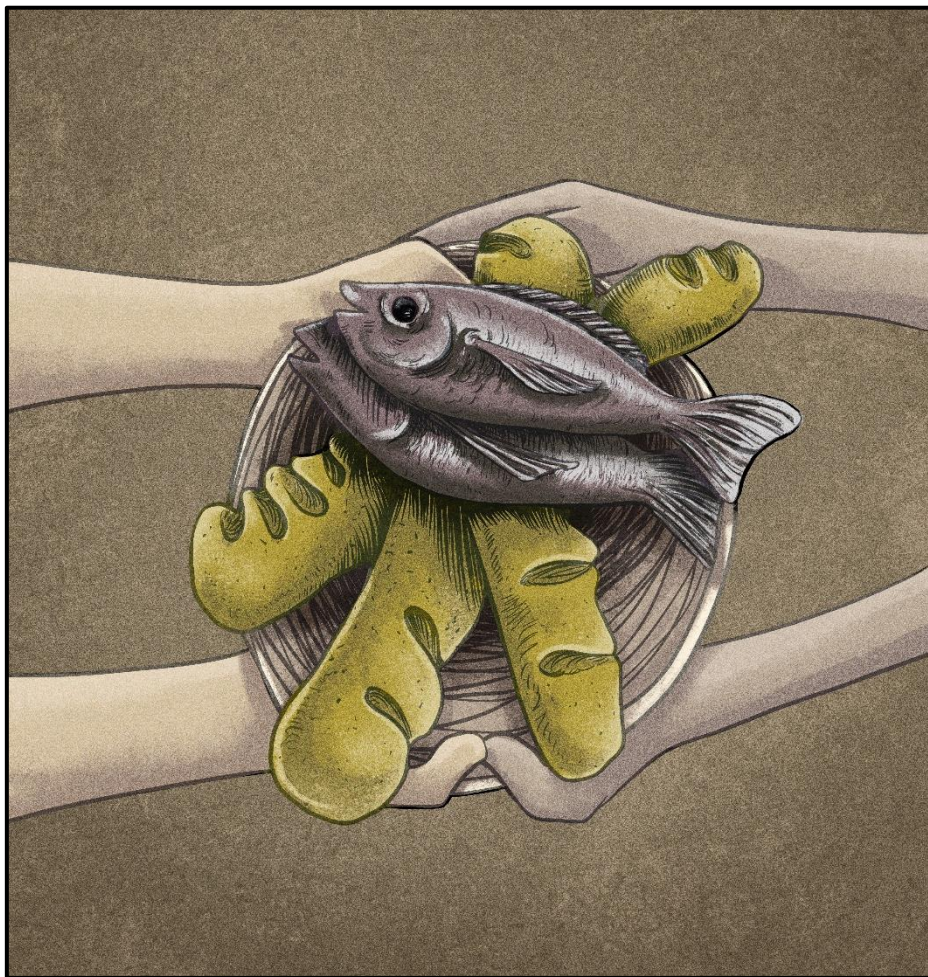


SALTBUSH  
UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY

# Ruminations



# Hospitality






Winter 2020


**Ruminations** is brought to you as part of **Saltbush – Uniting the Scattered Community**. The Uniting Church Synod of NSW & ACT oversees this work as an encouragement to all rural Christian communities and their leaders, irrespective of size or location. You are invited to share this issue of Ruminations with others.


Rev. Mark Faulkner  
Director of Rural and Remote Ministry Initiatives  
Uniting Mission and Education.

Editors:

Mark Faulkner  
Geoff Wellington  
Tim Jensen

-  Uniting the Scattered Community
-  PO Box 221 Canberra City, 2601
-  0477720151
-  saltbush@nswact.uca.org.au
-  <https://saltbushcommunity.uca.org.au/>

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## Contributors:

**Alice Ferguson** is a member of St Columba's Uniting Church, a follower of the Saltbush Christian community and part of the Safe Shelter Coordinating Committee in Canberra ACT. Safe Shelter provides a place of rest alongside hospitality for homeless men in the ACT.

**Nicole Wiggins** is the Director of the Early Morning Centre as part of the work of Uniting *Care* in the heart of Canberra. The Early Morning Centre provides hospitality, meals, showers, computers and advice as part of its community space.

**Rev. Dr. Ockert Meyer** is lecturer in homiletics (preaching) at United Theological College in Sydney. Ockert is a Uniting Church Minister with extensive congregational experience in South Africa, the Netherlands, and Australia. Ockert's great love, and the focus of his research and teaching in recent years, is the art of preaching and its place as part of drawing near to God.

**Rev. Phil Dokmanovic** shares in Ministry with Rev. Greer Dokmanovic in the Byron Shire Uniting Church which has the congregations of Bangalow, Byron Bay, Brunswick Heads and Mullumbimby in northern NSW.

# Editor's Introduction

Welcome to your winter edition of Ruminations  
with the theme of

## Hospitality!

The world sure has experienced major changes over this last year with droughts, floods, fires and now a worldwide pandemic threatening people's lives, economic activity and how we even get to interact with each other.

All these events raise questions for us about our humanity and interrelatedness, what's really important in life and how we attend to our faith and spirituality in all this upheaval.

Our Ruminations theme this time, Hospitality, offers a framework to start to think about some of these questions. The articles can be summarised in three broad categories, God's hospitality towards us, Guests and Hosts and Welcoming the Stranger.

In particular Rev Dr Ockert Myer, Rev Tim Jensen and Rev Mark Faulkner all reflect on God's hospitality towards us as a starting point when considering hospitality. Hospitality is the very nature of God who offers welcome and relationship. It is this welcoming God who invites us then to show hospitality to the "other" beyond our own self obsession to discover the sacred in the face of the stranger and to experience Christian Community as a place of hospitality as guest and host.

