

HOSPITALITY AS A PARADIGM IN MISSION: AN ECUMENICAL AND INDIGENOUS EXPLORATION¹

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And if a stranger sojourns with you in your land you shall not mistreat him. But the stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself. Lev 19:33-34

Keep on loving each other as brothers (and sisters). Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them, and those who are mistreated, since you yourselves are in body also. Heb 13:1-3

ABSTRACT

Hospitality is missional in every aspect, as it invites others to experience the redemptive bliss and hospitality of God. As Christians we believe that we are created and called to live in community both with God and others. This means hospitality needs to become one of our priorities in reaching out to our neighborhoods. Hospitality to strangers gives us a chance to see our own lives afresh; through different eyes. One of the basic reasons for unfulfilled hospitality is difference. We feel more comfortable with those who share our likeness and interests, etc. Another factor is the individualism that has overshadowed communitarian living. This has promoted privatization, and satisfaction with the “I own, therefore I do not need my neighbor” attitude that gave birth to a selfish, competitive and unjust lifestyle.

This paper explores the ecumenical and indigenous aspects of hospitality with special reference to the Ao-Naga tradition in north east India, and further proposes hospitality as a paradigm integral to mission. Initially outline the biblical foundations of hospitality and then move on to speculate about hospitality through an ecumenical exploration that pinpoints the missional dimension of, and call to hospitality. Four aspects of the indigenous people’s understanding of hospitality will be highlighted: the blessing of hosting, sharing as an aspect of hospitality, reciprocity as an act of hospitality, and hospitality in the midst of brokenness. Later I attempt to infuse this with a Christian understanding of hospitality, showing how it can be established as a paradigm for Christian mission.

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Introduction

Hospitality is missional in every aspect, as it invites others to experience the redemptive experience and hospitality of God. As Christians we believe that we are created and called to live in community, both with God and others. This calls for hospitality to become one of our priorities when reaching out to our neighborhoods. Hospitality to strangers gives us the chance to see our own lives afresh, through different eyes (Koenig 2001, 5). The online *Oxford Dictionaries* (2018) defines hospitality as “the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors or strangers.” This definition is comprehensive in the sense that it already implies friendship, generosity and attentiveness to the other—whether friend or stranger/guest. Parker Palmer reminds us that we need to see strangers, not simply as the ones who need us, but as people we also need, in order that we may know Christ and serve God in “truth and love.” In his words, hospitality is the act of

...inviting the stranger into our private space, whether that be the space of our home or the space of our personal awareness and concern. And when we do, some important transformations occur. Our private space is suddenly enlarged, no longer tight, cramped, restricted but open and expansive and free. And our space may also be illuminated. . . . Hospitality to the stranger gives us a chance to see our own lives afresh, through different eyes. (Palmer 1986, 132)

This paper attempts to explore the ecumenical and indigenous aspects of hospitality and further proposes to employ this as a paradigm for mission.

Challenges to Hospitality

One of the basic reasons for unfulfilled hospitality is difference.² We are attracted to, or more or less comfortable with those who look like us, have common interests, or even similar religious views and culture. We like things or people that are similar and familiar. Expectations and likenesses are established and we open up depending on whether or not they are similar to us. Strangers are different; they are not like us. We are not familiar with them and this unknown-ness gives rise to discomfort and even fear. On this basis, many views are formed and we find ourselves content with simply being judgmental, and keeping our distance from others instead of engaging in relationships with them. In response, Matthew Carroll suggests that the differences between us are to be celebrated, not feared. As Christians, we believe each human being is created in the image of God, and as such, we should embrace the uniqueness of every individual (Carroll 2011, 521). While preserving our own uniqueness, difference must not become a barrier, but should be considered a blessing for unity.

Individualism has overshadowed communitarian living and this hinders our welcoming of the stranger. Individualism fosters a mentality in which everything becomes about us, and if others are weak or poor, let them also work hard to come up to our level. Moreover we are taught to be self reliant and take pride in what we can do and earn. This thinking is lubricated by the competitive world created by globalization under the umbrella of modernity. There is nothing wrong with having confidence in ourselves, but there is a danger when our understanding of independence is equated with the perception that receiving assistance from others is weakness.

