

HOSPITALITY

Paul R. Abernathy

An Opening Word: A Restatement of Purpose

I look at the world in which I live and the church in which I labor and I see an increasingly vast mix of peoples and competing, often conflicting, sometimes violently incompatible perspectives, many of which, generally, are religious in nature and, specifically, related to views of God. A state of existence that is one aspect of what I define as pluralism. A state of existence in which individuals, both as persons and groups, live in proximity with “the other”. I look again at my world and church and see, on the extremes, two characteristic and contrary responses – positive acceptance and negative reactivity.¹

I regard myself as a progressive Christian, one who embraces more the mythological and metaphorical truth and less the purported historical facts of the gospel narrative, and as a pluralist, one who wills to welcome “the other”, both in others and, indeed, in himself. From the standpoint of this worldview, I ask: Can I as a Christian and can the church as a Christian community continue to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ”² in a pluralistic world of diverse peoples and ideologies? In seeking to address and answer this question, I call for a revolution in Christian evangelism, so that its primary aim is one of conversation and not conversion of “the other” – a conversation meant to build bridges of mutual sympathy, bridges that, in turn, may lead to greater pathways of peace.³

Moreover, in response to my inquiry, I express my hope that each of us may behold “the other” as God’s own, however it is that we each understand God, and, indeed, as such, as our own. I imagine a world and a church in which God, again, however God is variously understood, might become a common source of identity for all. I find the theoretical root of my hope in the doctrine of the Trinity. As God is ever in eternal and internal interrelation, so, too, is all of creation formed in that image.

If that is so, then, I ask: How can the peoples of the world and church live into that image? What is the methodology that can give living shape to the theory? I reply: the ethical practice of hospitality.⁴

Definition

Hospitality, first and foremost, is a tradition of welcome between host and guest – who often, in relation, begin as strangers or “the other” to each other – primarily inherited from ancient Greek and near-Eastern cultures. In that inheritance, hospitality is a highly structured way of being in the world of relationships, indeed, a way of being in community. Each party to the social, relational encounter and experience has a role to play – the host, to extend welcome with grace and the guest to receive the welcome graciously. Hospitality was so deeply embedded in human social fabric of the civilizations of our forebears that it was seen to be part and parcel of the structure of the

cosmos. As John Koenig writes, “according to this tradition...hospitality is seen as one of the pillars of morality upon which the universe stands. When guests or hosts violate their obligations to each other, the whole world shakes and retribution follows.”⁵

As a Christian and as a student of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, the examples of this ancient tradition in the sacred book of my faith community are not hard to find.

Biblical Illustrations

In the Hebrew Scriptures, one of the most prominent examples of hospitality is the story of Abraham and the three strangers, who turn out to be divine beings bearing a message of glad tidings that Sarah will give birth to Isaac, the long sought, long prophesied child of promise.⁶ What fascinates me about this story is not so much the angelic proclamation of the coming fulfillment of the destiny of Abraham and Sarah, however significant that is in the sweep of the biblical story. Rather what intrigues me more are the elaborate details of the welcome offered by Abraham and received by his guests, indicative of the essential role hospitality played in establishing and ensuring relational bonds between and among people, even and especially when they were strangers one to another. Abraham, first, greeted the strangers, running to them and bowing before them. Beseeching them to stay, he brought water to wash their feet and invited them to rest under a tree then offered them a meal of bread, freshly prepared meat, butter, and milk.

So compelling was this tale, not only, I believe, for its theological import, but also for its social implications that by the close of the first century of the Common Era, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews was moved to refer to it this admonishment to the fledgling and possibly persecuted Christian community in Jerusalem: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”⁷

The New Testament is verily a cup overflowing with references to hospitality. The parables of Jesus are a treasure trove of illustrations. Among the many examples, I mention only three:

The Parable of the Prodigal Son⁸ is a story of a younger son’s preemptive demand of his inheritance, in effect, wishing his father were dead, followed by his irresponsible expenditure of that birthright and the father’s even more extravagant expenditure of a forgiving love and a reconciling welcome. In recounting this story, preachers and teachers alike often mention the grave dissimilarity between the father’s generous, even lavish greeting and the older brother’s refusal to embrace the obligations of hospitality in welcoming his brother’s return. That element of the story, indeed, is present, illustrating in the contrast both how essential hospitality was to ancient cultures and what happens when the obligations are embraced (reunion, in this case between the father and his younger son) and rejected (self-alienation, in this case, the older brother’s withdrawal from the family circle and celebration). However, I would add that a key ingredient to this story is the younger son’s hospitality in his recognition of

the stranger, “the other” in himself. It was in that far away land that he, having fallen on hard times, “came to himself”, recognizing both his grievous error and his true self as a child in his father’s household, and, in that dual recognition, determined to go home.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan⁹ tells the tale of a man, ostensibly a Jew, who was beaten, robbed, and left for dead, but is rescued, literally, saved by the ministrations of a Samaritan. Here, too, a contrast is made between the care afforded by the Samaritan and the inactions of others, a priest and a Levite, who, seeing the man in distress, pass by on the other side without offering assistance. At a deeper level, I think, is the ethical dilemma and decision regarding what principles or values take precedence, particularly in a time of crisis – religious rites and cultic practices, which presumably the priest and the Levite observed, hence, to stop and give aid would have made them ritually unclean and unfit for Temple service or the obligations of hospitality to a stranger in need. At the deepest level, I believe, is the discernment that not even the most historically onerous and ruinous enmity in intercultural relations, as was certainly characterized by Jews and Samaritans, need be, *ought* be an impediment to the ministry of hospitality. In the crucible of social intercourse, even within the incontestable context of historic cultural conditioning, human choice still matters. (On this point, I find especial relevance in our long term and current day global hostilities between and among faith traditions, particularly those involving Christians, Jews, and Muslims.)

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats,¹⁰ in which Matthew casts Jesus in the role of the Messiah-King on Judgment Day. He praises the sheep (a metaphor for the righteous ones, those who lived in right relationship with God) who, in serving the least, the last, and the lost had given *him* water for his thirst and food for his hunger, provided clothing to cover his nakedness and shelter when he was homeless, granted welcome when he was a stranger and care when he was sick, and visited him when he was imprisoned. The righteous are shocked, for they cannot recall having served Jesus in such ways. He comforts them, saying, “As you did it to the least of my sisters and brothers, you did it to me”. The goats (a symbol of those who, in their inaction, forsook their true calling and, thus, were considered wicked or, in my reading, alien to and alienated from their authentic humanity) are condemned, for they, in refusing hospitality to the least, have withheld it from Jesus. As Jesus appears unrecognized in the presence or person of the least, here, too, is an echo of the story of Abraham and the three strangers and the Epistle to the Hebrews admonition about entertaining strangers. (Additionally, a point to be drawn from this parable, I think, is that Jesus or the presence of the divine may often, if not always appear in the form of the stranger in need.)

According to the gospel narrative, not only did Jesus teach hospitality, he also demonstrated a generosity of welcome in his associations with others. It may be said that Jesus practiced what he preached. Jesus shared his table and broke bread, a most intimate

act of welcome, with all manner of people, whether socially prominent Pharisees and elders¹¹ or, even in the face of their withering criticism, those cultural pariahs, the “tax collectors and sinners”.¹²

Regarding tax collectors – presumably Jews, who, in collecting taxes for the Roman Empire standardized the practice of assessing an additional amount for themselves, and, thus, were considered traitors of the people – one story is especially conspicuous in combining elements of hospitality (with a surprising twist), in general, and table fellowship, in particular. The story of Zaccheus.¹³ When Jesus came to town, Zaccheus, desperate to catch sight of him and being short in stature, climbed a tree so to be able to see over the gathering crowd. Jesus, looking up, noticed Zaccheus, invited him to come down, and, then, incredibly, as the guest taking the role of the host in initiating the action, invited himself to Zaccheus’s home for supper. What a moment of hospitality it must have been! Here, the conversation led to a conversion experience, with Zaccheus, clearly affected both in spirit and in substance, pledging to “give half of all I own to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone, to pay back four times as much”.

