel music collection. Even later, once I landed in the Episcopal Church, I played the songs religiously while I dressed for church, my private time to "get my praise on." But hearing this music—a pop gospel hymn sung by soaring, expressive black voices—in an immense, dignified, European-American identified space? The tears poured, my hands waved, I lifted my voice, and deep inside I heaved a huge sigh of relief and gratitude for the welcome.

Years after my official reception into the Episcopal Church, a part of me that I didn't even know was sitting outside finally opened the door and came in.

*Rewind a decade.* It was the early 1990s, toward the end of my first year of divinity school, and I had just arrived at an Episcopal guest house in a major U.S. city. Mind you, I wasn't Episcopalian. I wasn't technically even Christian yet (I liked to study it and sing about it, but that was my limit). Still, coming to the door of the lovely building was like coming to a God-filled oasis for this country girl.

The host appeared at the door and asked how much I would be paying before I could step inside. I hopefully mentioned the sliding scale their materials advertised. The host offered to take \$20 off the price *if* I didn't eat meals with the community. It was still pricey, especially if I had to arrange my own food. The host smiled, suggested I try the nearby youth hostel, and shut the door, leaving a single, petite, young, black woman with limited financial resources and no place to go on the doorstep.

I walked away wondering what kind of religious community, and what kind of church, these Episcopalians had created. Whatever it was, I was sure it was not very Christian. And needless to say, it was radically unwelcoming.

I kept my distance from Episcopalians after that encounter. But the God of surprises had a shock tucked away for me. A few years later, I was baptized at a remarkable multicultural Lutheran parish in Boston, and even considered ordination in the Lutheran fold. But something still hadn't clicked. Then I discovered St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a vibrant city congregation filled with people of color and whites; heterosexuals, lesbians, gay men, bisexual people, and transgender people; young adults, some youth, middle-aged people, and seniors; poor and middle-class people rubbing shoulders with the Cambridge elite.

Not only did this mixed-up community feel like home, but the Anglican theology I was voraciously consuming resonated with my own latent sense of what a lived faith ought to be. I needed a comprehensive theology that tolerates ambiguity and acknowledges that no single perspective could ever capture the mind of God. I needed to join a body of people who maintain a reverence for tradition and Scripture alongside a deep respect for reason and context. I wanted the awe, the mess, the beauty, the poetry. I craved the emphasis on justice rooted in an incarnational, resurrection-focused faith. I had found it.

But that experience of welcome did not erase the memory of a door shut in my face years before. Yes, I have witnessed the enthusiastic response when a mostly white congregation sings that rare gospel tune, and I have quietly rejoiced when others remarked, "Why don't we sing this music more often? It's like something in me wakes up and starts to praise God again." But far more often, I have suffered the snide comments about evangelical and gospel music that is not "theologically sophisticated" enough for our churches. I have heard or read leaders of supposedly welcoming churches saying they don't want to "dumb down" their sermons or programs, or to water down their identity, in order to accommodate different races, classes and generations. As a thirtysomething person of color raised in the working-class South, I've had to continually set aside the hope of hearing and seeing the voices, images, stories, and values of my home culture incorporated regularly in any but the most intentionally welcoming mainline churches.

And I am not alone.

We are already here: the strangers, the outcasts, the poor, people of color, gay and lesbian people, young adults, and so many more. We resonate with our church's theology and traditions. We love our congregations and pray and labor for their health, growth and ministry.

That doesn't mean we feel welcome.

This conflicted experience has led me to wonder what it would take to reverse the effect of years, if not generations, of alienation, marginalization and outright rejection. Is it even possible to transform mainline churches into the multicultural, multigenerational, inclusive body of Christ so many of us yearn to become?

That's where radical welcome comes in.

*Radical welcome*<sup>1</sup> is the spiritual practice of embracing and being changed by the gifts, presence, voices, and power of The Other: the people systemically cast out of or marginalized within a church, a denomination and/or society. Your church may be predominantly white or Latino, wealthy or working-class, gay or straight, middle-aged or fairly young. Regardless of your demographic profile, you still have a margin, a disempowered Other who is in your midst or just outside your door. In fact, you may be The Other. Radical welcome is concerned with the transformation and opening of individual hearts, congregations and systems so that The Other might find in your community a warm place and a mutual embrace *and* so that you are finally free to embrace and be transformed by authentic relationship with the margins.

## The Radical Welcome Project

My survival in the church has depended on finding communities devoted to extending radical welcome. I first saw them in relative abundance on a study tour in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. But what if you couldn't get to L.A. or some other oasis? Where were their stories, and how could others learn from their experiences?

I dusted off my reporter's cap that summer and set out to examine eight churches moving toward fully embracing The Other in what I called "The Radical Welcome Project." Those congregations were Grace Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts; St. Philip's and St. Mary's, both in Harlem, New York; St. Bartholomew's in Atlanta, Georgia; St. Paul's in Duluth, Minnesota; All Saints in Pasadena, California; Holy Faith in Inglewood, California; and Church of the Apostles in Seattle, Washington. I consciously chose to focus on the unique hopes and challenges of a selection of Episcopal churches, trusting that ultimately their struggles and insights would also prove useful across denominational contexts.

The sample covers small, medium and corporate-sized churches and draws from the coasts, the heartland and the South, as well as the suburbs, large cities and smaller communities. Most importantly, I wanted to study churches that ran the gamut in terms of community composition and who and how they were welcoming. In particular, I opted to focus on how each dealt with embracing across lines of race and ethnicity, generation, sexual orientation, and class privilege. Some wrestled with one issue, most with a combination. No one had the same margins or the same center, so the lessons are truly broad in their application.

In each congregation, I conducted in-depth research over the course of two weeks, including advance interviews and parish-written histories and other introductory materials, followed by at least ten days spent attending services, programs, meetings, and informal conversations, and concluding with follow-up contacts as necessary. My study of these congregations was less a precise social scientific study than an exploration and exercise in deep listening. Along the way, we talked about where they started, where they are now, and what steps they took along the way. We discussed how they welcome people from the margins, who The Other is for them, why they've taken up this Christian practice, what has proved most challenging on the road to radical welcome, and what barriers remain. They told me of their successes, their hopes and their failures, admitting that they were far from perfect, still met plenty of resistance, and sometimes fell off the path. And so, while these may not be the most radically welcoming churches anywhere, I came to value them for their sheer humanity and humility: they fall short and they keep trying, the momentum has waxed and waned, and that's part of the wisdom they can pass along to the rest of us.

There are lots of radically welcoming Episcopal congregations nationwide and plenty more outside the Episcopal fold, and I've taken care to talk with representatives from a number of these communities. Over the past several years, I've interviewed more than 200 lay leaders, clergy, professors, seminarians, liturgists, change leaders at the local and national levels, and other observers: all of

whom shared wise reflections on change, welcome, fear, church history, theology, Scripture, and more.

In the pages that follow, you will hear these voices in a lively conversation with the writings of the faithful, from the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament through centuries of Christian theology leading to contemporary teachers throughout the Christian tradition and beyond our fold. Finally, I've incorporated insights drawn from my experience in faith-based community organizing and from consulting and sharing this material in communities considering or already committed to transformational growth. All this wisdom is compiled here and offered as bread for your journey.

## Your Radical Welcome Journey

Has God whispered in your ear or tugged your sleeve, urging you to step off the curb and onto this road? You're in the right place now, especially if

- your neighborhood has changed—maybe there are more people of color or young people or poor people or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people—and while you want to do the “right” thing, you have no idea where to start.
- you are one of The Others within a congregation, and you hope to spark or nurture your community's commitment to transformation and find nourishment so that you can persevere.
- your church and area are homogeneous (or seem to be), but you still feel called to radical welcome as a spiritual practice—one that trains and stretches your heart to receive more of God, to surrender to the surprising, transforming movement of the Holy Spirit—and you want to find those opportunities to say “yes” to God and to The Other.
- you want to learn the basic language of radical welcome and wrap your mind and tongue around a term that's getting more airplay everyday.
- you hope to move deeper, to get grounded in the biblical and theological issues surrounding and supporting radical welcome and perhaps to share those foundational insights with others in your congregation and community.
- you know you want to see your church become radically welcoming, but you could use some concrete examples and inspiring images of other congregations that have walked this road for a while, to see for yourself how it works.
- you're ready to cast your own radically welcoming vision, to imagine in Technicolor what would happen at your church if you embraced fresh words, voices, songs, and faces, all standing alongside the wise, revered traditions and voices that have grounded your church's identity so far;
- or you've already begun the journey toward radical change, but now you need to reckon with your history, fear (your own and others'), complacency, or a host of other challenges along the way.

This book is far more than a how-to guide for quickly achieving those goals. Rather, in the chapters that follow, I invite you to be part of a journey. Along the way, we will consider the biblical and theological foundations for radical welcome, explore vivid pictures of the dream come to life in several communities, and the resources people engaged in the work told me they found most essential—and hardest to find. You can take it to the next level using the book's online companion—“Bread for the Journey”—which includes exercises, Bible studies, charts, strategic planning tips, and a workshop for congregations.

As you read, examine and move forward, I hope you will be patient with yourself and your community. Please stay rooted in hope, rather than paralyzing guilt or finger-pointing (at yourself or others). Try to be honest about your story, your privilege and your fears. Don't be afraid to keep asking, “What new thing is God calling me to be and to do?” and “What support, education, training and practices would help me to follow through on what I now imagine for myself and my congregation?” The road into new life is a long one, and this leg of the journey is designed to stretch your imagination, fuel your passion and guide you closer to God's radically welcoming dream for us all.

<sup>1</sup> The term *radical welcome* has cropped up independently in various communities over the past decade or so. I coined the phrase for my own use after colleagues demanded a concise descriptor for the broadly inclusive churches I was beginning to study. My initial project—spending four months conducting intensive, on-site research with eight congregations nationwide—was called the Radical Welcome Project.

Later, I discovered leaders at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in New York City use the same term to characterize their ministry to all God's people, especially seekers and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people. Other groups in the “welcoming congregations” movement—which seeks total inclusion for LGBT people—have expanded the idea of welcoming so that it encompasses an even broader community of outcasts. They landed at radical welcome by a natural evolutionary process.



# Defining Radical Welcome

It's time to bring a different set of questions.  
Not just how do we get more people, but how do we  
share power, how do you create a culture that is flexible  
and fluid enough to be open, constantly evaluating and  
reorganizing based on the reality around you?

THE REVEREND ALTAGRACIA PEREZ, HOLY FAITH EPISCOPAL CHURCH, INGLEWOOD, CALIFORNIA

Just what is radical welcome? Most people hear the term and think it's about having a warm, dependable welcome at the door of the church and a really good cup of coffee and snacks in the church hall. They assume it's the province of the Hospitality and Greeters Committee or maybe, just maybe, the Outreach and Justice group.

Those are wonderful goals. But that's not where radical welcome is aiming. Radical welcome is a fundamental spiritual practice, one that combines the universal Christian ministry of welcome and hospitality with a clear awareness of power<sup>1</sup> and patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Just look at the words. Radical. Welcome. Both terms are rich with meaning. *Welcome* says come in, sit down, stay a while; we are honored to have you. It also says the door is open, a bit like, "You're welcome to whatever is in the fridge." And it indicates an openness of spirit, that what we do is a pleasure. When someone thanks you for a gift or kind gesture, your "You're welcome" communicates graciousness and ease and allows the other person to receive with equal ease and grace.

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf explores yet another avenue for understanding welcome: the concept of *embrace*. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf traces the four movements that compose mutual embrace<sup>2</sup>:

- *Act One: Opening the arms.* This move telegraphs the desire to reach beyond yourself in order to connect with the other,<sup>3</sup> to be part of the other and to have the other be part of you. The act of opening your arms also creates space for the other to come in—boundaries are down, the self is open. Finally, he says, open arms are an invitation. "Like a door left opened for an expected friend, they are a call to come in."<sup>4</sup>
- *Act Two: Waiting.* You cannot force the other to come inside. You cannot reach out and grasp and coerce. You must wait at the boundary of the other, wait for him to open to you, hope that the power of your vulnerability and desire for the other will prove compelling, even transforming.
- *Act Three: Closing.* After the other steps into the embrace, there is *closing*. This is mutual indwelling, holding the other within the bounds of yourself and finding yourself received in kind. Such indwelling shouldn't be confused with disappearing, melting into each other or merging into undifferentiated beings. "In an embrace, the identity of the self is both preserved and transformed, and the alterity (difference) of the other is both affirmed as alterity and partly received into the ever changing identity of the self."<sup>5</sup> Nor do you have perfect understanding of each other; the goal is not to master the other, but to receive the other on her own terms and continue to seek relationship.
- *Act Four: Opening the arms.* Because the two have not melted into one, you may once again open your arms. Now you have the chance to look at yourself and rediscover your own identity, "enriched by the traces that the presence of the other has left."<sup>6</sup> And you look again at the other, the one whose identity will continue to change, the one who will continue to be both friend and mystery. The one you may embrace again with your now open arms.

This is the drama of reconciling, mutual welcome. Think of the times you have been embraced, welcomed, received. We all know how good it is to come home like that, even if the territory is new. When someone carefully, lovingly sets a table for us; when someone thinks of us and our needs and hopes; when someone listens with full attention to our story and then offers their own, without seeking to master or coopt; when someone sets aside their own preferences in order to joyfully, humbly defer to ours. When we are welcomed like this, we can experience the state of freedom and love I believe God wills for all people. It is a joy to receive this welcome. It is also a joy to offer this welcome, to say to another person: "May I know you better?"

But there is more to radical welcome, as the word *radical* signifies. Radical, in this instance, should not connote the unreasonable, undisciplined action some people associate with the term. Instead, radical amplifies the welcome, broadening and deepening and launching it to the next level. It also indicates a deep, fierce, urgent commitment to some core ideal. That's not just any ideal, but one

at the root of a tradition, a movement, and, in our case, a faith. As Bill Tully, rector of St. Bartholomew's in New York, told me: "Radical is Jesus. Radical is getting down to the roots."

If welcome is the drama of embrace, then a *radical* welcome is the embrace that is hardest of all, requiring the broadest extension and opening of self, even as it draws us back to our core values. It is the embrace of the marginalized, silenced, oppressed Stranger. "Here is the core of hospitality," according to Father Daniel Homan, OSB, and Lonni Collins Pratt. "May I know you better? Will you come closer, please? No, it will not be easy, but make no mistake about it, your life depends on this saving stranger coming to you and stretching your tight little heart."<sup>7</sup>

Who is this "saving stranger," The Other, who is at once a full, complex, individual human being with a unique story and perspective *and* a member of a larger group that exists within the social hierarchy, as we all do? It's best to take on this question in two chunks. Let's begin closer to home. Depending on who the dominant, empowered groups are in your parish, The Others are the ones you have the power to systemically marginalize and/or oppress. They are, to borrow the language of the Visions Group, the *targets* of oppression, while those who hold certain privileges and power are *non-targets*.<sup>8</sup> It matters not what you as an individual feel you have done to The Other, or even whether there are particular ways you as a congregation have consciously hurt another group. Identifying The Other requires only the recognition that, within the social system in which we all function, some groups have been given social, economic and political power over other groups.

Now, we can widen the circle. Every church is a social institution, woven into a complex cultural and historical tapestry that operates beyond but has great implications for the individual congregation. So we all have to ask, "Who are The Others in relation to our tradition or denomination—the groups whose voices and gifts have not been part of shaping our collective identity, the ones who have not held much power or been welcomed with open arms?"

This level of discernment is crucial, if a little tougher to grasp. Suppose your church has lots of working class members; do you need to think about whether you're sending exclusive, classist signals? What if you're a largely black church in a multicultural neighborhood: why would you need to worry about radically welcoming blacks and other people of color? Why? Because when people who have been marginalized see the sign hanging on your door—Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, Methodist, you name it—they may automatically leap to a number of assumptions about who you are, who is welcome to fully share your common life and who is not. Despite your diverse membership, you may still be participating in many of the exclusive patterns of your tradition: music that is culturally limited, leadership structures that reflect the expectations of European, privileged, older, or straight communities, and so on. It takes extra vigilance and care to reverse the effect of the exclusive stereotypes and patterns your tradition has laid on you. It takes understanding who your congregation and your tradition have pushed to the margins. It takes a recognition of who is The Other and why.

Those are hard words for most of us to hear and process. If you're in a non-target group, you may feel the guilt and resistance creeping in: "I see where this is going. I'm now the enemy. Same old story." If you identify strongly with a target group, you may feel yourself somewhat objectified: "Surely I'm more than my group, more than my victim or oppressed status."

I can only promise you that this is not about guilt trips or victim complexes, but a statement regarding reality. We cannot transform systems without naming them. We cannot work for freedom and embrace unless we acknowledge what forces keep us from the reconciliation and compassion we know God is holding out for all of us. Part of what makes radical welcome *radical* is that it goes into the roots under relationships and systems, clearing debris and maybe even rewiring the motherboard so that we can live and welcome in new ways.

## Radical Welcome Is . . .

How do all those elements finally come together at the congregational level? When I describe a church as "radically welcoming," it means the community seeks to welcome the voices, presence and power of many groups—especially those who have been defined as The Other, pushed to the margins, cast out, silenced, and closeted—in order to help shape the congregation's common life and mission.

Few communities could achieve the vision of radical welcome in its totality. Radically welcoming communities are the ones committed to transformed life, a life that aims to be:

- **Hospitable:** They seek to offer a gracious, warm space to all people, especially those who have been defined as "Other," systemically disempowered and oppressed, pushed to the margins. In the Episcopal Church and most mainline churches, that could include people of color, poor people, children and young adults, gay and lesbian people, seniors, people with disabilities, and many other groups.
- **Connected:** They link to their neighbors, to their neighborhood, to brothers and sisters beyond their neighborhood with whom they actively practice what it means to embrace and be changed by Jesus.
- **Centered:** They possess a clear, compelling sense of Christian identity. That self-understanding is based in part in their cultural and denominational heritage, but primarily in the unapologetic and clear call to live out the dream of God as they have discerned it in light of Scripture, tradition, reason, and their context.
- **Open to conversion:** They attempt to listen carefully to, make room for, share power with, and learn from groups who've been silenced, closeted and disempowered, and they are open to genuine conversion and transformation based on this encounter with The Other. On the ground, that means they allow God's Spirit *and* the gifts of The Other to enrich and transform their understanding of who is inside and who is outside, what ministries they undertake, how they select leaders, how they do business, how they worship, what they claim as their mission and purpose, and how they partner with other groups.
- **Intentional:** They engage in training, research, active listening, strategic planning: some conscious, contextually appropriate effort that addresses individual, congregational, institutional, and systemic change. They realize radical welcome does not come merely as a matter of goodwill or a by-product of enthusiastic outreach programs.



- **Comprehensive:** They recognize that the work cannot be left to a specialized ministry area, like the Outreach Ministry, the Social Justice Team or the Hospitality Committee; it is a way of being, and should eventually be cultivated by the chief leaders through formation, worship, mission, and other areas of congregational life.
- **Becoming:** They realize this journey is never finished, so they are always becoming, always looking beyond the congregation to see who has been left out or pushed out, always aware that the stranger's face is the very face of Christ.
- **Beyond diversity:** They understand that radical welcome is not merely about diversity, evangelism, multiculturalism, inclusion, or getting it "right." It is simply, profoundly about being faithful disciples of the Christ who welcomed and still welcomes all.
- **Faithful:** They honor radical transformation not as a necessary evil or as change for the sake of change, a response to misplaced liberal guilt or a church growth strategy, but instead because they are saying "yes" to God's gracious invitation to welcome as Christ welcomes.
- **Compassionate:** They prioritize the work of creating "space for grace"<sup>2</sup>: small groups, forums and other settings where people can develop, express and hold their dreams and their fear of change, even as they deepen their commitment to radical welcome.
- **Real:** They acknowledge they will not be perfect or consistently, radically embrace every group. A radically welcoming congregation is one where the members are becoming God's radically welcoming people.

## Radical Welcome Is Not . . .

As you seek to understand radical welcome, get crystal clear on what it is not:

- *Radical welcome is not an invitation to assimilate.* We must move beyond the traditional inviting church paradigm, beyond inviting people to come inside and take on what we've already packaged and nailed down (as you will see in part 2). We are offering an embrace, and that means we have opened ourselves, offered ourselves. The risk is great, but embrace requires us to gird ourselves with the love of God and to say, "Come, bring who you are. My arms are open to you. Would you open yours to me?" We will receive one another, not losing our unique identities and histories, but releasing the rigid boundaries so that our stories can connect and a new community might be born.
- *Radical welcome is not feel-good ministry.* We are not pandering to the self-centered consumerism or corporate, customer-service expectations currently sucking the life and gospel out of many churches. Radical welcome is not simply a matter of making new or marginalized people feel comfortable, fashioning church in our own image, or hopping onboard for the next cultural trend.
- *Radical welcome is not reverse discrimination.* There is no need to toss out the gifts of tradition, or to ignore the needs and voices of people who have enjoyed certain privileges. An abundant, radically welcoming attitude says there is room for everyone to be heard, and that there is something beautiful, valuable and holy that everyone brings to the holy banquet, including those who've sat at the head of the table for a long time. In reality, there's bound to be some relinquishment and loss on the part of the empowered groups, but only so that each group can speak and help to shape the community they now share.
- *Radical welcome is not a conventional church growth strategy.* You are quite likely to grow if you take it seriously. But that's because it is an expression of Christ's New Covenant, a way that is rooted in the gospel. Should you engage this transformation, others will surely find your community attractive and compelling, because they will see the passionate and compassionate spirit of Christ at the center of it, and because your hearts will be so open, radiant and fearless, they will prove irresistible.
- *Radical welcome is not political correctness or a haphazard, reactionary throwing out of the baby with the bathwater.* It is deeply faithful, deeply committed to welcoming and participating in the continuous, powerful, surprising in-breaking of the reign of God. It's about finding yourself utterly accepted and embraced by God, and then running into the world and your community to see how you could extend that hospitality to others.

## Eight Radically Welcoming Congregations

I could tell you more about radical welcome, or I could show you. Here are some brief sketches from eight congregations trying to live the dream of radical welcome.

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We had to convince people that no one was trying to take over "their" church and run away with it. This isn't an "us" versus "them" situation. There's only us.

ENNIS DUFFIS, GRACE CHURCH-LAWRENCE

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**Grace Episcopal Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts**, was faced with that most painful of dilemmas: change or die. The historically white, middle-class city of Lawrence had shifted, and the sons and daughters of the aging white church community had moved on. Members of the dying church opted to live, and that meant embracing their now-Latino neighborhood.

From the beginning, there were concerns that Grace would become a Latino church, that the new members would actually "steal" the church from their white elders. The Latino priest and missionary, Ennis Duffis, took that fear very seriously. "We had to convince people that no one was trying to take over 'their' church and run away with it. This isn't an 'us' versus 'them' situation. There's only us."

Resurrection came when white and Latino members worked together to create and run several homegrown community ministries, and when they intentionally crafted opportunities to communicate openly and to truly enjoy and respect each other's cultures.

Eventually, the dominant Anglo community began to welcome the leadership of younger, less educated, less affluent Latinos. Moving beyond mere representation, the thriving congregation now looks like the neighborhood: more Latino than white, including a Latina who heads the vestry and a Spanish-language service with praise music and lots of children, preceded by a smaller but stable Anglo service. The next frontier for Grace: continue to grow while nurturing points of common ground between the white and Latino worship communities and the ever-changing neighborhood.

Harlem, New York, is a mix of cultures, races and classes, and small but spiritually mighty **St. Mary's Episcopal Church** in West Harlem seeks to embody it all. A banner at the front of the church announces to the world: "St. Mary's-West Harlem: The I Am Not Afraid' Church."

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Jesus says go to the highways and byways and welcome those people. This church came to the byways and got me and showed me that love.

JASEN TOWNSEND, ST. MARY'S-WEST HARLEM

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The presence of white and black members who hail from Harlem's established middle class and from nearby Columbia University is no great surprise here. Even the growing Latino population fits the neighborhood's multicultural profile. Perhaps most remarkable—especially for the Episcopal Church—is the leadership of the homeless and poor members, many of whom came for the community meal program downstairs and, thanks to the genuine and explicit welcome, made their way upstairs for Sunday worship.

These powerful apostles have brought a fresh spirit and urgency to the reading and singing of the gospel, and constantly challenge their companions' middle-class Anglican expectations. They also bring a commitment to welcome others as they've been welcomed. Jasen Townsend entered St. Mary's by way of the soup kitchen several years ago. When I met him, he was marching, shouting and waving as a straight ally in New York City's Pride Parade. Ask why he does it, and Townsend just points back to the gospel. "If the guests who were invited to the wedding feast won't come in, Jesus says go to the highways and byways and welcome those people. This church came to the byways and got me and showed me that love. . . . If you want to love Christ, if you want to live like Christ, then you've got to love every person." The next frontier for St. Mary's: broadening their radical welcome to include even more Latinos and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

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We have a history of resisting oppression, but we also know we can't live off that glamorous history. Others need us. How do we support them, too?

EMILY FRYE, ST. PHILIP'S-HARLEM

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Just blocks away, **St. Philip's Episcopal Church** in Harlem, New York, looks for the most part like what it is: the oldest black Episcopal Church in New York. Parishioners point with pride to their courageous founders, who in 1809 left the venerable Trinity Episcopal Church on Wall Street and demanded a separate home for black Episcopalians in New York. St. Philip's has been proclaiming black liberation theology ever since.

That venerable history drew the cream of black society for the better part of the last two centuries. But when Cecily Broderick y Guerra came to serve as their first female rector, she wasn't impressed. Instead, she said she sensed the church had become a "terminally closed system." So she set out preparing the congregation for transformation, both to welcome residents of their economically depressed neighborhood and to make room for gay and lesbian people at the center of their common life. She preached about the link between discipleship, *welcome* and transformation. Meanwhile, older black leaders began to make another link: the one between movements for racial justice and the struggle for gay liberation. As Emily Frye, a senior lay leader, explained it to me: "We have a history of resisting oppression, but we also know we can't live off that glamorous history. Others need us. How do we support them, too?"

Thanks to that welcome, a small, committed gay and lesbian community has grown at St. Philip's. Recently, with the support of the vestry and the Diocese of New York, the church became the host for Epiphany, the first Episcopal group for black Christian gays and lesbians. The church's leaders hope they can deepen the welcome to the LGBT community, drawing gay and lesbian people into parish leadership and encouraging members used to fighting for black civil rights to demonstrate the same passionate concern for their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters—and children. The next frontier for St. Philip's: keep moving on LGBT welcome while building greater relationship with the poor community that now dominates their corner of sweet Harlem.

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I think the cross over our altar says it all. You can't tell if Jesus is being crucified, if he's ascending or descending. What's clear is that his arms are outstretched to embrace us all.

JOHN YORK, ST. BARTHOLOMEWS-ATLANTA

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Tucked away in the land of blooming dogwoods, **St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church** in Atlanta, Georgia, is like a radically welcoming oasis. It bears all the marks of a healthy, suburban Atlanta parish—multi-building campus, more than 700 members on an average Sunday, thriving children's programs—and one mark you might not expect: the first out gay rector called in the Diocese of



Atlanta. That move took a lot of guts. It also took plenty of preparation; the community's leaders had to carve out appropriate spaces for questions, storytelling, healing, venting, and even healthy departure before and after William "Mac" Thigpen's arrival.

For years, St. Bart's has made its mark by connecting with the people other churches might not, first creating a nightly shelter for homeless families in their own parish hall and then welcoming young adults tied to the nearby Emory University community for worship *and* leadership. Whatever they do, lay leader John York told me, they try to imagine how it speaks a fresh, liberating word about God. "We have this opportunity to say, 'Not all churches are like the one you grew up in,'" said York, a Texan transplant who grew up Southern Baptist. "I think the cross over our altar says it all. You can't tell if Jesus is being crucified, if he's ascending or descending. What's clear is that his arms are outstretched to embrace us all."

The next frontier for St. Bart's: extending the welcome and keeping people of color and people without the economic privilege most members take for granted.

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Some of us were reluctant to open to the neighborhood. We worried about stealing. We needed to go through some change to become a place that wasn't afraid of having "them" around.

NANCY CLAYPOOL, ST. PAUL'S-DULUTH

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**St. Paul's Episcopal Church** in Duluth, Minnesota, was once known by neighbors as "the fortress." Duluth's class stratifications run deep, and for most of the church's history, a spot on St. Paul's rolls went right along with a country club membership. Then the money drifted further east. Now St. Paul's sits in one of America's largest poor, white communities, with increasing numbers of people of color only adding to the complex mix.

St. Paul's tried running from their neighborhood, usually preferring to "do for" their less privileged neighbors. The tide and the church's attitude have turned decisively during the last decade. But they did more than open their doors to the poorer and more ethnically diverse neighborhood. They opened the doors and *listened*. Then they set up or revamped their own ministries according to what they heard. Slowly, this historically white and wealthy church has opened its lovely, historic building in order to house homegrown social ministries and provide ample meeting space to a variety of secular community social services. As long-time parishioner Nancy Claypool admitted, "Some of us were reluctant to open to the neighborhood. We worried about stealing. We needed to go through some change to become a place that wasn't afraid of having 'them' around."

Now the parish is building unprecedented new relationships with its community, tearing down the walls so that neighborhood children and their parents can adopt the church as their own. They have vibrant ministries with young adults and are even taking steps to break through midwestern cultural silence regarding the presence of gay and lesbian people. The next frontier for St. Paul's: seeing to it that the poor children and families streaming inside during the week for various community ministries are welcomed as a consistent, empowered presence in the Sunday worship community.

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Please, preach in Spanish and then offer the English translation. It compels me to pick up a new language because I want to make friends with all these other people around me.

DANIEL MOGBO, HOLY FAITH-INGLEWOOD

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Over the years, **Holy Faith Episcopal Church** in Inglewood, California, has bent and stretched to accommodate its Los Angeles-area community. When Holy Faith was founded in 1911, the church was just like its community: white, reserved and wealthy. In the 1960s, blacks swept into Inglewood and whites swept out of the neighborhood and, at a slower pace, out of the church. It took another two decades, but by the early 1990s, Holy Faith was half white and half black. Within a decade, Nigerians and Latinos arrived and made their mark, turning an integrated parish into a multicultural one.

With every change, members have struggled visibly with racism and classism in order to incorporate the leadership, liturgical sensibilities and voices of the new community. Now they are learning how tough it is to keep performing the balancing act and to become a strong community (and not just several cultural groups that call the same building home). "The best times are when there's a combined service," Nigerian lay leader Daniel Mogbo told me. "I hope we do that more often. Please, preach in Spanish and then offer the English translation. It compels me to pick up a new language because I want to make friends with all these other people around me." Mogbo said they have to keep pushing, keep engaging other cultures and opening more fully to the discomfort of doing or hearing something new in the liturgy and leadership.

That's what they got when they called Altagracia Perez as their new rector. The first woman called to the post, Perez is Puerto Rican and black and fully bilingual. Her leadership is far from conventional, by design. "I try to bring a different set of questions. Not just how do we get more people, but how do we share power, how do you create a culture that is flexible and fluid enough to be open, constantly evaluating and reorganizing based on the reality around you." They will need those skills for the next frontier: welcoming the different socioeconomic backgrounds and cultures of their ever-evolving neighborhood.

One of the largest, most visible, progressive Episcopal churches in the country, **All Saints Episcopal Church** in Pasadena, California, hasn't traveled an easy road toward radical welcome. On the surface, it looks simple. During the Vietnam War, All Saints served as a center for the faith-based peace movement. Throughout the more recent gay and lesbian liberation struggle, they have become a powerful voice urging the church to move from fear to hope. Many congregations look to them for direction on how to step out on social issues while growing in numbers and financial health. What they could never face was the race divide.

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We've put so much energy into same-sex blessings and welcoming GLBT people, so now the boundaries are a little more permeable for everyone.

STEPHEN CHENEY-RICE, ALL SAINTS-PASADENA

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Until now. Over the last few years, they've worked to build passion for the genuine inclusion of people of color, and to confront and transform systemic racism and classism throughout the congregation's many sub-communities. According to lay leader Stephen Cheney-Rice, that's the hardest work of all. "We've put so much energy into same-sex blessings and welcoming GLBT people, so now the boundaries are a little more permeable for everyone," he said. "Still, at base, people don't want to give up the goodies. There's still an uncomfortable feeling when they talk about race or class." Leaders have taken some bold, even controversial moves in order to jumpstart change at All Saints, and those efforts are finally bearing real fruit. The next frontier for All Saints: continue spreading the critical consciousness within the congregation and building relationships in and outside the congregation, without losing their size and powerful voice.

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You can connect with people at a pub or a club. God has already been there. The question is, where will the church be? Jesus has gone ahead of us into Galilee. It's time for us to go out and meet him there.

KAREN WARD, CHURCH OF THE APOSTLES-SEATTLE

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At the other end of the spectrum stands **Church of the Apostles**, an emerging church in Seattle's funky Fremont District. COTA welcomes about 70 people to their main Saturday evening worship gathering, held at their arts-center-cum-worship-space, the Fremont Abbey. If you hadn't guessed, COTA is run by and for Generation-Xers (now in their thirties and early forties) and Millennials (now in their late teens and early twenties) and seekers of any age who yearn for postmodern, electronically savvy, "ancient-future" worship, and radical, authentic Christian living.

