

Emory University

**PLENTY GOOD ROOM:
RECLAIMING HOSPITALITY IN THE BLACK CHURCH**

A Final Project Submitted to
the Faculty of Candler School of Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

by

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Atlanta, Georgia

March 13, 2017

Introduction

Jesus' command to love God and love neighbor demonstrates that one of the most important things we do as followers of Jesus is to seek and create opportunities to welcome and accept one another in love (Mk. 12:30-31 and Matt. 22:37-39). While loving God and neighbor, we seek to build genuine relationships that foster mutual care, acceptance, and worth. In recent years, there has been a clarion call within the church to recapture the church's ministry within the community by focusing on mission and outreach; however, many churches have failed to continuously evaluate and enhance their ministries and systems for welcome and hospitality within the space we call church.

Many congregations affirm that they are welcoming and hospitable, but they do not engage in the critical conversations necessary to evaluate and enhance systems and methods that welcome new people. Significant amounts of material have been written in regards to welcoming and hospitality ministries; however, much of the material has not considered people of various racial and ethnic cultures.¹ Without these important and meaningful voices, the church is void of a wealth of knowledge and understanding as it relates to the topic of Christian hospitality.

Hospitality and creating a space for belonging have been hallmarks in the Black Church tradition, from the years of the secret prayer meetings held by slaves on plantations, to the mass meetings of the Civil Rights Movement.² The Black Church has been crucial to how blacks understand community and belonging. Despite this heritage, one must acknowledge that the

¹ See Christine D. Phol, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999). See also Henry G. Brinton, *The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

² F. Douglas Powe, Jr., *New Wine New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 28-29.

Black Church is not as central to the community as in generations past.³ In his book, *New Wine New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations*, F. Douglas Powe, Jr., acknowledges this shift in the cultural significance of the Black Church. He writes: “Some congregations will take offence and argue, ‘We are still missional focused. We feed the hungry and provide services for those in need.’ This is true. The challenge, however, is in valuing the identity of those being helped and not marginalizing them.”⁴

Some would argue that the Black Church today struggles with its understanding and practice of hospitality and welcoming and there is much work to be done to reclaim its identity as a sanctuary for all people. Valuing God’s children simply because God loves them is so important, especially in our contemporary culture, which so often speaks of hate and evil. In essence, the Black Church today must not be selective in choosing who to welcome, nor should it minimize hospitality to handing out goods and services, but it should hold fast to its heritage in “opening the doors of the church.”

One should not assert that all black churches are inhospitable or unwilling to build genuine relationships with those to whom they minister. But it also seems to be the case that churches, including black congregations, often struggle to embrace those who are different than the members who worship there on a weekly basis. This takes different forms based on the ministry context of a local congregation. In some congregations, there may be a difference in social class, economic status, political affiliation, and even race and ethnicity. Despite its struggles in recent years, the Black Church holds within history the principles necessary to recapture a vibrant spirit of Christian hospitality.

³ For present purposes, the “Black Church” refers to any Christian congregation predominately populated by Blacks, including those that are part of denominational traditions that began among Whites.

⁴ Powe, 35.

To contextualize the scope of research and analysis, this project focuses on New Beginnings United Methodist Church, a predominantly black congregation in Birmingham, Alabama. New Beginnings Church is the result of a merger that took place on January 1, 2013 among Douglasville United Methodist Church, Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church, and Wright's Chapel United Methodist Church. All three churches were predominantly black congregations founded in the early twentieth century within the North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Although these congregations had tremendous success in growth throughout their years of ministry, in recent years, they had experienced significant decline in regards to both membership and financial resources. Hopeful that merging would provide a greater chance for both survival as well as opportunities to reach more people for Jesus Christ, these congregations took a risk and began to do ministry together. After a year of conversations, evaluating the state of ministry of the three congregations and exploring the possibilities of future growth, New Beginnings Church became a reality that is still thriving today.

This project is divided into five major sections. Section One, "Project Rationale and Goals," articulates the importance of hospitality to the ministry of the church and the primary goals of the project. Section Two, "Contextual Scope of the Project," provides a snapshot of the ministry context of New Beginnings Church and the North Birmingham community. Section Three, "Description of Research Method," details the overall design and implementation of the project. Section Four, "Theological Dimensions of the Project Outcome," is an analysis of Biblical and theological themes and principles that developed as a result of the project. Section Five, "Assessment and Project Outcomes," includes an assessment of the project's effectiveness and a summary of transformation observed in the ministry context.

In designing the project, three goals were determined as primary in shaping and grounding the overall direction of research and analysis. These goals are unique to the ministry context of New Beginnings Church, while also framing the need for Christian hospitality through the wider lens of the Black Church tradition.

Project Rationale and Goals

In her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine D. Pohl writes: “For most of the history of the church, hospitality was understood to encompass physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationships. It meant response to the physical needs of strangers for food, shelter, and protection, but also a recognition of their worth and common humanity.”⁵ We see evidence of the importance of hospitality throughout the Judeo-Christian Tradition. From God providing time and time again for his covenant people, the Israelites, to the ministry of Jesus, who welcomes and embraces those whom society overlooks and in many ways, mistreats. In the Book of Exodus, God provides manna, quail, and water for Israel in the hot and dry wilderness. God serves as a divine host in that Israel must rely daily on the graciousness of a God who promises to meet their every need. Pohl highlights that Israel’s covenant identity includes being a stranger, an alien, a tenant in God’s land—both dependent upon God for hospitality and answerable to God for the treatment of others.⁶

In the New Testament, Jesus serves as host as he welcomes all people, especially those on the margins of life, inviting them to be a part of the coming of God’s Kingdom on earth. In Luke’s gospel, we hear Jesus proclaim his mission at the beginning of his ministry: “The Spirit

⁵ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."⁷ Jesus demonstrates that God's hospitality has no boundaries or limits. Simply put, Christian hospitality is recognizing opportunities to build relationships and meet the needs of others, particularly for those who are on the margins of life.