Nicole Wiggins, Alice Ferguson and Rev Phil Docmanovic share stories of practical ways hospitality is shown to strangers and invite us to experience the face of Christ in the other. As Phil, Alice and Nicole recount stories of hospitality it reminds me that offering hospitality to another often results in the roles of guest and host switching backwards and forwards. In offering hospitality I, in turn, experience hospitality myself and perhaps in this moment Christian Community is indeed sparked and God is revealed.

In a time when the temptation is to retreat to our own safe spaces, hospitality invites us to experience the sacred image of God in each other and to practice the art of hospitality wherever we might find ourselves.

Peace to you all.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rev. Phil Docmanovic", is centered on the page. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

# A word from the Moderator

I conducted a marriage interview on the weekend, for a delightful young couple I have known for some time. They came round to the house, as they have many times in the past. On the morning of their visit we realised that there had been no visitors to our home in almost three months.

We started tidying, Fiona cooked a slice and, for a short moment, we felt slightly discombobulated. When they arrived, we nodded with affection and appreciation (handshakes, kisses and hugs sadly absent!) and welcomed them, once more, into our home. We have tried to ensure that our home has always been an open one for friends and guests alike. Yet, due to this season of pandemic and response, almost no one has passed, physically, over the front step since the beginning of March.

We have, however, had loads of guests – pastoral and worshipful, meaningful and familial – in the last trimester. We have gathered the church from across the Synod and beyond, heard fine sermons and shared in Saltbush (and several other) Cafés. Our family has blown out virtual birthday candles, and good friends living in English isolation have shared their breakfast with us while we had dinner.

The challenge of physical isolation has been met and occasionally overcome by the blessing of meeting more people in a day than I might normally meet in a week. I have shared worship in Ballina in the morning, popped into Bathurst morning tea, slipped past Bowral's Facebook Sunday worship and completed my day in Saltbush Café that afternoon.

Always welcome, and certainly blessed.

We have asked, again and again in the last few months, what does discipleship look like in this different time? What does mission look and sound like?

We can begin, as we have always need to, with hospitality. Not words made tepid by repetition like tolerance and inclusion, but the deliberate act of making people welcome and safe.

Whenever we are able to worship together again with each other, physically, we need to remember what we have learned from this time. Those who could not and would not come to church, came to online worship. Those who did not feel safe in small groups could watch and share in a zoom café. Those who felt disconnected found a new way to connect.

How shall we show hospitality – in the new ways, in the old ways, in the ways in which our God has always made us welcome?

***Rev. Simon Hansford***

Moderator of the Synod of NSW & ACT.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Simon", with a long horizontal stroke underneath it. The signature is centered within a light gray rectangular box.

# The face of Jesus in the guest...

***Rev. Tim Jensen***

Saltbush Scattered Community Minister

To find a definition of hospitality I went to that fount of all information, Wikipedia. Where hospitality is defined as “the relationship between a guest and a host, wherein the host receives the guest with goodwill, including the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers.” Which sounds like what we all hope for when we go to a restaurant, a theatre or just down the road to the café. But in the same Wikipedia article Louis chevalier de Jaucourt describes hospitality in the Encyclopédie as the “virtue of a great soul that cares for the whole universe through the ties of humanity.” This definition gives hospitality a kind of divine feel and so it should as to be hospitable to others is big in God’s reign and for Jesus.

For Jesus hospitality is more than showing kindness. According to Jesus it’s recognising the image of God in the other and responding appropriately. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40). Hospitality takes on a very intimate and connected relationship with the other, who is in the image of Christ. Now it’s important to acknowledge that if you show hospitality to another person and it is not reciprocated, that is they do not acknowledge the Christ in you (or others) then that is ok, as hospitality is a gracious act with no need for reciprocity. “So when you give to the needy, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets,



to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they already have their full reward." (Matthew 6:2.)

And from the Epistles "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2.)

But if your hospitality is not received, then move on... "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town." (Matthew 10:14.)

Because of these very clear messages from the Gospels, the early church practiced hospitality that went way beyond the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, class and wealth. As Paige Gutacker<sup>1</sup> concludes in *Early Christianity in Context*: "Christian hospitality was motivated out of love, not fear, its host could be female, not just male, and its guest did not have to be of a certain ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Moving beyond the boundaries of kinship and race, elevating the role of women, and sourcing its motivation in love for Christ and participation with him." In the early church the only self-seeking motivation was to be blessed in seeing the face of Jesus in the guest.

Hospitality is the practical expression of what it means to show love of neighbour, for no other reason than acknowledging Christ in the other. This act of graciousness has no other motive other than an expression of Christ's love. Hospitality then is not showing someone gracious acceptance with the expectation of a return whether that is monetary or in kind. Unfortunately there

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<sup>1</sup> Paige Gutacker serves as the Alumni Director at Summit Ministries.  
<http://www.summitalumninetwork.org/paiges-articles/early-christian-hospitality-in-context-three-christian-distinctives-that-extended-and-transformed-contemporary-mediterranean-hospitality>

are times our acts of hospitality come with strings attached. Either that the person will join our church, that they will conform to our beliefs and behaviours or that they will look upon us with favour. If these are the motives then it would be wrong to call it hospitality, more reflective of recruiting others to our group. Which has little difference to how society practices hospitality.

