

Let's Talk

Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod

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Are All Welcome In This Place?

Table Of Contents

Are All Welcome In This Place?	3
All Are Welcome... But Are All Invited?	4
Survey: Is My Church Welcoming?	6
Hospitality as Welcoming Others, Welcoming Mystery	7
Welcoming Transgender People in Congregations	10
As I See It: Everyone Is Welcome to Worship...Except Children	12
On the Way: Aggressive Hospitality	15

Are All Welcome In This Place?

<http://mcsletstalk.org/are-all-welcome-in-this-place/>

Marty Haugen's hymn (#641 Evangelical Lutheran Worship) affirms YES—in the chorus. The verses, on the other hand, each begin more temperately, an acknowledgement, perhaps, that welcome is an aim at which we've not yet arrived, a building still under construction.

Welcome, of course, is a word rich with theological import. Whoever welcomes a child welcomes Christ, and the one who sent Christ, as Christ said (Mark 9:37). And, as Paul reminds us, we're only able to welcome because we have been welcomed: "Welcome one another as Christ as has welcomed you." (Romans 15:7)

And yet, how welcoming are our churches? Has the hymn, or the word, become ubiquitous but bland, affirmed but meaningless to our ears? Do our eyes glaze over it, as a doormat with letters on which we wipe our shoes? How can we say it better, sing it better, so that everyone hears it, and joins in the refrain?

Contributors to this issue of Let's Talk take up these questions and more.

[Being welcoming is well and good, Jennifer English says](#), but the conversation changes when it moves beyond welcome to invitation. English's thoughtful, practical questions are echoed and continued in a self-assessment tool developed by Nicholas Zook and Adam Warner. In a chapter excerpt from a forthcoming book, [Craig Mueller adds mystery as another element of welcome](#): welcome to the mystery of another, welcome to the mystery within oneself, welcome to the mystery that is faith itself. Michael Fick and Kelly Faulstich consider, with timeliness and care, words of welcome and [a community's attitudes and values about gender and identity](#). Age is the concern at the top of Frank Senn's mind, as he points out [all the ways churches fail to welcome children](#), Christ's command notwithstanding. Finally, in a very popular article first listed in Let's Talk two years ago, [Ben Dueholm reflects on the question of aggressive hospitality](#). That is, is our welcome mild enough, or distinctive enough, or wide enough, to include the possibility of the welcome being declined?

Welcome to the articles. We welcome your response.

All Are Welcome... But Are All Invited?

by Jennifer English

<http://mcsletstalk.org/welcoming/all-are-welcome-but-are-all-invited/>

In the delicate dance of social interactions, most of us intuitively know the subtle difference between being “welcomed” and being “invited.” Imagine that you show up at someone’s house for a dinner party, bottle of wine in hand. The host greets you at the door with a big smile and invitation to come inside. Everyone comes over to shake your hand and say how good it is to see you. But as you snack on the appetizers, you see the host scrambling to set another place at the table. Your stomach sinks. While the host’s spirit of welcome may have been genuine, you become uncomfortable once you realize you were not invited.

I wonder how often people entering our congregations feel welcome, but not necessarily invited. Most, if not all, of our congregations strive to be welcoming places. This is a good and worthy goal. For many congregations, cultivating a spirit of authentic welcome is an important growing edge. Other congregations may already have the gift of hospitality. These welcoming congregations might benefit from exploring the difference between being a “welcoming church” and being an “inviting church.”

Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Beverly neighborhood of Chicago, the congregation I serve, wrestled with the difference between being welcoming and being inviting when we looked at our congregation’s welcome of LGBTQ people. For years Bethlehem had a few LGBTQ members regularly participating in the congregation, but the congregation had never voted to be a Reconciling in Christ congregation. Some in the congregation wondered whether the designation was necessary. They felt we were already living as an RIC congregation in practice, if not in name. The conversation changed when one of the same-sex couples in the congregation shared their experience of looking for a church home. They told stories of going with their young children to visit congregations displaying “All are Welcome” signs out front, only to be ignored or even treated with hostility. They shared the experience of initially being welcomed at places they visited, but the “welcome” wore off after they had visited enough times that people began to realize they might stick around. They had gotten to a point where they would not enter an unknown church unless they were invited. They only came to Bethlehem because they were personally invited by a member of the congregation. Our congregation might be welcoming to the LGBTQ community, but our welcome would be useless unless we were also inviting.