These scriptures and traditions of the church are foundational to our understanding of what it means to welcome those who are a part of the family of God. The two most widely discussed biblical passages on hospitality can both be found in the gospels, Luke 14:12-14 and Matthew 25:34-40. In Luke 14, Jesus is explicit about the meaning of hospitality in the Kingdom of God. He proclaims that those who want to do the will of God do not invite only those who can return the favor, but the poor, lame, crippled, and blind. And, in Matthew 25, Jesus takes it a step further as he describes the last judgement. To welcome strangers is not only to do the will of God, but in welcoming "the least of these," we are welcoming Jesus himself. This passage should always compel us to give the best and most gracious welcome possible when we know we are entertaining and meeting the needs of Jesus Christ.⁸

It is often said that these scripture passages focus solely on helping those in physical need—those who are hungry, poor, or somehow at a visible disadvantage; however, hospitality encompasses all persons in every stage of life. Regardless of whether the hunger is physical or spiritual, the world is certainly hungry and in need of God's grace in many forms. In many ways, hospitality is at the center of our understanding of the Christian faith. In Romans 15:7,

⁷ Lk. 4:18 (CEB).

⁸ Pohl, 20-21.

Paul urges the believers to “welcome one another” as Christ has welcomed them.⁹ This demonstrates that hospitality is exemplified in how Christ has welcomed his followers into the Kingdom of God through his acts of grace and sacrifice; therefore, the Church, the Body of Christ, enacts God’s hospitality through Jesus Christ to the world.¹⁰

Considering what God has done in Jesus Christ, hospitality is not some extracurricular activity that one engages in if time permits, but the very essence of the church and the Christian life. David Bosch, an authority in Biblical missiology, often describes the importance of the church being outwardly-focused as opposed to being solely inwardly-focused. He affirms that God is a missionary God; therefore, the Church, the Body of Christ, is an instrument of God’s mission in the world.¹¹ The Church needs to be constantly reminded that hospitality as the work of Jesus is not optional. Indeed, it is one of the fundamental cores of our identity, especially as it relates to inviting and welcoming all of God’s children.

In discussing the ministry of Church, as the Body of Christ in the world, Dietrich Bonhoeffer illustrates this further when he writes, “The Church can never tolerate any limits set to the love and service of the brethren. For where the brother is, there is the Body of Christ, and there is his Church. And there we must also be.”¹² In essence, the Church of Jesus Christ must bear the marks and characteristics of Jesus Christ, who loved all and welcomed all, regardless of their station and status in life. Bonhoeffer continues his thought by affirming that the member of the Body of Christ must give the world a “visible proof of his calling,” especially through the fellowship of brotherly living.¹³

⁹ Rom. 15:7 (CEB).

¹⁰ Pohl, 29.

¹¹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Touchstone Rockefeller Center, 1995), 258.

¹³ Ibid.

For the Black Church, the Body of Christ is essentially the family of God, and hospitality in the Black Church has always been closely tied to familial norms and values. As Carlyle Stewart writes in his book, *African American Church Growth: 12 Principles for Prophetic Ministry*, “mutual caring, trust, and respect” are essentials to hospitality in the Black Church.¹⁴ He affirms that love, a sense of openness, and developing a sense of family through networks of care help to create a sense of belonging.¹⁵ In essence, the Black church has a responsibility to affirm and in some cases, reclaim this powerful identity.

This project on reclaiming hospitality in the Black Church tradition has three primary goals. First, the project seeks to expand the notions and understandings of hospitality by examining various Biblical and theological perspectives. This is of extreme importance because some congregations have over-simplified hospitality to gimmicks and practices that sound good on Sunday mornings, but never overflow into the daily lives of their members. Above all, hospitality should be a way of living in which Christians seek to be in relationship with others on a deep and spiritual level. Not only should one take the great commandments to love God and love neighbor seriously, but one must fully embrace the fact that the only way to enhance communion with God is to enhance communion with other people.

Secondly, this project seeks to analyze and research statistical and historical data of New Beginnings Church and the area it serves, the North Birmingham community, to compare the similarities and differences in demographics and contexts. In comparing church and community, key leaders can engage in crucial conversations on the current state of ministry within the church, but most importantly, within the community. One not only needs to know who is present

¹⁴ Carlyle Fielding Stewart III, *African American Church Growth: 12 Principles for Prophetic Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

within the congregation, but one should also know who is missing from the life of the congregation. This understanding makes for meaningful and authentic ministry, but also gives one an idea of how to enhance hospitality within the church.

Thirdly, this project seeks to provide next steps for New Beginnings Church towards enhancing the overall hospitality of the congregation. Recognizing that hospitality is contextual, this project will serve as a tool to develop an action plan unique to the ministry context of New Beginnings Church. These next steps will provide a concrete plan to measure effectiveness and success in recapturing hospitality within the ministry context.

Contextual Scope of Project

Snapshot of North Birmingham Community

North Birmingham is known as a low-income, aging, and high-crime area within the city. Historically, the community was predominantly white until the 1960s when blacks began to move into the area. Statistical reports highlight some major issues within the North Birmingham community that are relevant for this project. Utilizing *MissionInsite*, a tool that uses information from the U.S. Census Bureau, Synergos Theologies Inc., Experian, and DecisionInsite, a snapshot was compiled of current statistical data for a one-mile radius around New Beginnings Church.¹⁶ Most of the New Beginnings congregation resides in other areas of the city, so focusing on the one-mile radius gives a snapshot of who is in the immediate community. According to *MissionInsite*, there are approximately 4,162 people living in the area and the racial and ethnic diversity is as follows: 94.3% Black, 2.8% Hispanic, 2.4% White, and 0.8% Pacific Islander/American Indian/Other (Non-Hispanic).