In today's world 'hospitality' is big business and generates a lot of wealth. In many ways it panders to the whims and wishes of those who can afford to be waited upon. While engendering an almost hedonistic lifestyle where the provider promises to lavish the guest with all the luxuries they deserve. The only reason the guest deserves these luxuries is because they are rich enough to afford them.

The hospitality of Jesus and the Bible is counterintuitive to this understanding. Jesus says "the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." (Luke 22:26-27.) These words should convict us to the depth of what it means to be a follower of Christ but also what it means to be human. Perhaps in recognising the hospitality of Jesus as we live it out in our lives, significant cultural change can emerge where as a church we reimagine the world to be more compassionate, kind and gracious. In so doing, hospitality could undermine the inequality and narcissism of our own cultural moment and give witness to a gospel that turns the world on its head.



In turning the world on its head hospitality is then seen as an altruistic movement that is not only about the acceptance and welcome of others, but the potential healing of relationships, communities and, dare may I hope, the whole creation.

In our COVID, bush fire ravaged lives I believe we need to extend the understanding and practice of hospitality to include the whole creation. With no expectation of reward our care for the environment would encourage animal and plant species to survive and hopefully thrive. Our hospitality to creation would echo the words of Genesis where God created and it was good. Serving creation in this ways affirm our place alongside God the creator while reminding us of our place in creation's order and our inter-dependence on all living things.

To return to Louis chevalier de Jaucourt's quote, hospitality as "virtue of a great soul that cares for the whole universe through the ties of humanity." Not only does our hospitality reflect the Christ in whom we follow but it also connects us with the whole universe. Our place in the world is not determined by own individualistic needs, I am more than my own desires, but I am part of that which is so much greater than myself and yet of which I am uniquely and significantly connected.

Ultimately then, according to Jesus, our hospitality to others honours and recognises the Christ in them while affirming the image of God in ourselves. The hospitality to all creation cements the importance of our place in the universe as co-creators with God and servants of the cosmos.

May we all be inspired by the Holy Spirit's leading, to be bearers of the message of Christ and the image of God, to practice hospitality without regard so the world may know its true value and love in Christ.

# Our stories...

***Alice Ferguson***

Safe Shelter,  
Canberra, ACT.

## **Ruminations on Hospitality**

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. 35 I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.' 40 The King will reply, 'I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!' (Matthew 25:34-35, 40.)

Jesus uses "Hospitality" so often in his parables demonstrating the presence of the spirit and the love of God expressed through action. During one of our Thursday evening Saltbush Cafe meetings, we were asked to identify incidents of hospitality in the Bible and of course the examples just kept on coming – the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, Martha and Mary, The Last Supper; and what is Psalm 23 about other than Hospitality?

Hospitality is core to Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths. We know that doing good, loving your neighbour, providing shelter and succour for the poor and lonely, food for the hungry are faith in action. Yet, as with anything related to our faith as Christians, there are many layers to our knowing; many questions to our

believing; much pain to our doubting. Hospitality is no different. Why do people who have no faith offer hospitality selflessly to strangers? Many cultures put great store by hospitality and its importance for peace within communities and between individuals, even between nations. Hospitality then is powerful. So what are the words which come to mind when we ruminate on Hospitality – not only love, hope, compassion, generosity, spirit, but also words associated with effort- hard, cost, giver and receiver, risk, fear, power.

When I consider how hospitality can be expressed in a way that reflects every possible layer of meaning and complexity within its deceptively simple concept, I always return to the example of Safe Shelter ACT, the epitome of Hospitality.

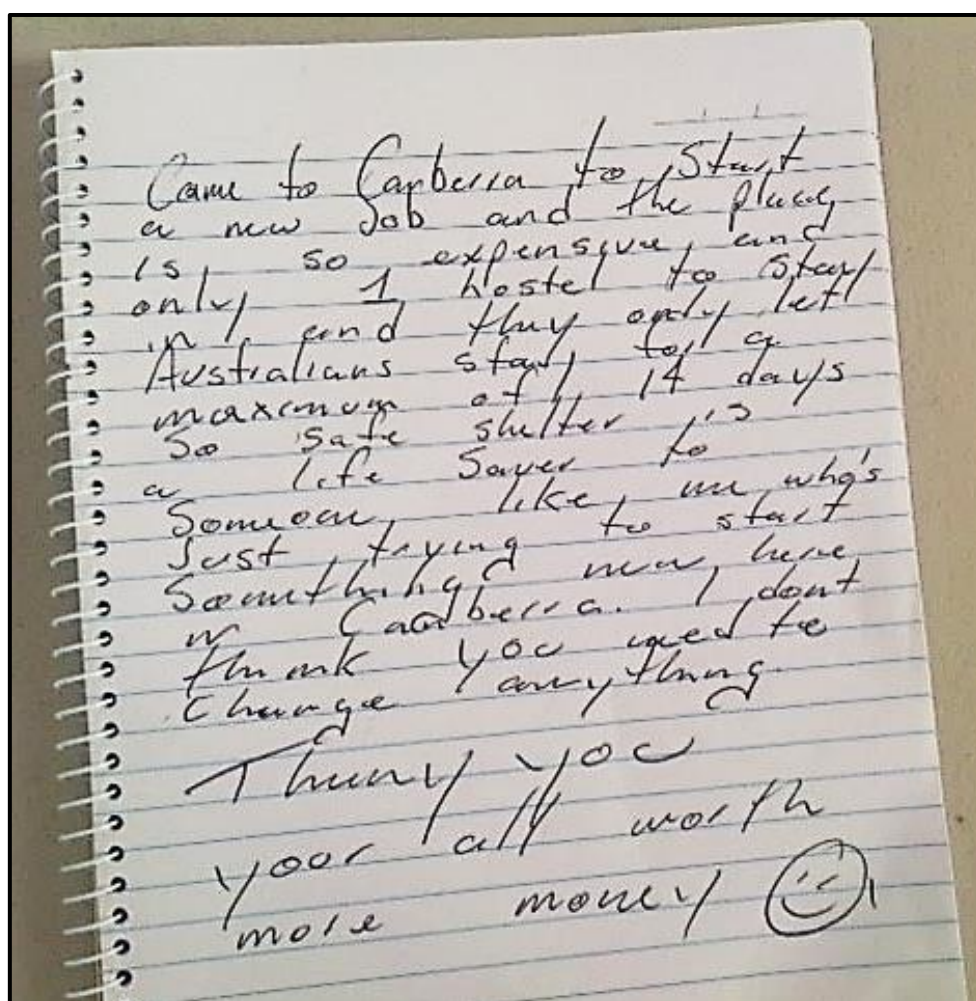
In the ACT the need for an emergency service for homeless men, available at point of need and requiring no formal referral or registration was identified as early as 2011 under the inspiration of Brendon Kennedy, Director Uniting *Care* Canberra City, who fought long and hard to get legislative compliance for this simple service. Safe Shelter opened in 2013. On the surface Safe Shelter is a basic, one dimensional service for homeless men delivered by volunteers who sleep on the floor alongside the men across three venues throughout the Canberra winter months. It is the only emergency shelter option in our capital city. The men who use the shelter have been sleeping rough on the streets or parks or surrounding bushland, sleeping in their cars, couch surfing at friends' homes or have nowhere at all to sleep. They have come to Safe Shelter having been discharged from hospital, released from Alexander Maconochie prison, dropped off by the Federal Police, or have heard of the service by word of mouth on the street or from the various support groups in the sector such as