Jesus’ ministry of hospitality is echoed throughout the New Testament epistles. The Apostle Paul made a point of appealing to Christian congregations to practice the hospitality of inclusivity, particularly when the community gathered for fellowship and feast.¹⁴ Apparently, these apostolic reminders were necessary, for, even within the nascent communities of Christian faith, rivalries and disaffections made common the forsaking of the obligation of hospitality.

This highlights what Koenig regards as the “shadow side” of hospitality. I use his commentary to close this section of this chapter, for it offers both a searing critique and a sobering caution for any who desire and dare risk the ministry of hospitality, which, I believe, is part and parcel of *any* human relationship:

Some of us will always be deemed unacceptable, unworthy of entry to the place or company we seek. And we in turn will fail to welcome others when we occupy the post of doorkeeper. Indeed, even when welcoming does happen, we sometimes allow it to degenerate into a trading of polite formalities, or worse, a time of mutual abuse on the part of guests and hosts. The ancient psalmist was smarting from a hospitality betrayed when he wrote: “Even my bosom friend in whom I trust, who ate of my bread, has lifted up his heel against me” (Psalm 41.9). Competition, prejudice, ostracism – all these occur with regularity in our attempts to be hospitable.¹⁵

Personal Illustrations

During my sabbatical, I, as a progressive Christian and pluralist, set out to explore the larger world and church. I desired to examine a reimagining of the ministry of evangelism as conversation in which people share their life’s stories for purposes of greater mutual understanding, and not conversion by which people seek to convince one another of the truth of their respective perspectives. I desired to engage “the other” and to be “the

other”. I desired purposefully to put myself in places not my own and with people who, largely, in culture and conviction, are not my own. I desired to test whether conversation as I describe it is possible, and, if possible, to discern the essential situational attributes that contribute to its occurrence.

I learned many things. Chief among them is the power of hospitality to hold in gracious tension two realities or recognitions. First, the recognition of human difference, for hospitality, by definition, primarily or, at least, often is an act of the giving and receiving of welcome between and among strangers. Second, the recognition that human difference intrinsically need not be a barrier that divides individuals or persons, one from another, for hospitality, in action, is a labor of reconciliation.

Where did I learn this? Through my encounters with people and ensuing moments of hospitality graciously offered and gratefully received. I share but three, all taken from the South African leg of the sabbatical journey:

Christina Gasa is an 80-year-old Zulu grandmother, who lives in the valley near the town of Hillcrest in the region of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Christina suffers from cataracts and other disabilities of aging. As many of her children have died from AIDS, she cares for nine grandchildren. Her home, comprised of two small rooms, stands on a narrow flat outcropping about a kilometer from the main road, down a steep long hill, the final approach reachable only on foot. I accompanied representatives of Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Hillcrest, who had come to assess Christina’s life care needs and to offer help. This was and remains a proverbial unforgettable, perhaps, life-changing experience. Christina offered a selfless hospitality in welcoming us into her home, a gracious humility in accepting whatever help we offered (which, truth to tell, was far short of her needs), and an admirable faith and fortitude in coping with her daily dilemmas. Christina, in the two hour’s time of our visit, taught or re-taught me a number of things: that physical poverty does not mean that one lacks wealth, for her spirit was abundant in its capacity to give of herself, both to her grandchildren and to us; that an abiding, unassailable faith in God is honorable and is to be respected, even, perhaps especially from the standpoint of a skeptical believer like me; that when I complain about my “various worries and woes” I must try to do so in fair relation to their severity, for the daily burden of some others is far weightier than anything I endure; and, especially, that graciousness and hospitality have much to do with a true welcome and acceptance of “the other”. On this last point, I was “the other” in Christina’s home, yet she received me as I was one of her own whom she had known for a lifetime. Upon entering a Zulu home, it is customary to sit immediately without being asked. To do otherwise would be an insult. Yet, before I could sit down on the floor, Christina rushed to bring me a mat upon which I could sit. She did this, I believe, not because I was a priest, an “uZwe” or “carer”, but because I was who I am, a person who had come into her home. In the spirit of the Zulu greeting or word of hello, “sawubona”, meaning, “I see you”, she, simply and profoundly, had seen and welcomed me.