² Difference is seen as a gift of God (cf., Tower of Babel and Pentecost Gen 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-11). The gift of difference is to be celebrated and remembered as God disciplining those who seek power over people. During Pentecost, people were filled with the Holy Spirit, and confused by the phenomenon. However each of them could understand their own language. Pentecost is not just a call to unity under Christ, but is also a call to understand everyone's difference (Russel 2009, 54).

Individualism has also promoted privatization. There is a widespread understanding that a family has their own car, tools, appliances, land or house, and does not need to rely on others nor share with others. The market-place and modes of payment have opened up opportunities where obtaining the necessities of life has been made easier for families. Such a philosophy of life hinders our spirit of hospitality and sharing. Hence, individualism has given birth to a lifestyle that is selfish, competitive and unjust. Technology connects us to people around the world with just a click of a button, but that is not like face-to-face relations. It is hospitality that engages us with our neighbors,³ transforms relationships, and is the meaning of true discipleship. Hospitality can bridge the divisions that exist in our society. Despite the risks that are involved in hospitality to strangers, when hospitality happens, God is encountered in a new way:

Hospitality questions one's way of thinking about oneself and the other as belonging to different spheres; it breaks down categories that isolate. Hospitality involves a way of thinking without the presumption of knowing beforehand what is in the mind of the other, dialogue with the other is essential. . . . To welcome the other means the willingness to enter the world of the other. (Richard 2000, 12)

Hospitality is therefore transformational and it can also occur in deeply counter-cultural contexts. John Taylor's reminder is still fitting in today's context—if one is closed up against being hurt or blind towards one's fellow-humans, one is inevitably shut off from God also. One cannot choose to be open in one direction and closed in another (Taylor 1972, 19).

It is becoming clear that, as Christians, there is a requirement to welcome strangers and care for them, which is a reminder of God's hospitality toward us. The early church also considered hospitality an important discipline. To offer care to strangers was one of the distinctive features of being a Christian. Hospitality therefore becomes an opportunity for us to serve God through wider avenues by enlarging our space of togetherness. What Christine Pohl said in this regard is significant: "Hospitality resists boundaries that endanger persons by denying their humanness. It saves others from the invisibility that comes from social abandonment. Sometimes, by the very act of welcome, a vision for a whole society is offered, a small evidence that transformed relations are possible" (Pohl 1999, 64).

Biblical Foundations of Hospitality

Biblical narratives depict the traits of hospitality in the form of hosting and visiting. Abraham left his home and kinsmen to become a vulnerable stranger, dependent on the hospitable reception of the residents of an alien land. There is an awareness of a deeper dimension to hospitality in the story of Israel, as they were on many occasions at the mercy of strangers. Another interesting insight we find in the matter of hosting and visiting is reflected in Hebrews 13:2: i.e., when Abraham encountered God's angels in three visitors (Gen 18); when Lot hosted strangers he did not know (Gen 19); and when a poor widow encountered a messenger of God by receiving Elijah into her lowly house (1Kings 17). To all of these individuals were added blessings beyond their comprehension. The book of Leviticus illustrates a latent conflict between an outgoing concern for all humans, and a fear of legal impurities that might be contracted from others. Nevertheless, even there, the hospitality that is enjoined on the people extends beyond ethnicity. The alien (*advena*) who dwells in the land should be treated like a native (*indigena*), and loved (*quasi vosmetipsos*), "as though he (she) were yourselves" (Lev 19:33-34) (Tavard 2007, 246). This reception-hospitality

³ Luke 10:29-37 narrates an incident following the question about the identity of one's neighbor. Jesus' idea of neighbor is not only the Samaritan who showed mercy to the victim, but he also insists that we are to be neighbors even to the ones who are despised. Jesus does not define who is a neighbor. We must simply be neighbor to everyone, since the definition of neighbor is not linked to our religious or cultural understanding.

is seen as a welcoming of all by each. Boaz, allowing Ruth, the foreigner, to “pick glean, drink, and eat, and instructing his workers to leave some stalks for her to pick” demonstrates his welcoming heart. Not only that, his declaration to marry Ruth again demonstrates hospitality, regardless of the boundaries set by tradition and community. He did not just welcome a Moabite woman who was a stranger and outsider; his acts of hospitality enabled a stranger to be part of the community. His hospitality is seen as the “outworking of God’s plan of salvation in the world” (Chan 2014, 674-5; Payne 2012, 73).