the wonderful Early Morning Centre, Red Cross, St Vincent de Paul and One Link. The doors are opened at 7.00pm Sunday to Saturday and the men queuing up are welcomed into one of our shelters after they have handed over any drugs, alcohol or weapons, have read the conditions for staying and have agreed to abide by the Guidelines. Our guests, as they are referred to, are provided with a rubber mat, with which to mark their own space on the floor, and are offered blankets and a swag. They are served hot drinks and biscuits. They can watch television, play board games or just chat with the two volunteers or with each other or, indeed, go straight to sleep on arrival as many do. Lights out and sleep for all at 10.00pm. The guests have a warm, dry and safe place for the night – simple and very basic. Their anonymity is respected. In the morning their belongings are returned, and they have left the premises by 7.00am.

These men have received hospitality from the volunteers. Are the men appreciative? Of course they are and in so many ways. A particular example springs to mind; a guest who was grubby and tired asked to go out to the Orange Sky van which offers its laundry service and shower facilities outside St Columba's Uniting Church in conjunction with Safe Shelter. When he knocked on the door an hour later to get back in, I opened the door, looked at him standing there smart and clean and said teasingly, "Who are you? I have never seen you before in my life!" and his smile lit up the night sky! "I have never gone for such a long time without a shower before." was his reply. I cannot describe the extent of his happiness. He was a man changed out of all proportion to one of us having had a shower and wearing clean clothes. Perhaps Safe Shelter is not as simple as it looks? Perhaps the guests receive more than shelter; perhaps they receive dignity through connecting with other people. Perhaps



they regain a little self-respect. The following comment was left for us by a guest one morning last winter:



What of the volunteers? What, if anything, do they receive? They give up plenty – their time, their comfortable accommodation, cosy bed, their privacy, the company of family or friends, their familiar bedtime routine, but what do they get? The volunteers, as many as 134 in 2019, come from all walks of life. The majority are younger than 50 years old and do not belong to a church. They enrol in an induction program which runs over two evenings and then start adding their names to the Safe Shelter roster. Many volunteers return to sign on again year after year. At the end of each winter, the volunteers are asked to fill in a



survey. It is in the results of this survey that the full impact of having volunteered for Safe Shelter becomes apparent.

The following feedback has been taken from the responses to the survey question: "What was worthwhile about volunteering for Safe Shelter 2018?" and "Were there any worthwhile or rewarding aspects to volunteering this year 2019?"

*"I thought and felt that it was worthwhile as it made homelessness less of an abstract 'social problem' which I had very little experience of and it turned my experience into a hopeful one. Hopeful because the men I met were such decent people who were intelligent, resourceful and smart. For me it was a privilege to be able to enter into their lives if only briefly, to help out and to hear their stories. It was an eye opener in a good way not in a reactive way."*

*"The appreciative guests, their courtesy and support was amazing. For me, I felt a sense of satisfaction that I made a difference to a small group of people who have so little to support them in their day-to-day existence"*

*"Meeting our guests and getting to hear their stories"*

*"You meet the best people, both guests and volunteers"*

*"Always. It is worthwhile and rewarding to be able to help provide safety overnight and some level of comfort to those going through difficult times. It is rewarding to get to know some of the guests, and also to get to know fellow volunteers."*

*"Feeling that I have helped in a small way"*

While we do not formally survey our guests, a nightly log is kept by the volunteers. These entries from the logs of 2017, 2018 and 2019 provide a glimpse into some of our guests' stories:

*"J. was robbed today. We gave him a jacket from the cupboard"*

*"P and W are mates – 'We look out for each other.' They asked to sleep next to each other"*

*"By 6.45am everything was packed up except B's shoes which were drying by the heater."*

*"R was admitted. He appeared disorientated and very cold. He had been sleeping outside on concrete when we arrived. We gave him a jacket."*

*"A and B arrived 'to spread the good news about Jesus' for 10 days in Canberra and had no other accommodation tonight"*

*"7.20pm E arrived. Provided him with details of three refugee support groups. He will go to the Early Morning Centre tomorrow to connect with these and other support groups"*

*"K came at 8.45pm. He was referred at 5.00pm by ACT Mental Health who gave him a Safe Shelter flier. He only had the clothes he was wearing."*

*"T. has sparse knowledge of English as he speaks Persian. The public library doesn't want homeless people in the library, so T. can't access a Persian/English dictionary. Guest D. said he would help him tomorrow".*

The words with which we describe Hospitality are evident in Safe Shelter, including risk, doubt and even fear. So is that it? Has Hospitality been adequately ruminated upon?