That same afternoon, we visited the home of Edie Zondi, a member of the Xhosa tribe, whose granddaughter, Slindiwe, had served as our translator during our visit with Christina. Edie was so pleased that we had come into her home, also located in the Hillcrest valley region. With a joyful enthusiasm, she proclaimed, deliberately, several times, “I am so glad that you have come to *my house*” and “You honor me by coming to *my house*”, both times, stressing the words “my” and “house”. Here, as with Christina, I felt the palpable presence of a sacred spirit of hospitality. Over tea and biscuits, Edie began to speak of her daughter’s death, some years before, due to AIDS. In recounting her experience, she forlornly, solemnly repeated the question that she had asked many times, “God, why did you let AIDS come to *my house*?”, again, stressing the words “my” and “house”. Immediately, I was struck with the thought that Edie felt that the God, in whom she had placed her trust, whether as divine host or guest, had not shown her and her household the hospitality of mercy. In the next instant, I was struck by an apprehension that Edie was asking me, a priest, for an explanation or some wise word so to help her make sense out of nonsense. Caught up in my anxiety, I was mute. After a moment’s silence, Edie, then, said, “I heard his voice saying to me, ‘I stand at the door and knock. To those who open the door, I will enter and dwell with them.’” I recognized the words as a paraphrase of Jesus’ words in the Book of Revelation.¹⁶ For Edie, this was a word of divine hospitality, offering solace and strength, which, she had received. Edie’s loss remained great. However, she could say, her voice, now wistfully soft, but no less convicted, “I know that man” (meaning God). There was a time when I might have described such faith as sincere, but simplistic. However, here, I sensed a profundity in Edie’s ever holding in tension her anguish and her assurance – not one alone or one without the other, but rather, the latter in spite or, indeed, because of the former. There is nothing simplistic (perhaps simple, but, again, not simplistic) about maintaining such a daily, delicate spiritual balance. Finally, I understood. She had not been asking me for insight; much less had she sought to put me on the spot, for that would have been inhospitable. Rather, she, vulnerably, ingenuously, and riskily, was telling me her story. She hospitably was opening the home of her heart to me. As with Edie’s faith, so, too, here – there is nothing simple about her taking the great and grave risk to share with me her life’s chronicle of the sorrows of loss and the joys of discovery.

At the behest of a friend, Eliza Getman, her friend, Margaret (Margie) Boardman, with her children, Robyn and Alex, ages eleven and seven, respectively, offered, sight unseen, my wife, Pontheolla, and me lodging in a guest flat during our stay in KwaZulu-Natal. Margie’s husband, Rory, a member of the merchant marine, was shipboard and half way around the world. Margie, a white South African, welcomed us with the most gracious hospitality, literally giving us free access to her property. Over the course of nearly two weeks, we formed a tender bond that involved many generous moments of the mutual sharing of our stories and experiences, our perceptions of religion and politics, culture and race, both in South Africa and the United States, and, yes, much

laughter. Two such moments, in particular, stand out. One afternoon, we were watching a television program, the broadcast language of which was Afrikaans. Margie, with inconspicuous and casual ease, served as our translator. This led, perhaps not predictably, but no less unnaturally into a conversation about South African apartheid, its establishment and disestablishment, current day race relations, and attitudes of white South Africans, both Afrikaaner and English. Potentially sensitive subjects all. The spirit of our converse, however, was open and honest, indeed, not merely civil, but also empathetic, even in the course of our exchange of views when our differences in race, nationality, and personal history became most manifest. In another conversation, Margie shared the experiences of her family traveling in America. She recounted, with obvious incredulity, one particular incident. Someone, hearing her accent, asked her, "Where are you from?" Margie replied, "South Africa". This elicited the person's skeptical response, "But you can't be from South Africa. You're not black." After our gales of laughter and Ponthoolla's and my earnest apologies for our country-cousin's ignorance, we talked at some length about the current American worldview of unilateralism and isolationism of which this vignette from her American travels perhaps had served as a small, but no less revealing expression. Another potentially sensitive subject engaged with grace – mutually open, non-reproving, on her part, and non-defensive, on our part. Indeed, in both conversations, we, it seemed, shared the spirit of a search for understanding. There were moments when we said, "Aha", aware that some common element in our human experiences had been revealed. Equally, there were moments when we were made aware of how very different we are. Although trusting that we, at no time, said everything that we could have said, at no time did I perceive any evidence of the caution or suspicion that can arise at the dawning of the awareness of difference. Perhaps this was because we were involved in the hospitable act of desiring to know more about "the other" with little, verily, no intent of proving the other wrong.