Karen Ward serves as midwife and spiritual mother to COTA. She came to Seattle in the 1990s and sold the Northwest Washington Lutheran Synod and the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia on her dream: to create a Christian community for a generation of seekers who were wounded by the church or have simply never darkened a church door. Like others in the "Emerging Church" movement, they are trying to get back to the source and create an authentic expression of church that honors Jesus' call and the church's ancient traditions and speaks the language of emerging generations and the cultures they inhabit. "Some people seem to think the Devil owns certain types of music, certain parts of the world, certain venues, and God doesn't," Ward told me. "Our theology says there's only one God, and God is already out there, everywhere. So you can connect with people at a pub or a club. God has already been there. The question is, where will the church be? Jesus has gone ahead of us into Galilee. It's time for us to go out and meet him there."

COTA has a clear vision and a strong commitment to building lay leaders who think of themselves as urban monks and apostles of Christ. The next frontier for this emergent community: convincing larger church bodies to invest in the church of the future, and convincing Seattle's secular culture that church matters.



As you can see, radical welcome manifests differently in every congregation, mostly because we all have different centers, different margins, different contexts in which we operate. And yet, even as these congregations vary widely in their demographics, liturgical styles, social contexts, and even theologies, they share a hard-won commitment to open to the often painful process of transformation. They've sought guidance, engaged in careful discernment and offered each other the gift of patience. They've directed their energy outward—out to the community, out to God—and it has enriched their internal lives beyond measure. They've listened to each other, to their surrounding community, to the faithful witness of generations past, and then set a course for the future. God's future.

## GO DEEPER . . .

1. Which of the stories, quotes or ideas you just read was the most challenging? Exciting? How do they connect with your own story? With your congregation's story? What do you feel inspired to ask or to do now?
2. What part of the dream of radical welcome sparks passion in you? Recall a specific story from your life that explains why you have that passion or concern.
3. What words come to mind when you think of "welcome"? What words come to mind when you think of "radical"? How do those associations help or hinder as you consider radical welcome?
4. When have you been radically welcomed? When have you walked into a place and found yourself completely appreciated and valued and included, despite your expectations? Reflect on that experience.
5. When have you felt left out? When have you entered a space only to discover no room for your voice or your identity? Reflect on that experience.

<sup>1</sup> I appreciate Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook's definition of power in her work on multiracial communities; she describes it as "the capacity to have control, authority or

influence over others. [In particular] social power refers to the capacity of the dominant culture to have control, authority and influence over” oppressed peoples. She concludes, “social power plus prejudice equals oppression.” See *A House of Prayer for All Peoples: Building Multiracial Community* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2004), 15.

[2](#). Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 140–45.

[3](#). Volf’s use of the phrase *the other* here indicates the individual one who is not the self. It is not necessarily the outcast or oppressed other, as when I use the term. I have marked the difference by capitalizing the term (“The Other”) when it refers to those who are part of oppressed or marginalized groups.

[4](#). *Ibid.*, 142.

[5](#). *Ibid.*, 143.

[6](#). *Ibid.*, 145.

[7](#). Homan and Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love* (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2004), 36.

[8](#). Valerie Batts, *Modern Racism: New Melody for the Same Old Tunes* (Cambridge, MA: Episcopal Divinity School Occasional Papers, 1998).

[9](#). A term made popular by priest and consultant Eric Law, whose works are featured in the bibliography.



# Radical Welcome Defined

## What is Radical Welcome?

Radical welcome is first and foremost a spiritual practice. It combines the Christian ministry of welcome and hospitality with a faithful commitment to doing the theological, spiritual and *systemic* work to eliminate historic, systemic barriers that limit the genuine embrace of groups generally marginalized in mainline churches (young adults, the poor, LGBT people, people of color, people with disabilities).

## What makes a church Radically Welcoming?

Radically welcoming churches understand that each group brings gifts and perspectives that help the whole congregation to fulfill God's dream and purpose. These churches seek to embrace everyone's voices, presence and power, with a special commitment to embracing groups who have been defined as The Other.

## Who is "The Other"?

The Other is any group that is likely (or would reasonably expect) to experience patterns of historic, systemic oppression and marginalization in your congregation and/or denomination, especially given your church's dominant race, culture, language, generation, socioeconomic class, education level, sexual orientation and physical ability.

In your church, which of these groups hold power—that is, the ability to have authority or influence, and to have their story, culture, and voice shape the congregation? These groups are your power center.

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Which groups do not hold this power?  
Whose story does not yet shape the history, culture, worship  
and identity of the church?  
These groups are The Other for you.

Now you are invited to join Jesus in stretching your arms  
and embracing these brothers and sisters,  
and allowing your heart and your congregation's life to be transformed  
by The Other's presence, gifts and power among you.

This practice is radical, and it is truly welcoming.

*Radically welcoming communities aren't perfect, and may never truly "arrive," but they are becoming . . .*

**Hospitable:** They seek to offer a gracious, warm space to all people, especially those who have been defined as "The Other." Every church has a different identity and thus a different margin, but these groups are often marginalized in mainline churches: people of color, poor people, children and young adults, gay and lesbian people (or depending on your context, bisexual and transgendered people), seniors without much money, and people with disabilities.

**Reconciling:** They build mutually transforming relationships with their neighbors, their neighborhood, and with brothers and sisters beyond their neighborhood—wherever Christ calls them.

**Centered:** They possess a clear, compelling sense of Christian identity. It is based on their cultural/ denominational heritage, *and* in an unapologetic calling to live out the dream of God as they have discerned it in light of scripture, tradition, reason and their unique context.

**Open to conversion:** They attempt to listen carefully to, make room for, share power with, and learn from The Other, and they are open to genuine conversion and transformation based on this encounter. Practically speaking, this results in a transformed understanding of who is inside and who is outside, what ministries the church undertakes, how they select leaders, how they do business, how they worship, what they claim as their mission and purpose, and how they partner with other groups.

**Intentional:** They engage in training, research, active listening and strategic planning—conscious, contextually appropriate efforts that address individual, congregational and systemic change.

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**Comprehensive:** They recognize radical welcome is a way of being, one that is cultivated by church leaders through formation, worship, mission and other areas of congregational life.

**Compassionate:** They prioritize the work of creating “space for grace”<sup>1</sup>: pastoral counseling, small groups, forums, and other settings where people can express and hold their dreams, stories *and* fears.

**Faithful:** They are not driven by the desire for diversity, growth, inclusion or getting it “right.” Rather, they are driven to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, who welcomes and heals all people and invites us to tell a new story of resurrection life together.

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1. A term made popular by priest and consultant Eric Law, author of *Sacred Acts, Holy Change: Faithful Diversity and Practical Transformation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002).

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## **Week 2**

### **The Theology of Radical Welcome**

Read “The Dream of God” and “Living with Arms Wide Open”

1. Go through the “Biblical Roots of Radical Welcome” handout
2. What is the image of God you see in these passages? Describe this God. How does this image of God compare with the God you grew up with? The God you worship now?
3. What is the image and how is it calling upon us as the people of God, as informed by these biblical passages? How does this picture of us and our calling compare with the understandings you grew up with, or the ones you operate with now?
4. According to these passages, who were “The Others” for the biblical writers? For Jesus? Who are the similarly marginalized and oppressed groups in relationship to your own congregation or ministry?
5. What associations do the words “conversion” and “surrender” bring up for you? Are the words promising? Limiting? Confusing? Why?
6. Do you know someone who exemplifies this radical openness to God and The Other? What have you seen or experienced in this person’s presence? What allowed her or him to live this way?
7. When have you had a difficult yet transforming encounter with someone who challenged your sense of comfort? What happened? How were you tested? How were you changed? Did the experience affect your relationship with God? If so, how?
8. When have you seen your church relinquish its carefully crafted plans and expectations? What happened? How were you tested? Did you change? How? How did the experience affect your faith?



## Living with Arms Wide Open

We have to lay down our preferences to make room for someone else's. It's not about me.

Because of who we are as a community you may need to lay something down on the altar, sacrifice it. If you explain it that way, maybe people will see that it's a privilege to let go like this. You will be blessed in mighty ways as your God gets bigger and bigger.

SARAH NICHOLS, ALL SAINTS EPISCOPAL  
CHURCH-PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

**O**n my desk, there is a sculpture of figures rising from a single root and emerging as three distinct bodies. Near the top, their arms reach out in a single embrace, one set of arms flowing into the other set into the other.

This image helps me to conjure the many movements of radical welcome. It starts with God's embrace of each and every one of us. It continues with our yearning to embrace God so completely we hardly know where we end and God begins. It manifests and deepens with our embrace and welcome of our brothers and sisters, especially those whom the mainline churches have found it hardest to see, hardest to touch, hardest to love.

This image also helps me to understand radical welcome as a spiritual practice, one that forms us more and more into the likeness of Christ and makes greater room for God to dwell in us. We cannot welcome others authentically and boldly if we do not see the link between that holy practice and the practice of welcoming and opening our arms to God.

### **Surrender All**

Mother Cecily Broderick y Guerra, the first female rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Harlem, is walking with a congregation slowly learning to surrender to the God who constantly presents us with transformation and surprise. She arrived at the historically black church in 2003, but when I visited the congregation later the same summer, she was already preaching the gospel of transformation and stirring up a congregation comprised largely of financially comfortable middle-aged and senior African Americans. "You need to test yourself, see whether you're holding onto something the Spirit leads you to or if you're clinging to something because you can't imagine life any other way," she warned the congregation as she strolled the center aisle, preaching without text and looking into parishioners' eyes with a mix of urgency, patience, humor, and hope. "So watch out, because staying blind and hard-hearted can be an obstacle to your own discipleship."

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It's hard to get church people to do new things, to sacrifice something. I used to be like that I spent my formative church years in a very rigid place. Then I realized I wasn't growing spiritually.

IRENE MCKENZIE,  
ST. MARY'S-HARLEM

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Reflecting at a quiet moment the following week, she told me, "A lot of people here aren't open to what the Spirit is dictating. They view the future by walking backward, and they have no tolerance for change. So I continue to reflect in my preaching that change is a part of life. It's not a reflection of failure. It's a reflection of being alive."

That's a tough gospel to live by. God knows we want to cling to something tangible, to stick with the way things have always been, to maintain traditional boundaries regarding who's in and who's out. But faith and real life come when we cling not to our own power or ability or institutions, but only to the living God. And sometimes the greatest blessing is that which wrenches our fingers off the controls and removes the illusion that we were ever in charge.

God has been calling humanity to risk and surrender like this for ages. We have already heard the bold witness of prophets like Isaiah, who shared God's plan to make all things new and God's hope that we would join that holy venture. Everywhere Jesus went, he held out his hand and said, "Drop your nets and follow me." He invited people into a life of abandon, a life of deep awareness and presence, a life transgressing boundaries the world constructs, and all in order to get to God. I can hear Jesus asking us now: "Do you think you know who's inside and holy, or who is outside and unclean? Are you sure what is pure? Are you certain death is the end? Ah, think again." He crossed lines and defied limits throughout his life—and beyond—to convince us that we could let go of our assumptions, expectations, and so-called knowledge, surrender and rest in God, who alone has the final word.

Surrendering to God is not a benign act. Maybe that is because God is not a benign God. In a pastoral letter dated June 23, 2004, the Episcopal Church's then-Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold, asked members torn by disagreement and misunderstanding to trust and not be "undone by God's wild and unpredictable ways." He continued:

The love of Christ, given root-room within us, is a dangerous force. We know that—as was the case for St. Peter—love can take us where we do not wish to go. It can require us to die to our desire for safety. It can demand a relinquishment of our carefully crafted plans, of our fondly held views, and of our clear expectations.<sup>1</sup>

So much of our time in church is spent maintaining and protecting: buildings, doctrines, traditions, plans, expectations. God does not change, and the church—as God's people on earth—is not supposed to change. But what if that is not our call at all? What if, as Griswold suggests, the love of Christ is actually supposed to free us, to make us imaginative and resilient and fearless enough to go wherever the God of transformation would have us go? What if closing the door to change, something we might have done out of love for our traditions and communities, actually closes the door to the Spirit of God?

Benedictine nun and Catholic theologian Joan Chittister warns that church folk too often tip in that very direction:

To close ourselves off from the wisdom of the world around us in the name of God is a kind of spiritual arrogance exceeded by little else in the human lexicon of errors. It makes of life a kind of prison where, in the name of holiness, thought is chained and vision is condemned. It makes us our own gods. It is a sorry excuse for spirituality. . . . The implications of that kind of closing out the multiple revelations of the mind of God are weighty: once we shut our hearts to the other, we have shut our hearts to God.<sup>2</sup>

Chittister claims, and I wholeheartedly agree, that there is a spiritual discipline in the act of maintaining a posture of utter receptivity and hospitality to new voices, new people, new ideas, new music, new words, new power. By opening our minds, our hearts, our very selves to The Other—the person of a different culture or ethnicity, the person of a different generation, the person of a different class background, the person of a different sexual orientation—we are letting go of our idols and practicing for that greater opening, the complete opening to the God who wants to be all in all *in us*. Being open, discerning God's presence in surprising places, is an act of love, surrender and faith like no other.

## Saying "Yes" to Conversion

Practically every story in the gospels could reinforce this simple, freeing good news. But one need go no further than the first words of Jesus' public ministry, as recorded in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. Jesus has just returned from his forty-day trial in the wilderness. He hears that John has been arrested and leaves his home in Nazareth to begin his work. "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Matthew 4:17).

This word—repent, or *metanoia*—has a storied history in Christian tradition. Some translate it specifically relating to the confession of sin that comes before forgiveness. But in this instance, the meaning is so much richer. When Jesus cries to the crowds to repent, he isn't just demanding that they come forward and give an accounting of their sins. In *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*, Patrick Keifert borrows from New Testament scholar John Koenig to offer some useful commentary on Jesus' activity here. Keifert explains, "Jesus was calling people to a change of mind and heart in keeping with the coming of God's realm. The change, often called repentance, moved them from isolation to 'the fullness of community life which God had always intended for Israel.'" <sup>3</sup> Jesus is urging them, quite literally, to "turn around": to turn to a new way, a radically hospitable way that breaks through the old hierarchies and patterns of relationship in order to issue in God's new order. The call is to be converted, to be transformed, for the sake of the just, whole, loving reign of God.

Without a doubt, saying "yes" to God's invitation demands of us more than passive observation. We are not mere bystanders watching the environment changing around us. Rather, God has promised: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean. . . . A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:25-26). God wants to work *metanoia*—a deep, fundamental transformation—inside us. God wants to renew the creation, and that includes our very hearts.

Some people may balk at this image of a God and a creation that never seem to stop shifting. Is this all an elaborate justification for making change for the sake of change? Does this mean anything goes, that God revels in chaos? Absolutely not. For millennia Christians have spoken of God's plan to draw all of creation back into union with the divine will. That requires movement. And movement of any kind is change. If our natural orientation, or certainly the orientation of our institutions, is to resist change and movement, then something has to give. *Metanoia*—that conversion or radical turning toward God—is the necessary breaking and turning of whatever inside us is resisting the movement toward God. Our will toward stability can turn into idolatry, or displaced

attachment to a symbol or idea that cannot possibly hold the fullness of divinity. *Metanoia* is the opposite force that frees our bound, trussed limbs for movement toward God.

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Let me tell you how much our comfort zones have shifted. People here used to say that anyone On welfare was bad. Now I go with people to pick up their food stamps.

TERRY PARSONS,  
ST. PAUL'S-DULUTH

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God needs a free church that defines itself as a community of humble, courageous, flexible disciples who are truly willing to surrender all. Why? Because God is a God of surprises, and our best posture in following and serving God is one of openness and receptivity. Every Sunday, in almost rote fashion, churches say “yes” to that invitation. We say it in the most commonly spoken words in the Christian tradition: the Lord’s Prayer. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Praying in the spirit of Christ, we beg for the courage, wisdom and humility to follow the One who surrendered his will and his life completely to that of his Abba God. We ask for the will to “travel naked into the land of uncertainty.”<sup>4</sup> We say we want God to reign, want heaven to come on earth, so that the world might reflect God’s will in the same way that heaven already does. That’s a revolution! In this prayer, we acknowledge that the revolution begins with us, that God will have to transform our own will and then use us as instruments of the divine will. As Christians, we claim we want God to be all in all. With this ancient prayer, we ask to be in sync with God, receptive to God, open to God.

### **Radical Welcome as Spiritual Practice**

This statement places radical welcome in a whole new light. God wants to touch the places where we are brittle and make us soft. God yearns to release the latches on our locked doors, and to open us once again to the fresh air and surprising movement of the Spirit. One way that we experience this stretching and opening is by fully opening our doors and hearts to the people and cultures and perspectives on the margins of our communities. Our prayer is to be radically welcoming to God. We prepare by radically welcoming The Other, who is Christ’s living presence among us.

That doesn’t mean it’s easy. Even for those who dropped their nets and followed Christ, the spiritual practice of staying open to God and open to The Other was far from intuitive. In Acts 11, some circumcised believers confronted Peter, frustrated that uncircumcised Gentiles had been accepted as part of the community. To ease their anxiety, he relates the story of his own dramatic conversion and opening. Once, in a dream, he saw unclean animals spread on a sheet coming down from heaven, and heard God commanding him to kill and eat the beasts. He dutifully replied, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” The reply came from heaven: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 11:8-9). At that very moment, he awakened to find several Gentiles at his door, begging him to come and baptize a Gentile household in Casearea. He knew the message from God was about freedom: the freedom to go to this household, the freedom to trust that the Holy Spirit was already there, the freedom to be as radically welcoming as God.

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When are we going to realize that God comes to us in ways we’d never recognize? The Israelites thought the Messiah would come as a great military king. Instead, he came as a poor child from a backwater town.  
When are we going to get it? You simply can’t place limits on God.

GAYLE HARRIS, BISHOP SUFFRAGAN,  
EPISCOPAL DIOCESE  
OF MASSACHUSETTS

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And so it is today In practicing radical welcome, we ask God, “What would you have us do? Who would you have us embrace?” And when God presents us with a holy opportunity to be stretched beyond our comfort—either by welcoming a particular group or by allowing that group’s culture and perspective to transform us—then we leap forward in faith, like Peter.

And like that great apostle, we will never be the same again.

We might think we are blessing others by this act of welcome. And, indeed, there are many of us standing on the margins of our own communities, wounded by painful forces of political oppression and left out by the culture and habits of mainline churches. There are so many people waiting for hospitality that is not conditional, not dependent on meeting certain insider terms and leaving certain parts of their identity and culture at the door. For them—for us—welcome is an act of healing and homecoming.

Almost as importantly, the radical act of hospitality can open and liberate those who have found safe haven at the center, whether they are European-American, economically comfortable, straight, middle-aged, or otherwise privileged. Most of us have moments when we are at the center, even if we identify culturally with marginalized groups. And those who receive power usually have to make a pact with the systems that secure our power, to cut off part of ourselves, to silence the voice that cries out for justice and relationship, in order to survive and be successful.

I know this because I, as a straight, able-bodied young adult who currently enjoys economic, educational and professional privilege, have only begun to reckon with the ways that I choose to welcome—or not welcome—people or ways that encroach on my sense of comfort or identity or propriety And yet, whenever I allow myself to be pushed open, I find the act drives me back to my dependence on God, and increases my trust and love for the One who sustains me. Maggie Kulyk, a partnered lesbian with kids at St.

Bartholomew's in Atlanta, has felt it, too. "I wish others understood that this isn't just about being welcoming, but that it's a way to deepen our own spiritual formation. We're not changing the music as part of a marketing campaign, but because we're inviting the Spirit in."

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To keep the door wide open takes missionary zeal and a willingness to let the Spirit lead. We have to learn to sustain ourselves in that most vulnerable space.

JOE DUGGAN, EPISCOPAL DIOCESE  
OF LOS ANGELES

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We can all open to God in this way. When we allow ourselves to humbly reside close to the heart of God, and our actions flow from that gracious place, radical hospitality will flow as naturally as our breath. We will find ourselves developing the compassion, flexibility, openness, discernment, awareness, readiness, and faith to be useful instruments of God's peace. And then we will discover that it is easier, even a joy, to open our ears and hearts to others and offer them a wide, gentle space to call home.

If we make such radical moves, we may feel frightened. God is waiting to receive us in that place of newness and uncertainty with open arms. We need only step there in faith. That is why theologian Verna Dozier defines faith the way she does: "Faith implies risk. I will cast my life on this possibility that God is for me. I do not have to have any proof except my commitment. I do not have to claim complete understanding—that is idolatry. The faith view of reality is frightening in its openness."<sup>5</sup> I love Dozier's frank words and the seasoned wisdom behind them. She is not fooled by claims that faith is about saying "yes" to certain doctrines, supporting the views of a particular church. She knows it is about going all the way with the God who transcends doctrine, denomination and tradition. She stakes her life on the God of transformation, relationship and welcome, the God who "calls a people to be the new thing in the world—the people of God."<sup>6</sup>

We are still human, so it does not work all the time. In fact, we are human and flawed enough that it probably does not work most of the time. But the good news is that one move informs and strengthens the other. I reach out in trust, openness and welcome, moving beyond my fear and closer to the one who is most unlike me; that challenging act of faith strengthens my mettle for the next leg of the journey and widens my heart. Likewise, when there is space for God to graciously pour more love, more trust, more beauty, more compassion into me, then I am more able to extend the same compassion and welcome to the world. It is the way of any spiritual practice. It is the way of radical welcome.

## GO DEEPER . . .

1. Which of the stories, comments or ideas you just read was the most challenging? Exciting? How do they connect with your own story? What do they inspire you to ask or to do?
2. How do these reflections link with your church's story, or the stories of churches you've known?
3. What associations do the words *conversion* and *surrender* bring up for you? Are the words promising? Limiting? Confusing? Why?
4. Do you know someone who exemplifies this radical openness to God and The Other? What have you seen or experienced in this person's presence? What allowed him or her to live this way?
5. When have you had a difficult yet transforming encounter with someone who challenged your sense of comfort? What happened? How were you tested? How were you changed? Did the experience affect your relationship with God? If so, how?
6. When have you seen your church relinquish its carefully crafted plans and expectations? What happened? How were you tested? Did you change? How? How did the experience affect your faith?

<sup>1</sup> The Most Reverend Frank Griswold, "A Word to the Church from the Presiding Bishop," June 23, 2004 (Episcopal News Service, [episcopalchurch.org/3577\\_41633\\_ENG\\_HTM.htm](http://episcopalchurch.org/3577_41633_ENG_HTM.htm)). See Acts 8.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Chittister, *Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 88.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Keifert, quoting Koenig, in *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 66.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (New York: Seabury Classics, 2006), 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



## The Dream of God

God is changing things so that they finally reflect the dream of God. It will be new to us, but it is merely the fulfillment of what God intended all along.

THE RIGHT REVEREND MICHAEL CURRY,  
EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF NORTH CAROLINA

Life would be so much easier—and church more comfortable—if we didn't answer the call to become radically welcoming. Why would a community go in search of transformation and dissonance, when most of us instinctively seek institutions to find stability and shelter from the storm? Couldn't we trust that Sunday morning is destined to remain the most segregated hour in American life, that certain groups have mutually agreed not to share spiritual relationship, and leave it at that? Why rock the boat? Why cross boundaries? Why risk welcoming?

Earl Kooperkamp answers that question as well as anyone I've met. "Radical hospitality is one of the most important spiritual gifts," said Kooperkamp, who serves as rector of St. Maiy's Episcopal Church in West Harlem, New York. "Look at Abraham and his three angelic visitors in Genesis. Look at Hebrews, where they speak of entertaining angels unawares. Look at Jesus' open table fellowship. That's my vision for what the church should be." Having warmed to his topic, the community organizer-turned-priest continued, "Jesus reaches out and bids us to do the same: to open our hearts and hands to those around us, to embrace the abundant life that God graciously offers to all."

Why are congregations like St. Mary's becoming radically welcoming? Why should any of us risk transformation? Quite simply because God did it first.

### **The God of Transformation**

From the beginning, God has been about the business of creating, reshaping, and making things new. The record of Scripture is filled with images of a God who turns things upside-down in order to get them right-side up, and creates something from what would seem to be nothing. Open the Bible to almost any page and you will see the evidence. In the beginning the Creator God takes the formless, watery void and brings forth life with a word and a touch. Later, we meet Abraham and Sarah, the unlikely patriarch and matriarch of Israel, both too old to expect to be the new parents of a great, holy people. Then we greet Moses, the stumbling, mumbling, ever-reluctant prophet and leader of Israel.

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Online Extra: Exercises for  
Discerning the Dream of God

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Though the truth and its implications are life-altering, can there be any doubt that God is a God of transformation who wants to embrace and transform all of creation? The promise is present in the prophet Isaiah, who cried out to the complacent children of Israel, giving voice to the word of God:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise. (Isaiah 43:18–21)

And in the closing chapters of the New Testament, we hear echoes of the same promise:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell among them; they will be God's people, and God will be with them, wiping every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and



crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” And the one who is seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” (Revelation 21:1, 3–5)

We humans might have a vested interest in depicting a changeless God who made a stable and unchanging world. Scripture, history and our own life experiences put the lie to that hope. “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” You have never seen rivers in the desert—this God will make it so. You have never seen wild animals obey—this God will make it so. You cannot imagine life beyond the old patterns and accepted ways that seem ingrained in the groove of creation—this God is not bound by those limits. This God is making a new heaven and a new earth, one where pain will cease, justice will rule, and death itself will die. God invites us to look around with the eyes of faith; then we, too, will see how God is “making all things new.”

A warning: the new thing God is bringing to life is not “new” in the way we so often understand and fear it to be. Bishop Michael Curry of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, the first black diocesan bishop elected in the South, and thus a man with long experience following the God of transformation, explained it to me with these simple words: “God is changing things so that they finally reflect the dream of God. It will be new to us, but it is merely the fulfillment of what God intended all along.”

Many theologians have painted their picture of this new thing God is doing in the world, what Episcopal laywoman Verna Dozier calls “the dream of God” and what Howard Thurman, another black theologian and mystic, describes as “a friendly world of friendly folk beneath a friendly sky.”<sup>1</sup> If it sounds pleasant and non-threatening, it is not. In his book *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu adds color, contour and depth—and teeth—to Dozier and Thurman’s sketches of the divine dream:

God calls on us to be [God’s] partners to work for a new kind of society where people count; where people matter more than things, more than possessions; where human life is not just respected but positively revered; where people will be secure and not suffer from the fear of hunger, from ignorance, from disease; where there will be more gentleness, more caring, more sharing, more compassion, more laughter; where there is peace and not war. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Having labored under the weight of racial apartheid, neither Tutu nor Dozier nor Thurman was under any illusion that the kingdom had come, that the creation had indeed become some idyllic “friendly world of friendly folk.” Their discussion of the dream of God hinges on their belief in a God who yearns for the transformation of a broken yet redeemable creation. “The world is not as God would have it be,” Dozier admits. “The kingdoms of this world are not yet the kingdom of God, but they can become it. They are not yet the realm where God’s sovereignty is acknowledged and lived out, but they can become it.”<sup>3</sup>

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Why do we do this? Because

we’re Christians. Christ ministered to all, and that’s the model for me. He was healing and touching all people, eating with tax collectors and lepers. Our call is to be with all, too, not just where we feel comfortable.

STEPHEN CHENEY-RICE,  
ALL SAINTS-PASADENA

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In Jesus the Christ, we see the lengths to which the God of transformation would go in order to bring the dream to life. In the Gospel of Luke, the first act of Jesus’ public ministry is to enter the synagogue and offer this prophetic pronouncement from the scroll of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18–19)

Having dropped his bombshell, he rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, and takes his seat. Meanwhile, everyone is staring at him, at once aghast and in awe. He knows what they are wondering: Is this guy serious? His response is curt: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Yes, he tells them, the Messiah has come. The old order is passing away, and I have come to usher in a new age. Things are about to change.

And change they do. Jesus’ whole ministry—the whole account of God’s human life among us—is that of one who honors his tradition, but will not be bound by it if the dream of God demands something else. So he speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well, even though Jews and Samaritans were not to relate to each other, and especially not a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman (John 4:1–26). When he sees the man with the withered hand sitting in the synagogue on the Sabbath, he knows the rules: do not touch him, do not heal him, do not perform any unnecessary work on this day ordained by God for rest. He also knows he is being watched by the religious authorities who are waiting to pounce on him for the slightest infraction. Knowing all that, as Mark tells us,

Jesus said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come and stand here.” The man got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to

them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” After looking around at all of them, he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was restored. (Luke 6:8–10)

Jesus knew, and we certainly know, there would be consequences for his actions. He also knew he had come to do his Abba God’s will, to usher in the just reign of God. And he knew, as we struggle to acknowledge, that there is no way to have the dream without the transformation. The point is not to slog away in maintenance mode or to sit on the sidelines, pining for what was. The God of transformation invites us to “be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating” (Isaiah 65:18). God yearns for us to be part of this new creation and to rejoice in its unfolding.

## The God of Relationship

That invitation reveals another face of God. The Holy and Immortal One could choose to act without us, could choose to be the watchmaker who sets creation in motion and then walks away. But the very nature of God is to be in relationship, first within the Godhead, then with all of creation, and even with each of us, making us the very children and partners of God.

According to orthodox theology, the Trinitarian God is a God in *perichoresis*, or an eternal, continual dance, with Godself. The Creator is in union with the Redeemer who is in union with the Sustainer who is in union with the Creator—at all times and in all places. That relational quality propels God into creation, where God yearns for relationship with us all and draws us beyond our barriers and into relationship with each other.

In Scripture we see this God going forth, claiming Abraham and his descendants and establishing a covenant relationship with them.<sup>4</sup> That promise sustains the Israelites during their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, and the Deuteronomist reminds them of the relationship when despair threatens. “It is the Lord who goes before you. God will be with you; God will not fail you or forsake you. Do not be afraid or be dismayed” (Deuteronomy 31:8). However dire the circumstances, however stacked the deck may be against them, they can always cling to the faithful promise of the One who speaks to them and has claimed them as beloved children.

Through the incarnation, God takes that intimate relationship another radical step forward. This time, God comes not only to dwell by our side but to share everything about our condition, surrendering the privilege of heavenly consort to take up a dwelling place within humanity. Some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible is reserved to describe this wondrous moment, when “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Creator, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Upon joining us, Jesus extends himself to humanity, yearning to know and be known, to have us join him in the divine union he has shared with his Abba God from the beginning of time:

Abide in me as I abide in you. ... As my Abba has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Abba’s commandments and abide in that love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:4, 9–11)

Listen closely and you will detect echoes of *perichoresis*, the eternal, interweaving dance between the three persons of the Trinity. The Son abides in us and we in the Son, who also abides in his Abba and thus allows us to abide with his Abba as well. The dance of embrace, mutual embrace, never ends. Through Christ, the relational God has grasped us, and we are inextricably bound up in the joy of the divine life.

Nearly two thousand years later, healer, teacher, social critic, and mystic Henri Nouwen summed up the mystery, power and call of the incarnation in these words:

Jesus, in whom the fullness of God dwells, has become our home. By making his home in us, he allows us to make our home in him. By entering into the intimacy of our innermost self he offers us the opportunity to enter into his own intimacy with God. By choosing us as his preferred dwelling place he invites us to choose him as our preferred dwelling place. That is the mystery of the incarnation.<sup>5</sup>

This is our God: a God who chose us as a preferred dwelling place and waits longingly for us to choose to dwell within God and align our lives with God’s own will. This is our God: a God who yearns for relationship with us, risks everything for relationship with us, and finally dies to be in relationship with us. If we ever wondered or doubted God’s yearning for relationship with us, the incarnation proves God’s desire with humbling clarity.

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Grace is too good to believe. The world wants to exclude certain people, say they shouldn’t be allowed inside. The church says, No one is excluded. We’re radically open. God keeps getting bigger, and we have to expand with God.

HOWARD ANDERSON, FORMER RECTOR, ST. PAUL’S-DULUTH

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Such incarnational theology is one of the hallmarks of the Anglican Way. The Church of England’s first systematic theologian, Richard Hooker, boldly proclaimed that something of God is present in all life, and that via the incarnation we are indeed “partakers”

in the divine life. “All other things that are of God have God in them and he them in himself likewise. . . . All things therefore are partakers of God, they are his offspring, his influence is in them.”<sup>6</sup> For Hooker, this means we are at once held by God and the ones who hold God. The Almighty God has chosen to be in union with us, taking on created nature and in the process joining us to God’s own life.

More than that, Hooker believed God has chosen to be vulnerable to us, chosen to need us, and even to impart a spark of the divine nature to us. “Sith God hath deified our nature (by the union confirmed through the incarnation), ... we cannot now conceive how God should without man either exercise divine power, or receive the glory of divine praise”<sup>7</sup> God has established a radically mutual relationship with humanity, and based on those terms we are God’s partners, the ones on whom God depends. Those are the radical implications of the incarnation, and they reveal the profoundly relational being of God.

God invites us to share in that nature, not only by some pure, mystical connection to God in Christ, but through our flesh, blood and spirit relationships with one another. At times, the church has conveniently interpreted this call as one to uniformity. If anything, what Christ came to offer, and died making possible, was union:

[H]e is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross. (Ephesians 2:14–16)

God rejoices when we move beyond ourselves, beyond our hostility and ignorance and suspicion, past our “dividing walls” and into relationship with one another, signifying to the world that we are one reconciled body, the body of Christ. In this, we reflect the mutual relationship and union that is the very nature of Godself.

