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# GROWTH POINTS

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## A Mark of a Mature Church

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The marks of a church are normally described as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. However, a mark of a mature church is also seen in its hospitality.

### Hospitality is an ancient expectation.

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Early stories of hospitality in the Old Testament often found the hosts in close relationship with God. One of the most important stories is found in Genesis 18 where Abraham and Sarah welcomed three strangers, one of whom was the Lord. They welcomed the strangers as part of the ancient social custom of care, aid, and protection. Special recognition is given to Abraham by the writer of Hebrews: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

### Hospitality is part of the sacred Law.

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After the nation of Israel left Egypt, among the many laws God gave to them was to be hospitable. “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as

yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:22-24).

The concept of a being a stranger was fundamental of Israel’s identity. God told Abraham his descendants would be “strangers in a land that is not theirs” (Genesis 15:13). Their experiences as strangers reminded them to depend on God, which resulted in the need for gratitude and obedience.

Hospitality in the Old Testament is closely connected to the recognition of God’s lordship, as well as his presence and provision.

### Hospitality is modeled by Jesus.

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Jesus is seen as both a stranger and a host in the New Testament. After his birth, his mother “wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).

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As he began to preach and teach, his own towns people “got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff” (Luke 4:29).

The apostle John records his rejection as a stranger: “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (1:10-11).

As a host, Jesus welcomed all who desired to come to him. Tax collectors (Luke 5:27-32), sinners (Luke 7:36-50), and the lost (Luke 19:1-10). His words, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest,” take on a powerful emotion when compared to his own rejection as a stranger to his own people.

Jesus also challenged the normal understanding of hospitality during his time on earth. Rather than welcoming family, friends, and the wealthy, i.e., those who could pay one back, he said to be hospitable to those who are poor, thirsty, hungry, lame, blind, crippled, the ones who cannot pay one back. (Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 14:12-14).

The practice of hospitality is clearly linked to Jesus in his incarnation, life, and teachings. His giving and receiving of hospitality led many to recognize him as their Lord and Savior.

## Hospitality is key to church growth.

Church growth in the early church was linked directly to the practice of hospitality.

The birth of the church, as recorded in Acts, resulted in 3,000 people added in one day to the community of faith. Hospitality was immediately needed to host the numerous new believers in Christ. They devoted themselves to “fellowship,” met “house to house,” were “taking their meals together,” and “began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need” (Acts 2:42-46).

Spiritual growth and evangelism took place through hospitality in homes. Paul reminded the early believers he “did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20:20). Stories of salvation, e.g. Cornelius (10:1-48), Lydia (16:14-15), and the jailer (16:25-40), all took place in relation to hospitality in the homes of those converted.

Mature churches place a high value on being hospitable to those inside and outside the church. Mature churches contribute “to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality” (Romans 12:13). They are “hospitable to one another without complaint” (1 Peter 4:9). And, they especially seek to “Let brotherly love continue.” They follow the admonition “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers” (Hebrews 13:1-2).

Now is a good time to reflect on your church’s practice of hospitality. How well are you doing? Do newcomers to your church sense the love, care, and welcome they should?

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