¹⁶ MissionInsite. *The QuickInsite Report*. Irvine, CA: MissionInsite, LLC, 2016. Accessed November 10, 2016. <https://maps.missioninsite.com/GenerateFile.aspx?Type=2&ID=587950>.

The adult educational attainment level is significantly low for this area. Reports indicate that 31.8% of adults (18 years of age and older) did not complete high school. The schools in this area are a part of the Birmingham City School System, which had an overall graduation rate of 78% in 2014.¹⁷ This further demonstrates that the educational attainment for this area is much lower than the overall city.

The average age of the population for this area is 40 years old; however, there are a significant number of single mothers and young families in the area. According to *MissionInsite*, of those who have children, 59.6% are single mothers. One can easily observe these statistics by spending time in the community at schools, local events, and churches. Of those who work in this area, 58.7% have blue collar jobs. The estimated average household income is \$29,738 and 24.6% of families live below the poverty level.

Snapshot of New Beginnings Church

Within the North Birmingham community, a thriving four-year old black congregation called New Beginnings worships over 200 on Sunday mornings, making it the largest predominantly black congregation in the North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church. New Beginnings Church has experienced notable growth in its short existence. The 2013 annual conference statistical report indicates that church membership was 193 and average worship attendance was 175.¹⁸ The 2016 annual conference statistical report indicates that church membership has increased to 212 and average worship attendance is 207.¹⁹

¹⁷ Madison Underwood. "Birmingham City Schools Reports 23-point Increase in Graduation Rates over Last Four Years." AL.com. http://www.al.com/news/birmingham/index.ssf/2014/12/birmingham_city_schools_report.html (accessed January 8, 2017).

¹⁸ *North Alabama Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church Journal*. Report. Vol. 2. (Birmingham, AL: North Alabama Conference, 2013), 358.

¹⁹ *North Alabama Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church Journal*. Report. Vol. 2. (Birmingham, AL: North Alabama Conference, 2016), 352.

The current membership of New Beginnings is most accurately described as middle-class. The annual operating budget for the church in 2016 was \$230,000 and a significant amount of money has been invested for future growth and capital improvements. Overall, the congregation has outgrown the facility that it presently occupies and leaders of the congregation are discussing future building plans. It is important to note the growth of the New Beginnings congregation, because most predominantly black United Methodist congregations in the North Alabama Conference are in drastic decline for various reasons.

The conference has placed a significant amount of emphasis on New Beginnings in hopes that it will serve as a model for revitalization to churches in similar ministry contexts. All in all, New Beginnings is a healthy and growing congregation and provides a suitable context for research and analysis as it relates to hospitality in the Black Church tradition.

Description of Research Method and Results

Focus Group

The main tool for research and data collection was the development of a focus group comprised of members from the congregation and recent visitors to the congregation. An invitation was extended to the church leadership team as well as recent visitors to worship services, to create diversity and balance. On average, 8-10 people participated in the focus group each week. The entire group was Black, the average age 42 years old, and there was an equal balance of men and women.

The focus group met for four hours each week, over the course of four weeks, to discuss the importance of hospitality in the Black Church tradition and how it relates to the ministry of New Beginnings Church and the North Birmingham community. A significant amount of time

was given to exploring hospitality from a Biblical and theological perspective, reading scriptures, and exploring selected scholarly materials to spark in-depth reflection and discussion.

Week 1: Introduction to Hospitality and Our Weekly Practice

After a brief overview of the project and thoughts on Christian hospitality, the focus group participants were given an opportunity to ask questions before engaging in the prepared materials. There were general questions about the goals of the project and the anticipated involvement of the congregation. One person asked, “Do I need to bring my Bible?” Even though our time was not label as “Bible study,” I believe the question proves the importance of scripture in the life of the church, especially in the Black Church.

In thinking of a way to ground our discussion, I felt that scripture was key to understanding the importance of hospitality and the Christian life. Understanding the Black Church tradition requires that we first acknowledge the centrality of the Bible in the history of the Black experience. The Black Church is a prime example of how the sacredness of religious life and common practices intersect in everyday life.²⁰ Simply put, the Bible is not only a sacred book in which God reveals himself, but a guide to every day practical living. As recorded in the New Testament epistle, James, we should strive to be “doers of the word and not just hearers only.”²¹

As leader of the group, I introduced a tool that I developed as an exercise to center our hearts and minds on the presence of God, but also to make ourselves aware of the daily opportunities we have to welcome those we encounter. With scripture serving as a foundation, “A Practice for Reclaiming Hospitality,” combines elements of *Lectio Divina* (an early Christian

²⁰ Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Juan Floyd Thomas, Carol B. Duncan, Stephen G. Ray Jr., and Nancy Lynne Westfield. *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 53.

²¹ Jm. 1:22 (CEB).

practice of scriptural reflection) and The Daily Examen (a traditional practice of self-examination to provide space to engage scripture and the world).²² The purpose of this practice was to reclaim hospitality as being transformational in all aspects of our lives. In her book, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, Letty M. Russell articulates that most people are comfortable with hospitality when limited to the familiar, but when we begin to explore the true dimensions of Christian hospitality, we tend to compartmentalize our responsibility as Christians.²³ Some would argue that we live in an extremely individualistic society, and often we do not seek or recognize opportunities to engage others by sharing the love of God. Overall, "A Practice of Reclaiming Hospitality" helps to blur the barriers and dividing lines that often exist between us and those whom we encounter.