Christina Gasa. Edie Zondi. Margie Boardman. Only three of the many people I encountered during the course of my sabbatical. Only three of the many people who taught me much about hospitality, thereby transforming an ancient biblical and abstract concept into a present and living reality. Only three of the many people from whose welcome, upon long (and, no doubt, continuing) reflection, I have discerned the following principles of hospitality or aspects of an encounter and conversation with "the other".

Principles

The principles are listed in the order of their "appearance"; following the first, each evolving from the one preceding.

- I. Personal Encounter. A willingness to meet with "the other" and, as opportunity and occasion arise, sharing and listening to the life's stories, one of another. Personal stories, which reflect one's life experiences, reveal who one is and how

one perceives and discerns reality far more truly than the formal documents of the doctrine or dogma to which one ascribes.

- II. Civility. Personal encounter must be mutually kind. The sharing of stories is not an occasion to seek the perceived flaws or fallacies in the life's narrative of another, so to prove the superiority of one's point of view. Rather, the purpose of personal encounter is mutual understanding, the achievement of which requires a discernable and common spirit of safety, which, in turn, encourages vulnerability. Civility lies at the root of such a temperament or environment of encounter.
- III. Commonality. A willingness and ability to search for common elements between one's human experience and that of another, so to be prepared to recognize and acknowledge mutuality and similitude as well as difference.
- IV. Empathy. Feeling *in* – an opposed to sympathy or feeling *with* – the other. To empathize is to seek to be in the other's reality, to see and hear, think and feel what the other experiences. To empathize rather than to sympathize allows one to know or identify with the other, even and especially when commonality is not found and, hence, one cannot agree with the other.
- V. The Suspension of Judgment. The seed and the fruit, the planting and the product of empathy. A willingness and ability to listen intently in an unfiltered way. That is, to listen "outside the box", beyond the construct of one's own worldview and the framework of one's own history and memory, native instinct and attained insights, and established patterns of discernment, so to hear the story of the other clearly, empathetically through the ears of her/his reality.¹⁷
- VI. The Inevitability of Conflict. A manifestation of the impossibility of completely stepping outside of one's self. Any encounter with "the other" always reveals differences and, hence, the potential for disagreement. Personal encounter calls for a guileless trust, but not an imprudent naïveté. Armed¹⁸ with this awareness, one may be prepared to engage conflict creatively: (a) recognizing its appearance as unremarkable, indeed, normal, (b) being able to respond with calm acceptance, and (c) using it as a lens to see one's self more clearly, that is, through the eyes of another.
- VII. The Limits of Conversation. Knowing and understanding that some differences cannot be resolved. When conflicts arise, consensus¹⁹ is not always possible,²⁰ particularly when the conflict is about the contrary or conflicting truth claims between and among faith traditions, ethical mores, or belief systems.
- VIII. Self-Examination. An ability *and* willingness to engage in self-criticism, grounded in the awareness that one does not possess all or, even, *the* truth, but rather, only one's own truth, that is, one's sense of things, one's perception of reality, or, perhaps, at best, the meaning and destiny of one's own life.

- IX. Religion. Being aware that religion, meaning that which pertains to life's meaning and destiny, is at the root of many, if not all differences that arise in encounter with another. As such, being able to look more deeply underneath at what may be the presenting issues or concepts of the differences to see the heart of the matter.