As the conversation changed from “welcoming” to “inviting,” we discovered that lurking beneath the resistance to becoming an RIC congregation was some concern about how our congregation might change if we started intentionally inviting LGBTQ people to full participation in our congregation. Even some people who were in full support of “welcoming” struggled with the shift toward “inviting.” The difference between welcome and invitation became a center point of our conversation when we finally went through the process of becoming a Reconciling in Christ congregation. Ultimately our congregation grew through this conversation. We dug deeper into our self-proclaimed value of hospitality. The conversation opened new avenues for welcoming and inviting diverse groups of people. In time we were blessed with new LGBTQ members, people who had been living in our neighborhood but did not come through the doors until they knew they were invited.

While the difference between welcome and invitation takes on important dimensions in the context of reaching out to diverse groups of people, the conversation has purchase in every congregational context. In addition to actually inviting people into our congregations (an issue for another article!), how do we move toward being inviting congregations? One way is to live with the constant expectation that new people will show up. When I invite people to my house, I expect that visitors will show up on a certain day, at a certain time. You can be sure that on that day the house will be clean, the food will be ready, and I will not be taken by surprise when the doorbell rings. On another day a friend might stop by the house because she was in the neighborhood. I will welcome her in with open arms, but she need only take a look around to know I was not expecting any guests. Which do people experience when they come into our church buildings on Sunday mornings? Do they find us ready for guests or might they feel like they are crashing a family dinner? Is the space clean and free of clutter? Are the main doors clearly marked and unlocked? Are there more than enough places at the table (seating, communion elements, bulletins, refreshments, etc.)? When we greet a visitor, do we act pleasantly surprised to see them or do we treat them as an expected guest? Do we assume that there are visitors in the congregation in the way we do the announcements and the liturgy? Do congregational announcements in the local paper say “all are welcome” or “all are invited”?

Bethlehem is still growing toward being an inviting congregation and I certainly have a long way to go before I consider myself an inviting pastor. But we have found the language of invitation to be a helpful tool as we think about evangelism, outreach, and hospitality. Ultimately, of course, we seek to be an inviting church because we serve an inviting God. Wisdom stands at the door and cries out, “To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all who live” (Proverbs 8:4). The Lord invites, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” (Isaiah 55:1a). Jesus invites individual disciples to follow him. Each and every person who enters our doors is there because they were called by God; all come at the invitation of the Holy Spirit. Even when we forget to invite, the Holy Spirit is busy calling, gathering, and inviting people to follow Christ. How will we receive God’s invited ones when they come?

Survey: Is My Church Welcoming?

by Jonathan Malm

<http://mcsletstalk.org/welcoming/church-welcoming-survey/>

This survey was, in part, created and adapted from ideas presented in “Unwelcome: 50 Ways Churches Drive Away First-Time Visitors” by Jonathan Malm, and from conversations with Brian Zehr, Consultant with Intentional Impact.

Download the [Is My Church Welcoming?](#) survey in PDF format.

Hospitality as Welcoming Others, Welcoming Mystery

by Craig Mueller

<http://mcsletstalk.org/welcoming/hospitality-welcoming-others-welcoming-mystery/>

Most of the so-called welcoming churches value diversity and are quick to announce their openness to people of different backgrounds, races, sexual orientations, gender identities, religions, and socio-economic status. To that list my congregation intentionally adds an openness to those questioning and struggling with organized religion. The identities of individual worshippers are less fixed than they were previously. If I asked my parents if they were spiritual, they may not know what to say; Lutheran is the label that defines them.