In 2009, Brendan Kennedy told a story to the Saint Columba's Uniting Church congregation. He regularly walked through the city centre each morning on the way to his office, passing a man sitting on steps with his swag and bag of belongings beside him. Brendan would greet the man as he passed and exchange a few words. As the weather grew colder and the Canberra winter began to set in, Brendan decided the man needed something much warmer to wear and the next morning Brendan went up to the man and gave him his own wool coat to wear and keep. The man looked up at Brendan, smiled and said "No thanks, Mate. I don't need your coat". Brendan was completely taken aback. He told us he felt dreadful, bewildered and horribly disappointed that the man had not taken the coat when it was obvious he needed it! Brendan then ruminated on his own reaction, realising that his act of giving had had nothing to do with the man but everything to do with Brendan's own motivation and wanting to "feel needed and good".

So, do Brendan's words invoke yet another aspect of Hospitality? Perhaps we should "ruminate" a bit longer?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Note: Safe Shelter 2020 has not yet opened due to COVID-19 restrictions.

***Rev. Phil Dokmanovic***

Byron Bay, NSW.

## **Byron Bay Wet Weather Shelter**

Bangalow/Byron Bay Uniting Church has always displayed a passion to connect with the community, especially those who are disadvantaged and on the margins. Over the years the congregation has initiated a number of key ministries in the Byron Shire aimed at serving the community and sharing God's love and heart for justice with those in need. These have included a weekly Soup Kitchen, a thriving Op Shop, as well as opening the church building facilities for groups like Red Frogs and YWAM to use as a base for their Schoolies and summer ministries.

In 2017, following the effects of Cyclone Debbie in the Northern Rivers, Rev Greer Dokmanovic, along with other leaders in the church, began discussions with the Byron Community Centre to work in partnership to set up and establish a Wet Weather Shelter Program. The shelter would provide temporary accommodation for the rough sleepers and homeless in the community when severe weather conditions hit the local area. Despite its fame as a tourist destination, Byron Bay has the second highest number of rough sleepers in NSW behind inner-city Sydney. Each year, the Byron Shire experiences 3-6 extreme weather events, which typically include heavy rainfall over a number of days and nights and associated flooding. Generally, these events aren't serious enough to trigger formal State Government Emergency Evacuation Responses, but they have significant physical, emotional and psychological impacts on the large numbers of rough sleepers in the local area. A process of

seeking volunteers and community funding was established and this resulted in the program successfully launching in 2018.

When the Community Centre surveyed the rough sleepers of the area, the kind of building they identified as their preferred shelter was a church building. The Byron Bay Uniting Church offered their facilities as a venue to host this shelter. Its design as a multi-purpose space is well suited for this venture and the church community felt this would be a good way to serve and bless the local community.



The Church now stores the required stretchers, bedding and hospitality equipment necessary to set up the shelter when required. The Shelter has been in operation for two years and has been employed on a number of occasions when extreme weather events have occurred. Earlier in 2020, the Wet Weather Shelter

was opened for a two week period as severe weather hit the Northern Rivers. The Uniting Church was opened for this entire period for rough sleepers to seek safety and shelter. Over 50 people registered during this period. A number of the ministries of the church showed flexibility to assist the temporary running of the shelter and Sunday worship services continued with the stretchers still set up in the worship space. This was a visual reminder for the church during their gathered worship of the experience of people in the local community and the opportunities the church has had to show God's love and welcome.

## ***Nicole Wiggins***

Uniting*Care* Early Morning Centre, Canberra City.

### **Hospitality to the homeless**



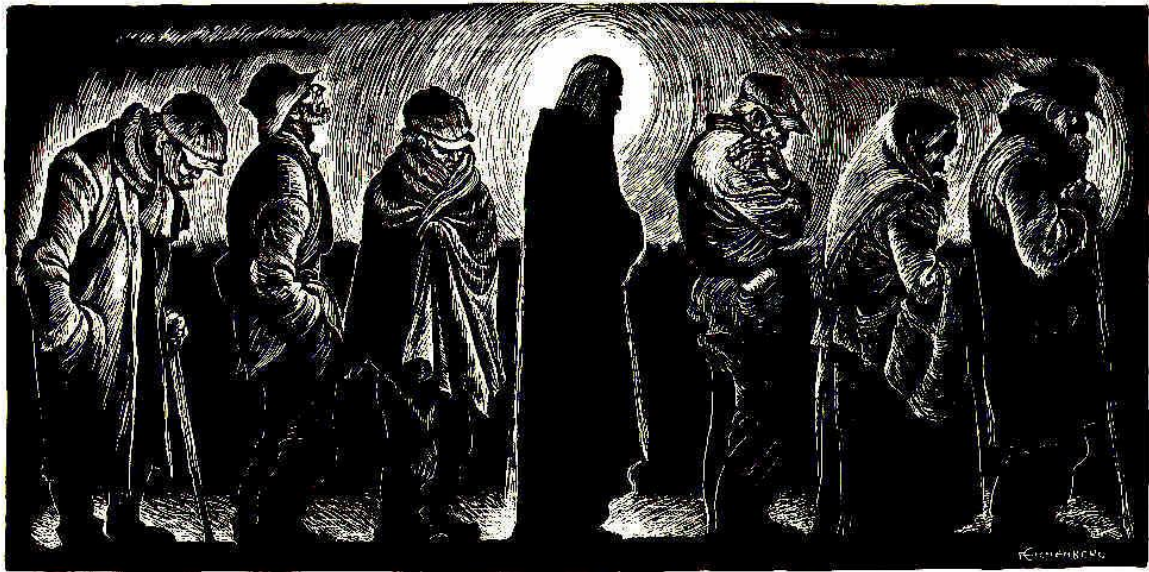
Working at the early Morning Centre for over 4 years has personally been an enriching and rewarding experience. The centre offers a range of essential services from breakfast to showers and many others activities that are designed to improve the life experience of our guests and contribute towards improved health outcomes. Being part of something that makes a difference in people's lives, whether small or large, makes being part of the service extremely rewarding and satisfying. It is a reason to start each day with a positive view to what that day may hold in not knowing what difference or contribution can be made. This is a two-way exchange as every time I am able to