## The God of Welcome

Looking closely at the witness of Scripture, we see a God who not only seeks relationship and union with the creation but who reaches *out* intentionally for everyone, and in particular for the outcast. Regardless of how unclean, unworthy, insignificant, or marginalized we may feel or others may claim we are, the God of grace and welcome shatters every barrier to embrace us and draw us home.

Lest we think the welcome is meant for us or our group alone, the Scriptures are filled with reminders to God’s chosen ones that they are *not* the only ones God welcomes. In Deuteronomy, Moses speaks to the Israelites as they journey from slavery in Egypt and through the wilderness. The frightened, tired and confused clan no doubt sought comfort in the knowledge that their covenant with God made them special. They soon learned that there is no rest for God’s chosen ones. Instead, God’s people are called out for a special mission.

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Online Extra: Bible Studies on the Biblical Foundations of Radical Welcome

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[T]he Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, the mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17–19)

It is true that God stands with God’s people through every trial, but not so that they will sit comfortably with the privilege of apparent divine favor. Now they have to stand in solidarity with, graciously receive and *welcome* the vulnerable ones within their community and beyond it whom they might find it most difficult to accept: the orphan, the widow, the stranger, The Other. God has done it for them. Now they are called to respond in kind, literally imitating the God who graciously welcomed them.

Isaiah rails at Israel for trying to please God with superficial religious acts while ignoring God’s yearning to extend justice and welcome. He shares this judgment as he has received it from God:

Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see them naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6–7)

God has made it clear: if you love me you will work for liberation with the oppressed and marginalized in your midst, and you will share your home and food with those who have none. You will not hide from the brothers and sisters I have placed near you. Rather, you will actively go out to meet them and draw them to yourself, even if it is risky, even if you feel uncomfortable (and would you not be uncomfortable, after encountering the naked poor and welcoming them into your home?).

That message has certainly been muffled by people of faith over millennia. “If you are Christian,” we say, “be kind. Give charitably. Serve the needy” Each is a noble pursuit, but they are *not* hospitality and welcome the way God does it. God’s way is like

Abraham, who greets the three angelic strangers at the oaks of Mamre with nothing short of reverence (Genesis 18:1–8). He arranges for their feet to be washed, brings them bread and an extravagant meal that includes the meat of a calf. He treats these mysterious outsiders like honored guests.

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I'm very happy about having a gay bishop, radical hospitality and radical inclusion. But we strive for that so we can do Matthew 25:35: "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat." We do it because we still have a dynamic sense that the gospel can change lives.

BONNIE PERRY, ALL SAINTS-CHICAGO

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God's way is like the father in the outrageous story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). The rash younger son asked for his inheritance while his father lived, an act that, at the time, was the equivalent of wishing his father dead. Having squandered the gift and hit rock bottom, he returned in desperation to his father. By every standard in their society, and by his own internal moral compass, he had to know he was as good as dead to his family, barely fit to live among his father's servants. But the moment his face showed on the horizon, his father raced out "filled with compassion" to embrace and draw him in. I imagine the young man approaching, dirty and humiliated, head hung low with the fear of justified retribution and anger. Much to his surprise and our own, his father saw only a glorious face and a reason to celebrate in a wildly generous manner.

Henri Nouwen reflects on the meaning of this prodigal welcome for his own life, where he came to realize

God is not the patriarch who stays home, doesn't move, expects his children to come to him, apologize for their aberrant behavior, beg for forgiveness, and promise to do better. To the contrary, he leaves the house, ignoring his dignity by running toward them, pays no heed to apologies and promises of change, and brings them to the table richly prepared for them.<sup>8</sup>

That is God's hospitality: the welcome that actively loves and receives us just as we are, despite every reservation, expectation or term we might set out, however strange we imagine ourselves to be, however far out we have been cast. That is Jesus' hospitality, as he illustrates with seemingly every action, and nowhere more clearly than in his radically welcoming table fellowship. He invites lowly fishermen, unclean prostitutes, marginalized tax collectors, and insignificant widows to partake of the lavish feast he has come to offer all. And he does it to teach us a crucial lesson: God made us all and loves us all, and no one more than those society casts out or sets apart. There are no limits to the love and justice of God. So, now, having known the welcoming love of God, the Holy One seems to say to us, "Be released from your fear and scarcity, go forth boldly and share from the abundance you have received. Do not worry about who may be watching and what they might say. Do not worry about your dignity and do not set terms on your welcome." God has graciously, prodigally welcomed you, because it is in God's very nature to seek you out and welcome you home when you feel the least worthy of embrace. Can you do likewise with others, entering solidarity with the outcast you find yourself least willing or able to receive? Can you make room within yourself to receive The Other?



Knowing God as the One who transforms, connects and welcomes does more than inspire us from afar. Why? Because if this is the nature of God, and we are made in the *imago dei*, then the same instincts are deeply imbedded in our very DNA. Some part of each of us surely rejoices in transformation, in seeing the creation and our own lives turning and turning in the direction of the dream of God. Some part of us must be made for relationality, made to be connected to God and to each other. Some part of us knows how to stretch in gracious welcome, to make room to receive The Other, to meet people where they are instead of insisting that they assimilate to our ways and meet us on our terms.

Such generosity and self-emptying are the marks of the divine nature; by the grace of God, they are at the core of our own human nature, as well. As we come to intimate knowledge of the transforming, reconciling, welcoming nature of God, we discover something beautiful about ourselves.

## GO DEEPER . . .

1. Which of the stories, comments or ideas you just read was the most challenging? Exciting? How do they connect with your own story? What do they inspire you to ask or to do?
2. How do these reflections link with your church's story, or the stories of churches you've known?
3. How does this image of God as transforming, relational and welcoming compare with the God you grew up with? The God you worship now?

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (New York: Seabury Classics, 2006), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Dozier, *The Dream of God*, 106.

<sup>4</sup> I would add my own belief, shared with many liberation theologians, that while the Israelite story is foundational and formative for the Christian witness, God surely covenanted with many peoples in many lands at many times throughout history. For more, consult the work of Native American Christian theologians like Steven Charleston (see Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, eds., *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000]).

The point is an important one as we seek to dismantle traditional insider/outsider distinctions, especially within Christian communities.

[5.](#) Henri Nouwen, *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective*, as reprinted in *Henri Nouwen: Writings Selected*, edited by Robert A. Jonas (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 5.

[6.](#) Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, V.56.5.

[7.](#) *Ibid.*, V.54.5.

[8.](#) Jonas, *Henri Nouwen*, 79.



# The Biblical Roots of Radical Welcome

The facilitator should post the six passages on walls around the room. Allow people to walk around the room seeking the passage that, to them, captures an essential aspect of radical welcome. When all have found their passage and stood next to it, invite people at each passage 1) to say the word or phrase that stands out for them and 2) to offer one sentence on why it is significant.

## **Genesis 18:1–8: A Son Promised to Abraham and Sarah**

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

**Deuteronomy 10:17–19:** 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, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

**Isaiah 43:18–21:** Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the

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desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

**Ezekiel 36:25–26:** I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

**Luke 4:18–19:** Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

**Luke 6:1–10:** One sabbath while Jesus was going through the cornfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” Jesus answered, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?” Then he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”

Even though he knew what the Pharisees were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come and stand here.” He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” After looking around at all of them, he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was restored.

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## **Week 3**

### **The Picture of Radical Welcome**

Read “Beyond Inviting and Inclusion” and “The Signs of Radical Welcome”

1. Go through the “Moving From Inviting and Inclusion to Radical Welcome” handout
2. Look again at the signs of radical welcome associated with each part of congregational life. Have you seen or heard about churches that demonstrate these signs of radical welcome?
3. What was it like to be in such a community? Did they welcome in some areas and not in others? Did they welcome some groups and not others? What was the story behind their willingness to welcome?
4. Have you seen communities that don’t demonstrate signs of radical welcome? What was it like to be in such a community? Did they welcome in some areas and not in others? Did they welcome some groups and not others? What was the story behind their lack of welcome?
5. Take another look at the “Moving Beyond Inviting . . .” handout. If you’re headed to inviting or inclusion but dream of radical welcome, what could you do to help your congregation shift gears and deepen its commitment?



## **Beyond Inviting and Inclusion**

Our welcome can be a very surface thing. We said we were welcoming everyone, but we weren't. So the first five years of the Neighborhood Partnership have been getting to know the neighborhood. We didn't want to go out and tell the people what they needed. We worked hard at not being Lady Bountiful. People don't want to be projects.

RHODA ROBINSON, ST. PAUL'S-DULUTH, MINNESOTA

**L**ots of congregations would nod and cheer for the radical welcome vision. Doesn't every mainline church want to be seen as friendly and welcoming and to become more inclusive and diverse? Well, yes, and therein lies some of the problem. Inviting is not the same as radical welcome. Neither are diversity and inclusion. In this chapter, we will get a clearer picture of radical welcome by looking at its cousins: inviting and inclusion.

### **The Inviting Congregation**

The inviting congregation is an admirable one: it reaches out, listens for others' hopes and concerns, risks the possibility of rejection, tells the story of God's grace in its community, and invites others to join it in ministry and journey. It is intentional about evangelism (to draw new people), greeting (to help new people come inside) and incorporation (to draw new people into membership and deeper relationship).

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Online Extra: Best Practices  
for Inviting Congregations

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|                    | Inviting   | Inclusion  | Radical Welcome   |
|--------------------|--|--|---|
| <b>The Message</b> | “Come, join our community and share our cultural values and heritage.”   | “Help us to be diverse.”   | “Bring your culture, your voice, your whole self—we want to engage in truly mutual relationship.”   |
| <b>The Goal</b>    | <b>assimilation:</b> community invites new people to enter and adopt dominant identity   | <b>incorporation:</b> community welcomes marginalized groups, but no true shift in congregation’s cultural identity and practices                              | <b>incarnation:</b> community embodies and expresses the full range of voices and gifts present, including The Other  |
| <b>The Effort</b>  | Systems and programs in place to invite and incorporate newcomers into existing structures and identity; rejection or marginalization of those who do not assimilate | Stated commitment to inclusivity, but less attention to ongoing programs, systemic analysis or power; emphasis on individual efforts                           | Systems and programs in place to invite and welcome people, including those from the margins; to ensure their presence, gifts and perspective will be visible and valued; and to ensure that these new communities, gifts and values influence the congregation’s identity, ministries and structures |
| <b>The Result</b>  | Healthy numbers (perhaps with some members who claim marginal identity) but institution and its membership is overwhelmingly monocultural                            | Revolving door, with people coming from margins only to stay on fringe or leave; institutional structure remains monocultural, with some pockets of difference | Transformed and transforming community with open doors and open hearts; different groups share power and shape identity, mission, leadership, worship and ministries  |

We need inviting practices. Without them, the church is a stagnant gathering, an empty husk. Any congregation would benefit from an analysis to see if they are extending a genuine invitation, and commit to providing and maintaining that receptive space. If you’re not sure whether you’re truly inviting, consult the inventories and resources like Andrew Weeks’ *Welcome!: Tools and Techniques for New Member Ministry*), Roy Oswald and Speed Leas’ *The Inviting Church*, and a useful booklet from the Church of England called *Creating a Culture of Welcome in the Local Church*. In particular, Clayton Morris’ *Holy Hospitality: Worship and the Baptismal Covenant*<sup>1</sup> is an invaluable resource for assessing and then revamping your church’s invitation on all fronts (it also includes helpful analysis from both inclusive and radically welcoming points of view).

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Birds of a feather flock together. They also lock together. “This is who we are and we’re not changing.”  
I’ve felt some of that, felt pushed outside. You may not be white, but if you can “act” white, then you’re in.  
It’s a big problem.

MARK BOZZUTI-JONES, ST. BARTHOLOMEWS-NEW YORK

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You could stop there—isn’t inviting like this enough?!—but I would insert a strong caution. Because as warm and attractive as it is, inviting generally assumes the existence of an outgoing, set gathering and says to the newcomer, “Please, join us in what we are already doing.”<sup>2</sup> For our purposes, the key word when describing the inviting congregation is *assimilation*. Your congregation may be incredibly friendly, engaging and passionate, but you as the hosts maintain the option of remaining largely unchanged. The guest is expected to assimilate into your gathering or community on terms you have set, leaving behind his or her own cultural worldview and practices in order to adopt yours.

Assimilation is a tricky concept, because on the surface it seems far from problematic. Many church members I’ve encountered

would argue (quite rightly), “As we live into our call and express our particularity, some people will feel drawn to us and others will not. We can’t try to please everyone. Shouldn’t we focus on maintaining a strong identity and boundaries? Isn’t that why others would want to join us?”

The answer is yes. A clear identity and boundaries are important both to carve out and to maintain. You need to be clear who you include and who you exclude. According to Oswald and Leas,

A Christian church usually excludes people who do not profess belief in Jesus as Lord. . . . But there are other boundaries that help us differentiate between “us” and “not-us.” For example, some churches “exclude” those who are not comfortable with a certain kind of theology or those within certain socio-economic brackets (high as well as low). Some churches exclude certain ethnic groups, others exclude those who don’t include several ethnic groups . . . and so on. Boundaries are needed for a healthy church.<sup>3</sup>

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Sure, I get frustrated. They get one of us on a committee and say, “Generation X is now represented.” It’s the same with one person of color. Imagine if they said, “We can only run one white old man, or it will split the vote.”

SARAH DYLAN BREUER, EDITOR, THE WITNESS

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And so, if you give people something clear to belong to, make it apparent who is inside and who is outside—including certain ethnic groups or economic groups and certainly other communities—then you will grow as more people come looking for their familiars.

The critical question I would pose to Oswald and Leas and anyone building an inviting congregation as previously described is this: a healthy church needs boundaries and exclusion, but are all boundaries and exclusions healthy or, more to the point, Christian? Is all growth a sign of genuine health? Resources like *The Inviting Church* and *Welcome!* say little on the topic. The Bible, on the other hand, says plenty:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:1–4)

Exclusion may be necessary in the formation of any healthy community. But is a wealthy church drawing large numbers of other wealthy people and (actively or passively) turning away their poorer neighbors around the corner truly healthy? Is a white church to be commended for having little genuine appreciation for cultural expressions and relationships beyond their own group? Could these congregations grow in discipleship if they opened their doors and hearts to welcome The Other into their common life? Again, James is clear on the answer: “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor” (James 2:5–6). Closing the door to the gifts and presence of the marginalized Other, even for the sake of clear identity and a certain kind of growth, may cause a congregation to miss a greater blessing.

Using the logic of inviting, we quickly find ourselves locked into a pattern of reaching out to people who will appreciate our institutions and practices *as they are*, or who at least seem willing to assimilate to them. If your focus is on invitation, it will be difficult to justify reaching out to those who are different from you. You may grow, and by most measures observers would call you healthy and successful. You must ask yourself whether you have answered the call to live as the whole body of Christ.

## The Inclusive Congregation

The inclusive congregation is one that has heard and implemented some of the principles of the inviting congregation, and then added a crucial commitment: the biblical mandate to provide hospitality to the stranger. Whereas the inviting congregation’s plan largely draws those who reflect the cultural identity of the existing church community, an inclusive congregation has begun to explore what it means to welcome those outside their cultural group (as defined by factors like race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and age.) They hear Paul’s plea to “welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7), and they are getting familiar with and excited about the dream of inclusion.

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Online Extra: Best Practices  
for Inclusion Congregations

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These communities have the best of intentions, and many people may experience them as quite enlightened. What makes them inclusive instead of radically welcoming? The exchange is still largely one-way: “Come, be part of us, even bring your personality and

culture because we find them interesting and exciting, but neither the institution nor the current membership will actually be changed or shaped by your unique presence or gifts. You may join us, but you will not affect our central cultural values and practices.”<sup>4</sup>

As Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook explains in her study of multiracial congregations, the core problem is that the inclusive church has yet to really address power. (While she emphasizes racial dynamics, her analysis and definitions are eminently transferable.) She defines power as “the capacity to have control, authority or influence over others. . . . Social power refers to the capacity of dominant (white) culture to have control, authority and influence over people of color. Social power plus prejudice equals oppression.”<sup>5</sup> Many churches send members to anti-racism or other anti-oppression trainings, hoping they will come back transformed people. Only a tiny group of those communities move past the analysis of individual and interpersonal attitudes and behaviors to address the structural supports for oppression and dominance. If anything, Kujawa-Holbrook argues, “most religious institutions stop or drastically curtail antiracism efforts that move beyond personal and interpersonal awareness of racism.”<sup>6</sup> Put bluntly, they didn’t sign on for that level of transformation. They didn’t open the door to share power.

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They say come, but they don’t want you to make an impact. You’re welcome— to become one of us.

RUY COSTA, EPISCOPAL CITY MISSION, EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MASSACHUSETTS

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These congregations are striving to be genuinely hospitable and inclusive, but the operative word to describe their goal is really *incorporation*, offering marginalized people a place inside, but still on terms that allow the hosting institution’s power structures and identity to remain unchanged. So while they are open in theory and ideology, and they often thrill at the presence of a person of color or a gay or lesbian person or young adult or (more rarely) a person who appears to be poor or homeless,

- They incorporate different cultures into their worship, but without building relationships or sustaining an effort to educate and excite the larger community about the impact of fresh voices and perspectives. It stays at the level of “cultural tourism.”
- They may open their doors to marginalized groups, but that invitation usually goes out to certain, acceptable members of the marginal group, often the ones who share the dominant group’s class, culture, or aesthetic values (e.g., black Ivy League graduates, gay bankers, young classical music lovers, articulate homeless people, and so on). These members can be trusted as leaders. Other more marginal representatives likely won’t get that welcome.
- They may partner with “diverse” congregations, but usually the “haves” are offering something to those who “have not.” The church’s ministries foster the assumption that certain groups are the objects of service but not subjects with whom they engage in genuine partnership and embrace. Mutuality and interdependence has yet to break in and transform these relationships.

Thus, the inclusive church’s culture and environment will continually contradict its warm welcome. “Come in and join us, and please come back!” members say with their lips. But they wind up creating a revolving door, promising to receive people whom they have yet to develop the capacity to truly welcome.

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I heard someone say, “Anyone who wants to come to this church would be welcome; why do we have to make a statement?” We had to explain that some people would never cross that threshold.

LUCIE THOMAS, ST. PAUL’S-DULUTH

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The inclusive stage is vitally important in a congregation’s journey. Many churches reach this point and stay, because they are not prepared to release control and surrender the tight hold on their established identity and practices. Others may begin with inclusion, only to hit the wall or notice the revolving door through which marginalized people tend to travel. This dissonant awareness causes a fissure, and that break lets light stream in from the other side. That’s how you know there’s more to do, further to go. That’s how many churches arrive at radical welcome.

## **Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist, Multicultural Institution**



| MONOCULTURAL  |  | MULTICULTURAL  |
|---|--|--|
| Racial and Cultural Differences Seen as Defects   |  | Tolerant of Racial and . . .   |
| <p><b>1. Exclusive</b><br/>A Segregated Institution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intentionally and publicly excludes or segregates African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans</li> <li>• Intentionally and publicly enforces the racist status quo throughout institution</li> <li>• Institutionalization of racism includes formal policies and practices, teachings and decision-making on all levels</li> <li>• Usually has similar intentional policies and practices toward other socially oppressed groups, such as women, disabled, elderly and children, lesbians and gays, Third World citizens, etc.</li> </ul> | <p><b>2. Passive</b><br/>A "Club" Institution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tolerant of a limited number of People of Color with "proper" perspective and credentials</li> <li>• May still secretly limit or exclude People of Color in contradiction to public policies</li> <li>• Continues to intentionally maintain white power and privilege through its formal policies and practices, teachings and decision-making on all levels of institutional life</li> <li>• Often declares, "We don't have a problem."</li> </ul> | <p><b>3. Symbolic Change</b><br/>A Multicultural Institution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes official policy pronouncements regarding multicultural diversity</li> <li>• Sees itself as "non-racist" institution with open doors to People of Color</li> <li>• Carries out intentional inclusiveness efforts, recruiting "someone of color" on committees or office staff</li> <li>• Expanding view of diversity includes other socially oppressed groups, such as women, disabled, elderly and children, lesbians and gays, Third World citizens, etc.</li> </ul> <p>But . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Not those who make waves"</li> <li>• Little or no contextual change in culture, policies and decision-making</li> <li>• Is still relatively unaware of continuing patterns of privilege, paternalism and control</li> </ul> |

| ANTI-RACIST   | ANTI-RACIST MULTICULTURAL   |  |
|---|---|--|
| Cultural Differences  | Racial and Cultural Differences Seen as Assets  |  |
| <b>4. Identity Change</b><br>An Anti-Racist Institution   | <b>5. Structural Change</b><br>A Transforming Institution   | <b>6. Fully Inclusive</b><br>A Transformed Institution<br>in a Transformed Society   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growing understanding of racism as barrier to effective diversity</li> <li>• Develops analysis of systemic racism</li> <li>• Sponsors programs of anti-racism training</li> <li>• New consciousness of institutionalized white power and privilege</li> <li>• Develops intentional identity as an "anti-racist" institution</li> <li>• Begins to develop accountability to racially oppressed communities</li> <li>• Increasing commitment to dismantle racism and eliminate inherent white advantage</li> </ul> <p>But . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional structures and culture that maintain white power and privilege still intact and relatively untouched</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commits to process of intentional institutional restructuring, based on anti-racist analysis and identity</li> <li>• Audits and restructures all aspects of institutional life to ensure full participation of People of Color, including their worldview, culture and lifestyles</li> <li>• Implements structures, policies and practices with inclusive decision-making and other forms of power sharing on all levels of the institution's life and work</li> <li>• Commits to struggle to dismantle racism in the wider community, and builds clear lines of accountability to racially oppressed communities</li> <li>• Anti-racist multicultural diversity becomes an institutionalized asset</li> <li>• Redefines and rebuilds all relationships and activities in society, based on anti-racist commitments</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future vision of an institution and wider community that has overcome systemic racism</li> <li>• Institution's life reflects full participation and shared power with diverse racial, cultural and economic groups in determining its mission, structure, constituency, policies and practices</li> <li>• Full participation in decisions that shape the institution, and inclusion of diverse cultures, lifestyles and interests</li> <li>• A sense of restored community and mutual caring</li> <li>• Allies with others in combating all forms of social oppression</li> </ul> |

## The Radically Welcoming Congregation

Radical welcome takes us to the root level, the Jesus-level. It understands that a church needs to have a clear identity, mission and purpose, and it finds its *raison d'être* in the good news of liberation, justice and reconciliation for all of creation. Thus rooted, radically welcoming communities can go forth in Christian mission and ask the hard question: Who is not at the table? Who would never even come to the door because they are so sure we will not receive them, because, historically, we have not?

Those outsiders may be people of color, poor people, young adults, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. They may be children, people with mental or physical disabilities, the homeless, addicts, ex-offenders, or the elderly (especially those without financial means). They may actually be represented in the community, but they have yet to engage significantly at the deepest levels of parish life and leadership. And they may have lived near the church their whole lives and been told your church is one of *those* churches. Like Tony LeDeaux, an American Indian lay leader at St. Paul's-Duluth, they've seen the signs. "In the Indian community, we know about the Episcopal Church. It's got a big sign outside that says, 'Whites Only'" To be truly welcomed, they need to see the signs of genuine openness and not mere tolerance. They need to know that they matter and that they can bring their whole selves into church, and *not* only so that they can be assimilated into the church's dominant culture.

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First it's about getting people onto the same page, that you can't be Christian without being welcoming.  
That being a country club might be socially acceptable, but it's not what Jesus wanted.

ALTAGRACIA PEREZ, HOLY FAITH-INGLEWOOD

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The movement from inviting to inclusion to radical welcome is the move toward cultivating mutually transforming relationship.

The terms and power have shifted. Both parties matter, and both are open to conversion. People on the margins will enter and discover resonances, time-honored wisdom and beauty in the congregation's received tradition, even as they share love and stories and engage in ministry as part of the gathered body. But the existing community will also experience conversion, hearing with new ears the wisdom brothers or sisters bring from the margins, trying on new practices, engaging God from a different perspective, and expanding their sense of what is possible, normative, essential, or holy for Christian life in their context. Structures are changing, and lives are changing, as well.<sup>2</sup>

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The whole idea of hospitality has to do with accepting people where they are. We usually show them our books, and then get annoyed if they're not as excited as we are. We don't say, "What are your gifts? Your questions?" Maybe in a token way we put them on a committee, as long as it's not Finance or the Altar Guild.

JANE OASIN, SOCIAL JUSTICE MINISTRIES OFFICE, EPISCOPAL CHURCH CENTER

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If invitation is assimilation, and inclusion is incorporation, then the key word for radical welcome is *incarnation*. Jesus emptied himself and took on humanity; radical welcome calls us to surrender and openness to the culture and perspective of The Other. You should not release your heritage wholesale or attempt to erase everything and start from scratch. You need not demonize the gifts of the dominant culture. But you will have to examine the elements of your church life—your mission, identity, liturgy, leadership, and ministries—and determine where there is more flexibility than you first thought, which supposed essentials and non-negotiables are in fact simply your preferences, where you might be able to make room for another voice or perspective to enrich, enhance, stand alongside, and even transform the one generally privileged. As the seminal report from the Church of England, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*,<sup>8</sup> makes clear, we must learn to listen, surrender, and immerse ourselves in the wisdom of the gospel and in our cultural context. We do it for the sake of the Incarnate One, Jesus the Christ.

Priest and consultant Caroline Fairless understands how easy it is to stop before delving into the hard work of radical welcome, but she urges communities to plunge into these deeper waters:

The common language we use to evangelize is so often the language of coercion rather than conversion. We welcome you. We want you. Be like us. We do it to our children. We do it to each other. Can we reach for a vision of evangelism that assumes that each new person who graces the community will alter the complexion and the spirituality and the depths of the community? Can we understand this as a good and desirable thing? Can we understand evangelism in terms of the mutuality of the exchange of the gospel?<sup>9</sup>

What if we began to understand that kind of mutually transforming exchange of the gospel as a central part of our mission as Christian communities? It would profoundly shift the starting ground for congregational development. On the one hand, the radically welcoming congregation should do much of the same work that the inviting or welcoming church would; gospel-centered, structural transformation is crucial, but don't neglect the importance of an attractive website that tells your story and a clear process for incorporating new people into your common life. The difference is that radically welcoming communities look at conventional congregational development strategies and then ask the hard questions about who's inside, who's outside and what it would take to go beyond inclusion to mutual embrace and transformation.

## GO DEEPER . . .

1. Which of the stories, comments or ideas you just read was the most challenging? Exciting? How do they connect with your own story? What do they inspire you to ask or to do?
2. How do these reflections link with your church's story, or the stories of churches you've known?
3. Take another look at the "Inviting/Inclusive/Radical Welcome" table on page 64. Which of these models best fits your church's operative ideal (where you are headed, unless there is a change of direction)? What observations bring you to that conclusion? If you're headed to inviting or inclusion but dream of radical welcome, what could you do to help your community to change course?

<sup>1</sup>. See bibliography for details on each of these titles.

<sup>2</sup>. According to the schema designed by the Crossroads Ministry, a national organization that trains congregations and institutions becoming anti-racist and multicultural, a congregation at this stage is a "club." In other words, the community is "tolerant of a limited number of people of color [and others from the margins] with 'proper' perspective and credentials," and it "continues to intentionally maintain [the dominant group's] power and privilege through its formal policies, practices, teachings and decision-making on all levels of institutional life." For more information, see the "Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist, Multi-Cultural Institution," on page 70 and in the online resources section. For more information, contact Crossroads at (773) 638-0166 or [www.crossroadsantiracism.org](http://www.crossroadsantiracism.org).

<sup>3</sup>. Oswald and Leas, *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1987), 19.

<sup>4</sup>. According to the Crossroads schema, a congregation like this is interested in symbolic or even identity change: members make official policy statements on diversity and even cultivate a growing awareness of the systemic nature of racism. They include members of the marginalized group(s) on some committees or on the staff. However, they draw the line at welcoming people who "make waves" and leave essentially intact the institutional structures and culture that maintain [the dominant group's] power and privilege. See their resource on page 70.

[5](#). Kujawa-Holbrook, *A House of Prayer for All Peoples: Building Multiracial Community* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2004), 15.

[6](#). *Ibid.*, 22.

[7](#). Crossroads defines congregations at this stage as either “transforming” or “transformed,” working for structural change in order to become fully inclusive. By transforming, they are actively, strategically rebuilding their congregational life *and* the wider society in concert with a multicultural, anti-racist vision. The fully realized vision is a transformed congregation, one where people once on the margins are fully enfranchised, where the church reflects “full participation and shared power with diverse racial, cultural, and economic groups in determining its mission, structure, constituency, policies, and practices,” and where the congregation is actively working to eliminate oppression in the wider world. See the Crossroads resource on pages 70 to 71 of this chapter.

[8](#). Archbishop’s Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and, Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

[9](#). Caroline Fairless, *Children at Worship—Congregations in Bloom* (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2000), 148.



## Radical Welcome Signs

We have about 120 people here every Tuesday night for a Community Kitchen, our version of a Soup Kitchen. There's great conversation and a meal. So when our associate Bridget was ordained, she invited a whole bunch of that crew to the service. They came to the church then, and they're still coming. We had a Newcomers' party, and they parked their baskets right next to someone's Subaru and came right in. Now, I know there's still classism out there. But I've never seen people crossing boundaries like this. It's a profound thing to see the gospel lived out. It gets you excited.

BONNIE PERRY, ALL SAINTS-CHICAGO

If you were hunting for an Episcopal church in an unfamiliar neighborhood, you might look for the ubiquitous sign announcing "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You!" How do you know when you've found a radically welcoming church? What are the visible signs that a community is opening its doors and its common life to The Other?

I've grouped these signs, or criteria, into five categories<sup>1</sup>: mission and vision, identity, ministries and relationships, leadership and feedback systems, and worship. The point is not whether a congregation has achieved them all. These criteria can give us a clear vision and attainable goals to reach for and imagine with.

### *Mission and Vision*

1. A clear, compelling, transformational mission and vision—one that incorporates radical welcome of The Other—has been discerned, communicated and supported by the community.
2. The mission and vision guide the continuing development of the community's identity, ministries, leadership, and worship.

### *Identity*

1. The congregation values its history, traditions and denominational heritage; it also fosters an identity flexible enough to include The Other.
2. Leaders have consciously studied the make-up of the surrounding community and intentionally invited those neighbors to join and help to shape their common life and common mission.
3. The congregation is developing critical consciousness of who is inside, who is marginalized and who is outside, and why, and seeks to eliminate exclusionary barriers blocking The Other.

### *Ministries and Relationships*

1. The congregation's activities have been thoughtfully organized to reflect and fulfill the radically welcoming mission.
2. Community ministries reflect mutuality and a desire for empowerment and transformation of self, other and community (doing *with* others, rather than doing *for* others).
3. Ministries draw members at the community's center and its margins into mutual, transforming relationship.

### *Leadership and Feedback Systems*

1. Leaders are intentionally recruited, mentored and selected from the distinct groups in the community, with special attention to building power among the under-represented margins.
2. There is wide access to decision-makers and transparency regarding decision-making.
3. Different cultural and generational styles of leadership are understood and creatively accommodated.

## *Worship*

1. The make-up of the worshipping body—which may be spread over more than one service—reflects the surrounding community.
2. Liturgical texts, music, images, and worship leaders reflect the congregation and surrounding community.
3. The community’s worship is lively and reflective, deeply rooted in lived traditions, yet open to fresh expressions (again, not necessarily in a single service).

Focusing in these areas, it’s a lot easier to explore at greater depth what the radically welcoming dream of God looks like when it’s made incarnate in real congregations.<sup>2</sup>

## **Mission and Vision**

*What Is It?* The congregation’s understanding of its purpose and direction as the radically welcoming people of God in the long- and short-term.

*The Signs:* 1. A clear, compelling, transformational mission and vision—one that incorporates radical welcome of The Other—has been discerned, communicated and supported by the community.

2. The mission and vision guide the continuing development of the community’s identity, ministries, leadership, and worship.

If anyone is wondering what the reign of God looks like, they should be able to look at the mission of the church and catch a glimpse. As the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) reminds Episcopalians, our mission as church is to “restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”<sup>3</sup> We are the reconcilers who go forth, forge redeeming and reconciling relationships in the world God made, and bring the creation home to God.

At St. Bartholomew’s in Atlanta, that calling translates into a radical mission, particularly down South. Their mission statement, printed in a variety of visible places and referenced regularly by leaders, reads as follows: “We open our doors to all who seek God or a deeper knowledge of God. We are a nurturing, inclusive community centered in Jesus Christ, called to grow in our faith through worship, ministry, education, and service.” It’s not a sexy statement, but over the years, that commitment has led them to open their parish hall to homeless families six nights a week in a program conceived, organized and run by parishioners (and this during an interim period!). It has led them to reconfigure their leadership structures and demands so that students and other young adults ordinarily perceived as transitory and pushed to the margins could take full part in the life of the community (why require young, new members of the Altar Guild to do every task for an entire week, when you could break up the tasks for those who might be working or studying?). Most recently, it opened the way for them to call Mac Thigpen as their rector.

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I took a van full of students to different congregations all over town on Sundays. It was amazing to arrive with this group, identifiably undergrade, and nobody would speak to us. St. Bart’s was the only one where people came up and were excited about this group of young people.