Welcoming Bricolage

But things are different with younger generations, and, I have to admit, even with me. Bricolage is a delectably fun exotic word that describes an eclectic mix of things. A number of scholars use bricolage to describe the individualism inherent in today's religious and spiritual marketplace, and refers to a strategy of blending and mixing various elements to create something new. Diana Butler Bass argues that Christianity arose from a weaving of the "spiritual experience of Jesus, rabbinic Judaism, Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, and Roman paganism."¹ To Bass, many people have valid reasons for rejecting parts of their tradition while supplementing them with other experiences, and this approach signals the end of an outdated, irrelevant, or legalistic kind of religion. In its place, "people are engaging in religious bricolage; they are 'doing it themselves,' as they pick up fragments of practice from various sources at hand and construct new sorts of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other religions."²

I am a Lutheran pastor but have my own bricolage. I go to Benedictine monasteries for retreats and am considering becoming a Benedictine oblate. I practice yoga in which there are Hindu chants. I meditate and value insights from Buddhism. I am nourished by perspectives and practices from a variety of Christian and other spiritual traditions. I have to also admit that a part of me is agnostic, particularly as I compare my Christian theology to that which the media portrays—since it is linked with the religious right and accompanying values of certainty and exclusion.

Welcoming Uncertainty

Can churches be places that welcome questions? Can they be safe places for doubters, skeptics, and seekers? Can pastors be comfortable with not being able to answer every question, and but simply let some be? Are we able to value faith more than certainty and hold up mystery as an antidote to theological systems that are rigid and closed rather than open to the Other? In fact, can we begin to name God as Other and reflect on ways that we welcome the mystery and all that is unknown in us, not only in God but in other people, in the universe? The implications are many, from welcoming strangers in our country and in our congregation, to welcoming that within ourselves that is less familiar or even scary? How can welcoming the Other lead to spiritual growth not only as a church but as individuals?

Welcoming Newcomers

Maybe welcoming mystery is a key to welcoming newcomers to our congregations. After all, guests are strangers and many of them today do not fit our previous assumptions about potential church members. Benedictine spirituality talks about welcoming strangers as if we were welcoming Christ. Could church people begin to welcome newcomers unconditionally regardless of whether it leads to their belonging or even believing as we do? Can seekers and church shoppers who drop into our churches respond to a sense of openness, authenticity, and even mystery in the ways we preach, conduct the liturgy, and encounter strangers?

Jessicah Duckworth, a young theologian who has focused on these questions, suggests that the presence of newcomers is unsettling because the fluidity and liminality that defines their lives disturbs what we often consider to be “settled, determined, and fixed.”³ Duckworth goes so far as to say that the church will be saved in its relationship with these somewhat mysterious folks dropping into our churches these days.⁴ By listening to their questions rather than giving pat answers, we take seriously their context and the human condition of “suffering, pain, loss, angst, horror, grief, and shame.” In that sense, we walk together the way of the cross, and the dying and rising that is part of human life.⁵

Without the presence of newcomers, our congregations may die as they focus on themselves rather than strangers, the world, and God. “At the same time, these newcomer strangers lurk threateningly, representing by their presence a hope for a new community that requires the death of the old. . . Welcoming the Other and the stranger molds and shapes who we are and who we are to become.”⁶

In the future public worship in some contexts may be a fluid gathering of both active members that support a congregation financially and assume various service and leadership roles, and those who hunger for community and spiritual connection, but are suspicious of things institutional—such as membership and stewardship programs. David Lose wonders if the decline in religious participation is largely due to a generational shift in which younger people have multiple ways to consider what is important in their lives, are less likely to attend things that do not seem worth their time or effort, and are more likely to engage activities that will make a noticeable difference in the world. Congregations that still talk about membership, pledges, and friendship pads, for example, may find that Millennials may not respond to such language.⁷

It is possible to be a public church that welcomes people at whatever level of commitment they find themselves, while encouraging others to become more involved in the life and mission of the community. Sometimes I feel I am being a pastor to these two tracks of people, and to be honest, all kinds of variations on the themes. The default setting for most congregations is to welcome and get to know new people, and then invite them—in fact, expect them—to become members. Yet as we continue to name, that strategy does not work for a number of people today.

I suspect that the larger the worship attendance, the easier it is for folks to slip in and out of worship without being invited to coffee hour or cornered to teach Sunday School or sing in the choir. It is often smaller worshipping communities that, usually with good intention, risk suffocating newcomers by being overly friendly at first. Based on my experience, I expect many do not return because we either appear too needy or we give the impression that we are desperate for newer or younger members.