This pattern continues in the New Testament, as the disciples encounter the resurrected Christ in a stranger they meet on their way to Emmaus, and who they then host when night falls (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus became flesh to live as a guest among us (John 1:14). He taught in ways that send an invitation to his festive banquet, which is, in fact, a powerful metaphor for the Kingdom of God, in which all are equally welcomed. The concept of Christian hospitality is made clear in the parable narrated in Matthew 25, when the righteous say to Jesus, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go visit you?” (Matt 25: 37-39). In doing what Jesus commanded here—visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger—we are living out a very different set of values in relationship. We are according dignity to others; we are breaking social boundaries; we are including those who are so often excluded; we are engaging in transformation (Ross 2014, 5). Jesus holds the entire world accountable to the criteria of love and care for the “least”.⁴ Gustav Stählin underscores the linkage between the love of Christians for one another (*philadelphia*) and hospitality (*philoxenia*) (Stählin 1967, 20-21). Furthermore, John Koenig notes that Pauline expressions of this kind of caring are found in expressions such as “extend hospitality to strangers” (Rom 12:10) and “welcome one another . . . as Christ has welcomed you (Rom 15:7) (Koenig 2001, 26-29).

Hospitality in Ecumenical Explorations

The ecumenical dimension of hospitality was first noted in the Anglican context when Christian mission was seen as turning around the two poles of “embassy” (announcing the gospel to others) and hospitality (receiving the other so as to better live the gospel).⁵ The first case of ecumenical hospitality between the Catholic Church and the WCC seems to have been the presence of five official Catholic observers at the third Assembly of the WCC in New Delhi in the year 1961. The following year, an example of hospitality was given when Pope John XXIII invited Orthodox and Protestant churches to send observers to the Second Vatican Council of 1962 (Tavard 2007, 245). Further, our contemporary situation of multi-religious and multi-cultural societies provides a new context for questioning the traditional closed-shop nature of Christian theology and its attitude of a closed particularity. There is, therefore, a growing recognition that Christian theology must justify being “Christian” by articulating a theology of religion at large and incorporating this into its traditional responsibility for its own distinctiveness. Such a theology of religion can only emerge through a process of dialogical encounter with people of other living faiths and not through an *a priori* Christian logic.⁶ Similarly, while affirming the division based on economics, class, race,

⁴For details see Gray (1989, 255-72).

⁵ Refer Cragg (1992). His insight was echoed at the Lambeth Conference of 1998, which recognized hospitality as a dimension of its missionary perspective.

⁶ The challenge before us is not that of producing a proper hypothesis to account for the presence of religious diversity in our midst, but rather to let that diversity, with all its specific claims of religious truth and experience, question our Christian convictions and theological presuppositions. It is in this process of mutual encounter that the concerns of a Christian theology of religion become very much intertwined with the general theological task of defining Christian self-identity amid others (Rajashekar 1987, 458-9).

colour etc., the tenth WCC General Assembly statement on the “Way of Just Peace” affirmed that churches can be advocates for peace by building cultures of peace and transforming conflicts. In this way they may empower people on the margins of society, thereby enabling both men and women to be peacemakers (WCC 2013). In this new approach, and in dialogue with other faith traditions, certain dimensions need to be taken into consideration.

The Missiological Dimension

The witnessing paradigm of Jesus Christ is grounded in the Bible,⁷ and is reflected in the activity of the early church.⁸ In the modern period there are various ways of conceptualizing the call for witness, of which one is mission. From an ecumenical perspective, the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, which was a conference of western denominational mission agencies, met with under the theme “The evangelization of the world in this generation.” However, in 2010 it was affirmed that there is no centre for mission: mission happens “everywhere to everywhere,” a view that recognizes the irrelevancy of the binary structure of home base and “mission field.” Thus the concept of giver and receiver within mission enterprises has been challenged, highlighting the need for growing together in Christ, relying upon the power of the spirit of God (Balia and Kim 2010). Thus, today the church is called to witness to Christ by sharing in God’s mission of love through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

