Refugees as Guests and Hosts: Towards a Theology of Mission Amongst Refugees and Asylum Seekers

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Dr Ross Langmead

Introduction

Refugees and asylum seekers are among the most powerless, marginalised and dislocated people in the world, clearly a high priority for those who follow Jesus. Christian mission and ministry stands or falls on its response of hospitality to such groups.

I want to suggest that in any sketch of a theology of mission amongst refugees and asylum seekers hospitality will be a central metaphor for mission. In this context hospitality is a strong concept which includes justice-seeking, political action, inclusion around our tables, intercultural friendship, pursuing a hospitable multicultural approach to church life, practical assistance, long-term commitment, learning from those who are different, sensitivity to the power dynamics of "welcome", a willingness to "let go" as well as "embrace", interfaith dialogue and discovering the intertwining of the guest and host roles which is embedded in biblical and theological understandings of God's activity amongst us.

Following the approach of practical theology, of which missiology is a part, I will begin with the questions raised by our lived experience, correlate them with the resources of the Christian tradition and wrestle with the practical implications (Langmead 2004a: 13). The Young Christian Worker movement summed it up simply with its slogan, "See, Judge, Act" (Hally 2008). As Gustavo Gutiérrez put it, reflection is only one part of praxis, which is the dialectic between action and reflection for transformation. The aim of a theology of mission amongst refugees, therefore, is to make our "commitment to liberation … more evangelical, more concrete, more effective" (Gutiérrez 1999: 29).

While this exploration has relevance for a Christian response to refugees and asylum seekers in the Majority World, where the challenge is even greater than found in the West, the context from which I speak is Australia and my suggestions have the greatest relevance for western countries, which have only recently felt real pressure from the global tides of persecuted and displaced people desperate to find a home.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The global phenomenon of vulnerable people being displaced, persecuted or fleeing conflict and war has grown in the last fifty years to be a major humanitarian challenge.

While figures are unreliable, the people of concern to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2011 numbered around thirty-four million, the main groups being refugees (eleven million), asylum seekers (one million in

process), internally displaced persons (fifteen million) and stateless persons (three million) (UNHCR 2011a). The number of those recognised as refugees grew from one and a half million in 1960 to around ten or eleven million in the decade since 2000, having peaked at nearly eighteen million in 1992 (UNHCR 2011b).

The political context in which western Christians are responding to refugees is often one of increasing hostility and resentment to numbers of desperate people seeking entry.

In Australia, for example, the national mood has deteriorated since the 1970s, when Vietnamese asylum seekers arrived by boat to widespread sympathy, partly because they were fleeing the communist victors in Vietnam against whom Australia had fought and lost. Several factors have contributed to a growing resistance to refugees, including fear of hordes arriving, political swings to the right and immigration policy focusing on economic benefits to Australia (McMaster 2001: 50–65).

Despite a chequered history of white racism in Australian immigration there has been a steady quota of immigrants who are refugees or their families. Between 1993 and 2009 Australia received 186,000 migrants under its humanitarian program (Refugee Council of Australia 2010). In the UNHCR resettlement program it ranks second only to the United States in the numbers it takes in (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2005).

To put this into perspective, however, only 1% of the world's refugees are offered resettlement by the UNHCR. If we look at the broader picture, over the last ten years Australia has taken 0.53% of the world's refugees, ranking 19th on the table of nations, 23rd on a per capita basis and 68th relative to national Gross Domestic Product (Refugee Council of Australia 2011a: 3).

Australia's resettlement program for recognised refugees is well regarded, with language programs, settlement services, provision of basic housing needs and other welfare benefits. On-shore asylum seekers—those who fly in and then apply for asylum—are also allowed to remain in the community while being processed. But off-shore asylum seekers—those arriving without papers by boat—have been treated less well.

In the 1980s off-shore asylum seekers began to be classified as "illegal non-citizens" and their legal rights were gradually limited, despite objections from human rights groups. Since 1991 those who arrive by boat have faced mandatory detention. Australia is one of only a few nations to impose this on all unauthorised arrivals (Refugee Council of Australia 2011b). A series of detention centres have been built. Some have been extremely remote; the Port Hedland centre on the west coast, operative from 1991 to 2003, was more than 1600 km from a major city.