Applications

Throughout my sabbatical, from its conception to its preparation through its execution, whenever I have contemplated the ramifications for “the church”,²¹ I have been thinking of my community, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Capitol Hill, Washington, DC. Hence, I ask: What would it look like if we of the St. Mark's community sought to encounter “the other” and to expose and engage our “inner otherness”?

However, before sharing a few ideas here, it is important that I acknowledge activities undertaken by the St. Mark's community during the course of the sabbatical. Perhaps it is uncommon for congregations actively to engage the theme of a sabbatical in tandem with the clergy person (for that matter, it may be uncommon for the clergy person to discern a theme and design the sabbatical accordingly!). However, that is precisely what my community decided to do – “to go along for the ride, at home”, sharing in the experience of engagement with “the other”.

Guest Preacher Series, being a chief expression of congregational engagement in the sabbatical. Throughout the sabbatical period, the following guest preachers, who were selected because they represented a number of faith or belief traditions and perspectives within those traditions, graced St. Mark's pulpit. Their charge – each, speaking from her/his individual worldview, being “the other” among us and we as “the other” to them, through the medium of homiletical “conversation” – was to engage and challenge St. Mark's liberal and progressive ethos, reminding us that we are a community within a world of vastly different communities.

- The Rev. Benjamin Pratt, United Methodist minister and therapist, retired, Alexandria, VA
- Imam Yusef Saleem, Masjid Muhammed, Washington, DC
- Father Robert Drinan, S.J., Professor, Georgetown University Law Center, Washington, DC
- Tara Brach, Ph.D., Founder, Insight Meditation Community of Washington, DC
- The Rev. Canon Eugene Sutton, Canon Pastor, Washington National Cathedral, Washington, DC
- Rabbi Marc Gopin, Ph.D., James H. Laue Professor of World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA
- The Right Rev. Gayle Harris, Suffragan Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, Boston
- Ray Suarez, Senior Correspondent, the nationally syndicated *The News Hour*, Public Broadcasting Station, Channel 8, Washington, DC
- Sister Simone Campbell, National Coordinator, NETWORK: A Catholic Social Justice Lobby

- The Right Rev. John Shelby Spong, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark, retired

During an extended period for conversation after the Sunday morning's main service of worship, the following questions were asked of each preacher (depending on the person's faith tradition, the third question was altered accordingly):

1. When you interact with individuals of other faiths, what do you find most difficult? What do you find most rewarding?
2. Can you identify important aspects of your faith that were shaped or informed by faiths other than Christianity?
3. You adhere to the Episcopal tradition. As you look at other traditions, what do you think would be most valuable for us to focus on as we try to expand our own faith journey? What do you think would be most valuable for others to focus on from the Episcopal tradition?

Now, returning to the question with which I opened this section: What would it look like if we of the St. Mark's community sought to encounter "the other" and to expose and engage our "inner otherness"?

Encountering & Engaging "the Other"
A Few (for, doubtless, there are countless other) Ideas²²
(Listed alphabetically)

Intentional "Otherness". A self-selected body of St. Mark's members, in response to a parish-wide invitation, gathers to consider "joining" for a determined period (say, three to six months) non-Christian and non-progressive Christian worship communities, so to share in the life of those communities. The St. Mark's group meets for a specified period of preparation: (a) to consider the principles of hospitality (above) or to engage in another designated course of orientation, (b) to develop a list of "the communities of interest", (c) to divide the group into pairs (following the gospel principle of sending missionaries out two-by-two), (d) to draft a proposal for submission to the communities, explaining the undertaking, inquiring about the degree of potential reciprocal interest and, if interested, requesting their consents, and, upon the reception of affirmative responses from the selected communities, (e) to match pair groupings to communities. During the period of engagement, the members of the group meet regularly to share their experiences, paying especial attention to differences and similarities in their encounters. Findings, such as can be gathered, are to be shared with the visited communities and the larger St. Mark's community.