An important ecumenical leader once stated that “we cannot compromise mission because it is not ours; it is God’s. But in the midst of pluralistic societies, we are bound to review and re-evaluate our prevailing missiological perceptions, strategies and methodologies. A new missionary self-understanding will help us to resolve the continuing dichotomy between dialogue and mission. In fact dialogue is neither the end of mission nor a new instrument for mission. It is, in a sense, an outreach aimed not at converting the other, but witnessing our faith in interaction with the other” (Aram I 2003). Since Christian mission is embedded in the salvific act of God, and, fully aware that God’s saving work transcends church boundaries, reveals itself in history in manifold ways: “An inclusive understanding of God’s salvific act will lead the church to consider other religions as part of God’s plan of salvation and not as mere ‘mission fields’” (Aram I 2003). Hence, in a pluralistic environment our mission strategy is not to seek to add new members to our fold; rather we should seek to identify “Christic values in other religions and awaken the Christ who sleeps in the night of the religions” (Khodr 1971, 141-2). The Moderator of the conference therefore asserted that it was his conviction “that this missiological self-perception and self-articulation of the church will not jeopardise *mission dei*; rather it should open to new horizons” (Aram I 2003).

Call to Hospitality

Given the historical tension between mission and dialogue, it is no accident that the WCC (2006) document “Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding”⁹ defers to what is essentially an ethical category in the arbitration between the two. Its applicability to both international relations and internal Christian division is telling. Yet “hospitality” remains an ethical category and functions essentially to encourage relationships between people of different faith communities. In other words, it belongs most fittingly at the dialogue end of the tension between

⁷ In the great commission Jesus charges, “Go unto all the world and make disciples . . . teaching them to observe all that I have taught” (Matt 28:19-20).

⁸ The spread and growth of the early church point to an emphasis on evangelism, which was made possible because of a commitment to this task. It is also to be noted that the early church did not set out to change the world; that was not their goal either. They were well aware that Christ’s kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). Rather, they set out as Christian disciples to witness to the world (Acts 1:8) and extend God’s kingdom. For details see Schmidt (2001, 39), Allbee (2005).

⁹ This document is the result of a two-year process in response to suggestions made in 2002 at the WCC Central Committee between staff and networks in the conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), Faith and Order and the Office on Interreligious Relations and Dialogue (IRRD).

mission and dialogue (Race 2005). In similar way, the Scriptures witness to the unknown blessings one might experience by showing hospitality to others (see Heb 13:2), for in being open to others in their otherness we encounter God in new ways. Moreover our willingness to be open to others and to accept them is the hallmark of true hospitality. Thus hospitality is both the fulfilment of the commandment to “love our neighbours as ourselves” and the means of discovering God in new and wider avenues (Matt 19: 19; 22: 39; Mark 12: 39; cf. Lev 19: 18). This is also a way of giving indigenous people the right to life, liberty and security in every context.

Postmodernity may have contributed to the contemporary awareness of otherness, because hospitality can be both opportunity and risk. The danger in our encounter with the other is that it might increase fear of otherness, rather than lead to enhanced understanding. Indeed, otherness can be experienced even in relation to ourselves. When relations with others fail, the question remains of how we should respond to, and overcome the fear of the other. Henceforth, in situations of political or religious tension, acts of hospitality may require great courage, especially when there are people who disagree with us, and even consider us as their enemies. Furthermore, the presence of inequality between two parties, distorted power relations, and hidden agendas, can spark a fire between the parties that hampers a progressive dialogue.

The plurality of religions has now been accepted as a fact of life. Christians have not only learned to co-exist with the adherents of other faiths, but have also been transformed by such encounters. Hence the statement that “we have discovered unknown aspects of God’s presence in the world, and uncovered a neglected elements of our own Christian traditions. We have also become more conscious of the many passages in the Bible that call us to be more responsive to others” (WCC 2006, para. 39).¹⁰ Practical hospitality and a welcoming attitude towards strangers eventually leads to the creation of a space for mutual transformation and may even result in reconciliation (Gen 14; Acts 10: 34-35). Drawing upon the consequences of such biblical experiences can widen our understanding of mutual hospitality among peoples of different religious traditions. From the Christian perspective, the statement affirms that, “this has much to do with our ministry of reconciliation. It presupposes both our witness to the ‘other’ about God in Christ and our openness to allow God to speak to us through the ‘other’” (WCC 2006, para. 42). By contrast, a triumphalist attitude can lead to religious animosity and violence. Hence the statement above recognizes that it is hospitality that allows us to accept others as created in the image of God, and that enables us to know that God talks to us through others, in order to teach and transform us and vice versa. Enriching effects such as these are the result of authentic witness.