In 2001 the 433 occupants of one boat which sank were rescued by a Swedish tanker (the *Tampa*) which was then denied landing rights in Australia amidst a political furore (Jupp 2003: 185–197). In response the Australian government declared some of Australia's nearby islands—such as Christmas Island, which is closer to Indonesia than the Australian mainland—not to be part of Australia for immigration purposes. Boat

arrivals on those islands were, for some years, sent directly to detention centres on Christmas Island or in Nauru and Papua New Guinea so that the Australian government did not have to consider them as having arrived in Australia. Several other boats have sunk, with the loss of hundreds of lives, in a political atmosphere that favours immigration control above humanitarian assistance.

For a decade the media has reported instances of long or indefinite detention, inhumane treatment, denial of legal representation and severe mental illness resulting from high stress (sometimes leading to suicide). Children were detained in harsh prison-like facilities behind razor-wire until 2012. Due to political pressure from refugee advocates, including churches, government policy is softening a little, with children being released, senate committees urging strict limits on the length of detention, improvements in processing applications and the option for citizens to offer homestays for asylum seekers with bridging visas (Australian Homestay Network 2012; Murphy 2012; Wilson 2012). Between 1999 and 2008 those who arrived by boat were issued with only temporary protection visas with few legal and travel rights, and an obligation to prove their status again once the visa ran out. Australia is the only country to have issued such visas to those who have proven their refugee status (Human Rights Watch 2003). Political cartoonists have often noted the irony of white Australians, the first "boat people" on the continent, being so vigilant in turning away later boat people. Cartoons abound of Indigenous people watching the arrival in 1788 of Captain Phillip and his boatloads of convicts being discarded by Britain. In the cartoons the Indigenous people are always anxious about being overrun by these boat people, and history has vindicated their concern (Evers 2010).

Often hidden by the politics and statistics is the human and personal dimension of being a refugee. I know women who have been raped in their home country, men who have been tortured and leaders who have been imprisoned in harsh conditions. Friends of mine have lost many relatives and lived in daily fear for years before fleeing for their lives. Respected church leaders I know have been used by the military in Burma as forced porters for days at the point of a gun. Some of my friends have fled for their lives through jungles, bringing out only what they could carry. The stories are told in many places (such as Lemere & West 2011). So many of them face fear, powerlessness, uncertainty, the unlikelihood of recognition as a refugee, poverty and physical privations. It is clear that refugees and asylum seekers are among the most marginalised people we are likely to meet in the West. If Jesus came to bring life, and to bring it abundantly (Jn 10:10), these people, of all people, deserve to experience the Good News in all of its dimensions.

Although the Australian context is unique and the stories of each country's response to the waves of refugees and of asylum seekers differ, it is common in western countries to hear loud calls to "keep them out" almost drowning more humanitarian voices. It is in this atmosphere that the Christian churches are having to develop their response. Such a response needs to be biblical and theological, politically aware and practical.

Fortunately, a strong and focused concern for the most marginalised is deeply embedded within the Christian tradition. I will draw out some strands of that concern, which begins with the Christian understanding of God and God's mission.

The Marginalised Are at the Centre

The foundation of Christian tradition is the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, himself a refugee when he was an infant, according to the story in Matthew 2.

In his *life* Jesus consistently broke boundaries and reversed the social order in affirming the human dignity and blessedness of those on the margins of his society—the women, children, ritually impure, poor, sick, cultural outsiders and moral failures. Although he mixed with all types of people, these were the groups he particularly welcomed, touched, talked to and ate with. In Donald Kraybill's memorable phrase, these were the "inside outsiders" (Kraybill 2003: 194). The explosive social implications of Jesus' life were foreseen in Mary's song of praise, a song of dramatic reversal (Lk 1:46–55). In his *death* Jesus was executed alongside common criminals by crucifixion, the form of death reserved by Romans for slaves, rebels and despised foreigners. The symbolism of Jesus' identification with the margins is unmistakable. It continues in the four Gospel accounts of his *resurrection* appearances where the first witnesses are women, including Mary Magdalene (Mt 28:1, Mk 16:1, Lk 24:10, Jn 20:1), who had been cured of mental illness (Lk 8:2).