It is no doubt difficult for pastors and staff members to maneuver in a public church made up of both members and those in various levels of attendance, interest, or commitment. I am often torn between the institutional side of me that is concerned with offerings, attendance, and having enough people to maintain the ministry of the congregation, and the other side which wants folks to feel comfortable getting to know the community and participate at whatever level is comfortable for them.

As custodians of an institution, we need members who participate, contribute financially, volunteer, and assume leadership in our faith communities. Clearly, I believe we need to continue to invite people to become members of our congregations, conduct stewardship appeals, develop community, and provide opportunities for folks to grow in faith and commitment.

At the same time, I continue to struggle with how to integrate those who may consider our communities their church home but not necessarily under the terms and conditions we set. If our only invitation is to a new member class, a certain percentage of folks may never respond or, if pushed too strongly, may stop attending. If an invitation to a membership event may limit the number of people who respond, calling the gathering an introduction—or something similar—may allow such a session to appeal to both those on a membership track and those who we might consider seekers or inquirers.

The ways we welcome strangers and newcomers, the openness we have to mystery and not having all the answers, will lead us to encounter new and surprising people in our unique contexts, both as individuals and as faith communities. As we consider themes of welcome, there is always more. There are always more outsiders and people on the margins to not only welcome, but honor as beloved children of God. Our encounter with mystery means that God is always more as well. The Holy Spirit continues to open our minds and hearts in fresh, creative and sometimes unfathomable ways. The welcome we proclaim in baptism is more radical than we ever imagined.

Notes

1. [^Diana Butler Bass, Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening \(New York: HarperOne, 2012\), 151.](#)
 2. [^Bass, Christianity After Religion, 150.](#)
 3. [^Jessicah Krey Duckworth, Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church \(Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2013\), 35.](#)
 4. [^Duckworth, Wide Welcome, 37.](#)
 5. [^Duckworth, Wide Welcome, 101.](#)
 6. [^Duckworth, Wide Welcome, 108.](#)
 7. [^http://www.davidlose.net/2014/10/an-emboldening-thought/](http://www.davidlose.net/2014/10/an-emboldening-thought/)
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Welcoming Transgender People in Congregations

by Michael Fick and Kelly Faulstich

<http://mcsletstalk.org/welcoming/welcoming-transgender-people-congregations/>

"All are welcome" is a common sentiment expressed by congregations. Some display rainbow flags or signage as a sign of welcome to members of the LGBTQ community; or, the Reconciling in Christ cross may communicate welcome to Lutherans familiar with the symbol and the congregational process it represents. Asked to reflect on how we welcome transgender people in our congregations, we recognize that, as cisgender pastors, we are not experts, but we are people who have been gifted by the presence and participation of transgender persons in our congregations. We see the welcoming of people into our congregations to live, learn, and serve the gospel as a pastoral and congregational responsibility.

We believe it isn't the responsibility of transgender people to accomplish or facilitate their own welcoming. We serve with the conviction that the church is where the gospel is preached and the sacraments rightly administered (AC Article IV), where Jesus has come that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10), and where we have been freed in Christ to love God and neighbor (ELCA Social Statement).

Here are a several simple reflections on what we've experienced in living and serving alongside transgender and non-binary confirming people participating and living out their faith as children of God in a congregational setting.

- 1. *Transgender people are everywhere.*** They may already be worshipping and serving in your congregation, without publicly self-identifying. Many others may have family members who identify as transgender. Other will have walked with friends and coworkers who are transgender, non-binary confirming, or are in a coming-out process.
- 2. *Language holds power.*** Language that primarily defines humanity in terms of gender identity or expression is inessential to the communication of the gospel, and can indeed obscure the Good News in community (Galations 3:28). Encourage members to avoid conversations that engage in gossip around anyone's gender identity or expression. Always call people by the names they use for themselves, and listen for how people use pronouns to describe themselves, using the same in response.
- 3. *Respond to changes graciously and attentively.*** In the experience of some, coming out as transgender in a church community can be a great source of anxiety. If a member of the community begins to express gender in new way, or begins to use a different name or pronouns, model respect by responding in like manner. If the person self-identifies as transgender, or in a transition experience, rites for honoring a new name are available, reflecting the continuing baptismal covenant.
- 4. *Be thoughtful about groups within the church that identify in a gender-binary way.*** Consider practices that avoid tasks in congregational life in which the invitation to serve is gender-specific (recruiting "ladies" to help in the kitchen or "guys" to work on a renovation project. This is not to say that there will not be groups which gather men and women to share experiences and reflect on spiritual practices. Such groups and events should be encouraged to reflect, however, on how

transgender or gender non-binary confirming people may feel included or excluded by their invitations and activities.