Christine D. Pohl offers a very critical question in her writing that provides a foundation for this practice of scriptural reflection and seeing the world: "If we use hospitality as a lens through which to examine our homes, churches, jobs, schools, health care, and politics, might we see them differently?"²⁴ In most cases, our worldview is challenged and transformed when we begin to look deeply into our surroundings through the lens of hospitality. In short, this practice slows us down so that we can see God at work in our lives and in the lives of others.

At each session, participants received a new handout with a new scripture and a brief devotional that guided them through the practice of reclaiming hospitality. As group facilitator, I provided a brief introduction to the practice and emphasized the call upon each of our lives to seek and create opportunities to welcome and accept one another with the love of God.

²² see Appendix: "A Practice of Reclaiming Hospitality."

²³ Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 80.

²⁴ Pohl, 150.

Participants were encouraged to write down their thoughts throughout the week as both a point of reference and source of reflection to share with the group at the following session.

In her book, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, Amy G. Oden affirms that the first step of living in hospitality is remembering who we are as Christians and the call that we each have on our lives to share the love of Christ with others; however, the second step is recognizing who the “stranger” is standing before us.²⁵ It is easy to know and understand that we should share the love of Christ, but it is another thing to live into that calling when the opportunities avail themselves.

Throughout the course of the sessions, the group seemed to appreciate these exercises and began to engage the idea of hospitality on a deeper and more meaningful level. Each week, participants shared powerful stories and moments in which they experienced the presence of God in their interactions with others. However, the exercises also demonstrated that everyone has room to grow in their walk with Christ, especially as it relates to welcoming and caring for others.

It is in this openness to growth and transformation that we begin to let go of our selfishness, and become selfless in our relationships with one another. When we are vulnerable and honest about our shortcomings, we create space for God to use us in ways that we never could imagine, touching the lives of others, one person at a time. At the end of the day, we all have work to do in our lives and no one has fully arrived; therefore, one of the most powerful understandings of hospitality is that it is a continual process. Continual in the sense that, even in our failed attempts of welcoming others, we must always strive to do better. The first week of the focus group time helped participants to see that learning to live a life of hospitality takes time

²⁵ Amy G. Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 50.

and practice and we never reach maximum potential; therefore, the key is to remain open to new possibilities to engage those around us each day.

Week 2: Church and Community

In the second week of the focus group, participants explored and analyzed statistical data from New Beginnings Church and the surrounding North Birmingham community. The church data included the following: historical statements from all three previous congregations (Douglasville, Mt. Pleasant, and Wright's Chapel); statistical data from annual conference reports for New Beginnings Church; and demographics of the current church membership. The community data included *MissionInsite* reports with information on population, racial and ethnic diversity, household income, occupations, adult educational attainment, and religiosity.

Each participant also shared their own personal story about how they became a part of the New Beginnings Church. There was a balance between those who were a part of the previous three congregations and those who had only been a part of the New Beginnings Church. Even though these experiences were different, there were some common threads that helped us to understand the context of New Beginnings more fully. For example, most people mentioned the warmth and family-like environment, and how they looked forward to experiencing it each week.

As we continued our discussion, I challenged the group to not only think of New Beginnings Church, but to begin to think about the North Birmingham community. What are some of the similarities and differences? This comparison enabled the group to begin to analyze and assess the congregation's level of hospitality toward the immediate community. Three questions were posed to the focus group for continued discussion and analysis:

1. What groups/demographics are missing from our church? Why do you think these groups are missing? How can we be more hospitable?

2. Why do you think other people in the neighborhood, who don't go to any church, choose not to come to New Beginnings?
3. When new people in the neighborhood come, how have we or have we not made them feel welcome?

These questions not only gave a glimpse into the convictions of those in the focus group, but it enabled us to begin visioning and articulating where God might be leading us as a congregation.

An example of one of the most common convictions of the focus group was the congregation's lack of connection with young adults (ages 18-35), both within the congregation and the community. One participant affirmed that many of the existing groups at New Beginnings do not consider that younger people work and have families. In short, many of the leadership teams and groups in the church meet during the day while most young people are at work. This individual believed that until the congregation shows a vested interest in younger people, their families, and careers, New Beginnings would never be a place of hospitality for younger people. Other responses from the group that give a summation of our discussion are as follows:

- "Maybe they think we're 'stuck-up' and we don't really care about them."
- "We do a lot of mission in the community, but how often do we invite people to worship. Not many who attend our community meal attend our main worship service. Why?"
- "We look down on people who are dressed differently. Maybe we should change the way we dress."
- "Jesus said: 'Love.' We've got to love folks more and that means more than just on Sunday mornings."
- "Most people think the church is about money and they don't come."

- “Our ushers don’t really greet or seat people—they just hand people a bulletin.”
- “We need a team of people to greet those who visit, but the members of the congregation need to be more welcoming.”
- “We don’t have any programming for children. We have the choir, acolytes, and Sunday school class, but outside of that we don’t have anything else.”
- “We will never have young adults until we have something more engaging for their children.”
- “I’ve seen church members not speak to people when they walk into the church.”

Above all, the second session provided space for the group to gain a sense of the strengths and weaknesses within the congregation as it relates to hospitality. It is important to note that the second week was a turning point for the participants and for myself, because on numerous occasions, someone would mention “we,” both as a congregation and individually, must change before we can offer true and genuine hospitality. The group left with a determination to not only evaluate the church, but to evaluate their personal responsibility as it relates to hospitality. Our goal before the next session was to compile a preliminary list of things we could do both individually and as a congregation to connect with and welcome those who encounter our congregation.

Week 3: Developing Major Themes

The third week of the focus group involved the development of major themes and theological claims that the group felt were similar or unique to the Christian tradition as it relates to the Black Church. The following question was offered as a guide to the discussion: “When you think of hospitality in the Black Church, what should be most important to us? What is most important to you?”