His *teaching* centred on the kingdom of God, an upside-down kingdom (Kraybill 2003) which is virtually impossible for the rich to enter (Mt 19:24); is open first to prostitutes, tax collectors (Mt 21:31) and the poor (Lk 6:20); is for the childlike (Mk 10:15); and is for the humble (Mt 18:4).

Of particular relevance to refugees on the margins is Jesus' promise that God's realm is especially good news for those who are persecuted as justice-seekers (Mt 5:10), and for those who are poor, who weep now and who are hungry (Lk 6:21). This gracious realm is a hospitable tree whose branches give birds a place to nest (Lk 13:19).

Jesus is anointed to bring good news to the poor, release for the captives, healing for the sick and liberation for the oppressed (Lk 4:18). His parables often describe the switch from the centre to the margins and vice versa. A striking example is the story of the great banquet, which in the end is opened to the poor and sick from the streets and lanes and closed to the invited guests (Lk 14:15–24). There is also a dramatic switch in Jesus' biting story of the judgement in Matthew 25. Only when serving those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, imprisoned and foreigners—what better summary could there be of the extremities faced by so many refugees?—are the people of all nations worshipping God (serving Christ himself) and living into God's gracious realm (Mt 25:31–46).

Jesus stands in a rich Hebrew tradition in which God is merciful and just, "a refuge for the oppressed, a place of safety in times of trouble" (Ps 9:9). God sees the needs of the widows, orphans and foreigners and acts on their behalf (Deut 26:12, 24:21). The Exodus, the basis of Israel's identity, is God's response to their cry of oppression (Ex 3:7–8). It is Israel's weakness and vulnerability, not their righteousness, that leads to God's liberating concern. When they are freed from slavery they will know that God is their God (Ez34:27).

The prophetic tradition out of which Jesus speaks calls God's people to worship and fast through justice seeking: "Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives. Then my favour will shine on you like the morning sun." (Is 58:6–8).

Particular concern for those who are hungry or in prison is expressed elsewhere in the New Testament writings, such as in Hebrews 13:3, where after urging his readers to show hospitality to strangers, the writer counsels: "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured."

Christian mission is a response to the mission of God as understood through the lens of Jesus. It is to take up the cross and follow Jesus (Mk 8:34), to live into the gracious realm of God and proclaim the Good News.

Even this brief review of what the Good News of Jesus means in relation to those who are pushed to the margins in persecution, poverty, landlessness, orphanhood, widowhood and statelessness makes it clear why it is at the core of the Christian faith to defend refugees and asylum seekers. If the command to love our neighbour is seen through the eyes of the story of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37), the neighbour is clearly the friendless stranger (Bretherton 2006: 139), one who is beaten up and abandoned by the side of the road, or perhaps left for years in a refugee camp or left to drown on the high seas in a leaky boat.

Mission as Hospitality

The metaphor for mission that most readily suggests itself in response to the plight of those seeking asylum is that of hospitality. Mission as hospitality or friendship has been fruitfully explored by several authors in recent writings (such as Bass 1998: 139; Cornish 2002; Hershberger 1999; Huertz & Pohl 2010; Oden 2001; Pohl 1999; Ross 2008; Russell 2009; Sutherland 2006). The very concept of hospitality is intertwined with that of the stranger. The New Testament word for "stranger" (*xenos*) also means "guest" and "host". Whether someone is a stranger or our guest depends entirely on how we respond to them (Pineda 1997: 33). And as I will note further below, whether one is a guest or a host also depends on what transformations occur in the divine–human relationship and in human relationships, a common theme in the Bible.

In this context I am using hospitality to mean much more than offering a meal or bed, or making someone feel comfortable in our presence. It is a strong and multidimensional concept similar to that of public friendship in classical Greek times, which (although only available between peers) involved solidarity and defence of the other. Jesus' friendship with tax collectors and sinners (Mt 11:19) broke the contemporary boundaries of friendship, reflecting the transforming and open friendship of God (Moltmann 1978: 50–63). In Letty Russell's words, hospitality is "the practice of God's welcome, embodied in our actions as we reach across difference to participate with God in bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis" (Russell 2009: 2). As Arthur Sutherland puts it, with particular relevance to refugees, "Christian hospitality is the

intentional, responsible, and caring act of welcoming or visiting, in either public or private places, those who are strangers, enemies, or distressed, without regard for reciprocation" (Sutherland 2006: xiii).