NANCY BAXTER,  
ST. BARTHOLOMEWS-ATLANTA

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“Calling a gay rector made us vulnerable,” said the Reverend Charles Geary, a deacon who serves on the St. Bartholomew’s staff. “I was the coordinator for Toco Hills Ministry (a collective of neighborhood social ministries), and we had a broad spectrum of conservative churches and excellent relations. After Mac was called, the Baptists left, all because he’s gay. So yes, there have been repercussions.” Invitations to ecumenical events stopped coming and local conservative leaders protested. LGBT people might not have become the majority, but St. Bartholomew’s was definitely known as the “gay” church.

Then something happened. The crisis pushed them to clarify their radically welcoming mission. They redoubled their focus on welcome for *all* people, taking more care to follow up with visitors, hoping that for every person who left or was scared off, there would be more who were curious and even excited about this risk-taking church. Monthly dinner groups gather a mix of members—young adults and elders, gay and straight, old-timers and newcomers—as they work hard to keep the community integrated and vibrant.

The call to join gay and lesbian people on the margins might have been the best thing that happened to this group of upper-middle class, comfortably liberal, well-educated, mostly white suburbanites. The bonus: a fresh batch of newcomers, many of them young families, have come to join them in that mission.

“I once heard someone talking about this large church with a lot of gays,” said Shelley Parnes, a mother of small children who left the Roman Catholic fold to join St. Bartholomew’s. “I said, ‘Good, that’s a sign that this is an open, welcoming community.’ If they’ll accept someone who’s gay, then they’ll accept others for any reason. That’s the kind of church I want my children to grow up in.” The neighbors might not be happy, and some members remain a bit edgy, but their mission is clear—and contagious.

The brothers and sisters at Church of the Apostles have fully internalized that lesson, as well. This church plant is truly “mission-shaped”: it sounds, looks, feels, and operates like the Seattle neighborhood where it’s planted. That means it is truly alternative: alt-music, alt-worship, alt-culture. But don’t be fooled by the “alt” title. COTA may be part-art collective, part-party promoter, but it is *all* church. They are just working with a different definition.

“We keep re-reading the Bible to get insights about what Jesus did,” Pastor Karen Ward said. “Here’s what we know: he traveled with a small core, and they did life together. They slept in some meadows, encountered large groups. A few of those they met actually listened and followed. Half of them were men and half were women. They went around trying to live the kingdom life and trying to tell people about it. We’re trying to use the same paradigm.”

That approach has taken the Apostles into territory most mainline churches do not venture near. For instance, COTA adapted to its culture by providing multiple entry points. Besides worship, members have run a tea bar where they provided Benedictine hospitality with a cup of Darjeeling. Some people link through an artists' collective called "artwerks," a separate nonprofit that serves as one of COTA's alter egos. Others connect through The Fremont Abbey, home for worship and a venue where musicians and artists of all ages book shows and support others' work.

And at the center of it all are the Apostles, that smaller band of brothers and sisters who are living "the kingdom life."

Curate Ryan Marsh and Mistress of Music Lacey Brown are part of that group. They live with four other friends in a house called Rosewood Manor. Together, they are shaping their own intentional Christian community, complete with a rule of life and daily prayer. Ward is the abbess to this countercultural band of "urban monks."

"I'm all about being poor and being with people," said Brown, a twenty-something who grew up in the Reformed tradition. "So much in our culture forces us to be alone." Marsh shared her concern. "Everybody is scattered from where they were raised," he said. "People never leave the house, never leave the computer. They scoff at the idea of family and community."

These young people are fierce about reclaiming community and connection, and they are passionate about sharing it in ways that speak to their context. "I'm just being myself and hoping others will be themselves, discover their gifts," Brown said. "I'm hoping to find God in my community and that my community finds God." That mission drives the Apostles into the world and brings the world right into their funky little abbey.

## Identity

*What* The demographic markers like the church's size, median income, its dominant age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ideology, etc.; *Is It?* also includes the defining culture and story of the community's life to this point.

*The* 1. The congregation values its history, traditions and denominational heritage; it also fosters an identity flexible enough to *Signs:* include The Other.

2. Leaders have consciously studied the make-up of the surrounding community and intentionally invited those neighbors to join and help to shape their common life and common mission.

3. The congregation is developing critical consciousness of who is inside, who is marginalized and who is outside, and why, and seeks to eliminate exclusionary barriers blocking The Other.

Seminary professor and South Indian church leader Christopher Duraisingh describes beautifully what happens when we open the bounds of our identity to embrace the myriad voices of fellow pilgrims around us:

The story of God's Jove in Jesus Christ is like the bud of a fragrant flower, fully ripe but as yet only in the process of opening fully. As we read and hear the [gospel] from the variety of our languages and perspectives, multivoicedly, to use my phrase, each interpretation opens one petal of the gospel-flower. As each petal of the flower opens, we come to behold the loveliness of the blossoming flower and smell its fragrance.... Only through a process of a multicultural, or multivoiced, opening up shall we discern that love in all its fullness.<sup>4</sup>

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We believe the Holy Spirit embraces, protects, and cares for persons of every race, culture, gender, age, sexual orientation, economic circumstance, and belief. Holy Faith respects all people and we welcome everyone to worship with us.

### HOLY FAITH WELCOME STATEMENT

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As Duraisingh intuits, the more we welcome new perspectives and voices fully into our lives, the bigger and fuller our knowledge of the world and of God, *and* the richer our identity as the body of Christ. Radically welcoming communities are in the business of saying yes to that opening, even if it means a de-centering, identity-shifting encounter with The Other.

At St. Mary's in West Harlem, the community has claimed a truly welcoming and flexible identity. Here, you meet Charles Kelly, a homeless man with matted hair and spry eyes who shows up in the robing room, dons his alb and processes down the center aisle with confidence. And when he stands at the center of the assembly to read Jesus' words, he is glowing, transfigured. "I was unemployed and I needed something to eat, so I came to the Soup Kitchen," Kelly told me. "It was different here. I felt these good vibes and lots of love. It's like when I arrived, they asked me, 'You want to cut the bread, help to make some sandwiches? You want a job as a clean-up aide?' They invited me to become part of it all."

Here, middle-class Harlemites and Columbia University professionals clap and praise alongside those who first entered the church through the Soup Kitchen downstairs. And for a time, in this place, they stand together. "Whoever you are—rich, poor, from the streets, black, white, gay or straight—we are not afraid," parishioner Glenda Marie White told me as she pointed with pride to their infamous "The 'I Am Not Afraid' Church" banner. "If you're here," she said, "you're already one of us."

The community admittedly has a long history of pushing aside social barriers and standing with the least of these. In the 1800s, they were the first parish in the Diocese of New York (some say the country) to ban pew rents. In the 1980s, they opened a shelter and later a hospice for victims of the AIDS epidemic ravaging New York's gay community. Today, they are working to stay aware of class stratification and discerning how to genuinely, intentionally welcome gay and lesbian people.

With every new challenge, every new group that appears, the people of St. Mary's have to say "yes" again to a Christian identity that is risky and runs counter to the larger Episcopal Church's culture. Nobody ever said it would feel good. Middle-class members



like Gloria Smith long for a more dignified service (with some concern, she said the choir rehearsals “sound like they’re getting ready to go to a dance!”). But she continues to serve as the junior warden, and she told me she is devoted to the community vision. “I went to another black church in Harlem when their priest was installed. I put on my Sunday best and walked in. Well, there was a big difference between the people inside and who’s outside in the neighborhood. It made me feel strange. I need to be in a place where everybody’s totally accepted.” She found it at St. Mary’s.

All Saints in Pasadena started from a radically different position. It’s one of the largest Episcopal congregations in the country, and yet, despite all their power and experience, they couldn’t seem to cross one barrier: the race divide.

Former rector George Regas led the congregation from the turbulent 1960s and into the social upheavals of the 1990s; he admitted to me that he never poured the energy into dismantling racial oppression and analyzing white privilege that he did into other struggles. “I had zero experience with homosexuality when I came,” he said, but members soon pushed him to new awareness. That never happened around race. “To get deeply into where you are [regarding race], how you became that, what you get out of it ... we’ve had a hard time with that.”

Race in Pasadena was simply a tough and nasty issue, especially for All Saints. In the 1940s they planted St. Barnabas, a separate congregation for their black servants. Since then, most All Saints members have assumed black people would prefer St. Barnabas. With so many layers and such deep-seated antagonism and mistrust, Regas said he never had the opportunity—or the will—to step into the quagmire of racism.

Christina Honchell works at the intersection between the surrounding community and the church. She pointed out yet another layer of privilege All Saints has yet to reckon with: economic privilege. “Honestly, I believe it all comes down to class. We’re good at welcoming Latinos who are professionals and don’t like noisy children. But poor people? I don’t think even working-class whites would fit in here.”

Given that tough reality, Honchell sees only one way out. It begins with engaging the community, listening to the people on the ground, getting to know the local public schools and workers, and building real relationships rather than trying to “do for.” Then it takes bringing diverse cultures together in the sanctuary. “To be welcoming,” she said, “you have to get people to really bump into each other, to pray and play with people they wouldn’t see at work or at home.”

Current rector Ed Bacon said he understands all that. But even bumping into each other takes work. It requires taking a hard look at your identity through both the race and class lenses. “We’re perceived as a rich white folks’ church. To change that, we’ve got to have meaningful relations with people of different races and classes. It’s going to take getting the dominant, privileged class skilled enough to know their power and what happens when they walk into a room.”

In the last decade, Bacon, the senior staff, committee heads, and other leaders and members have undergone anti-oppression trainings designed to give them a common language and conceptual foundation, along with an opportunity to identify systems of privilege in a structured, mediated environment. In true All Saints’ style, they also crafted and widely disseminated a detailed plan for opening their doors and expanding their identity.<sup>5</sup> Year after year, they’ve increased their cultural competence and broadened their commitment. And while they haven’t arrived, they’re finally positioned to launch a Spanish-language service as a base for ministry with area Latinos.

Knowing who you want to become and establishing a sense of urgency about moving from the current identity to one that embraces The Other—this, in itself, is a significant mark on the road to radical welcome.

## Ministries and Relationships

*What* Any practices of the congregation related to fulfilling the mission and dream: pastoral care, evangelism, community service, *Is It?* justice ministries, community life, stewardship, Christian formation, and external relationships.

*The* 1. The congregation’s activities have been thoughtfully organized to reflect and fulfill the radically welcoming mission.

*Signs* 2. Community ministries reflect mutuality and a desire for empowerment and transformation of self, other and community (doing *with* others, rather than doing *for* others).

3. Ministries draw members at the community’s center and its margins into mutual, transforming relationship.

Radically welcoming churches are intentional about realigning their activities and relationships for mission. After all, where else do we practice radical welcome except on the ground, in ministries and community relationships that train us to be active participants in the constantly in-breaking reign of God? This is where we first encounter The Other and discover a common bond in our shared commitment to the dream of God.

Kenneth Adams, a black native of Los Angeles, saw it work that way at Holy Faith in Inglewood, California. When black people began to arrive some thirty years ago, the welcome was far from warm. The parish history cites a particularly painful incident from that early chapter. One of the first black parishioners had volunteered in the church office and was busy opening the mail. He found a response to the parish survey, which asked how best to improve Holy Faith. The respondent simply wrote, “Get rid of the niggers.”

Adams arrived during that dicey period. “When I came here, the church was 99 percent white. It was rather strange. Several whites were bending over backward to welcome us. Some whites left.” Over time he said the members who remained formed relationships across boundaries, creating and then serving together in a variety of ministries and small groups. Veteran members like Adams, along with his dedicated white counterparts, set an example as the bridge-builders, literally paving the way for more and more people from both communities to meet and build a common life in Christ.

Former rector Gary Commins shepherded the community through more recent changes with the same intentionality. “We had programs and conversations and asked: What do you really treasure in your culture? And then we asked, How does your culture express prejudice?” Eventually, they formed a task force, created a curriculum and shared it with other churches working through issues of cultural diversity and inclusion. They made the commitment and then concretized it as part of their formation and community ministries. They equipped themselves for change.



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This family system has always been hospitable in a noblesse oblige way. It was not okay to be rude. That's tacky. And for years, their money kept the diocesan Indian programs going. That's the history: bearing the white man's burden. The real stuff happens at the next stage, where there's real, one-to-one engagement.

HOWARD ANDERSON, (FORMERLY) ST.  
PAUL'S-DULUTH

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St. Paul's in Duluth, Minnesota, is living proof of the difference relationships make: these connections change neighborhoods; they can also change a church.

Over the years, St. Paul's had generously responded to community needs, but parishioners told me it was generally from a privileged, Lady Bountiful-like distance. So while they are proud of their work in the 1970s sponsoring and shepherding families fleeing Cambodia and Vietnam and supporting Indian ministries throughout the Diocese of Minnesota, members did not push beyond their comfort zone on a regular basis. And while some poor and non-white neighbors entered the church, they rarely stuck around for very long.

Architecture did not help the welcoming cause. Built in 1915, this venerable stone edifice looks like a fortress, and for too many years that is just what the neighbors thought it was. The hinge on the 300-pound doors was set so low you could barely open the doors. Visitors would never have known the doors were even unlocked. If that sounds like an apt metaphor, it is. "We knew the neighborhood was changing, but the congregation was still basically a small, insiders' parish financed and influenced by a small group of old men," said Elaine Killen, who has been at St. Paul's for nearly sixty years. "We needed people who could help us to open up, go out on a limb."

They called Howard Anderson, hoping he would do the job. "I told them if I came I'd want to change some things, but I guaranteed that I'd add 100 people in the first year." He was true to his word. Average Sunday attendance doubled in his ten-year tenure, jumping from 175 to 350 people. They list nearly 1,000 active members.

Anderson now leads the Cathedral College at Washington National Cathedral. During his years at St. Paul's, he led the community on a wild ride—always keeping the ministry of pastoral care at the forefront. A huge team of priests, deacons and trained lay leaders visit hospitals, nursing homes, homes, and any other place where people were lonely or hurting. "When you're doing this left-wing 'pinko' stuff, they need to know you love them," Anderson said. "Then they'll feel safe enough to go with you anywhere. So we've gone slow, let people know we love them without patronizing them. It's possible to gain young adults and reach out to the neighborhood and not lose your older, wealthier, more conservative members. Just don't pull the rug out from under anyone."

That doesn't mean they didn't take any risks. To launch their new commitment to the neighborhood, St. Paul's tithed 10 percent of the proceeds from their million-dollar capital campaign and invested it in neighborhood outreach. *Then* they invited neighborhood and civic leaders to join them in discerning how the resources could best be used. Suddenly, St. Paul's was no longer Lady Bountiful riding about town, dropping favors on the lowly. Now the congregation was entering genuine partnership, laying itself open to the needs of the community.

According to Duluth native Jackie Johnson, that was the moment when St. Paul's finally became a real neighbor. "This church had a reputation," said Johnson, who has observed the church from a distance most of her life. "The money people were the parishioners, and everything was geared to that group. We've come a long way. My mother-in-law was a housekeeper here for many years. Now look at it. They want us to come in."

One popular church-sponsored program, the Mind 2 Mind summer enrichment program, has drawn a whole new generation to the church building. Kids who skirted the forbidding old church now think of it as their second home. When vandals tried to deface the church, one leader told me, a couple of kids ran in and stopped them, yelling, "You're not gonna touch my church!"

Besides Mind 2 Mind, St. Paul's hosts dozens of community groups and sponsors several of its own community ministries: a neighborhood center next door, the Little Treasures child care center, a parish nurse who serves the community, a computer lab in their carriage house, and more. The fortress walls have come tumbling down.

With fewer walls in place, St. Paul's has been touched by its community relationships like never before. In the past, by virtue of their power, members could always choose to maintain critical distance from their beneficiaries. Now parishioners have a chance to get involved and form new, mutually transforming relationships with their neighbors. "Let me tell you how much our comfort zones have shifted," said Terry Parsons, the church's Director of Lay Ministries. "People here used to say anyone on welfare must be a bad person. Now I go with people to pick up their food stamps. That's a change."

Someday St. Paul's may take those new relationships to the next level and welcome their neighbors to join the church's common life on the inside. Grace Episcopal Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts, didn't have to wait: the marginalized members had already come in. The two groups just had no idea how to relate with one another. It took common ministries to build real community—inside the church and outside.

That didn't come easily. A congregational development consultant met with Latino and Anglo leaders to figure out their future together, helping them to name their frustrations in a structured environment. Parishioners kept talking and discovered shared hopes. They found they wanted to model a different way of approaching change, for the sake of their parish, their neighborhood and the wider church. "There are a lot of us '8 a.m. saints' who don't want to bend," Carol St. Louis told me. "But if you don't bend, you might break. I've seen other churches close because they couldn't bend and accommodate new people. That's not going to be us."

The consultant told them they needed two things: better communication and shared ministries. So they branched out, drawing members from the English- and Spanish-speaking congregations together to offer computer skills and language courses to the neighborhood. They also hosted regular dinners and fellowship events for the express purpose of bringing the communities together and building friendship across the race and class divide.

Those intentional efforts have slowed over the years, but the seeds still bear life. Fran Kuchar sees it. A white woman who has

been part of the Grace community for more than thirty years, she watches a steady stream of Latinos of all ages coming to the church for everything from worship to computer classes to women's prayer groups to neighborhood youth jams. Once, it might have disturbed her. Now she welcomes the challenge, because she sees where it is headed. "Sure, if we come together there will be things we lose. But look at all we gain: a place that's full of people and filled with so much spirit you can touch it."

## Leadership and Feedback Systems

*What Is It?* The set of mechanisms that enable a group to reflect effectively, make decisions, act, and otherwise exercise power

- The signs*
1. Leaders are intentionally recruited, mentored and selected from the distinct groups in the community, with special attention to building power among the under-represented margins.
  2. There is wide access to decision-makers and transparency regarding decision-making.
  3. Different cultural and generational styles of leadership are understood and creatively accommodated.

People on the margins know the importance of power, mostly because institutional power is so often withheld from them. They know there can be no genuine, radical welcome without a sharing of power.

St. Philip's-Harlem has a mixed history when it comes to sharing power with The Other. They're strong on black liberation. But as one of New York's flagship black Episcopal churches, they also have their share of hang-ups about tradition, class and keeping up appearances, and thus who "ought" to be in leadership.

For a time, that worked perfectly for Sidney and Philip Blake-Spivey, a professional couple in their fifties. "I think we're both seen as the Good Negro and the Good Gay," Philip said. "We're professional, we're active, we're well-spoken, and people treat us like we're special. Maybe that makes us easier to take, but there is something we can do. We can raise sensitivity to class, ageism and sexuality. We can bring those up. They'll try to normalize us, but we'll keep on bringing those issues up again."

Cecily Broderick y Guerra partnered with leaders like the Blake-Spiveys to crank the system open for younger, less "acceptable" gay and lesbian leaders. "[Sidney and Philip] are among the most respected leaders in the congregation, partly because their social background and family constellation matched this stratified system," she explained. "We're capitalizing on that opening to get a group of younger gay leaders out there."

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I thought it was symbolic that of the six originally asked to be Journey to Adulthood and Rite 13 mentors, four were gay or lesbian. That's extremely important. It's one thing to put gay men on the Altar Guild. It's something else to put us teaching the kids.

MAGGIE KULYK,  
ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S-ATLANTA

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Brodneck y Guerra said the strategy is working. She has groomed and mentored gay and lesbian newcomers and advocated for their appointment to task forces and subcommittees of the vestry, and she said it's making a difference. "The vestry agreed to pick several leaders to send to a diocesan training. Four of the twelve are from Epiphany (the black gay and lesbian group based at St. Philip's). Is that tokenism? It would be poor stewardship if we didn't capitalize on their leadership."

LGBT people come together at St. Philip's for Epiphany, a gathering of black Episcopalians (and others) who are "in the life." From that home base, several partnered lesbians and gay men have felt secure enough to step up as part of the church's core leadership. And several older members said hosting Epiphany and having out people as leaders has actually given them something to brag about.

I met one of those church mothers, Beatrice Tomlinson, who fairly preened as she informed me, "I've told my friends with lesbian kids that they need to come here. And the people who started Epiphany? They came here because of me. They visited one Sunday, and I called them and told them they should come back and join." Even as she spoke the words, she looked with a smile to her adopted granddaughter, Dorothy Carlton, a 19-year-old lesbian who has led the church's young women's service guild.

Chuck Allen is one of the men Beatrice Tomlinson welcomed years ago. He appreciates her open arms. He also promises it will prove mutually beneficial. "Gay people are going to save St. Philip's and this entire diocese," he said. "We're going to teach them that they can be open enough to save themselves. All they have to do is practice welcome. God will do the rest." Allen and his lesbian and gay sisters and brothers are leading St. Philip's right into the dream of God.

At All Saints-Pasadena, black and Latino members told me their struggle to obtain power is a daily one. "I think a lot of people thought, because I'm Latino, I would bring in the Latinos," said Abel Lopez, an Anglican from Cuba who serves on the All Saints clergy staff. "I said, 'No, I'm not going to do anything to get Latinos or blacks or anybody else until this environment changes.' This community has to learn how to do power-sharing. I want us to be inclusive, but we have to do it the right way, and we're not there yet."

Associate rector Wilma Jakobsen came to All Saints from South Africa. A white woman who worked closely with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, she said she was shocked by how few people of color she saw when she first visited the church—especially in positions of power. "This community went ten years with no priest of color. My antenna goes up when I hear that. Something's going on, and it's an issue for people who love justice to pay attention to."

She took the job because she saw a real desire to change and to deal with root causes and questions of power. "One of the reasons I wanted to come here was because of the intentionality," she said. "I saw the commitment to looking at power dynamics. I saw people in little positions saying things to people in big positions."

Thanks to the work of leaders like Jakobsen and Lopez—and rector Ed Bacon’s willingness to use his own power to open doors for others—there’s been real change. The rota of readers and lay ministers always includes people of color, and they’ve hired and nurtured a number of clergy of color. Some white members have complained that Bacon is engaged in crass tokenism, and they resent the fact that there are not as many slots open to them. Bacon told me he sees the bigger picture and hopes others will, too. “The Eucharistic table should look more like L.A. and more like heaven,” he said. “I know that’s a ‘diversity’ move and not multiculturalism, but it’s a slow process, and we started here.”

Over time, the entire congregational leadership system is also being transformed from the inside out. Those who want to take part in high-profile ministries and overseas missions are required to participate in Visions, an anti-oppression, consciousness-raising program based in Arlington, Massachusetts.<sup>6</sup> It’s made a difference. “The clergy and committee chairs and lots more leaders are getting the training, and that is informing our work,” Lopez told me. “I have to ask, What does leadership mean to me as a young man of color in a meeting with all women? This is where the real tension is, for all of us.”

*It may be a tense position to stake out, but All Saints’ leaders are realizing that no power equals no welcome.*

At Grace Church in Lawrence, the congregation’s efforts to make change and become welcoming stalled until they finally learned to talk about power. There were two worship gatherings: a dwindling white service and a thriving Latino one. With each day, the tension and resentment started to build. The relationship between the two was essentially Anglo landlord-Latino tenant. No one wanted to touch the elephant in the room: the white parishioners’ fear of handing over the reins to Latinos with different cultural values, a different ecclesiology and different leadership styles. “The old guard was willing to let [Latino] people be members, but not to be the leaders,” said Ennis Duffis, the priest-in-charge.

Their first foray into shared power came when white and Latino members collaborated on common ministries to serve the city of Lawrence. Eventually, the old guard agreed to form mentoring relationships with the newer, Latino members and experimented with surrendering more control.

The key was people like Migdalia Mendez, who stepped up and created links between the new leaders and the older ones. “I’ve been called the bridge,” she said. “I came to Grace fifteen years ago and was one of the few who stayed. In some way, I felt I belonged. People asked me to be part of things. In the Catholic Church, no one asked me to be this involved.” Now, Mendez and other key leaders take responsibility for helping others to stay the course for real transformation.

They’ve also listened and helped their community to hold the fear of change. Through intentional feedback sessions, members could share their concerns *and* passions. Latino members like Elsa Berroa *could voice* their lack of excitement about traditional Anglo liturgy and decorum. “Some people think there’s only one way to do church,” she said. “They squeeze the children if they make noise, because church is supposed to be quiet. Well, I think that’s just boring.” Berroa and other Latino leaders also shared their frustration at being shut out of leadership because of white perceptions of what it takes to hold authority. Meanwhile, senior white members like Pauline Messer, who has called the church home for fifty years, could admit that they found the Spanish-speaking service too large (about 200 on an average Sunday) and too loud (with a praise band and children present for the entire service.) It was freeing for everyone to finally tell the truth.

There is still some tug-of-war, but now the vestry more closely resembles the congregation: Mendez, the Latina senior warden, heads a council that includes eight Latinos and three whites. And people know they don’t have to whisper in corners or feel like tenants. It may be less than “proper,” but it’s everyone’s home now.

## Worship

*What Is It?* The complex of ritual activities that *serve* to gather God’s people and foster relationship with God and with each other through prayer, praise, sacrament, and Scripture<sup>7</sup>

*The Signs* 1. The make-up of the worshipping body—which may be spread over more than one sendee—reflects the surrounding community.

2. Liturgical texts, music, images, and worship leaders reflect the congregation and surrounding community.

3. The community’s worship is lively and reflective, deeply rooted in lived traditions, yet open to fresh expressions (again, not necessarily in a single service).

There’s no one way to reflect radical welcome in the context of worship. For instance, Howard Anderson told me he was dying to have more fun with the liturgy at St. Paul’s in Duluth. (“I get bored by it,” he confessed.) But he knew members needed an anchor, and it was liturgy. So they kept the formal, spoken Rite I Eucharist at 8 a.m., and priests only stopped facing the back wall a few years ago. “People need a home base,” Anderson said, “then they can venture out.”

Holy Faith-Inglewood has committed to performing that delicate balancing act and still embracing the gifts of whites, African Americans, Africans, Latinos, and women. On any given Sunday, you can start the morning at a conventional Anglican service with music from the standard hymnal and an inclusivized Book of Common Prayer liturgy. Stay in your seat and you will witness a longer, even more inclusive BCP liturgy, featuring music from the church’s homemade hymnbook, which boasts selections from the many cultures that call Holy Faith home. Depending on the Sunday, you may also get to fall in behind Nigerian members who lead the rest of the congregation (including some awkward but enthusiastic white members) in a dancing, singing offertory procession to the altar. You can then finish the afternoon with a folksy Spanish-language service for families and children that features guitars, maracas and songbooks with no musical notation at all (which makes the hymns accessible to those who don’t read music).

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There have definitely been some protests about what Ed is doing with the altar (holding spots open for LEMs of color). You hear a lot of, “This is tokenism. I used to be a LEM and now, because of these ‘other folks,’ I can’t.”

And several times a year, all those groups come together for a family reunion-style bilingual service, something their bilingual rector, Altagracia Perez, delights in leading.

Holy Faith has crafted a body of liturgies that speak to their cultural context, uphold the essentials of the tradition, and express their shared faith and hope in Christ. It can feel a bit of a hodge-podge, but Nigerian lay leader and cradle Anglican Daniel Mogbo told me he never doubts that they are firmly in the Anglican tradition, even if they are sometimes outside of convention. “There are essentials of Christianity that you don’t compromise. Then there are the nonessentials that are subject to cultural norms and conditions. Jesus is God. No argument on that. How do we sing? Use a hymnal? Sing five praise songs? Stand up? Sit down? Dance while processing? These are decisions each group has to make. There’s nothing Anglican or Episcopalian about those choices.” If anything, the quintessentially Anglican response is one that honors its context as well as it does the tradition.

The crew at Church of the Apostles in Seattle could not agree more. They gather for a weekly Eucharist, but not on Sunday mornings. Honoring their context, their main worship gathering is on Saturdays at 5 p.m. in The Fremont Abbey, the converted church building that serves as the community’s art gallery, music venue and sanctuary.

When it’s time to worship, the service follows the same basic structure—the *ordo*, for Latin lovers—that Christians have been following for millennia: gathering, word, meal, sending. But the Apostles weave in art and film on video screens; electronic, ambient music by their house band; meditation and group reflection with the Scripture appointed for the day; original prayers for confession and forgiveness; icons created by young artists in the community; and a variety of entry points and worship foci that recall the energy and movement of Orthodox liturgies. From week to week, they crack open The Word in creative, stirring ways, but they’re always grounded in The Word. The resulting blend is a unique and surprisingly Anglican amalgam of ancient and future, catholic (that is, connected to the church universal) and reformed (that is, connected to its cultural location).

To Ryan Marsh, a media arts wiz and gifted musician, that kind of translation and adaptation is what worship is all about. “If you look around, you’ll see that the Church has been doing this—taking from one part of the culture and applying it to the Church—forever. So how does that happen in our culture? Maybe you play Björk instead of Bach. At some point, you’ve got to not be afraid of things in the culture that are usually separate. If there’s a DJ spinning trance, then maybe there’s a spiritual element that you couldn’t see in the original context. We want to bring that out.” If liturgy is the work of the people—drawn from the Greek *laos* (people) and *ergon* (work)—then the people at COTA are definitely doing their work.

## GO DEEPER ...

1. Which of the stories, comments or ideas you just read was the most challenging? Exciting? How do they connect with your own story? What do they inspire you to ask or to do?
2. How do these reflections link with your church’s story, or the stories of churches you’ve known?
3. Look again at the signs of radical welcome associated with each part of congregational life. Have you seen churches or other communities that show these signs? What was it like to be in such a community? Did they welcome in some areas and not in others? Did they welcome some groups and not others? What was the story behind their willingness to welcome?
4. Have you seen communities that do not demonstrate signs of radical welcome? What was it like to be in such a community? Did they welcome in some areas and not in others? Did they welcome some groups and not others? What was the story behind their lack of welcome?

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to my colleagues on the Diocese of Massachusetts’ Congregational Development and Support Team. Their work to set out criteria for vital congregations helped me to organize this schema for describing radically welcoming congregations.

<sup>2</sup> Looking for even more compelling visions to inspire your community? Consult the bibliography for resources.

<sup>3</sup> BCP, 855.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Durasingh, “Toward a Postcolonial Re-Visioning,” in *Beyond Colonial Anglicanism: The Anglican Communion in the 21st Century*, ed. Ian Douglas and Kwok Pui Lan (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2001), 351.

<sup>5</sup> Check out the plan on their website: [www.allsaintspasadena.org](http://www.allsaintspasadena.org).

<sup>6</sup> For more information on Visions, please consult the bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from “What is corporate worship?” in the Catechism, Book of Common Prayer, 857.



# Moving From Inviting to Inclusion to Radical Welcome

*As you consider this grid, ask yourself the following questions:*

- Which of these models best fits your church’s current reality, in general?
- What observations bring you to that conclusion?
- Who is The Other for you? What oppressed or marginalized group do you feel most compelled to welcome?
- What might this group’s experience be in your congregation? What barriers would they encounter?

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|                    | <b>Inviting</b>  | <b>Inclusion</b>   | <b>Radical Welcome</b>  |
|--------------------|--|--|---|
| <b>The Message</b> | “Come, join our community and share our cultural values and heritage.”   | “Help us to be diverse.”   | “Bring your culture, your voice, your whole self—we want to engage in truly mutual relationship.”   |
| <b>The Goal</b>    | <b>assimilation:</b> community invites new people to enter and adopt dominant identity   | <b>incorporation:</b> community welcomes marginalized groups, but no true shift in congregation’s cultural identity and practices                              | <b>incarnation:</b> community embodies and expresses the full range of voices and gifts present, including The Other  |
| <b>The Effort</b>  | Systems and programs in place to invite and incorporate newcomers into existing structures and identity; rejection or marginalization of those who do not assimilate | Stated commitment to inclusivity, but less attention to ongoing programs, systemic analysis or power; emphasis on individual efforts                           | Systems and programs in place to invite and welcome people, including those from the margins; to ensure their presence, gifts and perspective will be visible and valued; and to ensure that these new communities, gifts and values influence the congregation’s identity, ministries and structures |
| <b>The Result</b>  | Healthy numbers (perhaps with some members who claim marginal identity) but institution and its membership is overwhelmingly monocultural                            | Revolving door, with people coming from margins only to stay on fringe or leave; institutional structure remains monocultural, with some pockets of difference | Transformed and transforming community with open doors and open hearts; different groups share power and shape identity, mission, leadership, worship and ministries  |

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# The Radical Welcome Signs

## Mission and Vision

**What is it?** (Mission) The congregation's understanding of its purpose  
as God's people

(Vision) A specific, compelling picture of the community's future

### The signs

1. The community has discerned and claimed a clear, compelling, transformational mission and vision that incorporates radical welcome of The Other.
2. The mission and vision guide the continuing development of the community's identity, ministries, leadership and worship.

## Identity

**What is it?** The demographic markers like the church's size, median income, its dominant age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ideology, etc.; also includes the defining culture and story of the community's life to this point.

### The signs

1. The congregation values its history, traditions and denominational heritage; it also fosters an identity flexible enough to include The Other.
  2. Leaders have consciously studied the make-up of the surrounding community and related communities, and intentionally welcomed those neighbors to join and help to shape their common life and common mission.
  3. The congregation is developing critical consciousness of who is inside, who is marginalized and who is outside, and why, and seeks to eliminate exclusionary barriers blocking The Other.
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## Ministries and Relationships

**What is it?** Any practices of the congregation related to fulfilling the mission and vision: pastoral care, evangelism, community service, justice ministries, community life, stewardship, Christian formation, external relationships and more.