The discussion was lively and the group decided on the following as major themes of Christian hospitality as it relates to New Beginnings Church and to the Black Church tradition: (1) love of God and neighbor; (2) family and relationships; and (3) creating a space that feels like home. These themes provided the focus group with a gateway to discuss their own experiences of hospitality, as well as, an opportunity to discuss hospitality from a theological and Biblical perspective.

Week 4: Where Do We Go from Here?

In the fourth week, the focus group discussed developing an action plan specifically for New Beginnings Church. This hospitality action plan would engage both current members as well as those who visit the congregation on a regular basis. Above all, the four weeks of conversation affirmed that hospitality cannot be condensed into a set of actions and programs before and after worship services, but it must become something we all strive toward in every aspect of our lives.

In response to this affirmation, the group decided to be intentional about offering opportunities to the congregation to engage and expand their understandings and practices of hospitality. The first thing we discussed was the possibility of expanding the work of the focus group beyond the four-week sessions. The focus group itself would develop into a team of people whose sole purpose is to study Christian hospitality, while also creating opportunities for others in the congregation to engage in this ongoing discussion. To organize, the group would meet monthly to develop a long-term plan of action that would possibly include small group discussions.

It was also suggested that the extended focus group would continue to examine the North Birmingham community in hope of moving beyond simply offering services and goods to those

who reside there, to finding avenues for connection and relationship. Our congregation currently has several service projects within our community, but not many of them are ongoing or provide a space to engage and build relationships with those who reside in the immediate community. This group would continue the practices of scripture reading and prayer, while looking to the world around them.

To engage the entire congregation, we made preliminary plans to implement a new sermon series entitled “Plenty Good Room,” based on the traditional Negro spiritual. The sermon series would focus on scriptures and themes that relate to hospitality in the New Testament, especially those that highlight the interactions with Jesus and those on the margins of life. It was suggested that we explore the table fellowship of Jesus in the gospel accounts for both a sermon series and a Bible study. The sermon series and Bible study would not only provide the congregation with an opportunity to hear scripture texts and themes that discuss the essence of Christian hospitality, but also allow space for reflection.

To make these themes more practical and relevant to the congregation, we discussed providing tools that persons could engage in their everyday lives outside of church. These tools would possibly include daily devotional books and teaching exercises like the “Practice of Reclaiming Hospitality” that the focus group utilized in their discussions.

Another major development that the focus group discussed was the formation of a hospitality team that would draft and implement a system to integrate new people into the life of the congregation. This system would begin with basic practices, such as how to greet guests in the vestibule on Sunday mornings to how to follow-up with guests after weekly worship experiences. This team would also develop a system on how guests navigate through the membership process and integrate into the life of the congregation.

Theological Dimensions of the Project

One of the most distinctive moments in our focus group was the discussion of the three major themes that the group felt were important to hospitality, especially in the Black Church tradition: (1) love of God and neighbor; (2) the importance of family and relationships; and (3) creating a place one could “call home.” One individual stated, “If we don’t have love, anything we place on the list will not and cannot be accomplished.” This statement gained the affirmation and support of the entire group.

I was reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthian church, “If I speak in tongues of human beings and of angels but I don’t have love, I’m a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal.”²⁶ It is easy for one to claim to be in ministry to welcome all persons, but it is much more difficult to truly fulfill this calling. The very fact that most congregations consist of people who all look the same is evidence that there are many opportunities for churches to engage in ministry beyond their current contexts.

Most would agree that the entire Christian faith and the Church is grounded in the notion and idea of love. In modeling their ministry after Jesus Christ, the apostles sought to breakdown socioeconomic barriers that prevented people from loving God and loving one another. The call rings true today—to invite all to live in community, where all are valued and loved, because God created us all, and God loves us all.

The ministry of Jesus in the gospels is the foundation of understanding love as the essence of hospitality. Most often, when one articulates our call to minister to all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or social status, one will begin with Jesus’ commands to love God and to love neighbor, in Matthew 22:37-38. However, followers of Christ must move

²⁶ I Cor. 13:1 (CEB).

beyond hearing these words, as simply commands to follow, toward the embodiment of a personal response to God's love and grace that is at work in all our lives.

To truly embrace a ministry of hospitality, we must certainly begin by affirming that these are the commands of Jesus Christ; however, the question must then become: "How does this relate to my life?" Only then, do I believe that we can move from obligatory and somewhat reluctant acceptance to truly loving others with our heart, mind, and soul. Sharing God's love and grace with others is grounded in our own realization that God has chosen to love us. Even with our faults and failures, God's mercy welcomes us, despite what we have done or left undone. Our posture towards the stranger must be rooted in that same love.

Another major theme of hospitality, one that is especially important within the life of the Black Church, is valuing all people as part of the family of God. On numerous occasions, I heard participants in the focus group mention feeling a part of a family. Of course, we can draw from the Biblical and theological tradition of belonging to the family of God; however, it also has cultural connections as it relates to the heritage of Black people. In her book, *African American Christian Worship*, Melva Wilson Costen affirms that one of the strongest forces in traditional African life that continues among Blacks is a deep sense of kinship or relatedness.²⁷

It is recorded in historical accounts that many families were torn apart because of the American slave trade, and it was typical that these enslaved Africans would create new families for identity and belonging. Costen writes, "In spite of separation and transition through slavery, this concept continued throughout Black culture, especially where two or three were gathered in worship or at work."²⁸ Interestingly, she highlights that often these systems of relatedness and

²⁷ Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1993), 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

interconnectedness come to fruition in situations where there is mutual interdependence, trust, and suffering within community.²⁹

The New Testament tradition and the early church give us a model of an inclusive ministry in which all are considered children of God and brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Henry G. Brinton writes: “A distinctive characteristic of worship and hospitality in early Christian households was the inclusion of believers from different political, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.”³⁰ These early Christian communities destroyed barriers by creating a welcoming space for all people, and forming a new community built on mutual care and acceptance.