Hospitality among Indigenous People

For indigenous people, being hospitable is considered a fundamental virtue and practice, and is followed in many cultures around the world. People’s homes are always open to welcome visitors and entertain them with food and drink, and to listen to their stories through the offering of time and attention, thereby respecting the situation of the guest and so forth. Hospitality is one of the hallmarks of indigenous people. For the Ao Naga it is called *sobaliba*, a word that embraces the etiquette, and the ethical principles that abide in and guide a person individually, and in the community collectively. A person who lives a life fulfilling this principle is honored and respected in the community. Coupled with biblical teachings, *sobaliba* teaches people to be hospitable to others. People’s obligation to care for the stranger (*ainer/tangar*) maybe because of their experiences as sojourners coming in contact with people of different orientations, languages, ethnicities etc. This corresponds with the Israelites’ experience as strangers in the land of Egypt,

¹⁰“Religious Plurality and Christian Self-understanding” is a document in response to suggestions made in 2002 at the WCC Central Committee and was aimed at three staff teams: Faith and Order, Interreligious Relations, and Mission and Evangelism. It must also be noted that this document does not represent the view of the WCC. The discussions show how important and controversial the matter is, and this document was thus shared as background for discussion and debate.

and in the wilderness, through which they learned to be hospitable, and which serves as a reminder of and witness to God's hospitality. There are stories and traditions among indigenous people also that guests and strangers might be angels bringing promises and blessings. Hence offering care to strangers is one of the distinctive features of indigenous people. One Ao-Naga folktale goes like this:

Lijaba [a deity]¹¹ came disguised in the form of an old man, almost naked, having sores all over his body. He sought for shelter but everyone made excuses saying "Behold, we wait for the coming of Lijaba." Some would say, "we are observing *anempong* (*genna*) because a child is born to us today." Others said "we have *genna* because a calf is delivered by our cow today and so we cannot entertain you today." No one in the village welcomed him in. Finally on the outskirts of the village there were two orphans, namely Yarla and Asatula, who welcomed him in. At first they were reluctant because of their poverty and also they could see that the old man was not carrying anything to offer them, so they said, you know we do not have enough food to entertain you. But the old man replied, I have enough for the three of us. In the evening the old man asked them to keep the pot on the fireplace, and took a grain of rice from his head and put it into the pot. To their great amazement the pot was filled with rice. In the same way, he peeled a small piece of skin from his knee and cooked it in another pot. Lo and behold! It turned into a pot full of meat. The three of them had a delicious meal that night.

The next day when they were sitting at the *salang* (a verandah-like platform attached to the house which is made of bamboo) the old man overlooking the fields of the villagers asked the two sisters to identify the owners of the fields. They named them one by one but they did not mention the owner of the field that belonged to them because it was so small and they were ashamed to disclose it. The younger sister, who could not hold it in, intentionally dropped her comb and when her sister went to collect it, she told the old man that the smallest field actually belonged to them. This indeed turned out to be a blessing for the two sisters! The old man blessed their field and cursed all the fields that belonged to the villagers. After blessing them the old man left and disappeared out of sight. They had a plentiful harvest.¹²

A concept of hospitality that suits indigenous people and their context can, I believe, be helpful as a resource that strengthens Christian hospitality. The above folktale represents an act of hospitality at the individual/family level with implications for the practice/understanding of hospitality. Similarly, at the collective level there is also a practice of hospitality manifest through the concern of the community. The people are agrarian by nature and their livelihood/economy, especially in the village context, depends on the produce from their fields. When there is sickness or difficulty in any family, the neighbors or community come forward to extend their help to complete the work in their field. For instance, during sowing time, if the owner of any field falls sick, neighbors voluntarily come together and complete the work in one day. It is understood that everyone will bring along their own food, and tools appropriate for the work. There is also a practice of fetching firewood for helpless families, voluntarily helping with building a house, etc.