assist one of our guests, even in some small way I too get something positive and rewarding for myself.

The Early Morning Centre views our service users as guests and therefore to remind and ensure that staff and volunteers understand and use this ethos in their everyday interactions we refer to all who use the centre as guests. Using the word *guests* rather than *service users* or *clients* provides a reminder that we are providing a service in a particular way that ensures and respects each guest and their particular needs. This can vary on different days or even different times of the same day, where a specialist and individual attention and response is provided in a respectful and caring manner. We are here to provide a service that, although free, should be viewed as if the person is a paying customer in a private business. Free services should not be viewed as doing favours or that people using our free service should be grateful in anyway. Having our guests be grateful and appreciative is an added bonus and does on most occasions happen, but is certainly not a requirement and I don't believe that service delivery should ever be viewed in that way.

Through providing a welcoming environment where each guest is greeted as a respected and cared for individual opens up avenues for engagement and conversations that allows the guest to feel comfortable to share their story or just talk about their day. I always try to do this in a manner that provides the message that regardless of the story or the circumstances the guest won't be judged or viewed unfavourably. Each day I get to meet and talk with guests from a vast array of backgrounds and experiences. I am constantly astounded by the stories from our guests. Their life stories that are extremely wide and varied, that are almost always extraordinary, ranging from poverty and





disadvantage that started in childhood to those who have had high levels of education and worked in highly skilled jobs and everything in between. Conversations are always interesting and we often comment that there is never a dull moment in a day at EMC. Each time I sit and talk with one of our guests I come away having learnt something about them and also quite often about myself. There are interesting stories that are heart-warming and there are the heart breaking stories that make you wonder how that guest faces the world each day. The resilience and strength that is inside our guests is nothing short of astounding. It makes me believe in the good of the world and what is possible when guests can overcome extraordinary disadvantaged to be able to meet life's everyday challenges, even reaching levels of incredibly high achievement. This high achievement is relative to the individual guest, being able to approach each day after facing levels of trauma and disadvantage that many could not imagine possible for one person to endure, this day to day coping and getting along is a remarkable high achievement in itself.

Providing hospitality to our guests is one of our key aims. We want to provide a warm, safe and welcoming space where all feel welcome, enjoy the experience and want to come back the next day. Small gestures like taking the time to listen to guests, listen to their life stories, what is happening to them at this stage of their life and when and if needed offering some assistance to help then get to where they want to be. It is a heart-warming and always moving experience, knowing that you are being trusted enough by guests that they feel they can talk with you about any subject. Knowing that the type and level of hospitality being provided is in a manner that suits any and all guests and having the flexibility to alter and change the approach so it is able to suit and reach each individual guest so even the smallest of positive outcomes are possible is always personally satisfying.

The staff and many volunteers who work hard to provide an environment of hospitality for all, but it is really the guests who use the service who make this possible each day and reward our lives. On behalf of staff and volunteers, I would like to say thank you to all the wonderful guests of the Early Morning Centre for making it such a nice, friendly and welcoming space to work.

# Experiencing the Word...

***Rev. Dr. Ockert Meyer***

United Theological College, Sydney.

There are few, if any, congregations in the Uniting Church that do not think about themselves as hospitable congregations. All of us like a yarn, a cuppa and the fellowship we have with our fellow believers. And that has been true of all the congregations where I have served as minister: they all took pride in the fact that they were a hospitable community.

And that is both important as well as wonderful. Hospitality is much more important in the bible than most people would be aware of. It plays a central role in the Old Testament and in Jesus' preaching truly was one of the touchstones of the Kingdom of God.

However, particularly telling and revealing was when I asked newcomers or visitors to these congregations: how do you experience the congregation – as distant or hospitable? The answers varied but it would be true to say that many newcomers experienced it in an entirely different way than the parishioners did.

This really intrigued me. Why was there such a gaping divide between the way those on the inside viewed the presence of hospitality in their communities – their own or what they experienced from others - compared to those on the outside?

It would be true to say that it was only when I understood what the bible meant by hospitality that I began to understand the reason for the discrepancy between the two groups. So let us take a closer look at hospitality in the bible.

The Greek word for hospitality in the New Testament is philoxenia. Literally it means: "love for the stranger." The opposite of hospitality is something we know very well in modern society: xenophobia – fear (or even hate) of the stranger.