The simple act of hospitality in the home is based on creating a safe and comfortable space for our guests. This is also at the centre of a fully-orbed hospitality as an expression of Christian mission. The Hebrew word for salvation, *yasha*, carries the meaning of bringing us into a spacious environment, freeing us from a narrow or cramped existence (Bradley 2010: 104), and this sense of making room, or creating space is part of all dimensions of hospitality (Pohl 1999; Ross 2008: 173).

Theologically speaking, extending Christian hospitality is fundamentally a response to our experience of God, "gifting and honoring human beings with the super-abundant hospitality of God" (Byrne 2000: 124). As mission is our response to our own experience of God's Good News, so also is hospitality a natural response to finding our home in God. Mission through this lens is a spiritual–material welcoming, a "unified ministry of word and table" (Koenig 1985: 110).

Mission as hospitality both reaches out and gathers in. The two aspects are integrated in the concept of incarnational mission, where—following Jesus' example—Christians endeavour to embody good news in our lives and words (Langmead 2004b). It occurs "out there" in society and "in here" in the practices of hospitable Christian community. There has been an appropriate emphasis in missiology on centrifugal mission—flinging the message outwards across the world, as it were (since Blauw 1962: 34). But in hospitality there is a correction to any danger that in centrifugal mission "the other" might remain in our eyes as "the other", or that we are simply distributing pearls of wisdom. In an article on "Centripetal Mission, or Evangelization by Hospitality" Mortimer Arias addresses the phenomenon of the world coming to the door of western countries through migration, arguing that centripetal mission is a necessary balance to centrifugal mission. As seen in the Hebrew Bible it is the call of God's people to authenticity and faithfulness where we are. Western countries, says Arias, need to practise God's hospitality by welcoming migrants and refugees, living out God's welcoming justice (Arias 2008: 429–430). "Like Jesus, the speech and action of the church is simultaneously centrifugal—they go out into the world—and centripetal—the world is drawn into participating in the banquet" (Bretherton 2006: 135). In this double action we are drawn into mutuality rather than a relationship of distribution from the centre, with the possibility, indeed likelihood, that both partners will be transformed (Gittins 1994: 398).

The themes we have briefly canvassed provide the elements of a theology of migration and identity, particularly with refugees in mind. There is a correlation between—on the one hand—the human experience of journey and alienation until we find our welcome in God and—on the other—the migrant experience of uprootedness until experiencing the different dimensions of hospitality in a new home. If the churches in the "receiving" country catch the vision of mission as hospitality, strangers will become guests, and then hosts. Those without defenders in their old country will have advocates in the new. Those on the margins will, at least in faith communities, become "insiders", "at home". Our welcome will in some way reflect God's abundant welcome. We should not

underestimate how countercultural this vision is, or how challenging it is to live out in a fearful and often selfish society.

In teasing out further the dynamics of hospitality let us ground it in the context of welcoming and defending refugees and asylum seekers. My brief comments can be made under ten simple headings and usually involve both reflective and practical aspects.

What does Christian hospitality towards refugees and asylum seekers involve?

Aspects of Hospitable Friendship

1. Defending Human Rights

If friendship involves solidarity we begin by defending the human rights of those whose humanity is denied. Justice is structural love, or the principle of love for all distributed fairly in a social context. If there is neither slave nor free before Christ (Gal 3:28), if the Good News is of life abundant, then Christian mission involves at least strongly and actively supporting international instruments which seek to guarantee rights and freedoms such as the following from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: that all humans have dignity, are treated fairly and without discrimination, can move freely, know security and freedom from violence, have rights before the law, are not imprisoned for political reasons, may speak freely, may hold religious beliefs freely, may assemble peacefully, can vote freely, are able to work, receive medical care, have a roof over their heads, and have access to education (United Nations 2007 [1948]).

Refugees themselves not only join with western Christians in calling for human rights to be respected but are typically very active in exile, opposing oppression and injustice in their home country and calling for the international spotlight to be trained on their plight. They can speak freely in exile in ways that were impossible at home. Refugees see justice-seeking as public hospitality towards their own.