International Community – a Gathering Place. Washington, DC is a gathering place of international peoples, represented, for example, by the diplomatic community and student populations. What would it look like if St. Mark's were to reflect this characteristic feature of our larger DC world and become "a gathering place"? For example, designing and hosting forums that bring together diverse, perhaps even contending individuals or groups for the purposes of dialogue and understanding, or seeking and reaching out to

international students, offering “a home away from home” with opportunities to learn from their experiences as “strangers in a foreign land”.

Open Church. Advertise, especially in the Capitol Hill community, and open the nave on weekdays for daily prayer and quiet space (for example, Monday through Friday, 8.00 a.m. – 4.00 p.m.) for a prescribed trial period of six months. Recruit volunteers from the St. Mark’s community to serve, two-by-two for two to three hour periods, as parish representatives, who are prepared to offer on site information (parish history, church architecture, etc.) and assistance (restroom location, directions, etc.), conversation with visitors, as the occasions and opportunities present themselves, and building security.

Relationships – International. An international relations committee makes recommendations to the Vestry annually as to the scope and shape of congregational global relations for mutual benefit with parish-based institutions and individuals (e.g., St. James’s Anglican Church, Piccadilly, Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Hillcrest, South Africa, St. James Episcopal Church, Florence, Italy). Our now historic association with the Episcopal community in Honduras, which continues to inspire the interest of parishioners, remains a primary field of engagement. Through these relationships, St. Mark’s desires to reach out to the world, to give and to receive.

Relationships – Local. The Outreach Board identifies neighboring non-Episcopal, non-Christian communities with whom St. Mark’s may partner in engaging in relevant social service ministry, centered on the themes of love and justice. Through such efforts, conversations between and among members of the various communities, each being “the other” to the others, may arise naturally and proceed with depth and intentionality.

Relationships – Local: The Hill. Taking the risk of breaching the divide that some of us place between the religious and political realms, a self-selected body of St. Mark’s members, in response to a parish-wide invitation, and parishioners invited specifically for their expertise and experience, gather to consider becoming a part of a parish-sanctioned, well-informed, intentional and concentrated and continual (not “one-stop”) lobbying effort. The St. Mark’s group meets for a specified period of preparation: (a) to define the nature and scope of lobbying activity, which may involve discerning necessary distinctions, for example, between theoretical principles (charity as acts of kindness and justice as changing structures) and between practical actions (sharing information and seeking to change opinions), (b) to define the issue or issues (i.e., frame the focus), e.g., DC-related issues (education, housing, voting rights), global issues (environment, Millennium Development Goals), and/or international issues (Middle East) (c) to educate and to train, and, then, (d) to meet with Episcopal representatives and senators and their congressional staffers.

Relationships – Local: The City. Guided by the social and pastoral rubric of addressing not only the presenting symptom, but also the underlying systemic and institutional causes of economic disparity, the Vestry considers renewing St. Mark’s parish membership, terminated in 1998, in the Washington Interfaith Network. WIN, one of over 60 affiliates of the Industrial Areas Foundation, is a multi-ethnic, interfaith, non-

partisan politically active grassroots organization, consisting of more than 45 dues-paying member congregations, schools, union locals and other entities working to improve life in the District of Columbia for all residents.

Scholars in Residence. As an extension of the Guest Preacher Series, invite a person who is recognized in a field of study, which, in its subject and substance, is dissimilar to the culture and spirit of St. Mark's, and chosen in accord with a determined parish-wide theme, to join in the life of our community for an academic semester. The person would be asked to lecture, teach, and preach, using the theme as a guide.