In the Old Testament Israel is reminded to show hospitality to the strangers, because they have been strangers in Egypt. Therefore the stranger, or the ger as he or she is known in Hebrew, takes a special place in the bible. In the face of the stranger Israel saw themselves, in slavery, in bondage, dependent on the mercy of others.

In ancient Semitic society – as it is still the case in much of the Arabic world – hospitality was regarded as one of the cornerstones of a just society. Hence there are many, many examples of this hospitality in the bible. The problem, however, is, we don't recognize it, for almost all of us have grown up reading the bible with moralistic eyes and are often blind to the theology of the bible.

A good example of this, is the way the church has read and how many people still read Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction.

When the bible refers to the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah we hear it with moralistic ears, therefore people think that the depravity is of a sexual nature: in this case, homosexuality.

However, it is clear that Sodom and Gomorrah's depravity, their sin, was not homosexuality, but a lack of hospitality.

This is of course, fairly easy to prove, since Jesus Himself referred to Sodom and Gomorrah's grave depravity in Matthew 10 when He sent his disciples out and then with regard to the people and the towns which fail to show them hospitality in receiving them, Jesus said: "If anyone will not welcome you, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly, I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town." So clearly Jesus was not thinking of Sodom's in as something sexual, but as their refusal to offer hospitality.

In other words, hospitality is about much more than receiving a few friends around your table for dinner. It is much more than welcoming everyone with a handshake at church. It is much more than a yarn or a cuppa.

At the heart of biblical hospitality is the love for others, but not in the first place, love for others in their sameness of us, but exactly in their otherness of us. In Jesus' context, it meant inviting the crippled, the lame, the blind and the poor to your dinner table – and not only the friends, relatives and rich neighbours.

In our own context learning what this means, does not necessarily begin by inviting strangers into our houses. For us it begins by learning, not only to tolerate the differences between us, but truly appreciating the differences between us. With 'us' I mean, we who are together on any Sunday, we who have already much in common, we who can even call ourselves friends of one another.

Friendship begins with recognizing and appreciating the same traits, the same interests and the same views of life in others. Hospitality begins with recognizing and appreciating the different interests and the different worldviews of others.

In most congregations we welcome people with the hope of making them one of us or perhaps making them like us. We don't even realise that we do it, but they do.

Hospitality is an openness, a welcoming and a receptiveness of others because of their otherness.



Strangers are the others; that is; not only the people looking different from us, speaking a different language, but also those among us, those that do not conform to our norms or choose a significantly different lifestyle than what we have chosen. They often are the outsiders, the outcasts, the marginalized and the fringe dwellers.

I reckon the author of Hebrews puts this better than anyone else when he says: "Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!"

In other words, we do not simply welcome others because they may be more interesting than we thought and we don't show others hospitality simply because that is part of our culture – we welcome others because we have been welcomed by God; we show others hospitality because God has shown us hospitality.

In and through Jesus Christ we know that God has taken our otherness to God's heart. In and through Jesus Christ we know that God who is the Totally Other, has fully received and welcomed us in God's life.

Some of you might have seen the film "The day after tomorrow" about fifteen years ago. It dealt with the possibility of the rapid dawn of a new ice age. Towards the end of the movie there is a scene of extreme irony. When the cold weather settles on the northern hemisphere, Americans are forced to flee south, to Mexico. One of the film's most striking images is the sight of Americans wading across the Rio Grande, trying to enter into Mexico illegally.

In his address, which is broadcasted from Mexico, the American president thanked the government of Mexico for allowing millions of his fellow citizens into the country when they needed their hospitality, and confessing that they did not do the same when the economic circumstances in their neighbouring country forced their citizens to flee north.

This brings us to perhaps the final and most important aspect of hospitality: that of reciprocity. Note the way Jesus concludes the parable about hospitality in Luke 14: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you..."

I think these last words are the key to understanding the person of the other. He or she is the one who cannot repay us, who cannot offer us anything, that is anything but their otherness, their difference, their strangeness. This does not mean that they are necessarily from a different culture or a migrant. Quite often they live next door to us. We meet them on the streets, in the church, even within our own household. But how are they a blessing to us?

According to Jesus they are a blessing to us because they cannot repay us in the currency we value. Their blessing lies in who they are and what they symbolize to us, what they teach us.

Therefore, they are the ones we should value. Why? Because, according to the bible they have more to offer us than we have to offer them. For they remind us of the Totally Other. It is in their eyes that we see ourselves before God. It is in the mirror of their need to be embraced by us that we see ourselves and our need to be embraced by God.

And finally, the strangers among us also remind us of who we are: a pilgrim nation, strangers in a culture of self-service and self-interest. No wonder the author of Hebrews calls them angels: they truly are messengers of God.



# News from Saltbush...

***Rev. Mark Faulkner***

Director of Rural and Remote Ministry Initiatives.

**Is there such a thing as genuine Christian community online?**



As we have been shaping Saltbush as a movement over the past few years I have constantly said that everything we do needs to be built upon a foundation of the missional relationship and be both online and on ground!

The Saltbush Team had already begun to gather Christians from across the land for our weekly cafés well before we were all confined to our homes. We had already begun to provide online weekly opportunities to experience the word with our Gospel

based messages. We had already begun to provide Ruminations and weekly liturgies online, but the opportunity to gather people online as a community for prayer, reflection, silence, music, conversation around faith and life and even communion has been a sudden next step for us.

The challenge however for us, and for the wider church, is not simply to be online, but to shape Christian community online.