### **The signs**

1. The congregation's activities have been thoughtfully organized to reflect and fulfill the radically welcoming mission.
2. Community ministries reflect a desire for mutuality, empowerment and transformation of all participants (doing *with* others, rather than doing *for* others).
3. Ministries draw members at the community's center and its margins into mutual, transforming relationship.

## Leadership and Feedback Systems

**What is it?** The set of mechanisms that enable a group to reflect effectively, make decisions, act and otherwise exercise power

### **The signs**

1. Leaders are intentionally recruited, mentored and selected from the distinct groups in the community, with special attention to building power among the under-represented margins.
  2. There is wide access to decision-makers and transparency regarding decision-making.
  3. Different cultural and generational styles of leadership are understood and creatively accommodated.
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## Worship

**What is it?** The complex of ritual activities that serve to gather God's people and foster relationship with God and with each other through prayer, praise, sacrament and scripture

### **The signs**

1. The make-up of the worshiping body—which may be spread over more than one service—reflects the surrounding community and communities with whom you seek meaningful relationship.
  2. Liturgical texts, music, images and worship leaders reflect the congregation, surrounding community, and communities with whom you seek meaningful relationship.
  3. The community's worship is lively and reflective, deeply rooted in lived traditions, yet open to fresh expressions (again, not necessarily in a single service).
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## **Week 4**

### **The Practice of Radical Welcome: Imagine with God**

Read “Re-Imagine Your Common Life”

1. Go through “The Dream of Radical Welcome” handout. Take 10 minutes to look it over and write out your own thoughts, then discuss.
2. What might radical welcome look like in your community? Take these considerations into account:
  - Who is “The Other” for your community?
  - Whose voice and culture would bring a fresh, if challenging, perspective to the way things have been? (Don’t just think ideology, but think especially of groups systemically oppressed and disempowered by the church and society.)
  - How would your congregational life change if the groups now on the margins came closer to help to shape your common life?
3. Look at the five areas of your congregational life and the suggestions and strategies in each. Where has your community already begun this work? Where is your community most ready to make fresh moves? What is the deeper work that you will eventually take on over a longer term?



## Re-imagine Your Common Life

The call to ministry is the call to be a citizen of the kingdom of God in a new way, the daring, free, accepting, compassionate way Jesus modeled. It means being bound by no yesterday, fearing no tomorrow, drawing no lines between friend and foe, the acceptable ones and the outcasts. Ministry is commitment to the dream of God.

VERNA DOZIER, *THE DREAM OF GOD*<sup>1</sup>

**W**e all can and should take individual responsibility for living radical welcome. The revolution means nothing if it doesn't result in new hearts, new behaviors, new convictions. Alas, most of us would probably prefer to limit radical welcome—or any transformation—to the personal and interpersonal level. But radical welcome has to go deeper, into the very marrow of your congregational life. A community cannot hope to live faithfully and fully as the body of Christ without re-imagining its structures in order to make room for The Other. You can refresh the wine you pour. You must also fashion new wineskins.

In what ways can you re-imagine and reconfigure your common life to fulfill the radically welcoming dream of God? You could consult a number of change process manuals.<sup>2</sup> But if you wish to consider not only how to change but what to change, you'll need some extra tools. In this chapter, you will have the chance to turn your gaze inward, assessing how your congregation's bodylife can reflect and further God's dream in your context.<sup>3</sup>

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Online Extra: Exercises for  
Discerning the Dream of God  
in Your Community

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Look at the five broad areas and start to imagine where change needs to happen in your community, if The Other on the margins of your community's life is to find a warm, hospitable space and a welcome table.

### **Mission and Vision**

Why revisit and possibly reconfigure your mission? Bluntly stated, too many mainline Christians have made a deal with our churches: provide us with security, stability, control, beauty, comfort, familiarity, pain alleviation, intimacy, and family. Be our home and refuge. In exchange, we will attend worship faithfully, contribute our money and various talents, join in service to those in need, and offer devotion to Christ. For many, the deal is off if the church pushes or challenges us to live into values that compromise our current way of life. We balk if we sense the ground shifting under us. Most of us want to live and love well. We did not come here for radical transformation

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The church's mission is no longer about us; now it is about God, whose mission is sure to conflict with some of our own most heartfelt desires.

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Say "yes" to Jesus, and you have agreed to rewrite the terms of the contract. You begin to live as if "[i]t's not the church of God that has a mission, but the God of mission who has a church."<sup>4</sup> The church's mission is no longer about us; now it is about God, whose mission is sure to conflict with some of our own most heartfelt desires. We are more than our buildings, more than our liturgies. We are more than a family, more than an intimate, friendly group that shares certain culturally or historically rooted practices. We are God's partners in loving a new world into being. The question is, how can you serve and partner with God in this radical adventure, given your context?

| Elements of Your Congregational Bodylife               | Main Guiding Questions for Discernment   |
|--|--|
| <b>Mission and Vision</b>                              | How could your stated purpose and plans for the future reflect the dream of God?   |
| <b>Identity</b>  | Who does the dream of God call you to include as fully present and empowered members of your congregation?   |
| <b>Ministries and Relationships</b> and <b>Worship</b> | What kinds of activities and relationships reflect the radically welcoming dream of God? How could your ministries and relations more fully proclaim, fulfill and prepare you for that dream?                  |
| <b>Leadership and Feedback Systems</b>                 | How is God calling you to recast leadership and to expand your notion of who is truly worthy of exercising power? How could you create structures for feedback that allow more voices to be heard and honored? |
| <b>Workshop</b>  | How could your liturgy and music reflect the dream of God for your community? What would it communicate about your community's culture(s), values and mission?   |

Your mission statement is where you get to define the clear, shared and compelling description of God’s purpose for your congregation.<sup>5</sup> You may also drop to the next level, from the long-term mission to the more specific vision, a detailed yet concise and compelling picture of the preferred future to which you believe God is calling your congregation in the next three to five years.<sup>6</sup> There are resources aplenty for designing your mission and vision statements, including the ever-useful *Studying Congregations Handbook*<sup>7</sup> and *Holy Conversations*. In “Bread for the Journey,” part of the online companion to this book, you will find exercises designed to guide congregations in finding specific language and images to name their own dream of radical welcome.

Whatever language and content you arrive at—and even if you opt not to write a mission statement but to determine and communicate your values and purpose in other ways—some sense of commonly discerned and agreed upon direction is crucial. At a minimum, consider how you would complete the following statements:

Through the Church, God is acting to ...  
 In this church, we are joining God by ...

The text and/or images you use to fill in those blanks will set you on the path to discerning the overall mission of the church of God (the first query) and how your particular congregation lives into it (the second).

Once you’ve got your mission and vision, don’t be afraid to proclaim them and to use them to hold yourselves accountable. Think of St. Mary’s-West Harlem’s banner: “The ‘I Am Not Afraid’ Church!” Whenever they walk by it, members have to think about whether they’re fulfilling that mission today. Or consider this statement from All Saints-Pasadena:

In grateful response to the love of God made tangible in Jesus Christ, the faith community of All Saints Church is called

- to embody God’s unlimited and inclusive love that embraces, liberates and empowers people, whoever they are and wherever they find themselves on their journey of faith
- to live out Christ’s vision of unlimited love that empowers new life not only for children, youth and adults within our membership but with other neighbors, especially those who suffer from violence, injustice and bigotry.

The statement is simple, clear, comprehensive. It distills well: their website opens to an image and the words, “Whoever you are and wherever you find yourself on your journey of faith, you are welcome here.” Best of all, it’s more than talk; you can look at their internal and external ministries, including aggressive efforts to increase the presence and power of marginalized people, and see how it flows from the mission.

### Transforming Your Mission and Vision

Take another look at the “Mission and Vision” signs and stories in part 2 (pp. 77-80). Then carefully consider these questions:

*Where Are We Now?*

- What is your church’s mission or vision? Is it publicly stated? Did the congregation have any input?
- What does it communicate about what you value and how you practice your values?
- Does the mission/vision actually shape what you do and how you look as a community? Does it get preached? Do committees and leaders reference it as they develop programs?
- What is already radically welcoming about your mission and vision? How can this positive experience equip you for the work ahead?

*Where Is God Inviting Us to Go?*

- How could you reconfigure your mission or vision so that it reflects your commitment to radical welcome? How could you invite the community to take part in that visioning process?
- In what ways can you ensure that the fresh mission or vision affects the church’s decisions and direction?
- How could you make sure you hold yourselves accountable to this vision of God’s dream for you?

Wherever you are placed, you have the chance to examine how you reflect the cultural, socioeconomic and generational diversity of your surroundings. More than that, you have the chance to extend the bounds of your own identity and to engage in Christlike embrace of The Other.

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## Identity

How you define your community's identity, particularly whom you include and exclude, communicates volumes about you. If you seek to live into the dream of God, you should be even more intentional about drawing the boundaries of your community. Imagine Jesus' table fellowship and community of outcasts. Then try stretching the limits of your own circle to embrace The Other.

But who is The Other, the stranger, the one on the margins of *your* community whom God calls you to embrace and be changed by? This is certainly a question of power relations and context. The black, straight, middle-class church in Harlem filled with mostly seniors may need to pay attention to the gay men and lesbians, Latinos and Asians, poor people, and young adults who have flooded the neighborhood but remained at the church's margins. The predominantly white church in a multicultural urban or suburban context should open its eyes and doors to the incredible economic, generational, sexual, and racial diversity at its doorstep. Wherever you are placed, you have the chance to examine how you reflect the cultural, socioeconomic and generational diversity of your surroundings. More than that, you have the chance to extend the bounds of your own identity and to engage in Christlike embrace of The Other.

When it's time to get concrete about who is nearby but not inside, a variety of services can help congregations to identify and analyze the demographic make-up of their neighborhood, region or diocese.<sup>8</sup> But there's nothing like getting out, on foot, and walking the environs. Try talking to civic leaders who've had to make it their business to know the neighborhood, who is in it, and how it is changing.

That on-the-ground assessment pairs well with another one: The Pew Review. Jane Oasin, the Social Justice Ministries Officer at the Episcopal Church Center, suggests this exercise for congregations, and it's a simple one. Look at the people in the pews and then look at the ones on the sidewalk. "If they don't look the same," she warned, "then your church is going to stagnate or die." And lest anyone think only white churches should worry, she added, "This is true of churches of every race. I know a black Episcopal church in New Jersey, it's in the fifth poorest area in the country, but there are no poor people in the church. It doesn't reflect the neighborhood. Almost all the members have driven in. If anyone there wants to expand, they're going to have to reach out. Otherwise, they will die."

The drive to survive motivates lots of communities. According to Gregory Jacobs, many churches are fixated on "the Three M's: Mission, Money, and Maintenance" and how new people can help them with those priorities. Still others hope to become "diverse." I call this habit the acquisition model, as in, "We'd like to have more of them." None of these motivations will take you far. "If you're doing this because you want 'those people' to be with you, then that's paternalistic, materialistic, and condescending," Oasin told me. Echoing Paul's challenge to the Corinthians, she continued, "This is entirely about being whole, as God made us whole. If you're operating as a part, it's like being a body without one leg. You can't know the mind of God, be the body of Christ, if you don't represent or at least have relationship with the whole spectrum. If you view it as a task, a burden, and not as an opportunity and a gift, then you won't do it." Only the dream of God can compel you to seek this level of wholeness as a body.

Some will try to tell you embracing fresh voices in this way will jeopardize your core identity and threaten your ability to attract new members. They're only partly right. If you mumble a lukewarm, hesitant, bland welcome that says, "We're okay with everything because we don't really care about anything," no one is inspired by that! It's something else entirely to proclaim your radically welcoming identity with clarity and gospel integrity. Imagine the power of announcing, as Glenda Marie White at St. Mary's-West Harlem does, that, "If you are here, you are already one of us." If you have felt the pain and loss of being separated from another part of the body of Christ, and you want to heal the rift, then say so. Proclaim your conviction even as you continue to hold and be shaped by the culture, history, values, commitments, and even many of the preferences that have made you who you are. Have faith and leap with Christ, trusting that many yearning souls will be drawn and compelled by this invitation not just to attend your church but to share your life.

## Transforming Your Identity

Take another look at the "Identity" signs and stories in part 2 (pp. 80-83). Then carefully consider these questions:

### *Where Are We Now?*

- Who are you? Take stock of the congregation's dominant races, ethnicities, linguistic groups, ages, sexual orientations, class backgrounds, regional affiliations, physical abilities, and so forth.
- Which groups' voices and values have historically shaped your congregation and its practices? How?
- Which groups of people shape the congregation and its practices—who are the "insiders"—today? What is the story behind this pattern?
- Which groups have historically been on the church's margins, either inside or just outside? Why?
- Which groups are inside the congregation but disempowered today? What is the story behind this pattern?
- Which groups of people live within a one-mile radius? Are they part of the congregation? If so, why? If not, what is the story behind this pattern?
- What is already radically welcoming about your identity? How does this prepare you for the work ahead?

### *Where Is God Inviting Us to Go?*

- Who is The Other on the margins of your community?

- How could you publicly, authentically proclaim your desire to radically welcome, particularly with groups usually left on the margins?
- How could you prepare members for embracing the culture and identity of people coming from the margins?

## Ministries and Relationships

What is ministry? Remember theologian Verna Dozier’s words: “Ministry is commitment to the dream of God.”<sup>2</sup> Given that calling, you can boldly ask, “What activities can we engage in to make the world more as God would have it be? What activities prepare us to be active participants in the constantly inbreaking reign of God?”

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Go to your neighborhood ministry partners and listen to the actual needs of the community, and listen carefully to their answers, rather than go in with your own priorities and invite The Other to come on board.

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The possibilities are endless, mostly because churches are already engaged in a vast array of ministries and relationships within and beyond the parish walls. So start with what you have on the ground. Look at the existing ministries, and then imagine whether and how each ministry could even more fully engage and proclaim your common mission. It’s worth being intentional. Ministries are the most obvious—and often the least threatening—place where lives connect and change.

According to the Right Reverend Arthur Williams, congregations with few members from the margins should really focus on ministries and relationships. “In some cases, a congregation can begin by responding around justice issues and social service needs in the community,” said Williams, the Episcopal Church Center’s Director of Ethnic Congregational Development. “That brings them into contact with others. Of course, the concern then is getting into the paternalistic, Lady Bountiful mode. Still, this moves people into their communities. And as they work together on justice issues, the relationships come up around it.” To avoid the tendency toward paternalism, follow the St. Paul’s-Duluth model: go to your neighborhood ministry partners and ask about the actual needs of the community, and listen carefully to their answers, rather than go in with your own priorities and invite The Other to come on board. You might also get involved with grassroots, broad-based community organizations, including those affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation, Gamaleil Foundation, or Pacific Institute for Community Organization.<sup>10</sup> Time and again, I’ve seen these groups broker relationships between disparate communities. Are you located in the suburbs or a small town? Most of these broad-based organizations encompass wide areas and connect people across geographic, racial, class, linguistic, generational, and denominational backgrounds.

This may be the best way to build new connections to different communities, even those with whom the church has had a contentious relationship. In the process, you will increase your own competence as a community that knows how to interact mutually and lovingly with people who have been marginalized and disempowered. Finally, valuable as they are in their own right, these deepened connections could also pave the way for welcoming neighbors and marginalized people to become part of the full life of the congregation.

### Transforming Your Ministries and Relationships

Take another look at the “Ministries and Relationships” signs and stories in part 2 (pp. 84-88). Then carefully consider these questions:

#### *Where Are We Now?*

- What ministries are you engaged in? Take account of pastoral care, evangelism, community service, justice ministries, community life, stewardship, Christian formation, and external relationships.
- What are the stated ministry goals? What are the implicit ministry goals?
- Which groups tend to participate in which ministries? Are there some conspicuous patterns: groups who only work with each other, ministries that remain segregated along some demographic line? Why are these patterns present?
- In your social ministries, who is serving and who is being served; in other words, are you “doing for” The Other or “doing with”?
- Who are your ministry partners? How do you relate to your ministry partners; in other words, who holds the power to control your external partnerships?
- What is already radically welcoming about your ministries and relationships? How will this prepare you for the work ahead?

#### *Where Is God Inviting Us to Go?*

- What activities and relationships would most fully reflect and prepare you to live into your mission? Are there new ministries that would reflect your mission and your hope for radical welcome?
- How could your current ministries help people to build authentic, mutual relationships between members and with your neighbors?
- How could your ministries and relationships empower people, transform systems, and enable others to find their voices and speak their truths?
- More specifically, how could you engage in ...
  - care-giving that serves both pastorally (helping people to heal and reckon with hurt) and prophetically (challenging people to

test and stretch into vulnerable areas)?

- evangelism that more effectively reaches marginalized people where they are and on their own terms?
- community engagement that looks less like serving “them” and more like genuine partnership?
- becoming an ally with those who lack your power and access, advocating and seeking justice in the wider community and society?
- community gatherings and celebrations that reflect the priorities and styles of different groups?
- formation programs and other activities that help members and/or ministry partners to share stories and cross boundaries?
- stewardship programs that truly welcome the gifts of all members, sincerely highlighting the value of time and talent and not just large financial contributions?

## Leadership and Feedback Systems

When you begin to imagine your leadership and feedback systems anew, you’re touching a very tender spot: Who will be at the decision-making table? Who should have access to the clergy and leaders? What sort of clergy might we hire? Whose voice will be heard and honored? There is no way here to avoid the discussion of power, and church folk are among the most hesitant to raise that topic. Doesn’t Jesus call us to surrender power? Then why should anyone seek it? Why on earth are we talking about it?

Genuine, mutual relationship simply is not possible if one dominant group (or a cadre of groups) continues to order life for the whole. People who have stood at the margins know this, and so we often wait for the signal that power could shift before joining institutions run by a privileged group. The real proof of welcome is whether partners share their common life, including the power to order it

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Offer the mentoring and encouragement—and, if necessary, reconfigure your own leadership structures—to make new leaders feel truly, radically welcomed.

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Why is it so difficult to open and share power? Probably because it requires more than inviting a own leadership structures-few token representatives to serve on committees (although, frankly, that may be a starting place). Ultimately, it requires us to surrender control, grow to trust each other, and even shift our expectations and definitions of “good” leadership. Systems of oppression make that tough to do. Certain groups have been depicted as less competent, less prepared, less trustworthy, and generally less equipped to exercise power. As a result, the empowered insiders consciously and subconsciously struggle with the fear that these marginalized members can’t be trusted with leadership. Fitness to hold power has always depended on passing the résumé test or exuding a culturally specific air of authority, and as Thom Chu has noticed, that ensures certain groups will never stand on equal footing. “If you want to be a deputy to General Convention or even a delegate to Diocesan Convention, there’s a long résumé barrier,” said Chu, the Program Director for the Ministries with Young People Cluster at the Episcopal Church Center. “If you’re younger, you simply can’t have the same résumé a Baby Boomer has. That’s emblematic of how we say we want something but it doesn’t come out on the other end.”

For many of the same reasons, people moving from the margins to the center may have a difficult time finally owning their new power. Cultural theorists call it “internalized oppression”: the deeply ingrained belief among marginalized, disempowered people that we really are not smart enough, good enough or fit to hold power.<sup>11</sup> “I had to tell other [Latino] people we’re really talking about power, letting people know that our vote means something,” Grace Church’s Migdalia Mendez told me. “If you’re on the Vestry, you’re not just there to listen. You have power, and you can use it to make a difference.” As one of the bridge people, she helped to train her peers so they saw themselves as people who could move from the margins to exercise leadership at the heart of the community.

If you are recruiting fresh leaders from marginalized groups, realize these patterns may be at work. Then offer the mentoring and encouragement—and reconfigure your own leadership structures—to make new leaders feel truly, radically welcomed. Ask around and see if it would help to change the meeting times: very few non-professional, hourly employees can get away in the middle of the work day, and 6 p.m. on a weekday may exclude a gifted member who works the night shift. Be clear that there is financial assistance for leadership conferences. Go ahead and invite college or graduate students to be Sunday school teachers, knowing they may only be able to commit to one semester at a time. If you need bilingual translation for meetings, help the leaders to get on board, then invest the time and money to make it work well, and then get started.

Power does not spread of its own accord. But given the genuine commitment and appropriate strategy, it can spread.

## Transforming Your Leadership and Feedback Systems

Take another look at the “Leadership and Feedback Systems” signs and stories in part 2 (pp. 88-92). Then carefully consider these questions:

*Where Are We Not?*

- What are the key power positions in your congregation? What groups hold those positions?
- Are there power brokers beyond these posts? What groups hold that power?
- Whose leadership do people seem to gravitate toward and trust? Whose leadership is less trusted by the majority of members?



- What are the dominant styles and methods for leadership? What kind of leadership do people most trust? What groups are likely to exercise this kind of authority?
- What are the dominant expectations and requirements for leadership? Think about education, class, experience, longevity, conference attendance, and so on.
- Who is being mentored or nurtured?
- Do your meeting times and locations exclude certain groups from taking part in leadership?
- Whose voice gets heard and honored? Who hears about and influences important decisions?
- Who is being left out of the leadership circle? Are there some common traits or assumptions about these people?
- What is already radically welcoming about your leadership and feedback systems? How will this experience prepare you for the work ahead?

#### *Where Is God Inviting Us to Go?*

- How could your leadership—clergy, staff, top lay leaders, committee members—better include cultures and groups present in and around the congregation? Be sure to consider formal and informal processes by which people become leaders (i.e., election of vestry members vs. appointments to key committees).
- How could your hiring policies make explicit a commitment to building a radically welcoming congregation?
- How could you mentor and promote leaders from marginalized groups?
- If there is a link between résumé/pedigree/wealth and fitness for leadership, how could you sever it? How could you help the congregation to expand its understanding of what is required for leadership?
- How could you expand the community’s understanding of the various gifts and skills needed for leadership, so that you honor the gifts and practices of marginalized cultural groups?
- Are there ways to reconfigure certain ministries or leadership bodies so that excluded members could take part?
- How could you open communication lines so that more members have access to information and decision-making processes (even if they are not the ones actually making the decisions)?
- What feedback systems could you put in place to allow more voices to be heard and honored?

## **Worship**

Worship is a community’s most important, most accessible public offering. It communicates our values, our culture and our priorities; it shapes us as followers of Christ. As Richard Giles puts it in *Creating Uncommon Worship*, “[The] experience of dying to self, of being reborn, of knowing ourselves to be children of God, is what worship in community should open up to us.”<sup>12</sup>

Now imagine if your voice or history were not part of that holy offering. The effect could be devastating and wholly unwelcoming. But reverse that trend, regularly and intentionally include authentic expressions of the culture in which The Other is rooted, and you have just offered a bold welcome to those who have stood on the margins. “We came up with a musical blend: some African-American, some African, some European,” said Gary Commins, the former rector at Holy Faith in Inglewood who now serves at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Long Beach, California. “The point is it’s the music and language of people’s souls. When you’re from a different generation or a different cultural background, and there’s nothing from you in the worship, the connection’s not going to happen. But hearing (elements of your culture) says there’s some of me in here. Even if they don’t recognize a song, they know the style. It’s something that touches their soul in a particular way. Now, it’s not a matter of someone else’s worship; it’s *our* worship.”

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An inculturated liturgy invites the different voices present to proclaim the gospel in their own cultural language, and then it listens for ways of crafting a distinctive blend that honors the tradition and they cultural context of members.

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We do not introduce different voices, sounds and styles into the liturgy to make people feel good. We do it because it should be “our” worship, work of our ancestors within the denominational and community tradition and the work of living members of the assembly who may also bear the gifts of cultures outside the privileged tradition. Especially in the uniquely multicultural American context, we should expect the liturgy to speak of more than the European-American heritage. There is no shame in claiming our role as partners in this work, offering our hearts and voices in all their beauty and particularity to God in worship. There is technically nothing holier or even more elegant, beautiful or transcendent about words, music and images that are printed in a book, at least forty years old, or European.

There are so many ways of faithfully incorporating the voice and presence of The Other into your worship, from Holy Faith’s homemade songbook and African procession to the St. Marys-West Harlem gospel choir. Like St. Bartholomew’s-Atlanta, you might enjoy the high-church style of worship but in a way that is consciously accessible. Just add the full worship booklet and a set of friendly greeters who don’t make people feel like they’re entering a concert hall where they should sit straight and mind their manners (a very culturally specific way of praising God). This field is so full of possibilities—and so important to the dream of radical welcome—that a section of the bibliography is devoted to worship resources for fully embracing people of color, people with disabilities, children and young adults, and gay and lesbian people. Please dive in and let God’s dream shape your worship, even as your worship shapes you to live more fully into God’s dream.

Some people may complain that such efforts to welcome The Other are distracting or even taking something precious away from those who are already present at the center. With great love, you can explain that actually, people at the center may enjoy and benefit from the expansion of welcome. For instance, they may feel uncomfortable singing gospel or evangelical songs the first few times, but eventually the music may open something inside them. Our most popular sendee by far at St. Paul's Cathedral in Boston is the Hymn Sing. Twice a year, we pull out *Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, the Episcopal Church's African American hymnal, and let people choose all the music for the service as it proceeds, including an open space for about six songs where the sermon would have gone. People come from all over the diocese and even beyond the Episcopal fold to join the celebration. One older member, not known for her welcoming attitude, comes up to me probably once a month to say, "I love those old hymns. I wish we could sing them all the time. They just bring you closer to God." So the staff and council decided that, every Sunday, at least one song would come from that hymnal. It has been pure joy.

That said, some efforts to radically welcome in worship may not please certain people at all. In *Holy Hospitality: Worship and the Baptismal Covenant*, Clayton Morris says that's a moment for formation.

Most Episcopalians recoil at the thought of a presider giving verbal directions during the service. Folks are expected to know what comes next. "That's what inquirers' classes are for!" ... In order to proclaim the gospel, the church needs to attract people to hear the proclamation. Without a pervasive sense of welcome, people won't come... Seasoned parishioners simply must accommodate the need for a clear sense of welcome in the course of the Sunday morning liturgy.<sup>13</sup>

Is worship for those who are present and empowered? Is it an intimate family affair where everyone knows the rules and all the rote responses, and we hope marginalized people will stay because they would like access to this exclusive club? Or is worship an open and public gathering where we rejoice at the opportunity to welcome the stranger as Christ? Ideally, this should not be an either/or question, but if you have to choose, I pray you will err on the side of The Other.

I say all this knowing full well that, especially among Anglicans, liturgy is the highly charged third rail. The Reverend Susan Deetz, the vocational deacon at St. Paul's in Duluth, Minnesota, understands the dilemma perfectly well. "People want rules. That's why they go to the mega-churches. We only have the Prayer Book to hold us together. You change that, and what's left? Something's got to be stable." Threaten that stability, and you are creeping into treacherous territory.

So let's slow down and look carefully at just what radical welcome has to do with worship. Does liturgical change have to accompany becoming radically welcoming? Shouldn't people have something they can lean on, some constant in an ever-changing world and church? Isn't continuity with centuries of tradition part of our identity, something others will see and love as we do?

First, I would not dream of encouraging any change leaders to begin with major liturgical renewal. You must build trust and carefully discern what language and music speaks to those you have gathered and those you hope to gather, and what amount and pace of change the community can tolerate. The fact is, even among the radically welcoming parishes I visited, about half had not recently made major changes in the main Eucharistic liturgy. So the question bears repeating: how do liturgy, radical welcome and the dream of God intersect?

In his essay "On Liturgical Hospitality," William Seth Adams outlines several possible responses to that question.<sup>14</sup>

### **Assimilation**

A popular strategy among mainline churches aims for assimilation, whereby the disempowered one surrenders or downplays his own cultural identity in order to learn and eventually internalize the dominant, often forcefully imposed liturgical practice. The most prominent example of this dynamic is the colonial church planted by Western missionaries around the world. In the Anglican case, such churches may actually place greater value on the maintenance of English culture than their English peers. I will certainly never forget traveling to the Holy Land in 2002 and worshipping at St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem. The church provided worshipers with a faithful translation of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and soon this community of mostly Arab Christians was offering prayers in the King's English with great reverence and solemnity. I wasn't sure what I had just walked into, but I could imagine that any local, non-Anglican entering the church would see the colonizer firmly in power there.

One need not travel to Jerusalem to see this dynamic at work. At a more subtle level, this practice operates whenever congregations invite people to join *if* they demonstrate a willingness to release their home culture and take on the church's received culture and liturgical practices. There is nothing uncommon about assimilation like this; most evangelism efforts assume it.

And yet, it should be stated, not everyone experiences this assimilation as an ill. My friend Alex Dyer, a priest trained in the Episcopal Diocese of New York, has told me of the remarkably diverse Manhattan church where he interned. Anglicans of many classes, races, ages, and sexual orientations were drawn together by their deep love of the awesome, awe-filled liturgy. "They couldn't agree on much, but that was okay," Dyer told me. "They were united in their love for a high, incense-filled liturgy." The key question, for me, was what would happen if someone brought non-European language or music into the church, or if someone not so in love with Mother England walked in. He admitted there would have been no place to hold those alternate visions. While they had a diverse congregation, everyone had gathered around one culture's worship. That is neither multicultural nor radically welcoming.

### **Acculturation**

On the other hand, acculturation assumes a kind of mutual forbearance and even distant appreciation without much movement on either side. We see this model alive in congregations with a parallel worship community that stands alongside the original. For instance, St. Bartholomew's in New York wanted to attract seekers and those burned by prior experience with the church, so for years they offered a relaxed "Come As You Are" service on Sunday evenings, complete with a live band and a praise team that led a contemporary, Catholic-style worship service. That community existed alongside the 11 a.m. crew, the older guard who appreciate

being able to continue in their traditional liturgical mode, unaffected by the shifts happening in the evening. They shared the space and joined for some common ministries, but without much interaction as worshipping communities. According to their rector, Bill Tully, that was by design. “We’re trying to honor tradition but be radically welcoming. We’ve worked hard to keep a lot happening under one roof. So you keep the services distinct, and the effect is that it lowers the anxiety level. People are usually worried that one change will trip all sorts of others. Instead, I communicate a conscious sense that we’ve inherited lots of gifts as a community, *and* we’re open to others.”

That strategy requires commitment and risk, particularly in a community with a solidly conventional core of people who feel no service in “their” church should depart from the accepted norms. And in communities where the marginalized group has a strong sense of cultural identity—a Spanish-speaking or Nigerian community service or even postmodern young adults—members who have come from the margins may actually prefer having their own worship space. Cultural theorist bell hooks writes with a keen understanding of that yearning: “Those of us who remember living in the midst of racial apartheid know that the separate spaces, the times apart from whiteness, were for sanctuary, for re-imagining and re-membering ourselves. In the past separate space meant down time, time for recovery and renewal.”<sup>15</sup> The Right Reverend Cathy Roskam, Bishop Suffragan of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, said she strongly supports parallel development. “Our oneness is in Christ, not in the service. I’ve no problem with the 8 o’clockers and the 10 o’clockers. Independent worship doesn’t have to mean separate communities. There are other things that call people into community. Do a program on spirituality and you’ll draw from all the communities.”

In many ways, I agree with hooks and Roskam. Space and time apart ought to be guarded and nurtured, not least because people who come from the margins often feel we must be “on” as representatives of our groups. The margins are often the fertile spaces where we come alive and feel at home. And sometimes the marriage of two communities is a power move by the dominant group, which seeks to acquire the marginalized group without sharing power.

### **Inculturation**

But if mutual relationship and embrace is truly happening throughout the community, then the congregation can offer a powerful witness by sitting together and crafting worship that reflects its unique, diverse set of gifts, voices and values. No one will get everything they wanted, but their love for each other and for the living body of Christ compels them to literally lay down some preference at the altar, and instead to listen, celebrate, weep, confess, and pray in the voices of all the people.

That is why the harder task—and perhaps the one that most fully reflects the radically welcoming dream of God in the worshipping body—is inculturation. According to Benedictine Roman Catholic scholar Anscar Chupungco, it is like mutual assimilation. That is,

[I]liturgical inculturation is basically the assimilation by the liturgy of local cultural patterns. It means that liturgy and culture share the same pattern of thinking, speaking, and expressing themselves through rites, symbols and artistic forms. In short, the liturgy is inserted into the culture, history and tradition of the people among whom the Church dwells. It begins to think, speak, and ritualize according to the local cultural pattern.<sup>16</sup>

In a multicultural context—and most American congregations are situated in a multicultural setting, no matter how dominant one race, generation or class may seem—an inculturated liturgy would reflect the various local patterns present. It does *not* surrender all the traditions that have shaped and held the community or denominational body through history (this would simply be one-way assimilation in the reverse direction). But it also doesn’t assume these practices will resonate with The Other (or even with members of the privileged group). It invites the different voices present to proclaim the gospel in their own cultural language, and then it listens for ways of crafting a distinctive blend that honors the tradition *and* the cultural context of members.