Indigenous people are in fact known for their knowledge embedded in and associated with their land, culture and the practice of hospitality. It is difficult to find a single word to describe hospitality in an indigenous language, as it is often described or referenced through terms according to the situation. This understanding among the indigenous community, especially the Ao-Nagas and Mizos, is represented through the concept of *sobaliba* or *tlawmngaihna*. Such concepts and practices instill the *awashi* (mannerisms/etiquettes) toward others and that is how it becomes

¹¹ The word *Lijaba* means the one who enters the earth. *Li* means earth, *zaba/jaba* means enter. Hence, the meaning is the one who enters or indwells the earth.

¹² This folktale has been known to the writer since childhood. Such stories with lessons are narrated by grandparents and parents to their grandchildren and children.

understood that sharing and showing hospitality is one's responsibility or duty. Showing hospitality to others is like a sacrament, a pledge toward co-brothers and sisters. Words like *sasukini* (hospitality in the Sumi dialect), and *tejungnu* (hospitality in the Ao dialect) are used, but they do not encompass the whole meaning or understanding. *Ainer* (visitor/stranger in Ao language), *inami sasu keu* (hosting visitors in the Sumi language), and *sasuvi* (welcome in the Sumi language), are other words that instill an understanding of hospitality in the indigenous people.

The Blessing of Hosting

Just as the story of Abraham's hospitality to strangers reveals that the stranger is God, who then blesses his host, so here the story emphasizes that the stranger is *Lijaba*, the Supreme Being. The two orphans' hospitality turns into a blessing for them. There is a strong belief among the people that the Supreme Being is merciful to those who allow him to enter their homes and invite him to stay with them. However, if he is turned away, he brings wrath upon their fields and lives. There is a belief that *Lijaba's* visit is accompanied with unusual blessings as well as curses; he pours abundant blessings on the land, even multiplying the little that people have. A useless thing is transformed into enormous blessings. Hence, people are careful not to displease any stranger, lest by mistake they turn away *Lijaba* and invite calamity. This notion corresponds with the biblical injunction to be kind and generous to others, especially the destitute. In this act, the angel of the Lord may be entertained. In such situations, food is an important component of the sharing between host and guest.

Sharing as an Aspect of Hospitality

The two sisters willingly accepted the old man into their house despite their poverty. Even though they did not have much they offered space in their home. Thus people make sure to share what and in whichever way they can with their guests. A rich person's richness can be considered worthwhile only if he or she shares with the community or the needy. That is why the Ao-Nagas have a practice of hosting a feast of merit.¹³ Excessive accumulation of wealth is not approved by *Lijaba*, because wealth can make a person proud and also insensitive to the needs of others. Moreover it is a violation of *sobaliba*, which is the core sustaining principle of the Ao community (Longchar 2000, 18). This is paralleled in the biblical account, where God commands the people of Israel to gather manna according to each family's need: not more, not less. Some disobeyed and gathered more than was sufficient and this angered Moses their leader, and God as well (Ex. 16). Greed has no place in the responsible actions of a person, because people are to share if they feel that they have been blessed more than the rest.

Reciprocation as an Act of Hospitality

Reciprocation is a mutual exchange between individuals. There are many examples of exchange, and some have been practiced through the ages. Such reciprocity is seen in the way *Lijaba* provided. He saw that the two sisters had nothing to offer except space for a night's rest. So *Lijaba* asked them to keep the cooking pot on the fireplace and upon scratching his head he took a grain of rice and it multiplied, filling the pot. Again he peeled a skin from his knee and the pot the tiny piece was transformed into curried meat sufficient for them all. The implicit logic here is that it is not always on the part of the host to give, but the reciprocity of the guests makes hospitality complete. Both host and guest are expected to see each other's vulnerability and respond appropriately. The ability to identify and acknowledge one's vulnerability is an aspect of fulfilling hospitality. Accordingly, when a visitor is invited into a home, he or she will be given a space in the house and will eat the same meal.

¹³ The feast of merit is a given by a rich man for the whole village as acknowledgment of God's blessing upon their harvest.