In our society where half of all people experience loneliness at some time every week and nearly a third of all of us are lonely most of the time creating genuine community is surely an essential aspect of the Christian faith. It is an amazing fact, that even with so much online activity, chatting, Facebook, SMS, meetings and on it goes, there is still this grinding loneliness affecting vast numbers of people.

I was struck when I read in the Guardian of one person's honest realisation around their own loneliness. "The lockdown has made it crushingly obvious how few friends I have, and I feel depressed and lonely. It feels as if everyone else is having Zoom parties, quizzes and virtual meet-ups, while I'm sending the odd message and going to bed early... "

The Church worldwide has been gripped in this time with a frenzy of online activity, perhaps not fore-mostly around community, but perhaps more so out of duty, expectation and financial stability. The need to do what the church does! There has been a multitude of videos with Ministers alone in empty churches, streaming at set times, posts with prayers and sermons and activities and resources designed to fill the gap. And in response people have shopped around and dropped in and out, watched

streaming, but for the most part, most all people who used to attend their local church have gone nowhere. It's confronting to admit, but for the most part the people who once found their home within our congregations have in this time had little contact around gathering with others to ponder life and faith.

Diana Butler Bass (contemporary theologian and author) in her book *Christianity after Religion*, writes about the "sacred work" of being in community and "listening, learning, laughing and leading together. It can be hard to find strangers, or even friends, willing to do this kind of work. In the face of daunting problems and fear, many people have retreated from even the hope of real community into "self-contained private realm(s)" where "we can pursue our own happiness without regard for the needs of others". "Even many churches, sadly enough, are not really communities of belonging; they have, instead, created religious "private realms" where each member maintains personal theologies with little concern for the larger world." <sup>3</sup>

It is a confronting comment and perhaps you don't agree, but it is expressing the sacredness of community and the fact that our societies, and even the church, struggle to grow genuine community.

Perhaps it also depends on what we believe the purpose of "going to church" is. Over the years I've moved away from my belief that the purpose is around "worship" and that God needs to constantly know how much we love, adore and are thankful (and sorry) to God. Not that any of those expressions are wrong,

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<sup>3</sup> Butler Bass, D.  
*Christianity After Religion*  
Harper One, 2013. p.263ff.

but are they at the heart of gathering with other Christians? Perhaps, as it was for the disciples and early church, it's more about the sharing in common, or as Butler Bass writes, "listening, learning, laughing and leading together", and to discover something of the sacred in sharing about life and faith together.

Creating Christian community then online is not a simple idea or action; it's not just putting up "church" to watch or tune into and not about simply replicating what we "usually" do, especially if we agree with some of the comments above from Butler Bass. The question is how do we shape a genuine Christian community online that gathers, listens, participates, breaks the bread and takes on the journey of mission into the wider world?

### **How is Saltbush thinking about Christian community online?**

One of the key aspects for us is, again, about the Missional relationship. Saltbush is not holding online gatherings outside of relationship. As we shape our online work we don't see this as a place for people to retreat from relationship, but to be in relationship, both with each other and with the Scattered Community Ministers. Again, what we do online goes hand in glove with our gatherings in the towns and cities around the land, our visitation to existing congregations and groups and our availability to anyone, so that as a movement we can establish relationships together.

Our online gatherings are also centred around the Word. This is not simply listening, but the opportunity to explore the Word, life and faith together. To do this we provide an opportunity for small groups of people, online, as part of our gatherings, to discuss what they have heard and where they have been

challenged. Although we come from a long tradition where, at length, any church gathering has been preached to, community in its wholeness is also about listening to others and diversity of opinion and experience.

Participation is also a characteristic of healthy community where many contribute as they are drawn and encouraged. In praying, reading, sharing ideas and life experiences, one of the key aspects of Saltbush online is to enable participation by the wider community so that the leader simply facilitates the gathering, rather than being the source of all word and action.

Of course one of the greatest reflections of community is hospitality and gathering around the table. Hospitality and its place in genuine community has been a key element of the struggle over past months within our wider society and world; cafés, restaurants, bars, social events, places of meeting like parks, playgrounds and beaches have been cut off and so too, our places of community around the “table”. And so we come to the question of communion online; sharing the bread and wine, gathering around the table as Christians.



Sharing the bread and wine as Jesus shared with his disciples has been at the centre of Christian life and although the Church's

rules, theologies, practices and fears have affected this simple sacrament down throughout the ages, it is the ultimate act of hospitality towards humanity and sign of being a Christian community. Therefore we have continued to celebrate this sacrament as part of our Saltbush gatherings, both online and on ground, and see it as an extension of our missional relationship with each other and a sacramental act shared with others around the one community, with many tables.

Together, we all gather our bread and wine, as people have done in all places and lands. We prepare the table, each as they will. We pray together and hear again the story of the sacrament founded with the last supper alongside Jesus. We invite the Holy Spirit of course aware that while we are not all in one place, we are together as one community and the Spirit breaths over the whole creation. We break the bread together and then drink from the cup together and at its heart, there is God and there is community.

### **The next significant challenge for online community.**

To be in mission is also a mark of the grounded Christian community. Mission means many different things to people and even within the church is a word used easily to mean just about anything from programmes, to organisations, to fund raising to acts of charity. At his simplest mission is to announce to others that the Kingdom of God has come near. The challenge is for Saltbush over time to create an online missional community enabling each other, although in different places, to live out their Uniting Christian community belonging within the wider communities in which they live announcing the Kingdom of God has come near.



**Please consider financially supporting Saltbush; either as individuals or as a congregation.**

Your donation will be directly used for the work of supporting Saltbush and the ways we are working to encourage smaller, rural congregations.

You can donate generally towards Saltbush and this will include the cost of enabling the printing of Ruminations.

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