Learning Module:

Welcoming the Stranger:
Cultivating the Spiritual Practice of Hospitality

Beta Vitality Process
for Congregations and Leaders
Hospitality is one of the most basic spiritual practices for many world religions, including Christianity. In the ancient rule of St. Benedict, the spiritual practice of hospitality is simply stated: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.” Even today, Benedictine monastic communities practice this rule and are renowned for their hospitality to guests and visitors. But the spiritual practice of hospitality is more than just a clean bed or warm handshake. It’s also an open heart and welcoming spirit that embraces the stranger as a gift from God.

Coaching Questions for conversation:
• What does hospitality mean to you?
• Describe a time when you were invited somewhere new and were shown gracious and deep hospitality by your host. What happened? How did you feel?
• Describe a time when you invited someone to join you somewhere, and you demonstrated hospitality. What did you do? How did they feel? How did you feel?
• How can a stranger be a gift, instead of an inconvenience?
• What does our culture tell about strangers?
• How is the spiritual practice of hospitality contrary to cultural values of suspicion?

The Household of God

Through our brother Jesus, Christians are adopted into the household of God. We have not earned our way into God’s family by our faithful and pious lives. Rather, we become family with God and one another because God loves and welcomes us. As part of the family, we are called to extend God’s love and welcome by loving and welcoming others. What we have received, we are to give.

Video 1: Why put others first in the church? – Rev. Gordy Hutchins
• What does it mean to be a child of God?
• How do you believe God wants us to treat strangers?
• Why should we put others first in the life of the church?

Coaching Questions for conversation:
• How did you first become part of a church? When, if ever, did you feel like you were a part of that church family?
• What do you think it means to put other people first in the life of the church?
• If we always put other people first, especially new people, how do we prioritize our long-time church members?
• How can we treat everyone, including strangers and new people, as sisters and brothers in God’s family? What if they are foreign, or smelly, or weird, or rude?
• How would our church be different if we practiced radical welcome and deep hospitality?
• How would our community be different if our church practiced radical welcome and deep hospitality?

The Spiritual Practice of Hospitality

Hospitality takes practice. The more we act on what we believe about welcoming strangers, the more developed our habits become and the more easily we display our hospitality. This is also a spiritual practice. When we offer hospitality to others, we take on the image of God and are drawn into a deeper experience of God’s own hospitality and grace to us.

Video 2: How do we practice hospitality? – Curtis Brown

- How is hospitality a spiritual practice?
- How do we practice hospitality by listening together?
- How do we practice hospitality by eating together?
- How do we practice hospitality by living together in Christian fellowship?

Listening Exercise:

A great way to experience hospitality is to practice listening. In pairs, spend 10 minutes listening to one another talk about a significant event from this past week. The listener should not speak or ask follow-up questions, but actively listen with good eye contact. After 5 minutes, switch roles. When both people have had a turn, discuss:

• How did it feel to be listened to?
• How did it feel to be the listener?
• How is listening like hospitality or like putting someone else first?

Coaching Questions for conversation:

- What are your individual spiritual practices?
- What are your communal or collective spiritual practices?
- What difference would it make for hospitality to be a more significant part of your individual and communal spiritual practices?
- What are two things that you could do to more deeply practice individual hospitality?
- What are three things that our church could do to more deeply practice communal hospitality?
- What are the obstacles to a deeper practice of hospitality in your individual life?
- What are the obstacles to a deeper practice of hospitality in our church?
- What resources do we have to overcome these obstacles?
- Who are the people we know who are skilled at the practice of hospitality? How could we ask them to help us grow in our practice of hospitality?
Strategies for change

Vision – How can our church better practice deep hospitality and welcome to all people?

Change – What difference would it make in our church if we more fully welcomed and included everyone?

Strategy – What is our plan for helping our church participants more fully practice deep hospitality?

Evaluation – How will we know if we are improving new people’s experience of hospitality in our church?

Resources for further study:

Books:
- Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love by Daniel Homan & Loni Pratt
- Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers by Elizabeth Newman
- The Welcoming Congregation: Roots & Fruits of Christian Hospitality by Henry G. Brinton
- Five Practices – Radical Hospitality by Robert Schnase
- Sticky Church by Larry Osborne
- Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church by Nelson Searcy

Websites:
- www.benedictfriend.org - articles and information on the Rule of St. Benedict and practice of hospitality
- www.umcom.org/welcoming - articles and resources on becoming a more welcoming church, including the annual Welcoming Certification process for United Methodists
- www.pnwumc.org/missioninsite - Pacific Northwest UMC’s access instruction to MissionInsite demographic group research, including invitation and welcoming preferences for various population segments

Video Presenters:

Rev. Gordy Hutchins is Senior Pastor at The Bridge UMC in Tacoma WA, where he ministers to a wide variety of people including many homeless and people in recovery.

Curtis Brown is a pastor currently serving as the Director of Faith Community Development for the Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Using this Learning Module:

This learning module is designed for use as part of larger Beta Vitality Process, focused on increasing the vitality of a local congregation. It is best used as part of a 2-hour session conducted on-site with a team of leaders from a local church facilitated by a coach.

Step 1: Coaching Check-In with group
Coach centers group, checks in on progress & established plans

Step 2: Learning Module
Using videos & written materials, church engages 45-60 minute training session on “quick-win” for vitality

Step 3: Identification of key change
Coach leads process where church identifies desired changes based on learning in Learning Module

Step 4: Planning strategy for change
Coach leads plan development to realize desired change

Step 5: Mobilizing implementation
Local church team commits resources for immediately implementing plans over next 4-6 weeks.

Who should be involved and invited to use this learning module?

Successful use of this learning module will result in immediate implementation of plans to engage the strategic changes envisioned by the participants. Therefore, you will want to invite all and any church leaders who will have insight, energy, responsibility, or interest in those strategic changes. For this learning module, you may want to specifically involve:

- The Beta Team
- The Church Council
- The Lay Leader
- The Pastor & Staff
- Evangelism & Welcome leaders
- Ushers & Greeters
- Small Group, Team and Committee Leaders
- Hospitality Volunteers