Hospitality amid Brokenness

The fact that the two sisters were living in the outskirts of the village reflects their status. As orphans, they are not well regarded in the society. Desertion, isolation, stigmatization or ostracization are some of the identical situations or experiences that many people face today. The reason they were reluctant to invite their guest indicates they did not have enough space to host guests in their home. Lack of food is also suggested in the story, limiting their ability to share with others. The following day when Lijaba and the two sisters were overlooking the fields, they were ashamed to identify their field to Lijaba because it was so tiny. This also speaks of the woes and pains of landless farmers, compelled to depend on rich and merciless landlords, whose dominating and harsh dealings add to their suffering. Despite their poverty and limited resources, the story highlights the sisters' humble hospitality in welcoming Lijaba into their home. They demonstrate the act of hospitality to the stranger even in the midst of their brokenness. This indeed answers the question of how to accommodate our Christian mission and ministry toward our co-creatures.

Christian Hospitality

By way of conclusion, let me note how hospitality should be part and parcel of our Christian life. The example of our Lord Jesus Christ, especially when it comes to hospitality, reveals the essence of Christianity. Jesus is the one who honors persons of different cultures, nationalities and religions. Along with his fellow disciples, he honored and respected "others in their otherness," such as the Samaritan woman, the Roman Centurion, Simon the Cyrenian, the outcasts, sinners and so forth. Jesus treated righteous and sinners equally, seeing in each a child of God blessed with "the image and likeness of God." The incarnation itself is God expressing hospitality, so that we too can become divine (Phil 2:7). This initiative from God, which is inexpressibly unique and astounding, restores our broken relationship with God and with all creation. This leads Christians to confess Jesus Christ as the one in whom all of humanity comes together and calls for an attitude of hospitality in our relationships with others.

With this in mind, and not because of religious or ethical obligations, our Lord offers his greatest commandment (Mark 12: 30-31): the reason for giving this mandate is in order for us as individuals and as members of the church to take up our abode in eternal communion with Jesus by imitating him. There is reciprocity in hospitality, which is what is intended when Jesus says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). This idea is further elaborated in Jesus's prayer in John 17:21, "As you, Father are in me and I in you may they also be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." While reflecting on the Lord's Prayer, during the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, Sang Chang asserted that injustice in this world is evident in disparity of wealth. Hence, the challenge that, as equipped disciples, we must stand on the side of God and resist and transform all life, destroying the forces of injustice in social systems and structures. Justice will be realized only when there is bread for everybody and not only for some rich and affluent individuals (Chang 2018). True Christian relationships are expressed in receiving, welcoming and offering hospitality to and from others, including those who belong to other communities or religions. This mutual hospitality mirrors the indwelling of the creator in us and in the midst of our human relations, and may represent hospitality in its truest sense. Ironically many Christians proclaim their love for God but fail to show hospitality to others. The hospitality of God, who receives sinners as just without any merit of their own, should be the model of our behavior, as we personally respond to God in faith, and collectively, as we gather in communities for the praise and glory of God (Tavard 2007, 253).

As Christians, it is therefore our responsibility to be open to others in the kenotic love that comes out of identifying with Jesus Christ (Matt 15:21-28; 8: 5-11). Furthermore our Christian mission should focus on doing mission in Christ's way: through kenotic love, humility, identifying in openness with the victims of the society, hospitality to strangers, and respecting cultural, ethnic

and social diversity, especially the dignity of each human being. Mission according to Kosuke Koyama (1993, 285), is “extending hospitality to strangers”. In this we should be ready to accept others in communion with the risen Christ (Matt. 25: 31-46). Lesslie Newbigin, while underscoring the need for a hermeneutic of the gospel, in terms of which a congregation believe the gospel and live by it, asserts that “the community of faith must live out that faith as a community of truth” (Newbigin 1989, 227, 229). A community of believers cannot be conceived without the sharing of love, in Christ’s way and in specific ways, according to the needs of each cultural and social context (Balía and Kim 2010, 209). In exploring the theme of hospitality, the Christian is called to affirm the importance of hospitality as a significant mark of Christian communities. We need to take the biblical, indigenous and ecumenical call to practice hospitality seriously, as we seek to live our commitment in a context characterized by discrimination against, and marginalization and exclusion of, various sections of people.

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