Engaging our "Inner Otherness" – One Idea

For many years, an ongoing discourse within the St. Mark's community is the conversation and, at times, contretemps between skeptics and believers. A salient aspect of our history includes a *phoenix-rising-from-the-ashes* period some fifty years ago; a rebirth and revitalization through the intentional recruitment and inclusion of disaffected Christians who previously had fled the rigid indoctrination of the institutional church. For a substantial time, our communal atmosphere has been most life giving for those who questioned, even rejected the Christian faith – doubters and disbelievers, agnostics and atheists. Over time, those who have joined our community, although, to a person, thoughtful and questioning, include large and increasing numbers of believers, those who, in their personal histories, have remained a part of or are new to the institutional church, hence, in either case, come without a deep-seated skepticism regarding matters of faith and polity. Here is an unprobed ground for dialogue and engagement, the form or forms of which are to be determined. The purpose of this dialogue and engagement is not to resolve which group "wins", for the inherent rightness of either or any position, given that such discernment is in the mind of the holder, is not a relevant, even reasonable consideration, but rather, to assist every member of our community to appreciate "the other".

Conclusion

I conclude by beginning, for this writing, representing the sabbatical experience of the past six months, is but a prelude to the coming years of life and labor with my parish, my people.

¹ *Reflections on Pluralism*, page 3.

² From *The Baptismal Covenant*, The (American) Book of Common Prayer, page 306.

³ *Reflections on Pluralism*, page 4.

⁴ For this idea, I am indebted to John Koenig, Professor of New Testament at the General Theological Seminary, New York City, and his book, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1985) and Martin E. Marty, the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago, and his book, *When Faiths Collide* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), particularly chapter six, *The Risk of Hospitality*. I also have been influenced, for many years, by the writings of Henri Nouwen, particularly *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975), particularly the second movement, *From Hostility to Hospitality*.

⁵ *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*, page 2.

⁶ Genesis 18.1-14

⁷ Hebrews 13.2

⁸ Luke 15.11-32

⁹ Luke 10.30-37

¹⁰ Matthew 25.31-46

¹¹ See, for example, Luke 7.36.

¹² Mark 2.16

¹³ Luke 19.1-10

¹⁴ See, for example, Romans 14.1-15.7 and 1 Corinthians 11.17-34.

¹⁵ *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*, pages 1-2.

¹⁶ Revelation 3.20

¹⁷ This, of course, is impossible to do fully. I cannot step completely outside of myself and remain an autonomous and real, that is, self-differentiated being who can (that is, being able to) encounter another. Yet, to engage fully with another, it seems to be a requirement that I discover and assume the character of “the other” within, that is, that part or parts of my self through which I experience my “inner foreignness”. As I encounter my inner and inescapable otherness, acknowledging that I can be a stranger to myself, I better am able to empathize with another, standing apart from myself so to feel and find myself in another’s place.

¹⁸ I use this word, ironic in this context, intentionally.

¹⁹ By consensus, I do not mean unanimity, being that state in which all persons or groups are in complete accord. Rather, I mean that occasion in which a resolution is reached, which all participants can support; that support, among the individual parties, running the gamut from agreement to neutrality.

²⁰ A humorous, but no less telling observation on the limits of conversation, indeed, civility is the following directive reputedly, although doubtlessly, from St. Benedict, meant to be an expansion of his Rule that his monks be hospitable, treating all guests “as Christ”: *If any pilgrim monk come from distant parts, if with a wish as a guest to dwell in the monastery, and if he will be content with the customs which he finds in the place and does not perchance by his lavishness disturb the monastery, but is simply content with what he finds, he shall be received for as long a time as he desires. If, indeed, he find fault with anything, or expose it, reasonably, and with the humility of Charity, the Abbot shall discuss it prudently, lest perchance God has sent him for this very thing. But if he has been found gossipy and contumacious in the time of his sojourn as a guest, not only ought he not be joined to the body of the monastery, but also it shall be said to him, honestly, that he must depart. If he does not go, let two stout monks, in the name of God, explain the matter to him.*

²¹ See *Reflections on Pluralism*, Section: *The Origin of a Sabbatical Theme*, pages 3-4.

²² I set forth these ideas, both here and in the section below, *Engaging our “Inner Otherness”*, as examples of actions that we, as a community, might take, as I am wont to describe it, “to open up and open out to the world and larger church.” They are meant, at the least, to encourage our communal discernment. None of these ideas should be understood as activities that I believe we *must* do. However, I confess that I would be happy should we, as a community, decide to engage them.