5. ***Facilities should be clearly marked.*** Restrooms available to all people should be present, even if it simply means adjusting signage on existing restrooms. Describe simply what is inside: Single-occupant restroom, all-gender, multiple stall restroom, etc. This is helpful not only to gender non-binary confirming and transgender people, but for anyone who has children or has a caregiver. Providing a variety of options can be the best way to serve a diverse community.
6. ***When talking with children, the adults are listening, too.*** Consider avoiding language and practices with children that communicate that their gender is the most explicitly noticeable or important thing about them. This is important in Sunday School, Children's sermons and messages, and in the nursery. Adults will often hear these interactions and be affected by them, as well, as gender binaries are reinforced. Complimenting children primarily for being a "girl with a pretty dress" or a "boy who is athletic" are some simple examples. These messages communicate what we value most about the adults present, as well.
7. ***Review the questions asked on baptism, marriage, membership, and other forms.*** Provide opportunities for people to self-identify with regard to gender. And perhaps even more importantly: Review why or if such information is even relevant. Our publications and forms are some of the first experiences people have with our congregations. Be sure they are communicating values clearly.

Resources for defining and using terms such as cisgender, transgender, non gender binary

1. [An Ally's Guide to Terminology](#)
2. [Lutheran Introduction to Our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, & Queer Neighbors](#)

As I See It: Everyone Is Welcome to Worship...Except Children

by Frank C. Senn

<http://mcsletstalk.org/welcoming/see-everyone-welcome-worshipexcept-children/>

When I was growing up in the 1950s I had the impression that everyone in the congregation attended worship. Admittedly, my frame of reference is limited to what I knew my friends did in their churches or synagogues in urban Buffalo, NY. There were a few who went to Sunday School, but not worship. But their families didn't go to worship either. If their families went, they went. They went to Sunday School and also to worship. (Granted, there were no youth sports activities on Sunday mornings in those days.)

My family sat in the second pew from the front so we could see everything that was going on. Since my mother sang in the choir (from her vantage point she could make eye contact with us) my father sat with us. Drawing on the bulletin was OK, maybe during the sermon. But at points where we were supposed to participate we had the hymnal open and my father pointed to where we were in the order of service. We sang and spoke the words of text as much as we were able.

As far as I knew, Catholic friends went to Mass and Protestant kids attended their services. When I got to know Jewish kids in high school I know they went to Friday night (and sometimes Saturday morning) services in their synagogue. Sometimes I went with them on Friday night for the experience, and I brought Jewish friends to my church. Then we compared notes. In fact, in high school I sometimes went to worship with friends and they came to worship with me in my home congregation. Perhaps I was showing a little teen age independence from my family.

In the 1960s things changed. For whatever reasons, "children's church" became popular in Protestant congregations and Catholic parochial schools had "children's masses." So the intergenerational character of worship began to break down. The kids were being segregated out of the worshipping assembly so that parents could worship in peace and give attention (ahem!) to the sermon. In Protestant churches with longer sermons this was a real issue. The emerging megachurches of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Willow Creek) definitely provided separate children's activities during services (even though one would think that the youth would be attracted to the contemporary music). But segregation continued and in many congregations there are now youth services with contemporary music being held at the same time as more "traditional" services for the adults.