Professor and pastor Kathy Black calls this “culturally-conscious worship.”<sup>17</sup> According to Black, this form of worship “intentionally works with a consciousness of 1) our multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural society and world; 2) the cultural diversity (its gifts and challenges) present in the congregation; and 3) persons who experience living on the margins and living with inequity of power.” To do it, we must cultivate a trust and openness of heart that most traditions have frankly shied from. To do it, especially for Episcopalians, many of us will have to refine our definition of what it means to be Anglican, since that identity has been so closely tied to particular formulations of the Prayer Book liturgy. If we accept that invitation, we will find ourselves in good company. After all, it was Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams who asserted that “there is plenty of theological room for diversity of rhythm and style, so long as we have ways of identifying the same living Christ at the heart of every expression of Christian life in common.”<sup>18</sup>

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Online Extra: Assessment Tool for Studying Your Congregation’s Reality and Charting Your Dream

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That is the unique call of worship. If we cannot examine our liturgy and music and how they include or exclude, inspire or threaten, stagnate or breathe, then we have thrown up a roadblock to welcome—and to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

### **Trans forming Your Worship**

Take another look at “Worship” signs and stories in part 2 (pp. 92-94). Then carefully consider these questions:

*Where Are We Now?*

- What is the lived purpose of liturgy and music in your congregation? What do people tend to experience, share, learn, or encounter?
- What are the expectations regarding liturgy and music? How should it be conducted? Who should be involved?
- How does worship look and feel? If there is more than one service, focus on the one that is best-attended and/or the one most of the church's key leaders attend. Whose cultural and aesthetic values shape the worship? Whose voice, image or presence shows up less often, if at all, in worship?
- Is your worship accessible to people who do not know your traditions? How would someone who is new to the church find out what words to speak, where to go to receive Communion, when or why to stand or sit or take part in other communal gestures?
- Do you have greeters? What is their purpose? How do they function?
- What is already radically welcoming about your worship? How will this prepare you for the work ahead?

### *Where Is God Inviting Us to Go?*

- How could your liturgy and music reflect the dream of God for your community?
- What would it communicate about your community's culture(s), values and mission?
- How could the language, symbols, readings, music, preaching, physical movement, and other elements reflect a wider range of cultures, generations or classes?
- How could you craft liturgies that are not quite so "controlled and contained" but sometimes "threaten to leap off the page and bite us?"<sup>19</sup> How might you accomplish this goal faithfully, responsibly and effectively, continuing to craft "good" liturgy?
- How could you include different gifts and values without misappropriation—that is, making sure you don't incorporate cultural traditions without either seeking relationship with the community of origin or at least sharing the background and story of that community?
- How could you ensure the full participation and welcome of people new to the tradition and to your church, especially people who come with the experience of being marginalized by the groups that hold power in your church?
- How could you introduce fresh music and liturgical forms in ways that are inspiring and least threatening to your members?

### **GO DEEPER ...**

- Which of the stories, comments or ideas you just read was the most challenging? Exciting? How do they connect with your own story? What do they inspire you to ask or to do?
- How do these reflections link with your church's story or the stories of churches you've known?
- What might radical welcome look like in your community? Write some thoughts or even draw a picture. Take these considerations into account:
  - Who is "The Other" for your community?
  - Whose voice and culture would challenge or disrupt the way things have been? (Don't just think ideology, but think especially of groups systemically oppressed and disempowered by the church and society. A hint: you will surely think of more than one group.)
  - How would your congregational life change if the groups now on the margins came closer to help to shape your common life?
- Look at the five areas of your congregational life and the suggestions and strategies in each. Where has your community already begun this work? Where is your community most ready to make fresh moves? What is the deeper work that you would eventually take on over a longer term?

1. Dozier, 139.

2. I have found Gil Rendle and Alice Mann's *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*, Jim Herrington et al., *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey*, Gil Rendle's *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders*, and Eric Law's *Sacred Acts, Holy Change* to be clear, effective, systematic guides to designing and implementing planned change processes.

3. Adapted from Herrington et al., *Leading Congregational Change*, 149-51.

4. Tim Dearborn, quoted in Archbishop's Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), 85.

5. Herrington et al., *Leading Congregational Change*, 49.

6. Ibid.

7. Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, and William McKinney, editors. See bibliography for full details.

8. Its not a cure-all, but a starter resource is Percept, which organizes U.S. Census data to provide congregations with a detailed picture of who is nearby, how the population is shifting, what their neighbors are seeking and much more. For more information about Percept, visit their website at [www.percept.info](http://www.percept.info) or call (800) 442-6277.

9. Dozier, *The Dream of God*, 139.

10. Groups like the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Gamaleil Foundation and the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) serve as umbrella organizations that plant and nurture faith-based, broad-based community organizations across the United States and beyond. For more information, see the bibliography.

11. For more on internalized oppression, see Valerie Batts, *Modern Racism: New Melody for the Same Old Tunes* (Cambridge, MA: Episcopal Divinity School Occasional Papers, 1998).

12. Richard Giles, *Creating Uncommon Worship: Transforming the Liturgy of the Eucharist* (Norwich, England: Canterbury Press, 2004), 12.

13. Clayton Morris, *Holy Hospitality: Worship and the Baptismal Covenant* (New York: Church Publishing, 2005), 39-40.

14. William Seth Adams, "On Liturgical Hospitality," in *Moving the Furniture: Liturgical Theory, Practice and Environment* (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 1999), 87-104.

15. bell hooks, as quoted in Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, *A House of Prayer for All Peoples: Building Multiracial Community* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2004), 11.

- [16.](#) Anscar Chupungco, as cited in Adams, "On Liturgical Hospitality," 90.
- [17.](#) Kathy Black, *Culturally-Conscious Worship* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 12. Black intentionally differentiates this culturally conscious worship from multicultural worship, which happens in a community with several cultures present but primarily reflects the dominant power group's values and culture.
- [18.](#) Archbishop's Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), vii.
- [19.](#) Giles, *Creating Uncommon Worship*, 12



# The Dream of Radical Welcome

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## **MISSION AND VISION**

**What would your mission and vision look and sound like if they signified a genuine, specific commitment to radical welcome of The Other?**

The congregation's understanding of its purpose as God's people (mission); The specific, compelling picture of the community's future (vision)

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## **IDENTITY**

**What would your church identity look like if you included the story and engaged presence of The Other, alongside the long-standing history and traditions?**

Demographic markers like the church's size, median income, its dominant age, ethnicity, ideology, sexual orientation, etc. Includes the defining culture and story of the community's life up to present.

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**MINISTRIES AND  
RELATIONSHIPS****What would your ministries and relationships look like if they were geared to enhance and prepare people for cooperation, mutuality and reconciliation with The Other?**

Practices related to fulfilling the mission and vision: pastoral care, evangelism, community service, justice ministries, community life, stewardship, Christian formation and external relationships.

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**LEADERSHIP AND  
FEEDBACK SYSTEMS****What would your leadership and feedback systems look like if they supported sharing power, decision-making and access with The Other?**

Mechanisms that enable a group to reflect, make decisions, act and otherwise exercise power

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**WORSHIP****What would your worship look like if it incorporated the culture, aesthetic sensibility and spirituality of The Other with your existing traditions?**

Ritual activities that gather people and foster relationship with God and each other through prayer, praise, sacrament and scripture

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## **Week 5**

### **The Practice of Radical Welcome: Making it Real**

Read “Check Your Reality”

1. Reflect on the “How Radical Is Your Welcome?” handout. Take 10 minutes to look it over and write your own thoughts, then discuss.
2. Create a congregational timeline. When was your congregation most vital? Who was in the neighbourhood and what did it look like? How did the church connect with the wider community? How has the church’s vitality shifted since this time? What is your relationship with the neighbourhood now? What has it shifted?
3. Think of the stereotypes, the history, and the cultural inheritance attached to your tradition. What are the barriers to radical welcome inherent in your congregational and denominational history? Conversely, how do your history and traditions actually equip you for transformation and radical welcome?
4. In what ways does your congregation send a culturally exclusive message? Who might walk to your door, or enter your church on a Sunday, or engage in your ministry area, and not feel valued or visible? Picture the outcasts, the strangers, The Other who have been systemically oppressed and disempowered in society and in the wider church. What would change if you welcomed this group?
5. Return to the five-part image of the church’s “bodylife”: its mission and vision, identity, ministries and relationships, leadership and feedback systems, and worship. What elements of your church’s bodylife are the most entrenched and least welcoming to the gifts and cultural perspective of marginalized groups? Where have you begun to move toward the dream of radical welcome?
6. What are some strategies you’ve read about or considered that could help you to bridge the gap between your reality and your dream?



## Check Your Reality

Most congregations can grow, if they can live into the idea of radical welcome. You have to examine what's under the iceberg, what militates against transformation, for it to happen. You have to make some conscious choices.

THE RIGHT REVEREND CATHY ROSKAM, EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF NEW YORK

There's the dream, sitting in front of you, so real you can almost touch it. Then you reach out, and it shimmers and fades. With such fervent hope stirring us, why can't we just make the changes to become radically welcoming? Why does it feel as if we are running our legs ragged but moving only an inch? Why does it seem there is a block bigger than any single person or even congregation that's standing between us and the dream?

Because there is.

Every church has a history and a cultural identity. It is the water you swim in, the air all around you. Chances are, this story and these assumptions have been around much longer than your current congregation. These forces surround, and sometimes even contradict, whatever you are doing on the ground to welcome The Other. Part of welcoming *radically* is paying attention to these chilling forces. It's knowing how people feel when they come through your door and why certain groups might never even come near, no matter how welcoming and friendly you feel you are. It's knowing your history, knowing your culture, knowing the aura that floats around you and shades everything you say and do, how it's hampering and how it could help you.

In this chapter, I invite you to practice wrapping your mind around your church's culture and practices. Our test case is the Episcopal Church in the United States. If you're not Episcopalian, don't skip too quickly: notice the questions and patterns, and then delve deep and dig for the inherited, inherent blocks to the fulfillment of God's dream in your own church. Radical welcome seeks to transform these blocks and build a liberative community in their place. You can only do that once you get to know what's really going on—and what others see that you never even noticed.

### What Are “They” Saying About “Us”?

Q: How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Three: One to call the electrician, one to mix the drinks, and another to stand on the side complaining about how much better the old one was.

A friend forwarded this joke to me via e-mail several years ago. At the time, I was a fairly new Episcopalian and wondered what journey I had just signed on for. Because even if it was a joke, and I could guffaw out loud with the best of 'em, I knew it was also a cultural artifact capturing something about our hyper class consciousness and rigid resistance to change. On some level, this joke told the story about how others view my church.

For most Episcopalians, that's not reality. However, it's what a lot of people think of us. And if we take a moment—an honest, self-appraising moment—we have to admit that much of the history and cultural inheritance that define our congregations, dioceses and denominational identity remain rooted in this elitist pattern.

Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook knows this only too well. As a key proponent for anti-racism and a professor at the Episcopal Divinity School, teaching the history and polity of the Church along with pastoral care and Christian education, she has thought a lot about Episcopalians and change. “You've got to consider patterns of power and privilege,” she told me. “As Episcopalians, we have a history of holding power, so talking change gets complicated. People may be excited about inclusion and diversity, but when you talk about changing power dynamics and systems, few people stay excited.”

The idea of broadening our cultural base—or the idea that anyone would come along who did not seek to assimilate to the church's practices and traditions as received—has rarely occurred to Episcopalians. Susan Deetz, the deacon at St. Paul's in Duluth, helped me to understand why. “The church used to be the institution that taught you how to fit with the culture,” said Deetz, a cradle Episcopalian. “If you didn't want the culture, then you wouldn't want the church.” Assimilation was assumed, especially for immigrants trying to find their place in a new land, and next to public schools, the church was the chief assimilating institution that helped to broker that process.

That's not always a negative. But it can be, especially when membership in a church gets viewed as the equivalent of leaving your own culture behind. When other black, working-class friends and family found out I was becoming an Episcopalian, I took lots of flack. “Why are you joining *that* church?” people wanted to know. One person thought she had the answer: “I always knew you were

sididdy. This just proves it.” Mind you, a “sididdy” person is one who thinks she is better than others in her group. And in communities the world over, certainly in the Americas, the Episcopal Church is often viewed as the church for people who think they are better than everyone else. It’s the church of the high-society black folks, the ones who are lighter-skinned, better-educated, with their emotions and color under control. The church of the house slave, rather than the church of the field slave.

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The fault lines here are intellectual lines. There’s a huge bias toward being analytical, brighter than the average bear. Anything not to seem like the fundamentalists.

MAGGIE KULYK, ST. BARTHOLOMEWS-ATLANTA

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As I’ve spoken with other people of color and people from less-privileged class backgrounds, as well as gay and lesbian folks and young adults, many have reported similar experiences. We know better than most that the Episcopal Church has often been the church of choice for people who want some of *that*: some power, some culture, some social training, some privilege, even if it was privilege by association. If people assimilated to this church’s culture, if they proved they could be “proper,” then they were rewarded with a boost up the social ladder. In order to effect deep change, we will have to reckon with the skewed power dynamics and classist, Euro-American cultural dependency that has limited the Episcopal Church and most other mainline churches for far too long.

## The Church of the Empire

Americans find it easy to gloss over or just forget, but the Episcopal Church is the church planted by an empire. And while our church is more democratic than most of our counterparts in the Anglican Communion, we still bear the marks of our founding. The church of empire was supposed to secure order, quell revolution, advance reason. Let the Baptists have their wild times. Let the Catholics be “ethnic.” We had to keep it together, because we had to rule a nation. Never veer too far to the left or right. We had to wield power with a steady hand and a cool head.

The truth is, from its birth in 1529, when King Henry VIII declared himself the head of the Church throughout his empire, the Church of England has struggled to chart a course toward the center and to fulfill its call to maintain order for the whole. When Queen Elizabeth I ascended to the throne in the second half of the sixteenth century, she saw a nation ripped by the bitter and violent disputes between Protestants and Catholics. Religion was the chief rallying point for the parties. Elizabeth immediately realized the fate of the realm depended on constructing a compromise. “Queen Elizabeth said religion shouldn’t fragment people,” Kujawa-Holbrook explained. “She wanted to put together a tradition that most people would be able to follow and fit into.” And so she did, crafting an ideological and theological middle path, known as the Elizabethan Settlement (or Compromise) that for a time brought warring parties to heel. Another of her more severe peacemaking ventures, the Act of Uniformity of 1559, imposed harsh penalties on anyone who did not adhere to the Book of Common Prayer’s precise prescriptions for worship in the church.

It is impossible to understand these ostensibly religious developments apart from their political implications in England and abroad. Elizabeth was a faithful woman, but she also knew an established church with a rigorously enforced, common tradition could help bring a sober, orderly calm upon the people. That was the church’s chief calling in England.

It was also the church’s mission in colonies throughout the so-called New World, even after the American Revolution. True, the framers for the new American church instituted democratic systems and independence from the Crown (including removing prayers for the monarch and axing the requirement that ordained leaders vow allegiance to the monarch).<sup>1</sup> All that said, the church in America was still a church of the governing and owning class and, in many places, the masters’ class. These leaders had a vested interest in maintaining order, reasonable rule and social stability, and they were highly suspicious of anything that smacked of emotion, renewal or revolution in the church.

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Decorum has been highly valued in Episcopal circles As cultural diversity alters the way communities understand decency and order, the look, feel and sound of the assembly changes, but there is always a quiet sense of discomfort among Episcopalians if things seem a bit loose.

CLAYTON MORRIS, *HOLY HOSPITALITY*

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It should not surprise us, then, that even before the Revolution, as the Great Awakening swept the nation in the mid-1700s, Anglicans in America hesitated to jump on board. How ironic that an Anglican clergyman from England, George Whitefield, was the one stirring up much of the cross-denominational fervor. While his colleagues in America first welcomed their English brother, the reception soured when they saw how he stirred passions and inspired change wherever he went. According to Episcopal Church historian Robert Pritchard, most Anglican clergy beheld the awakened, spirit-filled masses with great disdain.<sup>2</sup> Especially in New England, where Anglicans had little strength before the Great Awakening, the church made a name for itself by providing shelter for horrified Congregationalists and Presbyterians whose churches had welcomed the spirit of revival. The Anglican tradition was aligned more closely with the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, and thus grounded itself in Scripture, tradition and reason. Converts could trust that this church’s liturgy, practices and theology would always appeal to the stable, rational mind, and not to the turbulent emotions and extremism of their awakened, but not enlightened, peers.

That snapshot only begins to explain how the culture of the Episcopal Church has been shaped by its call to maintain social order and stability. As the church of the establishment (if not the established church), Anglicanism in the United States has been steeped in

owning-class, elite, northern European culture, which demands that people maintain rigid control of their emotions, actions, words, bodies, and environment in order to prove their superior fitness to hold power.<sup>3</sup>

Even when the people in the pews are members of a marginalized community, that does not guarantee they will bring a different cultural attitude to bear. Sometimes, it is quite the opposite, as one report from the Lambeth 1988 Conference remarks:

[W]hen Anglicanism was exported to other continents, it came not only with the “Englishness” of certain styles of clothing, music and worship, but with certain assumptions about who made decisions, who had authority in social life, who had ultimate control in economic affairs, markets, production, land ownership. The dominance of the English style . . . could be seen as a reflection of the plain facts of political and economic dominance.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of that dominance, Kwok Pui Lan points out, people in former colonial strongholds discovered that participating in the dominant Anglo-Anglican culture gave them a social and economic boost. She has noticed that

Anglican churches in many parts of the world remain cultural representations of the colonial era. Africans and Asians living in tropical climates continue to wear English clerical dress, even under the hot blazing sun. The African bishop is addressed as the Lord Bishop of Cape Coast or Freetown. . . . In many cases, such mimicry of the “Mother Church” serves not as a mockery of colonial authority, but as a sign of privilege by association.<sup>5</sup>

Though North Americans are loathe to acknowledge our own colonial heritage, it continues to operate powerfully. I sat one afternoon to discuss these issues with Brother Geoffrey Tristram, a member of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, a monastic order based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Born, raised and priested in England, Brother Geoffrey has thought a lot about the American church and why we hold so fervently to a language and tradition that are not home-grown. “Americans are obsessed, it seems to me, with questions of identity,” he said. “They desperately want to belong to something and to find their identity in that. Especially if they’re Anglicans, that becomes their cultural identity. They can be a part of something. It is their home.”

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Each one of us lives with particular images and understandings of the church, many of which strengthen, console and challenge us. In some instances, these images make it difficult to recognize the presence of God’s larger purposes and radically reordering love.

THE MOST REVEREND FRANK T. GRISWOLD, “A WORD TO THE CHURCH FROM THE PRESIDING BISHOP,” JUNE 23, 2004.

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And so, for many Episcopalians, including the converts, we want the eighteenth-century hymns because they are part of our adopted cultural heritage. We want language that sounds formal and elevated (read: British) because it gives us a connection to something that sounds venerable and, by extension, holy and transcendent. We want a Prayer Book liturgy with little variation because it helps us to feel grounded in something that has “always” been this way (remember that, until 1979, nearly all Episcopal churches used one form for the Eucharist, and its language had changed little in several centuries). This complex cultural heritage acts like gravity, holding the church close to the ground and, in many instances, locking it in place. If leaders shift any part of that cultural complex—even with the hope of embracing emerging generations, different ethnic groups, oppressed sexual minorities, or people from less privileged class backgrounds—the repercussions can be dire.

Adding to the burden, we’ve also been appointed conservator of English-American identity by many non-Episcopalians. In particular, the language of the Prayer Book has taken on cultural icon status. Gregory Howe saw various non-Episcopalian critics weigh in following the 1979 Prayer Book revision, including William F. Buckley Jr., publisher of the *National Review*. These protectors of the tradition, Howe said,

try to freeze us in place at a late stage of the 1928 Prayer Book, as though we are custodians of a sacred cultural icon without which Anglo civilization, as we know it, would wither away. . . . For them the Episcopal Church is the guardian of an exquisitely beautiful museum piece.

Although he serves as Custodian of the Book of Common Prayer for the Episcopal Church, Howe is not satisfied with the calling to preserve the liturgy in amber so that future generations can gaze upon it with reverence and awe. He knows the liturgy—and the Church—has a higher calling than that of “museum-keeper.” “What does [preservation] have to do with the imperatives of the Gospel?” he asks. “Aren’t we sending the message that spreading the Gospel isn’t quite as important to us as the beautiful, even glorious literature (and other magnificent treasures) entrusted to us?”<sup>6</sup>

It seems that is precisely the message many people want and even demand that we send. So we take on the role of conservator and standard bearer of good taste, shouldering the white man’s burden, proclaiming to the world our commitment to a firm, unchanging identity.

## A Liberating Legacy

If that were the whole story for the Episcopal Church, we would be in dire trouble. The truth—the whole truth—is that there are many gifts already in our knapsack designed to equip us for radical welcome. While we need to understand how our culture militates against new life, we also need to celebrate and move to center stage the resources and practices that position us well for transformational growth.

For instance, as much as the Anglican tradition in America spurns certain change (particularly in the liturgy and the definition of our cultural identity), we also share a theological tradition that prepares us to take risks and to sit with contraries and hard truths. True, we have been the church of the establishment, preaching sobriety and order throughout the world. But we are also the church of the *via media*, able to hold tensions and seeming contradictions with the hope that there is always a third way, a way that is complex and even complicated but true to reality and context.

Our church was founded not as the people of the Prayer Book or a single liturgy (as we have seen, the crackdown and severe enforcement came later, in the wake of political strife). We are the people who demand that all believers be allowed to consciously, faithfully discern the mind of God, and the corollary is that no one—especially no single cultural or generational group—has a lock on the truth or the form in which it can be expressed.

American theologian William Porcher DuBose, a nineteenth-century evangelical apologist for slavery who also defended the Confederacy on the battlefield, still understood the Anglican necessity to gather and honor many voices and perspectives in order to grasp God's truth in its fullness.

All the truth of the church is not yet mine. There are points of it that I know to be true, because I have been all the time approximating to them, but I am still waiting, and shall probably die waiting, for them to become true to me. Truth is not an individual thing; no one of us has it all—even all of it that is known. Truth is a corporate possession, and the knowledge of it is a corporate process<sup>7</sup>

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I'll tell you now: this class thing is going to bite at us again and again. The people in power are still privileged people. And that's a deadly combination: upper-class, individualistic, comfortable faith. The Episcopal Church needs the community of the poor and oppressed. It would be so easy for us to fall, because we're so privileged.

ERIC LAW, EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES

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Following in the footsteps of Anglican theologians like Richard Hooker, DuBose knew that we need one another and the bits and scraps of truth and love each of us brings to the holy banquet table.

Likewise, in the church's earliest documents, the framers have acknowledged the complexity and multiplicity of life, and pledged that this church would respond with care to those changing times. The preface to the 1662 Prayer Book declares the early church's hope "to keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and too much easiness in admitting any variation from it." While these leaders would never encourage change just to make things interesting, they also admitted that the actual forms of worship are "things in their own nature indifferent, and alterable." For that reason, "according to the various exigency of times and occasions, such changes and alterations should be made therein, as to those that are in place of Authority should from time to time seem either necessary or expedient." For centuries the Anglican tradition has encouraged leaders to discern what forms of worship would actually reach and edify people in their context, and to build bridges accordingly.

And lest we think that commitment stalled before crossing the Atlantic, we need only look to the Articles of Religion, a non-binding set of statements about the faith adopted by the American church in 1801, where the authors wrote: "It is not necessary that traditions and ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been diverse, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word."<sup>8</sup> In short, the church's architects were wise enough to make room for the natural, inevitable, even desirable translation of the liturgy and doctrine into the cultural language of the people who use it, as long as the movement is consonant with Scripture. The change must be discerned by a community in response to their context and in relationship with their bishop, and not by rogue individualists. Having met that criteria, the community may move forward trusting they remain true to the tradition.

And it makes perfect sense that the American church's leaders would have made provision for that sort of change. The great move that marked the birth of Anglicanism was simply this: translating the Catholic, Latin liturgy and tradition so that it spoke to the hearts of the English people. Thomas Cranmer, who wrote that first Prayer Book and secured his place as the father of Anglicanism, set the precedent in the mid 1500s. Every time we translate our liturgy so that it speaks in the language of the people, or open our church to the culture, voices, music, practices of The Other in our midst, we are walking in Cranmer's footsteps. That is why Leonel Mitchell, widely respected leader of the movement that gave us the newest Prayer Book in 1979, could say with such confidence

We do Cranmer and his work no honor by gilding it and putting it on display. We best follow the lead of the first Book of Common Prayer by making liturgy in our own day, for our own people. It is not an heirloom of our cultural heritage to *he* displayed in a showcase for our children to admire; it is a working tool to be used by us and by them<sup>9</sup>

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“Anglican identity” can be code for something else. I think it’s code for “niche church.” It usually means worship one way. It has musical, liturgical and building implications.

CHARLES FULTON, CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OFFICER, EPISCOPAL CHURCH CENTER

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Daniel Caballero, formerly the Episcopal Church Centers Officer for Hispanic Congregational Ministries, agrees wholeheartedly with Mitchell. He told me the primacy of the vernacular was part of what drew him to the Episcopal Church, and its why he has hope that in time we can be a church that welcomes all people. “The Episcopal Church stands for, was formed for, the common people. The Book of Common Prayer came because the services and instruction had been in Latin, and they wanted to expand it and make it for the common people. It is only common once it has been translated into your language. And I mean cultural translation, not just linguistic.”

Comments like Caballero’s represent more than wishful thinking for Anglicans. They are part of our reality.

## What’s Your Congregational Reality?

Every congregation, every denomination, every tradition possesses just such a rich, sometimes contradictory story. These are the blessings and challenges that make us who we are, the gifts and liabilities we carry along every step of the journey toward radical welcome. Only by acknowledging them *in tota* can we strategize smart for the road ahead.

To get at those issues, some congregations opt for a systemic assessment. St. Bartholomew’s in New York hired former All Saints-Pasadena rector George Regas as a consultant to study the congregation and its reality and then guide them through the visioning and planning process. “We needed to know, What are some of the obstacles to growth?” St. Bart’s Rector Bill Tully explained. “Imagine a length with spikes on it, created to keep the pigeons from coming. We didn’t invent it, but it’s there. For us, that length is the perceptions, the traditions, the architecture.”

You may take advantage of user-friendly resources like those in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* and *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation*,<sup>10</sup> both of which detail processes that congregations can employ to study themselves effectively. You may also decide to take a more informal survey, speaking with old-timers, newcomers, former members, and neighbors to get a sense of what the congregation actually communicates about itself.

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Online Extra: Assessment Tool for Studying Your Congregation’s Reality and Charting Your Dream

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Trinity Church in Boston launched a major assessment and revisioning process prior to calling its latest rector. They set up committees of lay leaders who dove into the parish and into the community to do deep listening. While there, they heard some hard truths: many people inside the church felt disconnected and marginalized; meanwhile, other churches and civic leaders saw them as “the 800-pound gorilla” that always wants to control whatever it touches; the insulated, intellectual castle with no desire to engage The Other. Those leaders remembered times that Trinity had stepped out for social change, and what a difference the parish had made; they only wished the church’s leaders would come out of their rarefied environs more often. When Trinity hired its next rector, they hired a woman with a track record for leading large, urban churches into deeper relationship with their neighbors.

That’s smart strategy, informed by knowledge. And it’s knowledge gained by going out and asking the right questions.

How do you create a framework to hold this delicate conversation about the congregation’s systems and deep cultural patterns? Invite a team of leaders to spearhead the listening process (if there is a vision team guiding the process of discernment around radical welcome, even better). You could also ask an outside leader to come and perform the assessment with you. The “Where Are We Now?” sets of queries posted throughout the “Re-Imagine Your Common Life” chapter will help you to examine the contours of your congregation’s common life with radical welcome in mind, moving through mission, identity, ministries and relationships, leadership, and worship.

As you listen and construct the picture of your congregation’s common life, take note of the dominant patterns and strongest impressions. Imagine what someone who didn’t know you well would see and think first. Because if you want to connect with those who’ve been systemically, historically held at the margins of your church, there is no way to get there without understanding the congregation’s reality in terms of power, privilege, oppression, insiders, and outsiders. The goal is not to stir guilt and remorse, though both may surface over time. Rather, this kind of truth-telling equips you with the information you need in order to craft an effective, compassionate strategy. You can build on strengths and carefully note growing edges before they cut you or The Other you hope to radically welcome.

## GO DEEPER . . .

- Which of the stories, comments or ideas you just read was the most challenging? Exciting? How do they connect with your own story? What do they inspire you to ask or to do?
- How do these reflections link with your church’s story, or the stories of churches you’ve known?
- Create a parish timeline. When was your congregation most alive? What did the neighborhood look like? How did the church connect with the community? What has changed in the church’s vitality? How has the relationship with the neighborhood shifted?
- Think of the stereotypes and the cultural inheritance attached to your tradition and your congregation. What are the greatest challenges to radical welcome in your congregational and denominational history? How does your history and reality actually



equip you for transformation and radical welcome?

- In what ways does your church send a culturally exclusive message? Who might walk to your door, or enter your church on a Sunday, and not feel valued or visible? Picture the outcasts, the strangers, The Other who has been systemically oppressed and disempowered in society and in the wider church.
- Return to the five-part image of the church's bodylife: its mission and vision, identity, ministries and relationships, leadership and feedback systems, and worship. What elements of your church's bodylife are the most entrenched and least welcoming? Where have you begun to move toward the dream?

<sup>1</sup>. This historical account is drawn from Robert Pritchard's *A History of the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>. *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>3</sup>. For a thorough examination of the concept of "whiteness," white racial identity and the interlocking issues of class privilege and heterosexual and male privilege, and an honest appraisal of the costs of privilege, see Mary Elizabeth Hobgood's *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>. Kwok Pui Lan, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: The Lambeth Conference 1988* (London: Church House Publishing, 1988), 88.

<sup>5</sup>. Kwok Pui Lan, "The Legacy of Cultural Hegemony in the Anglican Church," in *Beyond Colonial Anglicanism: The Anglican Communion in the 21st Century*, ed. Ian Douglas and Kwok Pui Lan (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2001), 56–57.

<sup>6</sup>. Gregory Howe, "Expansive Language in Cyberspace" in *Gleanings: Essays on Expansive Language*, ed. Ruth Meyers and Phoebe Pettingell (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2001), 49–50.

<sup>7</sup>. William Porcher DuBose, *Turning Points in My Life* (1912), as reprinted in Richard Schmidt, *Glorious Companions: Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 205.

<sup>8</sup>. Book of Common Prayer, 874.

<sup>9</sup>. Mitchell, as quoted in Phoebe Pettingell, "I Hear America Praying: Liturgy, the American Vernacular and Expansive Language," in *Gleanings: Essays on Expansive Language*, ed. Ruth Meyers and Phoebe Pettingell (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2001), 21.

<sup>10</sup>. Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, and William McKinney, eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998); and Roy Oswald and Speed Leas, *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1987).





# How Radical Is YOUR Welcome?

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## **MISSION AND VISION**

**What is your congregation's stated purpose (mission)? What are the plans and future goals toward which you are actually moving (vision)? How does this reality compare to the dream you crafted earlier?**

The congregation's understanding of its purpose as God's people (mission); The specific, compelling picture of the community's future (vision)

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## **IDENTITY**

**What groups are part of your congregation? Your surrounding community? Which groups' voices and values most shape the life of the community? Which ones are on the margins? How does this reality compare to the dream you crafted earlier?**

Demographic markers like the church's size, median income, its dominant age, ethnicity, ideology, sexual orientation, etc. Includes the defining culture and story of the community's life up to present.

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**MINISTRIES AND  
RELATIONSHIPS****What activities is your congregation engaged in? What are your community and ministry relationships like? How does this reality compare to the dream you crafted earlier?**

Practices related to fulfilling the mission and vision: pastoral care, evangelism, community service, justice ministries, community life, stewardship, Christian formation and external relationships.

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**LEADERSHIP AND  
FEEDBACK SYSTEMS****Which groups tend to be in charge? Who makes decisions, and who has access to decision-makers? How does this reality compare to the dream you crafted earlier?**

Mechanisms that enable a group to reflect, make decisions, act and otherwise exercise power

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**WORSHIP****Whose culture and values get expressed in worship? Who is not present or might not feel at home in your worship? How does this reality compare to the dream you crafted earlier?**

Ritual activities that gather people and foster relationship with God and each other through prayer, praise, sacrament and scripture

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## Week 6

### The Practice of Radical Welcome: Reckoning with Fear

Read “Be Not Afraid” and “Reckon with Your Fear”

1. Reflect on “The Sound of Fear” handout (first page). Share with the group.
2. What are your personal fears around radical welcome? What are your congregation’s fears likely to be?
  - What does it feel like to recall this fear?
  - What does it conjure in my mind, in my body, in my spirit?
  - What is the effect off fear on my ability to welcome and embrace?
  - What practices help me to sit and work with my own fear and resistance?
  - What practices and conditions open me up again, help me to trust and take risks?
3. Look at the second page of the “Sound of Fear” handout. Do you see a practice or suggestion that might help you to bring compassion to your fear or the fear in your congregation? How might you put it to use?
4. Imagine a member of your church came to share her or his fears with you. Considering your own experience and insights gained from this small group cycle, what could you say or offer someone struggling with this fear?
5. What is your holding environment and how could you develop it further? In other words:
  - What practices and resources in your congregation could create the space and opportunity for people to express their fears?
  - What structures, programs and practices would help your congregation to respond to people’s fears with “compassionate awareness”? To “tell a new story” to their fear (in other words, to hear other people’s experiences with similar fears, to reconnect them with the dream of God, and to discover resources in your shared tradition)?