In Galatians 3:28, Paul writes: “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”³¹ In a society that was divided and at odds with itself, the followers of Jesus Christ tried to create a community—a family of baptized believers—who embraced all people with God’s love and grace. It is important to recognize that this identity does not come into being through human standards or systems, but is only made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This new identity is given to every believer at their baptism. Baptism is an act of response to God’s invitation to repentance and reconciliation through Jesus Christ. It is through baptism that God makes covenant with us, and we are initiated into the Body of Christ.³² In this sacrament, we are given a new community as we are made brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Henry G. Brinton, *The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 10.

³¹ Gal. 3:28 (CEB).

³² *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 33.

Despite the strong theological underpinnings of the family of God and our relatedness, the local church is often one of the last places in society to truly celebrate and embrace diversity. However, we must be reminded that the local church is the one place in society that affirms that all people are loved and valued by God. In the words of Adam Hamilton, “The church belongs to Jesus Christ. He is its Lord. He is its owner. The church is Christ’s body, his representative to the world; a world for which he died.”³³ If we are God’s instrument in the world, the body of Christ, then we must follow the example of its head, Jesus Christ.

In his day, Jesus was always going out from the temple (and away from those who were the religious authorities) in order to make God’s love accessible to all. The miracles of Jesus demonstrate that in the Kingdom of God there are no distinctions or divisions. For example, Letty Russell writes, “people should not be separated into classes of the clean and unclean, the worthy and the unworthy the respectable and the unrespectable.”³⁴ Jesus was revolutionary in that he continually destroyed barriers that separated people from the love of God and others. Through his willingness to give his life for the sins of the world, he embodies the destruction of all barriers that keep us from loving God and others.

In his book, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality*, Arthur Sutherland affirms that in the end, hospitality is a practice—an action—and actions are dependent upon will.³⁵ In many ways, our contemporary world does not encourage extending hospitality and compassion to strangers, especially those who are different from us. However, the Bible teaches

³³ Adam Hamilton, *Leading Beyond the Walls: Developing Congregation with a Heart for the Unchurched* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 28.

³⁴ Russell, 19.

³⁵ Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 77.

us to overcome our natural instincts and to live to a higher standard, as we seek to deny ourselves and follow the will of God.

Sutherland highlights the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-36, suggesting, according to the parable, the basis of acceptance and rejection in the Kingdom of God is our ability to see or not see the face of Jesus in the strangers that we meet.³⁶ The basis of Christian hospitality is the willingness of the Christ follower to overcome their natural instincts of individualism and self-sufficiency, and see opportunities to be in service and relationship with others.

To highlight how important the spiritual discipline of “seeing” is to hospitality and life of a Christian, Sutherland emphasizes an important observation in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. In Romans 12:13, Paul writes, “contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home.” However, before Paul admonishes the church to live into this responsibility, he writes in Romans 12:2 that the church should not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of their minds to determine the will of God.³⁷ Before one can see opportunities to be in relationship with others by welcoming all people, one must be willing to be transformed by God.

As we acknowledge the need for personal transformation, we begin to seek fully modeling the life of Jesus Christ. This moment of revelation is probably similar to what led Paul, formally known as Saul, to change his life on the Damascus Road as recorded in Acts 9. It was Saul’s blinding-light experience that caused him to change from a life of persecuting the followers of Jesus to being known as one of the most powerful figures in the spread of the gospel. We may not all have blinding-light experiences, but I believe the prerequisite for

³⁶ Ibid., 78.

³⁷ Ibid.

transformation is an experience of God’s transforming power to overcome self, and embrace the love and care of others.

In essence, we are not being transformed simply for our own sakes, but we are being transformed to be instruments of God’s love. As we are being personally transformed, we are also called to live in community. As we allow ourselves to be transformed by God’s love, we become conduits of love to others.

Feeling at Home

Another theme that the group and I felt was important to hospitality, especially in the Black Church, is the idea of church as “home.” As the focus group ended, one of the participants, who had been a life-long member of one of the former congregations, stated: “The church is just like home to me. I feel like I’m at home here. There’s so much love here and I feel like this is exactly where I need to be.” Hospitality has everything to do with how people feel—do people feel comfortable and “at home” physically, psychologically, and spiritually? Creating a welcoming and hospitable home involves everything from the appearance of the space to the very heart of the people in the congregation.

John Flowers and Karen Vannony provide practical steps toward radical hospitality in their book, *10 Temptations of Church: Why Churches Decline and What to Do About It*. Flowers and Vannony feel that hospitality in the church is like welcoming people into your home. They write: “If someone is coming over to your house, there are certain things you do to make them feel welcome and comfortable.”³⁸ For Flowers and Vannony, it is critical that the local congregation be ready to receive guests long before they arrive, not simply to open a toolbox of

³⁸ John Flowers and Karen Vannony, *10 Temptations of Church: Why Churches Decline & What to Do About It* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 102.

welcoming gimmicks, but always with an eye to building deeper relationships with those whom we encounter.

For someone to feel at home, they must be engaged by the host, acknowledging their worth and meeting them at their point of need, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Lucien Richard further highlights the idea of “home” as being more than simply a place. He affirms that home is a state of being when he writes, “The term home refers to affective elements. Less simply a space than a place of intensity, of emotional energy, 'home is where the heart is.'”³⁹

The idea of creating a place that feels like home is extremely important to the Black Church tradition. Black preachers have long often extended an invitation at the end of their sermons to those who would like to join the church and make the congregation their “church home.” Even to this day, people often give public testimonies in which they acknowledge their “church home.” A sense of pride, fulfillment, and security comes with making church a “home.”