Some congregations compromise on to extent to which children are in worship. In the Catholic parish in my neighborhood and in the Episcopal parish we usually attend, children are dismissed after the gospel reading for "godly play" and they return during the greeting of peace. I know it isn't our rector's preference to exclude the children from worship; she inherited the practice and has made improvements on the situation. On one Sunday a month all the children remain in the nave for the full liturgy and leave for "godly play" after their communion. Where Lutheran pastors might give a children's homily, she engages the children in ritual actions. So they are invited to gather around the font for baptisms, gather around the reading from the Gospel book at the Gospel procession, and then carry the Gospel book in procession behind their own smaller processional cross to their classroom to study the reading, and then gather around the altar during the Great Thanksgiving where they are encouraged to hold their hands in

orans position and bow together after the concluding doxology of the Eucharistic prayer. Most of them also receive communion. I don't know how much more welcoming one could be to children.

I want to use this space to call attention to the published doctoral dissertation of a Korean Presbyterian pastor who received his Ph.D. from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary: Hwarang Moon, *Engraved Upon the Heart: Children, the Cognitively Challenged, and Liturgy's Influence on Faith Formation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015). This is a scholarly work on the subject of including children in the congregation's worship that draws upon ritual studies, liturgical history and theology, child psychology, and embodied mind theory.

Moon begins in chapter 1 with the role played by liturgy and ritual in public worship---a case that needs to be made to those in the Reformed tradition (and maybe for some Lutherans too!). Chapter 2 reviews Calvin's thoughts about the role of liturgy in faith formation. Moon's exposition of Calvin's concern for stable liturgical order (which is comparable to Luther's) will be revelatory to many readers. Moon then goes on in chapter 3 to discuss more generally how liturgy is a "tool" (not my favorite term here) for Christian faith formation and education (catechesis).

He goes on to discuss in chapter 4 how children and the cognitively challenged face challenges to their participation in church life in general and worship in particular. A rational approach to worship is especially difficult for them and Moon emphasizes the need to find more opportunities for bodily involvement in liturgy. (See the example of my Episcopal rector's approach and consider that children's homilies can also be pretty rationalistic.) In chapter 5 he discusses the research on what kind of religious concepts are available to cognitive abilities at different stages of development.

In chapter 6 Moon discusses "why children and cognitively challenged persons *should* (my emphasis) fully participate in the sacrament." Here he applies Calvin's sacramental theology to the issue. The proposal is that the Eucharist should be celebrated more frequently---a practice Calvin encouraged but was never able to implement in Geneva. But consider that the Eucharist is all about the body---what the body does externally and receives internally. Embodied mind theory recognizes that the mind is affected by what the body experiences and holds in its memory.

Finally, he asks in chapter 7, "what are the benefits for children and cognitively challenged individuals in worship" that is physically accessible to them? And what are the benefits to the church? I summarize Moon's itemization:

- Development through experience forms a positive self-image, and teaches social skills.
- Including cognitively challenged children helps families who deal with these children.
- Intergenerational worship that is inclusive of all ability levels is a sign of the fullness of the body of Christ.
- Friendships are promoted between the youth and adults of the congregation.
- Worshiping together as a church community nurtures the spirituality and virtue of the church members who learn from fellow members of different ages and abilities.
- Inclusion of children and the cognitive challenged perfects the covenant community. The sacraments are god's gifts of grace that are intended to build up the whole church.

In conclusion we need to remember that faith is not a rational assent to propositions; that's belief. Faith is

about trust and commitment. People gain faith not just by listening to words, but by acting on what they hear (Kierkegaard). Children and the cognitively challenged have as much to gain on this basis as any “normal” adults in the community, and much to give to those adults, as Jesus well know when he placed a child before his community of adult disciples as a model of faith.

On the Way: Aggressive Hospitality

by Benjamin Dueholm

<http://mcsletstalk.org/communion-and-community/way-aggressive-hospitality/>

How do we let people say “No”?

In tandem with many churches, Lutheran and otherwise, my own parish has moved toward a wider, more explicit, and less qualified invitation to Holy Communion. This development has been more pragmatic than principled, at least as far as my own role is concerned. I am generally persuaded by the long witness of the relationship between baptism and communion, the former giving shape to the Body in which the latter is discerned, blessed, given, received, and oriented toward works of mercy beyond.