## **Be Not Afraid**

The disciples felt fear, but that's where the Spirit touches you. I've felt it like a presence. Every time I step into a space that scares me, my prayer is to make me transparent to the work God wants to do through me. If I let fear cloud the way, then it's getting in the way of the Spirit.

SARA HAMLLEN, EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MASSACHUSETTS

**O**pening our hearts to God. Welcoming Christ in the stranger. It all sounds so holy, good and life-giving, so undeniably Christian. It's also de-centering, difficult and downright terrifying. Make no mistake: Jesus asks something fundamentally dangerous of us when he invites us to follow him into the just reign of God, where we will have to lose our lives to find them (Luke 9:23-25). There is nothing easy or comfortable about losing your life, even if Jesus holds out the promise of new, abundant, better, resurrected life. We don't really know what that life will look like or what it will take to claim it. All we know is that our old ways must die, for there can be no new life without some form of death. Radical welcome is to a great degree the practice of embracing our inevitable fear of The Other, of loss, of death.

### **The Reality of Fear**

Fear is as common as the air we breathe, the ground we walk on. Even the most daring risk-takers among us experience fear. It's simply part of the human experience, as Jewish therapist Miriam Greenspan points out in her book, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear and Despair*:

Fear is as human as laughter and tears. Though few of us would care to admit it, we are all afraid. It gets down to this: the human condition is scary. Pain, loss and death are guaranteed the moment we are born. So, too, is some degree of helplessness in the face of apparently random events over which we have no control. We fear uncertainty, helplessness, isolation. We want to live without pain or death. And these impossible wishes make us all the more afraid. These basic existential fears inhabit us, whether we are aware of them or not.<sup>1</sup>

There is no way to avoid pain, and no way of avoiding the fear of it. Buddhist philosophy and practice begins with the statement of the First Noble Truth: "Life is suffering." It is not a pessimistic statement. It is a fact. Our many expectations will be disappointed; the structures that nurtured and supported us will suddenly shift; people and ideals will pass away; we will experience real physical pain. We will suffer, and we will not like it. We cannot talk ourselves out of it, and we certainly cannot shame ourselves or others into "getting over it," even if what we fear is another person or the change their presence represents.

### **Be Not Afraid**

Fear is there, assailing us all in so many forms it can seem unmanageable. But the Bible's response to fear is clear and unwavering: Be not afraid. Isaiah heard that message, and as a result he wrote: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation" (Isaiah 12:2). The Psalmist heard it, and that faith inspired this song: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult" (Psalm 46:1-3). Jesus spoke these words as he prepared the disciples for his coming death: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27).

Be not afraid. When the words or the message appear in Scripture, they usually herald some dramatic shift just around the bend. God's people are predictably confused, tempted to hide their heads and pray for the tempest to pass. Then God speaks a word—"Be not afraid"—and beckons them to continue on the path, and the story of faith lives on.

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Some people decide that change is worse than death. They're scared to lose control. They've so defined themselves as Episcopalian that the word becomes antithetical to change. They don't really know what it means, except that it's what they're used to.

JANE OASIN, SOCIAL JUSTICE  
MINISTRIES OFFICE, EPISCOPAL  
CHURCH CENTER

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Alas, when we hear “Be not afraid,” the gut response may be to assume fear is the enemy, a demon to be exorcised. Western culture trains us to run from our fear and other “dark emotions” like despair and grief. “The fear of falling into the darkness, of going down and not being able to come up, lurks right at the edge of our ability to feel at all,” Greenspan explains. “Our culture reinforces this fear, which I call ‘emotion-phobia.’”<sup>2</sup> We Christians make life harder still whenever we shove fear down while declaring that the opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. If we confess fear or anxiety, somehow that sounds like an admission that we lack the strong faith and backbone of more mature believers. So we cover it like the dreaded scarlet letter that marks us as weak believers or bad people.

Especially when the fear or resistance surfaces while we are engaged in doing noble, Christian work, it can seem nearly impossible to admit our discomfort. At the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Boston, Massachusetts, where I serve, homeless and poor people are leaders throughout the parish and have claimed the church as their own. It is a fulfillment of the gospel vision. It also means many economically privileged people approach our steps looking for *their* Episcopal Church, only to turn away from the throng of unwashed masses who know this church as a sanctuary.

When I spoke recently with colleagues at a nearby church that doesn't open its doors so widely, they looked at me with pity: “Oh, you're the ones with all the homeless people.” I was torn. Were there limits to radical welcome, especially if it was creating this kind of press and causing others to find us somehow unwelcoming? What were the real costs of maintaining this gospel-based identity, and was I secretly scared of being further marginalized by our association with the homeless?

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You're talking about asking people to get in touch with their pain. Well, we're not pain-seeking people. Never mind that pain is at the center of the Christian story. We want to get through the pain quickly and get to the joy.

STEFANI SCHATZ-DUGGAN, ALL SAINTS  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH-BROOKLINE,  
MASSACHUSETTS

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My colleagues and I have wrestled with these questions, and I am convinced we are not alone. Of course, liberal Christians want to welcome *all* people at God's table! Of course we are willing to make *some* changes in order to welcome them. We congratulate ourselves for being so much warmer and friendlier than some other group or congregation. We say we do not feel awkward or anxious in the presence of someone who is oppressed and does not have the privilege and access we take for granted. We tell ourselves we would be overjoyed and pleased to have “them” as part of our congregations (and declare it a shame that they do not seem to want to join us). No one wants to be a racist, a homophobe, a snob. No one wants to seem inhospitable in our polite church culture.

Meanwhile, we ignore the frisson of anxiety and the voice that whispers, “I don't know how to do this. I don't want to do this. Why are we going through this? God, why do things keep changing?” We keep silent, shove the fear down, pray for freedom from this sin. In one workshop, a woman admitted her desire to take scissors to her fear and “cut it all out.” We want to clear out the evidence of our weakness, to deal quickly and move on, to use our rational minds and make sense of these nonsensical impulses. Then, we have been told, we will be free.

Except that the promised freedom doesn't actually materialize. Cut, and you only slice away at yourself. Rationalize, and the feelings remain. Deny, and the truth pops up in another place. If you have ever tried any of these tactics, and at some point all of us have, then you know they bring little more than short-term relief, if that. Why? Because, as Elizabeth Lesser tells it, “Repressed pain never goes away. It is stored in the heart, in the body, and even in the genes.”<sup>3</sup> Repression, denial and silence are not the same as healing. The way of genuine transformation and wholeness—the real invitation behind the admonition to “Be not afraid”—travels a different route.

Buddhist teacher Machik Labdrön points the way with this refreshing insight: “In other traditions, demons are expelled externally. But in my tradition demons are accepted with compassion.”<sup>4</sup> The “demon” of fear is not some external force. It is part of human nature, and thus part of our own make-up. What a gift it would be to learn finally to love what American Buddhist leader Pema Chodron calls that “shaky and tender place,” the place deep inside that holds our fear of The Other, our fear of change, and our fear of loss:

Tapping into that shaky and tender place has a transformative effect. Being in this place may feel uncertain and edgy, but it's also a big relief. Just to stay there, even for a moment, feels like a genuine act of kindness to ourselves. Being compassionate enough to accommodate our own fears takes courage, of course, and it definitely feels counterintuitive. But it's what we need to do.<sup>5</sup>

Sitting in this way may at first seem self-indulgent and terribly nonproductive. Then we begin to shudder and feel “uncertain and edgy.” Difficult as it is, we have no choice but to approach the demon with care and kindness. If we do, Chodron promises, the effect will be transformative. I believe that is because sitting with fear nurtures within us three spiritual gifts: wisdom, freedom and faith.

### **Fear and Wisdom**

Fear is a wise teacher, and shoving it aside without listening actually places us in more danger, not less. As Miguel de Cervantes wisely noted: “Fear is sharp-sighted, and can see things underground.”<sup>6</sup> If I fear walking around my Boston neighborhood after dark, it is because people have been attacked here in the past. That fear is smart, and should lead me to get a companion to join me for the walk. A friend was stuck in a painful pattern of dating women who expect him to be their caretaker, while they give him very little in return. He is wary now, checking for signals, asking better questions, sharing more about his own story and his own needs. His fear has served him well. Telling the truth about fear, no matter how ugly or vulnerable it makes us feel, is the beginning of wisdom.

### **Fear and Freedom**

Facing fear can also make you free. My own spiritual and vocational journey has countless times brought me back to the place of facing my own stifling, confining fears: the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural ones. I can hardly describe the rush of freedom and energy that surged through me when I began to walk toward those fears and toward the loss and pain that lurk in the corner of all fear. It’s the difference between walking into the wind backward, and suddenly realizing that if you only step forward, the wind will be at your back and you could run. Or, as Elizabeth Lesser puts it,

We live in a river of change, and a river of change lives within us. Every day we’re given a choice: We can relax and float in the direction that the water flows, or we can swim hard against it. If we go with the river, the energy of a thousand mountain streams will be with us, filling our hearts with courage and enthusiasm. If we resist the river, we will feel rankled and tired as we tread water, stuck in the same place.<sup>7</sup>

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People love some changes. Give me that \$10 million. Bring me the love of my life. Make me thinner. It’s the painful stuff we run from.

GREG WONG, U.S. DIPLOMAT  
SERVING IN IRAQ

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Life experience has taught so many of us the same lesson: denying pain and fear only shackles and weakens you. Why not choose freedom?

### **Fear and Faith**

When we stop running away from fear, we can experience true vulnerability, the sort that is only possible when you finally stand in the storm, lift your hands in surrender and pray that all is not lost. That is when God loves to step in: when we are at our most confused, our most desperate, our most needy. Like the disciples on a storm-tossed sea, we may grow frightened and fear the end is near. But Jesus walks out to join us with these words, “It is I; do not be afraid” (John 6:16-21; Matthew 14:22-27). Do not be paralyzed by your fear. Do not be consumed with anger. Do not get stuck on the defensive. Do not run from The Other. Our fear of change and pain is powerful and frightening, but Jesus waits to offer us healing and renewal, imploring us to keep on moving, promising we may be tossed and even broken, but we will not be overcome.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott shares her own experience with being broken open by pain. She found herself floundering following the death of her best friend in the world and the end of a romantic relationship. Finally, in a passage I discovered soon after my father’s death, she writes of what I now understand to be the grace of grieving and sitting with pain:

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People are afraid of change. Why? Because it’s frightening. It threatens them. Who wants to let go of the things we find familiar? It’s unfortunate sometimes, but that’s the way humans are.

MARK BOZZUTI-JONES,  
ST. BARTHOLOMEWS-NEW YORK

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The depth of feeling continued to surprise and threaten me, but each time it hit again and I bore it, like a nicotine craving, I would discover that it hadn’t washed me away. After a while it was like an inside shower, washing off some of the rust and calcification in my pipes. It was like giving a dry garden a good watering. Don’t get me wrong: grief sucks; it really does. Unfortunately, though, avoiding it robs us of life, of the now, of a sense of living spirit. Mostly I have tried to avoid it by staying very busy, working too hard, trying to achieve as much as possible. . . . But the bad news is that whatever you use to keep the pain at bay robs you of the flecks and nuggets of gold that feeling grief will give you. A fixation can keep you nicely defined and give you the illusion that your life has not fallen apart. But since your life may have indeed fallen apart, the

illusion won't hold up forever, and if you are lucky and brave, you will be willing to bear disillusion. You begin to cry and writhe and yell and then to keep on crying; and then, finally, grief ends up giving you the two best things: softness and illumination<sup>8</sup>

Lamott's situation did not drastically improve when she began to face her own demons; mine did not, either. However, our ability to keep walking with courage, hope, wisdom, and compassion is incalculably greater when there is room for God to enter and offer us those two best things: softness and illumination. I do not believe God actively sends us trials to test us or push us into deeper faith. That said, I have no doubt that God delights when we turn, softened and broken hearts in hand, and beg God to be our companion in the way.

## Practicing Resurrection

Fear is never the final word in any story with God. Far more often, the bold act of acknowledging fear starts a new chapter. For Christians, that is the whole story of the resurrection. We are invited to participate in Christ's death and in his resurrection, to let the power that destroyed death now free us to be the living body of Christ. Many churches attempt to bring this theology alive by placing the baptismal font near the entry, where members must walk by it to come inside. On the one hand, this move signifies that baptism is our entry into the household of Christ. But at a deeper level, we are reminded that we have been literally baptized into the entire life, death and resurrection of Christ. We are members of his body, and if it has been raised, then we will be raised, as well.

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“Be not afraid” is one of the most common commandments. God is trying to say, “Chill out. I’m with you.” Of course we’re petrified, but because God loves us, it’s possible to go on, all the time, knowing God never leaves us.

EARL KOOPERKAMP,  
ST. MARY’S-WEST HARLEM

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That resurrection does not simply come on some unknown but imagined day when God will raise all those who have lived in God's embrace. It is a resurrection we can experience whenever we face death, all the tiny deaths that threaten to sap our souls. It is a resurrection that allows us to occupy a completely new posture in our daily lives. If death is not the end, if God's power defeats any enemy, including the most fearsome of all, then we can step forward and proclaim, hope, serve, and love without fear. Rainer Maria Rilke shares this stirring promise in one of his *Love Poems to God*:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us  
then walks with us silently out of the night.  
These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,  
go to the limits of your longing.  
Embody me.  
Flare up like flame  
and make big shadows I can move in.  
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.  
Just keep going. No feeling is final.  
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call Life.  
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.<sup>9</sup>

Taking on the voice of God, Rilke urges his reader to engage everything life has to offer—its beauty and its terror, the changes and the losses, the joy and the pain—knowing that no feeling lasts forever. The pain will come, but surely it will reveal something of God to us. The grain of wheat will fall into the ground and die, but that is the only way for it to bear fruit. If we are not looking back at mistakes and pains or ahead for trouble and loss, then we find ourselves in a glorious, hopeful present moment, and that is precisely where the God of life waits to take our hand.

If we know ourselves to be unconditionally loved like that, if we know even death is not the end, Henri Nouwen points out, we are dangerously free to love and surrender all for Christ.<sup>10</sup> We can go anywhere, even if it means we might be rejected, even if it means we have to look deep into the heart of our own fear. We can go to the most terrifying place in the world, because we know we are “loved beyond [the] boundaries” of the world.

The words I hear when I imagine stepping into that place of terror, uncertainty, chaos, and fear—the words I hope you will remember should you take that step—are simply these: *Be not afraid*. You are loved. *Be not afraid*. You are held. *Be not afraid*. You are God's own. *Be not afraid*. You will face your fear and you will live. *Be not afraid*. You have been called to live as the child of a radically welcoming God, to allow your very heart and mind to be broken open to make room for The Other *and* for God. *Be not afraid*.



## GO DEEPER . . .

1. Which of the stories, comments or ideas you just read was the most challenging? Exciting? How do they connect with your own story? What do they inspire you to ask or to do?
2. How do these reflections link with your church's story, or the stories of churches you've known?
3. What kinds of change inspire the *most* fear, resistance or anxiety in you? Why? Consider the same question for your congregation and your denomination or tradition.

[1.](#) Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear and Despair* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 169–70.

[2.](#) *Ibid.*, 2.

[3.](#) Elizabeth Lesser, *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow* (New York: Villard Books, 2004), 62.

[4.](#) As quoted in Pema Chodron, *The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002), 49.

[5.](#) *Ibid.*, 9.

[6.](#) As quoted in Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*, 169.

[7.](#) Lesser, *Broken Open*, 237.

[8.](#) Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Anchor, 2000), 72.

[9.](#) Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* (No. 1.59), translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 88.

[10.](#) Robert A. Jonas, ed., *Henri Nouwen: Writings Selected* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 72.



## Reckon with Your Fear

When we ask people to change, we're going into their deepest programming. Every individual has an iceberg—which you see above—and below are the myths, patterns. Even though most change is external, people are afraid of what it will do to their internal world, their iceberg. They see change, they feel threatened. If you change this, *will I disappear?*

THE REVEREND ERIC LAW, EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES

### **The “F” Word**

Call it what you like—resistance, anxiety, hesitation, paralysis, defensiveness—fear is always with us, and perhaps never more than when the world and the systems that have anchored us start to change. Your community may fervently hope to become radically welcoming. You may have already begun to identify the specific changes you would like to implement, and you're sure others in your congregation will be excited about joining the march. But consider changes like these, and imagine the response:

- hearing fewer of the community's beloved traditional hymns every Sunday
- mounting plaques or art representing the aesthetic values and images of non-dominant groups
- creating slots on the worship rota specifically for under-represented groups and reducing the number for others
- holding two slots on the Church Council for minority ethnic groups or homeless members or gay and lesbian leaders
- offering bilingual translation at meetings
- installing a screen and investing in a projector for alternative worship
- requiring that all ministries rise from the common mission and not just pet projects

Especially when our cherished institutions and private communities are “threatened” with change, it is quite natural to recoil, hunker down and resist like hell. Church leaders everywhere told me this struggle had probably sapped more of their energy and sabotaged more of their efforts than almost anything else. Yet, we have so little equipment or language for naming and delving into that fear. In some congregations, there may even be outright resistance to speaking of something so “personal” and “intimate” as fear and pain. In these places, people keep quiet lest they look like they're trying to use church as group therapy. Of course, professional intervention has its place. But surely the church can provide the space for admitting and holding the fear and pain we experience as transformation occurs within our faith lives and communities.

So how do you tell hesitant parishioners church will now challenge them, setting out a radical vision that may differ from so much of what they've worked to maintain? How do you help them—and yourself—to hold and eventually to transform fear? You can begin by getting to know the nature and sources of fear, particularly the fear of The Other and the fear of change.

### **Fear of The Other**

Anyone would feel a bit uncomfortable in the presence of someone whose perspective, practices, history, hopes, even their looks and smell, seem at least on the surface—and perhaps even after some exploration—dramatically different from your own. Even if you find it exciting to experience new cultures, some of the rush is surely the anxiety of approaching the unknown, the out-of-the-ordinary, the marginal. Why else do we call someone new and different a “stranger”? They are, to some degree, strange.

I am wary when people say, “If you just get to know people, you realize we're really all the same underneath.” Actually, we are *and* we're not. We all hurt, but different things cause us pain. We all laugh, but different things make us laugh. We all celebrate beauty, but what is beautiful in one culture may be a shock to the system or dull and lifeless in another. We all hope for some measure of success and peace, but defining that from one context to the next is like shooting at a moving target. Difference is difference. Expecting to transform The Other into a familiar commodity ignores the reality and value of variation and difference. It begs the deviation to be absorbed once again into a norm that we get to name and craft—usually in something like our own image.

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I know what some folks think when they see me [a homeless man]. I get the funny vibes. I said okay, and I

went to another member to get some counsel. She got it right away and said, “Honey, don’t you worry about it. God is not afraid of you.”

CHARLES KELLY, ST. MARY’S-WEST HARLEM

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Of course we find ourselves anxious in relationship with the one who is Other to us, and particularly the marginalized, oppressed Other. It’s more than disagreement, more than encountering the great unknown. This person’s very presence reminds us of—and perhaps represents some fundamental threat to—our own unearned privilege. Oppressive systems have taught us that there is something threatening, something ugly, out there, and then they have constructed The Other as a human repository for much of that ugliness. In the extreme, that can lead to horrible responses like gay-bashing, lashing out at “welfare mothers,” or placing a quarter of black men in jail to keep the streets safe. More subtle forms of fear and prejudice pulse *not so* far under the surface, taking privileged people just a little off center whenever they’re confronted with the specter of The Other.

Even members of oppressed groups look across to those in our own groups with some measure of fear. Anti-oppression experts call this horizontal oppression, when oppression flows not just on a vertical axis, from the privileged down to the oppressed, but also on a horizontal axis, from one oppressed person against another, and sometimes within the oppressed person herself. We’ve bought the oppressors’ line and projected those assumptions onto each other and ourselves.

Fear of The Other is so primal, so powerful. It resides deeper than most of us know or would want to admit. It silently telegraphs tension and negative energy into almost any encounter between insiders and outsiders. It’s there, begging to be named, held and somehow cracked open.

## Fear of Change

Hardly any experience inspires fear quite like change. Much of our fear of other groups, new experiences and the great unknown can be traced, I would wager, to the fear of change. As humans, we instinctively seek stability and avoid pain and possible rejection. If some experience might prompt pain, loss, failure, or rejection, we are apt to construct our lives and institutions to avoid the cause and thus to keep that pain at bay. In the process, we can easily begin to read nearly all change as a source of suffering, or some deterioration from a better, safer, original state.

The fear of change is a powerful and pervasive thing. All the more reason to pause and take a brief systematic look at this phenomenon on four key levels.<sup>1</sup> Look carefully, because our fear of change in one realm might be rooted in or intimately linked to fear at some other level.

1. **Personal:** At the personal level, we tend to fear anything that shifts us out of our own centered identity (unless it is a shift we choose—losing weight, building self-esteem, shifting to a higher-wage job). Lurking beneath this fear, on some level, is an intense suspicion that personal change will lead to hurt or even annihilation.
2. **Interpersonal:** The same fear operates at an interpersonal level: a good relationship is stable, predictable and, ultimately, unchanging. If we grow, we must grow together. Otherwise, it seems we’ve been abandoned or rejected and left to fend for ourselves.
3. **Institutional:** An organization and its members can certainly experience the fear of change. Many of us turn to our churches precisely because they provide a quasi-family within which we can pretend things have “always been this way” If new people, new ideas, new practices arrive, they threaten the sense of safety, order and meaning the institution provided: if this institution changes, how will we orient ourselves in the world?
4. **Cultural:** For many of us, change associated with the foundational principles that make up a culture—like God and the church—inspires the greatest fear. If God changes, then the world might as well turn in on itself. Nothing is sure. Even if the change is in the church, its doctrines or its practices, we may sense the creep toward some dreaded third rail: tampering with that which has no beginning and no end and should endure for all ages. Deep inside, I would suggest, there lurks the supreme fear: “If the way I understand God, or what God has revealed in Scripture and in the church, could change, does any of it even matter? Will all this change rip away my connection to God, or possibly erase God altogether?” No wonder we are far more likely to skirt that kind of pain and change whenever possible.

You can see now why mainline churches’ recent battles over liturgical renewal, sexuality and cultural identity have been so fraught with tension. Although people may be resisting particular innovations, that’s only part of the story. As Kujawa-Holbrook reminded me, “Making change—even what some of us think of as simple change—can cause people personal pain. For instance, the language of certain liturgies marks the special moments in their lives. It is why people who wouldn’t ordinarily go near Jacobean English ask for the King James Version of Psalm 23 at funerals. At those pivotal moments, the affective dimension takes over.”

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I admit it-. I get disturbed at the noon Spanishlanguage service. All the children running about. Not knowing their language makes it tougher. I don’t know what to do.

PAULINE MESSER, GRACE CHURCH-LAWRENCE

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Some call this the “language of the heart”: the language that suddenly transports you to a special place, communicates the holy, and links you to tradition and your very own communion of the saints. It is a verbal language, and a musical language. It is also a visual, liturgical, physical, cultural language. Tamper with it—even for the best of reasons—and you should not be surprised at the

jerk of fear, resistance and pain.

## The Sound of Fear

People will rarely come out and say, “I’m scared” or “I don’t want *them* around.” Our fear morphs and takes on many voices: the voice of scarcity, the voice of hesitation, the voice of anxiety, the voice of defensiveness. Listening for the sound of fear takes great care. Many of the people I met in the course of the Radical Welcome Project were brave enough to share their own fears and the fears they encountered. In so many cases, a reasonable, innocuous comment cloaks a deep fear and an old story.

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There’s a real fear that we’d have to dumb down to attract people of color. People say things like, “How would Spanish speakers understand our sermons?”

JIM WHITE, ALL SAINTS-PASADENA

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As you consider the list that follows, realize that there is nothing inherently wrong with many of these comments. The trouble comes when we allow the reservations to go unexamined and thus to cover deeper fears below the surface.

- *But I come here to feel good and safe. Is that so wrong?*  
The fear of losing our comfort zone
- *I hope they don’t expect us to change our liturgy.*  
The fear of losing a venerable tradition
- *It’s not a judgment—they’re just not like us.*  
The fear of losing a community’s cultural, social identity
- *But shouldn’t we study it a little more? We’ve never done this before.*  
The fear of looking or being judged ignorant, unprepared or otherwise less than “together”
- *What if we mess it up?*  
The fear of failing and being judged
- *We’ve tried this before. These things never work.*  
The fear of raising hopes and then being disappointed
- *What will our neighbors and ministry partners think if we do this?*  
The fear of incurring a backlash
- *What if we lose the Rogers family and their pledge?*  
The fear of scarcity
- *If we do this, won’t some people leave?*  
The fear of disappearing
- *I find their music loud and theologically simple. Let’s not dumb things down.*  
The fear of foreign cultures
- *I’d like to see them in leadership, but can we really trust them to do it right? Will they try to take over our church?*  
The fear of letting go of control
- *Wouldn’t they be more comfortable with their own people?*  
The fear of facing our own prejudice

If you hear yourself speaking or thinking these statements over time, investigate the story behind the statement. What makes me think that? What experiences or assumptions suggest that this is true? Does this have to be the case? Acknowledge what truth the fear may reveal. Then pause and ask what else is going on, if you are allowing a legitimate concern to take on greater power, cause paralysis or turn your attention from a challenging but faithful course of action. This may very well be the voice of fear.

## Holding the Fear

Hearing the fear is one thing. Holding it is something else. Ronald Heifetz, a noted psychiatrist, business expert and professor at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, has helped secular institutions to make that transition. He starts by describing change processes as “adaptive work”:

Adaptive work consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behavior.<sup>2</sup>

Heifetz then draws a conclusion many pastoral professionals could have guessed: if you are going to lead a community through

adaptive work, you have to create a “holding environment” to contain the stress of change.

- *A holding environment isn't just a structure; it is a relationship.* Within the context of this trusting bond, the parties can experience the relaxation, freedom and challenge necessary to continue engaging in change.<sup>3</sup> The holding environment may be the relationship between a politician and his constituency, the coach and her team, a minister or other church leaders and the congregation, or between one friend and another. Certainly, the church body itself may serve as a holding environment for parishioners. Whatever its shape, the holding environment is marked by trust and predictability. People need to be able to trust that the relationship will be there for them, and that it will serve them well.
- *The holding environment doesn't protect people from adaptation.* Neither does it always give them what they want. As Heifetz explains, “the point. . . [is] not to eliminate stress but to regulate and contain stress so that it [does] not overwhelm them.”<sup>4</sup> Within this relationship, we can face our fears knowing we will not be ridiculed, exploited or rejected. We can tell the stories of how life used to be, how much we miss it, how everything is swirling and how desperately we want to jump off the merry-go-round. That is the pastoral element.
- *The holding environment facilitates prophetic movement.* So we will be pushed, and we will experience stress, but because of the foundational trust of the holding environment, and because the stress is being introduced at a pace we can bear, we will be able to bend knowing we will not break. When the time is right, we can hear compassionate, persistent questions that would have made us balk before, can see images that challenge reality, and can imagine life differently and plot the steps necessary to walk toward that new way of being.

Every leader I spoke with insisted that there is no way to make deep change without this strong commitment to holding people's fears and concerns well. “There is a deeply pastoral dimension to this change,” St. Bartholomew's-New York rector Bill Tully told me. “The first year, I wasn't just a CEO. I was a pastor. You take soundings, hold dinners and one-to-ones, listen to people.” Meanwhile, Earl Kooperkamp of St. Mary's-West Harlem told me the secret to lasting transformation is pure presence. “If you want change, you have to establish a relationship of trust and love. There are people who disagree with what we're doing here, but I know what's up with them. We know each other. That relationship is what undergirds everything else.”

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I once asked to have a different table for the offering. The Altar Guild rep got his knickers all in a knot, stopped talking to me. I said too bad, because I'm still going to talk to you. I rub them, but we still love each other.

CECILY BRODERICKYGUERRA, ST. PHILIP'S-HARLEM

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You can't afford not to create and nurture the holding environment. How else will people relax and trust enough to face their fear and risk and grow and walk—together? But how do you create and nurture that holding environment in your own congregation? How does it operate on the ground? These practices will stand you in good stead as you help your community to walk with fear.

## Practices for Reckoning with Fear

### Practice compassion with your own fears.

Remember: holding fear starts at home. The simple truth is that it is impossible to act as a healer for others if you are hiding from your own fears and haven't learned how to bring compassion to yourself. Be gentle with yourself, and others will sense the graciousness in you. Be unforgiving of your own fear, and others will experience an edge of judgment and impatience in you. So physician, heal thyself. Make it clear to others that you are working with your own fear and vulnerability, perhaps by taking anti-racism or anti-homophobia courses or by sharing stories appropriately in the pulpit or wherever you have voice.

Certain spiritual practices can provide a context for literally sitting with our fears. In *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*, Elizabeth Lesser shares her own toolbox of practices, including prayer, meditation, psychotherapy, storytelling, journaling, painting, exercising, and more.<sup>5</sup> Take your pick. Sit in prayer. Sit in meditation. Sit with pen in hand and prepare to tell the truth about your experience. Find a practice and do not be afraid to come back to it again and again.

When we sit gently with fear and see it more clearly, alchemy occurs. We change fear from a silent force that grows in dark corners into a different material altogether, something sad and funny and deeply human. We listen to learn the story of our own fear, and then we can offer up a different one: the story of survival, the story of increased wisdom and strength, the story of new relationships and a closer walk with Christ.

### Open the space for honesty and truth-telling.

Fear will find a voice. Will it be a whisper behind a cupped palm, accompanied by a slanted glance and rolling eyes? Or could you shut down those counterproductive, often poisonous backroom conversations by opening up the space for honest, careful reckoning?

If you choose the latter, know that simply speaking about the reality of fear and the need for healing has a powerful effect. Model it from the pulpit.<sup>6</sup> Follow up with Christian formation and community conversations about topics like healing, loss, anti-racism, privilege, the denominational legacy, the changing community, and more—anything that will surface fear. In individual and group sessions like this, invite people to come together in order to give voice to their anxiety and then to explore in a safe space what their fear may be telling them.<sup>7</sup>

## **Train a team of leaders committed to pastoral care and transformation.**

Senior pastor or rector, assistant, lay leader, children's ministry specialist, elder, altar guild member: anyone can take up the vocation of healer and help to initiate and facilitate conversations about fear, hope and gospel-based transformation. It is especially useful to have parish leaders—members of your vestry or church council, the team charged with crafting a fresh vision, the leaders spearheading change or a designated pastoral care team—train to hone their listening and negotiating skills with pastoral care.<sup>8</sup> They should also be equipped with anti-oppression trainings, because they will need to understand the way systems of oppression hurt both the oppressed and the oppressor.<sup>9</sup> Though it may be a small group, this pastoral team should reflect the various groups in the congregation, including those who have been marginalized. Everyone in the congregation should be able to approach at least one of these caregivers and leaders with their fears, and know they will be held with respect, compassion and skill.

## **Bring compassion and wisdom to the resistance.**

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### Online Extra: Exercises for Meeting Fear with Compassion and Wisdom

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It is critical that healers learn how to bring both compassion and wisdom to meet fear. To picture those pastoral or prophetic skills in action, it may be helpful to return to just a few of the comments from the “The Sound of Fear” on pages 140-41. How do you respond to a person grappling with the fear of change when it manifests in these familiar ways? First, just listen and offer the gift of your attention and curiosity. Don't jump to debate or change someone's mind. Just listen. Imagine the fear and the story behind it. Feel free to ask the person what that story is. You may also find these insights useful:

- *But I come here to feel good and safe. Is that so wrong?*

The fear of being uncomfortable in a place that always felt like “home”

There is nothing wrong with safety and healing, but they should prepare us to go forth and take risks and make disciples in the name of God. And sometimes welcoming others into the church and allowing them to claim it as their home will require us to adjust what has made the space feel like such a home for us.

- *I hope they don't expect us to change our liturgy.*

The fear of losing a venerable tradition

Especially for Anglicans, holding onto a particular form of the liturgy is how we hold onto our link to the historic, liturgical tradition. But don't forget that the Anglican tradition began as an effort to create not just a common liturgy but a liturgy of the common people in a language that spoke to their context. It may be that our most faithful, most genuinely Anglican response is to allow the tradition to birth new life in fresh soil.

- *It's not a judgment—they're just not like us.*

The fear of losing a community's cultural, social identity

Of course people are different, and those differences can cause some discomfort. But the amazing grace of church is that it draws together people who would never develop relationships or even acknowledge each other's existence in everyday life. Are there ways that people with different perspectives can enhance our own conversion? Perhaps in the act of letting go of our dominant cultural and social assumptions, we will make room for other ways—and ultimately for God.

- *But shouldn't we study it a little more? We've never done this before.*

The fear of looking ignorant, unprepared or otherwise less than “together”

It's wise to conduct research, do due diligence, sketch various scenarios and assess risk. But if we think these plans will guarantee success, if we believe we can somehow achieve perfection or that God requires it of us, then we're in for sure disappointment.

Worse yet, we could end up bogged down or paralyzed just when God is calling us to move.

- *What if we mess it up?*

The fear of failing at something truly significant

Again, our efforts to give our best to God are noble. But when will we learn that our failures teach us as much as any success ever could? Perhaps the goal is not to avoid messing up, but to create a culture where leaders are equipped to make smart decisions, and where members trust each other's wisdom, forgive each other and reflect together when the outcomes don't match the expectations and hopes.