This idea of “church home” could point back to the enslaved Africans, who after having an experience of Jesus Christ, dreamed of a world outside of their current reality—a “home” in which they could experience freedom. The church has always provided sanctuary and solace from the struggles of life for Blacks. James Cone writes about this experiences of hope and liberation: “Black religion and its emphasis on hope came into being through black people’s encounter with the crucified and risen Lord in the context of American slavery. Their hope sprang from the actual presence of Jesus, breaking into their broken existence, and bestowing upon them a foretaste of God’s promised freedom.”⁴⁰ When we see the church as home, we begin to understand the theological ideals of God’s idea of community, where all are loved and valued by God and one another.

³⁹ Lucien Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 8.

⁴⁰ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 117.

Most often when you think of “feeling at home,” shared meals and times of fellowship come to mind. Most of the people in my focus group could recall church meals and fellowship times that characterized the nature of the church. Sunday dinner was an essential part of all three of the former congregation’s cultures. In fact, mealtimes have often been an important part of the Christian tradition, especially the Black Church. Around a dinner table, families and guests not only share food, but they share moments that build relationship and community.

Jualynne Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes affirm the importance of fellowship meals in the Black Church in an article entitled, “There’s Nothing Like Church Food.” Dodson and Gilkes write, “African American church members in the United States feed one another’s bodies as they feed their spirits or, more biblically, one another’s ‘temples of the Holy Spirit.’ In the process, an ethic of love and an emphasis on hospitality emerge, especially in the sharing of food.”⁴¹ These traditions of meals and Sunday dinner provide a powerful place for congregations to engage and fellowship with others on life’s journey.

One cannot help but to make the connection among shared meals, The Lord’s Supper, and the eschatological banquet, the “welcome table” for all of God’s children (Rev. 19:6-9 and Lk. 14:7-14). We are often reminded in the communion liturgy that Jesus Christ invites “all who love him” to the table where grace is extended to all.⁴² Regardless of who you are, or where you have come from, the invitation is extended to all of humanity to share in the meal as family of God.

Assessment and Project Outcomes

⁴¹ Jualynne Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “There’s Nothing Like Church Food,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63/3 (Fall 1995): 520-21.

⁴² *United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship*, 7.

Overall, I believe the project goals were accomplished through its implementation. The focus group participants seemed to not only engage the idea of hospitality from a Biblical and theological perspective, but they could relate the discussions to their own lives and the life of the church. The tool developed especially for the focus group, “A Practice for Reclaiming Hospitality,” enabled participants to study and reflect on the Biblical text, as well as consider, the roles everyone plays in welcoming others.

These weekly in-depth discussions allowed for honesty and vulnerability, as each participant had a chance to share their hopes and struggles in living into God’s call to love all people. A powerful moment for the focus group was the moment in which we all could understand and acknowledge that genuine hospitality is about building relationships and most relationships take time. Just like other elements of our Christian faith, there is always room to grow deeper in our devotion to Jesus Christ. It was in this revelation that we could take ownership of the call on each of our lives to welcome all people and never stop striving to do better.

The themes and principles essential to the Black Church, and especially to New Beginnings Church (love of God and neighbor, family and relationships, and creating a home-like atmosphere), are proof that participants could identify and recapture the spirit of Christian hospitality. Not only were they able to identify these themes and principles, but most of the participants immediately began thinking of ways to engage the congregation to enhance these within the life of the church. Because of this project, we now have individuals and teams of people who are working to demonstrate and model Christian hospitality while encouraging others to do the same.

Over the last 7-8 months, New Beginnings has welcomed sixteen new members. One of the comments I continue to hear as I teach classes for our newest members is that, after they had visited the church for the very first time, they wanted to come back because of the warmth and love of the congregation. My hope is that we continue this journey to enhance and leverage hospitality within New Beginnings Church.

There were also missed opportunities in the implementation of this project. In studying the statistical data and demographics of the church and community, it would have been powerful to engage more of the voices that are currently underrepresented or underrepresented in the life of the congregation. The two groups that our congregation struggles to welcome most are those who are under the age of 40, and those who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The scope of the project was limited because most of those who were engaged in discussions were older and considered to be working or retired middle-class professionals. To truly gain a fuller picture and understand the systems of hospitality at work at New Beginnings Church, continued research on younger generations and the poor and marginalized will be vital.

Another missed opportunity (and an area for continued research) involves the North Birmingham community itself. It would have been helpful to take a walking tour of the neighborhood or go to places in the neighborhood where people gather, such as local restaurants, schools, and stores, to have informal conversations outside of the church. This would have allowed focus group participants the opportunity to examine how the community understands hospitality and creating spaces for belonging. The North Birmingham community is a highly populated and busy area of the city and it would have been interesting to ask residents their thoughts and opinions on the New Beginnings congregation.

The scope of this project focused on New Beginnings Church, a healthy and thriving congregation, however, another area for continued research would be the comparison between a healthy congregation and one that is in decline. We tried to capture some of this compassion in our discussions of the three former congregations, but much of what was said was clouded by the new things happening at New Beginnings. The major focus for continued research would be if some of the same themes and principles would be identified as being important to every church's understanding of hospitality, especially in the Black Church tradition. If so, how does a congregation that is in decline interpret and understand these themes? Are there other themes that are more important in other contexts?

I believe hospitality is contextual and each context has its own unique identity and understanding of what it means to welcome people and create space to belong. This project offers some practical steps a congregation can use to continuously evaluate their own ministries for welcoming people: developing a focus group (or similar team that can engage Christian hospitality), understanding the context of the local church, and exploring the culture of community.