At the same time I am mindful of how our practices--in our case, individual wafers and, in about half of our liturgies, pre-filled individual cups of wine and juice--display an individually-administered “dose” of grace from which it seems, and perhaps is, rather small to exclude anyone. Trifling commitment to baptism itself is not irrelevant, either, when we see it and only it as the line between those who can receive and those who can't. I've communed individuals with dementia whose relationship to the body of the baptized was beyond knowing. It is too difficult, I have provisionally concluded, to catechize the relationship between our sacramental practices in the space of a bulletin or an announcement from the altar. If you disagree, simply consider the impression left by outsiders who visit a Missouri Synod parish. I have yet to hear a guest extoll the high meaning they ascribe to the sacrament thus protected from profane hands.

That being said, I have continued to look for faithful ways to prioritize baptism, and preparation for it, as we include new members in the Body of Christ. As my colleagues [Ben Stewart](#) and [Frank Senn](#) point out in different ways in this issue, Holy Communion is about more than who is around the table; it's about what happens to us when we share in the event. Our liturgical setting for sharing the bread and cup expresses something much more intense than hospitality received in a moment of social or spiritual openness. “With this bread of life and cup of salvation you have united us with Christ, making us one with all your people,” we pray in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. The *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer* is just as explicit in its prayers after communion: “Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ...” This assumes an identity and an assent to the meaning of communion that we do not foreshadow when we invite people without qualification.

And if it's true, as many argue today, that the Eucharist did not originate in the remembrance of Christ's last meal with his disciples but in Jesus' radically inclusive meal practices throughout his ministry, the consequences are serious. Such an insight, were we to accept it, would probably require communing the unbaptized but would certainly require abandoning language of body, blood, remembrance, death and resurrection. As is so often the case with a doctrinal change, it is not enough to simply delete a prohibition or add a statement of welcome; a whole liturgy and way of being church is bound up in the baptized, embodied identity of the people receiving the sacrament that would have to be unwound and rewritten in substantial ways in order to avoid incoherence.

Or worse: a kind of aggression in our hospitality that is left when we don't grant anyone a means of opting out. A problem with the desperately unqualified invitation is that it makes staying in one's seat look an awful lot like being ill-natured. Why else, after all, would anyone not wish to break bread with us? "Is there a pastorally appropriate way to invite a devout Muslim to communion?" Ben Stewart asks, and I admit I don't know what that would look like. Not every unbaptized person is a "none." And inside every "none" is not a Christian waiting to be invited out. One aspect of hospitality is allowing people to refrain, not just for the sake of their own scruples but for the sake of an expectation of conduct that they might not wish to bear at their nephew's first communion service. It is possible to drop our communal barriers so fully as to define everyone, including our Hindu or atheist neighbors, as suddenly part of a mystical body that we happen to be specially privileged to identify.

That is hardly to say that I wish to police my communion line for unbaptized dabblers or Jewish uncles gang-pressed into eating something everyone around them considers body and blood. To the extent that the essential relationship of baptism to communion is presented as a matter for policing it is largely being misunderstood. But our invitations don't simply remove obstacles; they also construct our understanding of our community and of those we invite. If we're truly anxious to be inclusive and missional, we can simply acknowledge that every life-giving verbal interaction is in some sense a proclamation of Gospel and that every meal shared in a group (or eaten by one person thinking of other people) is sacramental. Then everyone who talks, listens, reads and eats is already in church all the time. The numbers problem is solved, the relevance of our faith is established by definition, and we can all go and do something useful and necessary with our time and our talents.

But while it's tempting to follow this logic all the way to turning the church keys over to the bank and getting a regular job, no one seems willing to do so. And that leads me to the difficult truth that we do not really want our religious identity to be as thin as our ritual practice is tending. Because that's the thing: thin ritual renders a thin identity. There is a mismatch, then, between the "all" of the invitation and the "we thank you for feeding us" of the final prayer, a mismatch between a thinly-conceived Body and a thickly-experienced Sacrament. At the heart of even the most ham-handed and triumphalist gesture of welcome is an honest desire to bring people into something we consider valuable, not trivial. It is not, to borrow Kierkegaard's phrase, merchandise to be given away in the church's end-time fire sale.

Instead, as we deliberate about our communion practices, it's important to remember what we imagine worshipers are affirming--about themselves, each other, and God--by sharing in a holy meal. And it's equally important to leave room for the world to say "Thank you, but not for me."

Let's Talk

Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod

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