- *What if we lose the Rogers family and their pledge?*

The fear of scarcity *and* the fear of rejection

Anyone's departure feels like a huge loss, especially if that family takes a significant financial contribution with them. It makes us question everything when someone who cared so much about the community walks away. So go ahead and ask the looming question: Are we really on the path to which God has called us? If the answer is no, then continue discerning and don't be afraid to recalibrate. But if the answer is yes, then this is the time to walk in faith. Let's be resourceful, ask remaining members to give more, locate funding outside the congregation. Let's share our story more broadly and boldly, drawing new members who resonate with the gospel-rooted vision we have discerned. Let's trust that the Rogers family may need to find a community that lives into their understanding of the gospel. And let's have faith and pray that, even if some people disagree with our welcoming, they may eventually look back, see our vibrant witness, and learn from it.



These are only examples of how the voice of compassion and wisdom meets the voice of fear. It is empathetic, but not patronizing. It recognizes that there may be a story behind the fear, and it honors the wisdom and truth of that story.

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Some of the impetus I have for doing reconciliation work is my memories of what it's like to be marginalized. I listen to people, I hear their anger and pain, and I wonder if there's a hint of their feeling marginalized, too. I try to go to that place of compassion for them.

SARAH DYLAN BREUER, EDITOR, THE WITNESS

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All that said, remember that the wisest course early on may be to say very little, and instead to sit with people while they reckon with their own fear. Bombarding people with reasonable words, however compelling, may just shut down a meaningful conversation and relationship. Stay connected and know that it doesn't have to all happen at once.

### **Use and share breath and meditation practices.**

Lay leader Sarah Dylan Breuer shared these strategies from her Maryland community. "As the director of Christian formation, I'm teaching and leading and encouraging people to be in their own skin," said Breuer, the editor of *The Witness* magazine and one of the leaders of Gathering the NeXt Generation, the Episcopal group for Generation X leaders. "Breathe. Do it for twenty seconds whenever you get into your car. Notice what you're feeling. Try to instill and nurture the sense that I'm here and it's alright. This practice lays the groundwork for the deep healing and reconciliation that needs to happen, and it's leading us to a place we can return to. When things get tough, they can say, 'Hey, let's go back to that place and then we can keep up the conversation.' It's about having practical tools for reconciliation work."

### **Be prepared for the backlash.**

Once you step out front, be prepared for the backlash. Though you imagine yourself working with the best of intentions ("I'm just trying to help them . . ."), people are certain to get scared, defensive, anxious, and fearful about change, and you will be a convenient target for their anger and confusion. People will call you a troublemaker, declare that you are not truly Anglican or Lutheran or Methodist—insert your tradition as appropriate. Some will accuse you of trying to fix them, and they will stonewall you. Others will get terrified, and they will focus solely on what is right rather than acknowledge the hard work that waits for each of us as we live into the reign of God. You may also fall into the change-leaders' trap and take a patronizing, condescending, arrogant attitude toward your brothers and sisters in Christ. Know that these natural reactions are coming down the pike—yours and theirs. When they do, greet them with the same compassion and wisdom you've learned to bring to your own fears.

### **Mine for your tradition's resources for dealing with fear.**

Generally, change leaders think of the denominational heritage as an albatross around their necks, more likely to inspire fear than to help people to sit gracefully with transformation. Actually, there are resources aplenty in our respective traditions.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Cranmer bequeathed to Anglicans a tradition of expressing eternal truths in the "common" language. Thanks to Queen Elizabeth's masterful "Elizabethan Settlement" between warring Catholics and Puritans, we *have practice* stretching our boundaries to include all of God's children, including those with whom we disagree. The Anglican theological heritage is one that combines edginess, humility, and awe, and is convinced of what is essential and generous with the rest. We can trust there is not one of us who holds all the answers, which allows us to do the smartest thing of all: leave room for the Spirit to move in our midst and reveal truth in the Spirit's own time.

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Online Extra: Bible Studies on Reckoning with Fear and Embracing Change

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If we embodied this tradition at its fullest, and shared it with the church, we might help to ease some of the rigidity about what is truly "Anglican." The same is undoubtedly true for other mainline church folk struggling to meet the fears of traditionalists who might not actually know the breadth of the tradition. Quite often, the wisdom of the ancients can be more liberating than constricting, more hopeful than fearsome.

### **Return to the dream.**

In the end, nothing pulls us through fear to transformation quite like a clear, compelling vision. Remember Fran Kuchar's enlightened advice, gained the hard way at Grace Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts: "Sure, if we come together there will be things we lose. But look at all we gain: a place that's full of people and filled with so much spirit you can touch it."

As our communities reckon with fear, we can hold out the hope and the dream that God has given us. Don't be afraid to ask people: If money were not an issue, if we had not made that mistake ten years ago, if fear were not blocking us, what would we hope to be and do? What can you imagine we will lose? What do you imagine we could gain? Is it worth it? What has it cost us, spiritually and emotionally, not to have The Other as a full, engaged member of this community, to be cut off from others in the body of Christ?



Dreaming together and forging a common story and common commitment can help a community to neutralize the power of fear. It can fire our steps when we falter. And it can give us reason to listen to our fear and still say “yes” to transformation that is challenging, surprising and, yes, holy.



If churches have been slow to embrace radical change, it is usually because they haven’t felt strong or wise or daring enough to take risks. Many congregations have been idling in scarcity and survival mode for so long, the thought of change inspires absolute terror. Facing fear of change and fear of The Other simply is not part of our cultural, operational vocabulary.

But no one ever promised us that being the body of Christ would *not* be terrifying. None of the parishes I visited or scholars and leaders I interviewed indicated there would be no pain or terror. The Scriptures certainly don’t make that claim. Christ’s promise was that we would not be overcome by the spirit of fear, because we would be given the Spirit of power to do the work of God (2 Timothy 1:7). Our challenge is to create communities that know how to sit gracefully with fear *and* to cultivate the spirit of power.

## GO DEEPER . . .

- Which of the stories, comments or ideas you just read was the most challenging? Exciting? How do they connect with your own story? What do they inspire you to ask or to do?
- How do these reflections link with your church’s story, or the stories of churches you’ve known?
- Which of the fears listed under “The Sound of Fear” (p. 140-41) sound most familiar to you? Under what circumstances have you or others spoken words like these?
- What are your personal fears around radical welcome? What are your community’s fears likely to be?
- Did you notice a practice or suggestion that would help you to bring compassion to your fear or the fear in your community? How might you put it to use?

1. I have borrowed the model for performing analysis on these four levels from Valerie Batts, founder and executive director of Visions Inc., an Arlington, Massachusetts-based consulting firm that guides institutions toward becoming anti-racist and multicultural. For more information on Visions, go to <http://www.visions-inc.com> or call (781) 643-5190.

2. Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 22.

3. *Ibid.*, 104-13.

4. *Ibid.*, 106.

5. Elizabeth Lesser, *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow* (New York: Villard, 2004).

6. See Barbara Lundblad’s *Transforming the Stone: Preaching Through Resistance to Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).

7. For more resources to help facilitate honest conversation in your church, go to Katie Days’ *Difficult Conversations: Taking Risks, Acting with Integrity* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001).

8. For pastoral care training, start with Befrienders’ Ministries: (phone) (651) 9625775; (e-mail) [befriender@stthomas.edu](mailto:befriender@stthomas.edu); (website) [www.befrienderministry.org](http://www.befrienderministry.org).

9. For anti-oppression and multicultural organizational development resources, start with the following:

• *Crossroads Ministry*: (phone) (773) 638-0166; (website) [www.crossroadsantiracism.org](http://www.crossroadsantiracism.org)

• *Seeing the Face of God, in Each Other: ECUS A Social Justice Ministries*: (phone) (800) 334-7626; (e-mail) [joasin@episcopalchurch.org](mailto:joasin@episcopalchurch.org); (website) [www.episcopalchurch.org/social-justice/](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/social-justice/)

• *Visions Incorporated*: (phone) (781) 643-5190; (e-mail) [office@visions-inc.com](mailto:office@visions-inc.com); (website) [www.visions-inc.com](http://www.visions-inc.com).

10. An accessible primer on Anglican theological voices is Richard H. Schmidt’s *Glorious Companions: Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality*. See bibliography for publishing information.



# The Sound of Fear

These quotes are taken straight from congregations engaged in the ministry of radical welcome. Choose the one that sounds most familiar to you. Reflect on when you heard or saw it expressed. You may add other fears associated with radical welcome, telling when you heard or saw them expressed.

|  |   |
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| <b>“But I come here to feel good and safe. Is that so wrong?”</b>  | The fear of losing our comfort zone, the safe space where we know who we are and what to expect |
| <b>“I hope they don’t expect us to change our liturgy.”</b>  | The fear of losing a venerable tradition  |
| <b>“It’s not a judgment—they’re just not like us.”</b>   | The fear of losing a community’s cultural, social identity                                      |
| <b>“But shouldn’t we study it a little more? We’ve never done this before.”</b>  | The fear of looking or being judged ignorant, unprepared or otherwise less than “together”      |
| <b>“What if we mess it up?”</b>  | The fear of failing and being negatively judged   |
| <b>“We’ve tried this before. These things never work.”</b>   | The fear of raising hopes and then being disappointed   |
| <b>“What will our neighbors and ministry partners think if we do this?”</b>  | The fear of incurring a backlash  |
| <b>“What if we lose the Rogers family and their pledge?”</b>   | The fear of scarcity—not having enough money, people or other resources                         |
| <b>“If we do this, won’t some people leave?”</b>   | The fear of disappearing—shrinking or being made invisible in your own community                |
| <b>“I find their music loud and theologically simple. Let’s not dumb things down.”</b>   | The fear of foreign cultures—confronting unknown languages, cultures and expressions            |
| <b>“I’d like to see them in leadership, but can we really trust them to do it right? Will they try to take over our church?”</b> | The fear of letting go of control   |
| <b>“Wouldn’t they be more comfortable with their own people?”</b>  | The fear of encountering with The Other and coming face-to-face with our own prejudice          |

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## Responding to Fear

Having heard the voice of fear, you have several responses at hand. The *first step* is always simply to listen, without judgment or attempting to fix the “problem.” Listen with genuine curiosity and concern. Then keep listening for the story behind the fear. “Why would I or this person believe or feel this? What experiences or assumptions suggest that this fear is appropriate and true?” Keep asking “why” to see how the fear feels and what it’s connected to, and eventually to discern what else is going on, if a legitimate concern has begun to hold undue sway, to distract from the pursuit of your vision, or to cause paralysis.

Eventually, you and your congregation may want to employ these practices to make room for fear and help people to keep moving toward transformation—fear and all.

- Make a commitment to learn to sit with your own fears, so that you can provide a truly gracious and non-judgmental space for others in your congregation
- Use and share breath and meditation practices for sitting with fear
- Use the pulpit and formation programs as intentional spaces for honest conversation, facilitated reflections and story-telling about the reality, pervasiveness and wisdom of fear
- Locate, train and deploy a diverse team of leaders who have received training in pastoral care and are recognized as listeners who can help others to reckon with their fear
- Recognize the signs of resistance and backlash; then, instead of reacting in kind, bring compassion wherever you notice the signs of fear and anxiety

## Wise Words for Sitting with Fear

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.” —Psalm 46:1–3

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” —John 14:26–27

“In other traditions, demons are expelled externally. But in my tradition demons are accepted with compassion.” —Machik Labdrön

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(A Meditation by Elizabeth Lesser)<sup>1</sup>: Bring your awareness to focus on something in your life that is changing or ending or dying right now. Breathe gently as you consider whatever transition is most significant right now in your life. Note any feelings that arise—trepidation, excitement, resistance, anger, annoyance, or grief. Every time your feelings get the better of you, become aware of your breathing. Meet your troubled and contracted feelings with your calm and expansive breath.

Breathe, sigh, and stretch out on the river of change. Remember times when you resisted change in the past. Regard how things turned out in the end—maybe not how you thought they would, or you wanted them to, but in the end, there you were. Wiser, stronger, still alive. Tip your hat to the poignancy of death and the promise of rebirth. Smile, relax. Allow yourself to break open. Sit tall, with dignity and patience, watching your breath rise and fall, rise and fall. Pray for the courage to welcome this new change with openness and wisdom. Then open your eyes, go back into your life, and do what you have to do, but do it with grace, with hope, and with a lighter touch.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Lesser, *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow* (New York: Villard, 2004)

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## Week 7

### The Journey Continues . . .

Read “Where Do We Go from Here?” and “The Joy in the Struggle”

#### *Personal reflection*

Spend 5 minutes to reflect quietly on the following questions:

1. Which of The Others do I feel called to help my community to embrace?
2. Why do I care? What story or experience with The Other fuels my passion?
3. What barriers and signs of exclusivity is this group likely to encounter at your church?
4. What gifts might we share with The Other?
5. What has my church lost because we lack relationship with The Other?
6. What would we gain if we embraced The Other?

Complete the following sentences and share with the group:

1. I want to help my church to radically welcome . . .
2. I care because . . .
3. If these friends entered my church now, they might feel excluded by . . .
4. If we embraced The Other, I believe we would share . . .
5. If we embraced The Other, I believe we would gain . . .

*Review the “Our Passion of Action” section of the “Moving Ahead Together” handout*

1. What are the first steps—or next steps—you would take in your community to nurture radical welcome?
2. Who could you partner with in your own congregation? Think about people and other ministries that could provide strong leadership and a wise perspective on radical welcome. How could you engage them?
3. Who could you partner with beyond your congregation? How could you develop the relationships to prepare for welcoming The Other, and even to meet marginalized groups where they are?
4. What do you need to learn in order to take the next steps around radical welcome? Where could you acquire that knowledge, or these relationships?

*Complete the following sentences:*

1. My congregation has already begun to radically welcome The Other by . . .
2. Over the next 6 months, we need to . . .
3. In order to foster our movement toward radical welcome, I will . . .
4. In order to widen the engagement with our congregation, I will . . .
5. In order to widen the relationship with our neighbourhood, I will . . .



## Where Do We Go from Here?

Change is not immediate. First, you literally have to dance around the edges. But then we broke some important patterns and now the creativity is flowing.

LUCIE THOMAS, (FORMERLY) ST. PAUL'S-DULUTH

Years ago, the rector of St. Bartholomew's in Atlanta tried to plant a new Hispanic ministry. An announcement was made to parishioners. Leaders were given the opportunity to take Spanish lessons. They did lots of advance work, including some in the Latino community. Then they opened the doors. The ministry eventually flopped, largely for lack of real relationships and because the people of St. Bartholomew's had yet to claim the vision as their own.

It was the right thing to do for perhaps the right reasons. It was the decidedly wrong way. "When it comes to welcoming, there has to be ownership," their current rector, Mac Thigpen, told me. "If you haven't built the support and understanding, it won't work."

The best intentions for radical welcome can definitely go astray. How do you even begin to step forward? Here are some insights and practices that will serve you well on the road ahead.

### **Craft a Vision Together**

Congregational vision and new directions should certainly be shaped by the rector or pastor and the core elected leadership—that's what leading means. But if the rest of the people have no stake, no voice, no part of crafting that vision, they aren't likely to stay the rough course ahead. And this is a road we walk together. It takes time, but discerning God's dream for your community *as* a community is definitely time well spent. So while you may be reading this resource by yourself, please invite others to join you when it's time for planning and implementation.

Some people will balk at the idea of engaging in such intentional discernment and planning. Shouldn't these changes happen on the ground, organically? Is all this talk just a stall tactic preventing you from getting down to the "real" work of welcoming? No, and no. I believe it is incredibly empowering, as well as enlightening, to find appropriate ways of inviting the congregation to question together, to voice their hope and claim a vision, from the newcomers to the veterans who've been sitting in the same pew for fifty years. You don't have to write or make decisions as a 100-person committee. You don't have to wait for 100 percent buy-in before moving ahead. But listen to each other, to the hopes and passions that fuel your community, and then plan wisely. This is the ground in which the seeds of radical welcome will either grow or die.

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Online Extra: Map the Journey: Strategic Planning for Radical Welcome

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If complacency sets in or defensiveness kicks in—"Why are you trying to change us? Is something wrong?"—you can remind people that God is always calling us to live more deeply and reflect more fully God's dream for the whole of creation. We are never finished with that journey. There is always a challenge or opportunity to be and do something fresh in God's plan. Recall the Holy One's invitation in the Book of Isaiah: "See, I am about to do a new thing; . . . do you not perceive it?" We need time and space together to perceive the new thing God is waiting to do among us—or what God may already be up to.

### **Choose Your Battles**

We also need to be realistic about our resources. It is tempting to launch full steam ahead into ten different, noble causes. Radical welcome, and the radical transformation it may require in your congregation, is not something to take on without planning, asking hard questions, and assessing what action steps, resources, relationships, and training will get you from where you are to where you believe God is calling you. No one can do everything.

Certainly, no one can do everything at once, so pace yourself. You need not take on the transformation of every element of the institution—the mission, identity, liturgy, leadership, and ministries—or even all the ministry areas, in a single, creative but highly disruptive swoop. (If you are introducing a Spanish-language service at noon, then for a time the beloved 10 a.m. Morning Prayer worship needs to provide an anchor.) Especially if it looks like a particular area is combustible or sensitive, think twice, plan well, and strate-gize smart before you barrel in and lose all the good will and momentum you have built to this point. This pacing is not an admission of weakness or lack of commitment. It is smart planning, as the writers of *Leading Congregational Change* conclude: "All

congregations have resource constraints that cause them to defer other possible actions until later in the process. The ongoing transformation process should include periodic reviews to establish new priorities and implementation plans.”<sup>1</sup>

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Online Extra: A Welcome Change: The Radical Welcome Workshop

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## Give Thanks for the Small Victories

You will also find that, while a particular shift does not represent total alignment with your mission and dream, it could be an important intermediate step that draws your community closer to the dream of God. In Duluth, Minnesota, members at St. Paul’s knew building community relationships and hosting social service programs was not the same as welcoming new voices into the worship and ministry of the congregation. But they needed to take that initial step in order to literally open the doors of the church and encourage the neighborhood to finally claim the “fortress” church as one of their own institutions.

## Be Gentle with Each Other

Congregations aren’t just systems in need of reconfiguration; they are human communities that love, fear, and hope, and they deserve this more nuanced, patient approach, one that honors the need for stability even as it supports transformation. Janet Walton frames the issue well, saying, “Change is inevitable. But it does not mean eliminating all that is familiar, all well-loved language for God, all scripture texts, all typical forms of preaching. . . . It does require examining them and giving up whatever hurts, hides or dishonors”<sup>2</sup> As a congregation, you can discern what most hurts or holds you back, as well as what would be most transforming, life-giving and manageable.

With all this information in hand, you can lay out the changes that need to happen in the short term, the necessary adjustments that will take more time to live into, and the areas where you need to perform more discernment and planning before a course of action becomes clear.

## The Practices of a Radically Welcoming Community

What might change or develop in your community’s life if together you opened the door to the dream of God? Here is a summary of the practices others have taken on as they made their way toward radical welcome; they’re also the attitudes and behaviors you’ll need to cultivate for this renewed way of life.

### Engage in Formation for Radical Welcome

- Focus your preaching and Christian formation programs on the gospel message of embrace, transformation and liberation.
- Prepare people for the reality of change, day in and day out.
- Emphasize formation as disciples and apostles; mission and embrace aren’t just the clergy’s responsibility.
- Take advantage of anti-oppression trainings and resources in order to develop critical consciousness regarding systems, identity and your participation in oppression (past and present, individual and communal).
- Connect to your own history of participating in liberation *and* welcome.
- Tap into your personal and shared experiences of pain and marginalization.
- Look at the community through the eyes of The Other: what is exclusive and what is radically welcoming?
- Tell the story of the costs and loss your community suffers because of oppression and exclusion.

### Model New Attitudes

- Nurture an identity that can “flex” to include fresh ideas, perspectives, practices, *and* The Other.
- Allow yourself and others to try new things, fail and try again.
- Assume conflict is not the end of a relationship or a program.
- Cultivate patience and persistence and keep returning to the long view.
- Be playful and irreverent about yourself, your traditions and new possibilities.

### Create and Nurture Supportive Structures

- Revamp and/or plant ministries that are collaborative, with room for different groups to share leadership and teach each other.
- Cultivate deep pastoral resources and nurture your community’s holding environment.
- Practice open, effective communication, especially across various group lines in the congregation.
- Offer a wide variety of forums and opportunities for truth-telling, storytelling and healing throughout the community.
- Identify bridge people from the center *and* the margins who can help to lead change and nurture mutual relationships.
- Nurture ministries of inviting and evangelism, inclusion and hospitality.



- Open up participation in ministries, especially the ones perennially closed to new blood.
- Offer regular opportunities to ask questions and offer feedback with key leaders—and then be willing to follow-up, address concerns and incorporate good ideas.

### **Welcome The Other**

- Meet people where they are rather than require that they find their way to you.
- Advertise and evangelize in ways that connect with The Other's culture and location, and be sure your stated welcome matches your reality.
- Cultivate relationships in the surrounding community—think civic, political and cultural groups and broad-based community organizations—in order to increase your cultural competence, visibility and skill at welcoming and partnering with The Other.
- Create space back home to welcome these new gifts and leaders, even if they don't fit your standard requirements or expectations.
- Establish multiple points of entry to and relationship with your congregation: sponsor relevant community programs and events, offer exceptionally hospitable space for community groups.
- Ask your marginalized members and your neighbors what issues most concern them and what programs and offerings the community needs from your church.
- Recruit and make room not only for the “safe” people on the margins, but eventually those whose presence, voice, and power present a real change and challenge.
- Undertake “diversity” moves (efforts that increase representation and visibility of under-represented groups), but be sure to back them up with extra encouragement and support for these newer leaders, as well as communication and training for the rest of the community about the values guiding such decisions.

### **Prepare for the Journey**

And finally, before you continue, consider these preparatory questions for yourself and your community. You may not have all the answers yet—that's what the journey is all about!—but these questions will help to kick-start or deepen radical welcome in your community.

- Who are The Others for you? Whom do you hope to radically welcome?
- Why do you want to radically welcome these groups? Are there other groups who are on your doorstep who are just as marginalized? (For instance, are you beating yourself up for having no African Americans when the majority of people of color in a one-mile radius are actually Brazilian or Cambodian? Are you focusing on welcoming people of color first when there's already a disenfranchised, unchurched community of young people outside?)
- What do members of this group or these groups say about your church now? What have your interactions been like to this point? If there has been little or no interaction, what would they likely assume about your community?
- What would your institution need to change in order to convince The Other that the terms are now different? If they dare to venture inside, what activities, images, messages, and events would make it crystal clear that you are making room for their voices, their presence, their power, at the heart of your life together? (Don't be afraid to pose these questions directly to your marginalized members and neighbors.)
- Is there an existing group in the congregation already committed to something like a radical welcome vision? Could you engage them in this work?
- Do you have even a small, critical mass of people from the marginalized group, with bridge people in place (that is, members of the marginalized group who are already members and leaders; these leaders have likely helped the congregation to develop some competence in the marginalized group's culture, and they can provide a touchstone and ease entry for others)? Or are you starting from zero?
- If you are starting from zero, are you willing to develop some cultural competence (that is, how can you become conversant in The Other's culture, story, arts, style of leadership and of engagement) before people arrive?
- Are you willing to embrace The Other: *not* demanding that The Other be like you or minimizing differences, but stretching and re-imagining your way of life so that you might be transformed by those who have never been truly, radically welcomed in your community?
- What is the current center of this group's common life: coffee houses, ethnic groceries, daycare centers, the dog park, the soup kitchen, the refugee center, music stores, schools and colleges? How could you step out to meet them there? How could you incorporate wisdom from their culture into your community's life? Are you willing to find out ways to build and celebrate God's reign together?
- Are you ready to talk about power: individual power, interpersonal power, institutional power, systemic power? Do you know where to get the resources to have those conversations?
- Are you willing to deal honestly and compassionately with your community's fear of change and fear of The Other? Do you know where to get the resources to nurture a holding environment?

If you are ready to take a leap of faith after considering those questions, thanks be to God! Receive this blessing for the road, and go forth into the world as a blessing.

May your hearts open to the spirit of God.

May you move beyond your fears, reaching out in trust, openness and welcome.

May your yearning for transformation create a space where God can pour more love, more trust, more compassion into you. And may you extend the same compassion and radical welcome to the world, all for the sake of Christ.

## **GO DEEPER . . .**

- Which of the stories, comments or ideas you just read was the most challenging? Exciting? How do they connect with your own story? What do they inspire you to ask or to do?
- How do these reflections link with your church's story, or the stories of churches you've known?
- Have you seen communities striving for greater inclusivity and welcome only to come away bitter and disillusioned? What happened? What planning or approaches would have helped?
- What are the first steps—or the next steps—you would take in your community to nurture radical welcome? With whom might you partner for this work?

[1.](#) Jim Harrington et al., *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 153.

[2.](#) Janet Walton, *Feminist Liturgy*, as quoted in Barbara Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 74.



## The Joy in the Struggle

I don't know that we're doing enough to hold out  
the joy, the vision of what it could all look like.  
When I talk about change, I see the joy. So how  
do you communicate that? How do you communicate  
the value of looking under that rock, behind that door,  
tapping into Jesus' excitement at walking among  
the people your culture says you shouldn't be with?

THE REVEREND STEFANI SCHATZ-DUGGAN, ALL SAINTS EPISCOPAL CHURCH, BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS

Perhaps radical welcome sounds like an awful lot of work, sacrifice and pain. Maybe, having read this entire resource, you still feel it sounds like change for the sake of change, or some liberal call to political correctness. Maybe the words “radical” or “welcome” have you hung up, or you remain convinced and concerned that certain people already in the church will not be included if we commit to such a radical welcome for those who have been systemically disempowered and marginalized.

There is only so much those of us whose presence, culture and perspective have been marginalized, silenced and disempowered can say or do to convince our churches to journey toward transformation. But I can tell you this much: there is joy here. Joy in being among those received, valued and radically welcomed. Joy in opening our hearts to God. Joy in making the church big enough for all people to bring their whole culture, whole self, whole heart, inside.

The risk is real, but there is so much joy in becoming God's radically welcoming people. Why? Because when we engage in this practice as communities, we are engaged in knitting together the very body of Christ and abiding more closely in him. And Christ has promised that, the more deeply we abide in him, the more complete our joy will be. That promise is not a future phenomenon. Christ's joy is available to us, and radical welcome opens us to receive that blessing now.

It's true, no one will get everything they want. When it comes to welcoming change and newness, especially new people, cultures and traditions, we all need to work hard to relinquish our privilege as people who are from a particular racial, ethnic, or linguistic group, are heterosexual, middle-aged or have economic means. We may need to let go of the definition of church as the place that feels like home and the people who feel as familiar as family. We may need to name and give up our desire to be part of a club where we know everyone, sit in the family pew by ourselves, and enjoy singing all the songs and speaking all the words by heart.

There's no need to swap the entire classical choral canon wholesale for gospel or contemporary music. But can we faithfully make room for each other's gifts, voices and images to shape worship? Can we grow to trust each other's skills for leadership? Can we allow our identities to be converted by the encounter with The Other? Can we partner for ministry as equally beloved but differently gifted children of God? Can we make intentional, systemic efforts to open our communities in these ways, knowing that transformation rarely emerges as a byproduct of comfortable, one-shot programs? And can we do all these things trusting that Christ will show up more powerfully, smiling and beckoning us deeper into this radical call?

Even if Christ is beckoning, change—especially “radical” change—is hard. Under the best of circumstances, God may want to place a blessing in your palm, but first you have to open your hand and turn over something old and comforting in order to receive it. In the face of all that loss, I can't help but recall the wisdom of Christ, who warned that we may need to lose our life, but only so that we will find it.

If that is true, then maybe it is meet and right to strip away some common stereotypes hovering over the church. Are we the gathering of God's radically open, radically loving, radically welcoming people? Then we should make it abundantly clear that we are the least stiff, least unforgiving, least crusty, least homogenous, least fearful, least judgmental people in the world. If our public personae says otherwise, then we must take seriously the call to become an indisputably, radically welcoming presence in our communities.

Granted, there is room in the church's mission for the members' comfort and healing. We cannot heal the world unless we are simultaneously experiencing healing of our own. But ultimately, the church's primary mission, identity and ministry are not wrapped up in those of us who are already inside. It is not primarily about our comfort and sense of peace. It is not primarily about our sense of belonging. It is not primarily about doing good deeds or maintaining a cultural heritage. All those priorities, valid as they are, must be a means to serve our primary call: aligning our will with God's, loving as God loves, welcoming as God welcomes.

It is as simple, breathtaking, frightening, and joy-filled as that.



# Moving Ahead Together

## My Passion for Connection

- Which of The Others do I feel called to help my community to embrace?
  - Why do I care? What story or experience with The Other fuels my passion?
  - What barriers and signs of exclusivity is this group likely to encounter in my church or denomination?
  - What gifts might we share with The Other?
  - What has my congregation lost because we lack relationship with The Other?
  - What would we gain if we embraced The Other?
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## My Passion for Action

- What are the first or next steps I would take in my community to nurture radical welcome?
  - Who could I partner with in my own congregation? (Think about people and ministries that could provide strong leadership or a wise perspective on radical welcome. How could you engage them?)
  - Who could I partner with beyond my congregation? How could I develop the relationships to prepare for welcoming The Other, and even to meet marginalized groups where they are?
  - What do I need to learn in order to take the next steps around radical welcome? Where could I acquire that wisdom, training or experience (consult *Radical Welcome* Bibliography, pp. 167–176)?
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## Welcoming The Other

*What might develop in your community's life if together you opened the door to the dream of God? Here are some practices others have taken on as they made their way toward radical welcome. Note: This is an expanded version of the list on p. 156 of the book.*

### **Identify who The Other is for your congregation**

- What groups would be The Other in relation to your church?
- Why do you want to radically welcome these groups? Notice whether there are other marginalized groups on your doorstep. For instance, you may feel guilty for having no African-Americans when the majority of people of color in a one-mile radius are actually Brazilian or Cambodian. Or you may be focused on welcoming people of color first when there's already a disenfranchised, unchurched community of young people outside.

### **Understand your relationship with The Other**

- Do your homework and learn how your congregation and denomination have interacted with particular marginalized and oppressed groups in the past and how they interact today.
- Engage members of marginalized, oppressed groups in conversation and find out what people in their groups say about your church and denomination now. What have your interactions been like to this point? If there has been little or no interaction, what would they likely assume about your community?
- Ask people what your institution would need to change in order to signal radical welcome to The Other. If they dare to venture inside, what activities, images, messages, music and events would make it crystal clear that you are making room for their voices, their presence, their power, at the heart of your life together?

### **Help the congregation to learn about The Other**

- Develop cultural competence about The Other's language, history, religious expressions, arts, and style of leadership and engagement.
  - Ask members of marginalized groups what issues most concern them and what programs and offerings the community needs from this church.
  - Incorporate wisdom from the culture of The Other into the congregation's life, helping people to see how we can build and celebrate God's reign together.
  - Conduct an inventory to look at the community through the eyes of The Other—what is exclusive and what is (or could become) radically welcoming?
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## **Build a coalition of people who will lead change and plan together for change<sup>1</sup>**

- If possible, start with an existing group in the congregation already committed to the seed of a radical welcome vision (vestry or church council, welcoming team, social justice and service ministry), but be sure to expand the circle to include people who share the passion and have the respect of their peers (this will help to avoid marginalization of the change effort).
- Identify and engage leaders from the marginalized group—leaders who look forward to helping the community move toward deeper change and helping to ease entry for others coming from the margins.

## **Engage actively in communicating welcome to The Other**

- Find out the current center of this group's common life: coffee houses, community centers, ethnic groceries, daycare centers, the dog park, the soup kitchen, the refugee center, music stores, schools and colleges.
- Meet people where they are rather than require that they find their way to you.
- Advertise and evangelize in ways that connect with The Other's culture and location, and be sure your stated welcome matches your reality (invite leaders from marginalized groups to shape this effort, offering insight into appropriate methods and activities).
- If you have no existing relationships with The Other, cultivate relationships in the surrounding community—think civic, political and cultural groups and broad-based community organizations—in order to increase your cultural competence, visibility and skill at welcoming and partnering with The Other.

## **Offer radical welcome to people coming from the margins into your church**

- Over time, with deliberation, allow the gifts, voice and presence of people from the margins to transform the various elements of your congregation's life: its mission, identity, ministries, leadership and worship.
- Establish multiple points of entry to and relationship with your congregation: sponsor relevant community programs and events, offer hospitable space for community groups.

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1. Gil Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1998); and Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003).

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- As your community learns to embrace The Other, try to stretch and make room not only for the “safe” people on the margins, but eventually those whose presence, voice and power present a real challenge to the dominant culture. Imagine crossing not one but two or more lines: class *and* race (not just black and Latino educated professionals, but working class and even poor people of color), age *and* sexual orientation (not just middle-aged gay men and lesbians, but young and edgy “queers”), etc.
  - Undertake “diversity” moves (specific, strategic efforts that increase representation and visibility of under-represented groups), being sure to back these new leaders up with extra encouragement, capacity-building and support, and to communicate with the rest of the community about the values guiding such decisions.
  - Engage in parallel development, nurturing alternative worship and community spaces where the voice of The Other can flourish—but continue to create intentional opportunities for alternative and mainstream to come together and begin to transform the mainstream.
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