Conclusion

In his book, *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation*, Ralph E. Watkins poses the question: "How open are your church doors? Are we really interested in new people coming in and making us change even more than we want?"⁴³ In researching Christian hospitality, I have discovered that, now more than ever, hospitality is about change and transformation. It involves changing from our way of living in the world to a new way of living

⁴³ Ralph C. Watkins, Jason A. Barr Jr., Jamal-Harrison Bryant, William H. Curtis, and Otis Moss III. *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007), 55.

that creates space for more people and deeper relationships. Many people would agree that change is not easy to accomplish; however, change invites new people into our churches and our communities, and makes for a fuller picture of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

This project was not only helpful to the New Beginnings Church, but to my own ministry as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As a pastor, it is important to not only minister to those who are present within the life of the congregation, but also to the community and those who are not there yet. It begins with seeing who is missing, and then asking ourselves critical questions as to why these persons are missing from the fellowship of believers that Christ has opened to all persons. It is in that critical reflection that we begin to challenge ourselves to go beyond our shallow interactions with people, meeting them where they are in the hope of building an authentic relationship of mutual care and love.

Most importantly, hospitality cannot be disconnected from the nature of the church itself. One of the key themes of Jesus' ministry is his ability to serve the needs of others, which is the embodiment of hospitality. In Mark's gospel, Jesus proclaims, "Even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom of many."⁴⁴ Jesus demonstrates that to be one of his followers, one must seek to serve the needs of others. Not simply for the sake of serving the world, but for the sake of serving God.

Avery Cardinal Dulles highlights the Servant Church in his book, *Models of the Church*, when he writes, "Neither Christ nor the Christian is supposed to be the world's servant. Jesus is obedient, not to the world but to the Father. He is the servant of God, not of men, and we too are called to be servants of God."⁴⁵ The importance of serving others by meeting them at their point of need, especially in acts of grace and reconciliation is not only a mark of being a follower of

⁴⁴ Mk. 10:45 (CEB).

⁴⁵ Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York, NY: Image Books, 2014), 90.

Jesus Christ, but also a mark of his Church. One could argue that there is no Church without hospitality embodied through the act of service.

As Jesus gave his disciples final instructions before his death, he further affirmed our call to serve one another. After washing the feet of his disciples in John's gospel, Jesus says, "If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do."⁴⁶ In his book, *The Servant Church: Pastoral Letter*, Richard Cardinal Cushing, states that "The Lord was the 'man for others,' so must the Church be 'the community of others.'"⁴⁷ Simply put, when we serve the needs of others and create space for all people, we are doing the work and will of God. When one takes the time to reflect on the life of Jesus and our call to be servants in the world, it is indeed hard to do. It is exactly the opposite from the prevailing wisdom of the world, which focuses on personal success, achievement, and advancement. However, Jesus always calls us to do more for our community, to do more for the world.

In his book, *Walking with Nehemiah: Your Community is Your Congregation*, Joseph W. Daniels Jr. affirms a concept that I believe keeps the church's eye to those who are not there yet. He writes: "We must behave as if the community is our congregation. The streets are our sanctuary. The back alleys are our altars of blessing. Farmlands are our fields of opportunity. New housing developments become our narthex through which new life is ushered. And strip malls of suburbia become creative places for leading people to salvation."⁴⁸ These words have continued to challenge and broaden my view of ministry and hospitality as I seek to serve as a

⁴⁶ Jn. 13:14 (CEB).

⁴⁷ Richard Cardinal Cushing, *The Servant Church: Pastoral Letter* (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1966), 6.

⁴⁸ Joseph W. Daniels, Jr., *Walking with Nehemiah: Your Community Is Your Congregation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), 51.

pastor. These opportunities for hospitality and welcome are around us each day, but we must “have eyes to see and ears to hear.”

I firmly believe that I have a calling from God on my life to remind the church of this reality and to dedicate my life in helping reclaim the ministry of hospitality within the Black Church context. This project has provided an avenue for continued research and study, but most of all, a platform to fully participate in the ministry of welcoming all people on a larger scale. The church has a phenomenal opportunity to minister to the hearts and lives of people who are in desperate need of God’s love and grace, and my prayer is to be an instrument in service to God.

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APPENDIX: The Practice of Reclaiming Hospitality

The Practice of Reclaiming Hospitality

GUIDE FOR WEEK 1

Focus Scripture: Luke 14:7-24 (Common English Bible)

Welcome Table

Before You Get Started...

Hospitality is like a shared meal in which there is someone who plays the role of *host* and another who plays the role of *guest*. We see this *host-guest* analogy throughout the Biblical narrative, especially in the ministry of Jesus who instructs us to not only invite our family and friends to the feast, but “invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14:14b). As you reflect throughout the week, think of those you encounter from day-to-day and how you experience these encounters through the lens of our focus scripture.

1. Read *Luke 14:7-21* throughout the day

- ▶ Find quiet times to read the text, asking God to reveal not only its meaning, but allow the text to speak directly to you.
- ▶ Try reading the text both out loud and silently.
- ▶ Imagine yourself in the role of each person in the text.

2. Finish each day by reflecting on each person you encountered

- ▶ Review the day with gratitude.
- ▶ Were there moments that made you keenly aware of God’s presence?
- ▶ Were there moments you found yourself to be in the role of “host” or the role of “guest”? How did it make you feel?
- ▶ Ask God to reveal new meanings and insights in regards to making a place for hospitality in your life.

3. Choose an encounter/moment to share with our group that illuminated *Luke 14:7-21*.

- ▶ Were there encounters this week that modeled the essence of hospitality
- ▶ Were there encounters this week that distorted hospitality or shut out guests?
- ▶ Using the lens of the *Luke 14:7-21* what is God revealing to you?

4. Pray and look toward next week.

- ▶ Thank God for God’s grace and love in your life.
- ▶ Ask God to continue to reveal opportunities to exemplify God’s love and grace to those you encounter in the week to come.