2. Political Defence of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Defence of human rights leads to the more specific political defence of refugees and asylum seekers. In the Australian context it has been necessary for churches to counter public opinion by reminding governments that, because Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (United Nations 1988 [1951]), asylum seekers have rights to be treated well and not to be returned to situations where conflict continues and they are at risk. Churches have been the most consistent voice for ending mandatory detention, shortening processing times, restoring legal rights of appeal, improving detention conditions, allowing visitors to detention centres and abolishing temporary protection visas. Christians have lobbied the Australian government not to engage in trade with oppressive countries which are producing hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers. More broadly, Christians have articulated the morality of welcoming, rather than harshly turning away, the desperate people who arrive by boat (nearly all of whom eventually receive refugee status anyway, despite the hurdles they have to jump).

These first two aspects of hospitality exhibit the public friendship or solidarity referred to above, where Christians seek the merciful justice that characterises the God of the Bible.

3. Settlement Assistance

Hospitality involves making people feel "at home", and there are many aspects to welcoming as Christian mission. The dislocation that refugees experience in a new and rich country is usually massive. I know refugees from mountainous Asian villages—where is no vehicular traffic, intermittent electricity and widespread poverty—being flown into capital cities in Australia to face a totally new life. There are gaps in government settlement services which are filled by churches, often by migrant churches looking after their own.

I shudder to remember my biggest contribution to the settlement of a Chin Burmese refugee community in Melbourne soon after their first members began to arrive and become part of my local church—I taught two of them to drive a car, a nerve-wracking experience at any time without adding the cultural and language differences we faced. But those two young men taught others and several years later many in that community own and drive cars, which are a necessity for migrants renting houses in low-income areas away from public transport.

The Baptist Union of Victoria runs a Refugee Airfare Loans Scheme which has been used as a rotating fund assisting refugees to bring their families. In its nine years of operation it has assisted five hundred refugees and their relatives in coming to Australia. The rate of defaulting on loans is extraordinarily low. It now lends money to buy cars and meet other needs in assisting new migrants in settling in to a new country (Yang 2012).

Westgate Baptist Community in Melbourne offers a playgroup for Karen Burmese mothers and young children doubling as an informal English conversation class and community information forum, which invites local police, fire officers, health authorities, council officers, bank officers and others to explain how things work.

Hospitality amongst refugees themselves is particularly evident in settlement assistance. In the examples just mentioned, those with driving licences teach those without; those with employment take out loans to pay the airfares of other refugees in their home country; and those whose English is more advanced act as interpreters and guides. All migrant communities assist each other, but it is especially evident amongst those who know what it is to be crushed and in fear—hospitality, solidarity and generosity are features of refugee communities in their adopted countries.

4. Sanctuary and Temporary Accommodation

By definition asylum seekers seek sanctuary, a place of refuge. At a bureaucratic level they need to satisfy officials that they are fleeing persecution and are at risk. But once they reach a country of asylum they face often long periods of application and assessment. Christian churches have a real role to play in providing "asylum", here meaning a place of safety more broadly.

The little-discussed biblical tradition of cities of refuge can illustrate the role of genuine asylum. Both in Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 4 we find reference to six cities set aside for those in Israel who accidentally kill someone else, so that revenge will not occur before justice can be done. As Mike Purcell points out, they are a form of hospitality and a measure of humanity. Referring to Emmanuel Levinas's treatment of cities of refuge Purcell lists their characteristics and relates them to treatment of asylum seekers today: These cities are not to be enclosed or shut away, as immigration detention centres are today. They are to have sufficient provisions, which today might include food, drink and access to education. And they are to provide access to labour, which today might mean freedom to work (Purcell 2008: 67; Levinas 1994: 41; see also Derrida 2001: 3–23).

Churches often provide accommodation to asylum seekers while they await the outcome of their application for refugee status. Sometimes individuals offer accommodation, in personal hospitality. Sometimes the hospitality is organised and open, such as accommodation and support offered at the Asylum Seekers' House started by Brunswick Baptist Church in Melbourne and now run by Baptcare (Baptcare 2011). At other times it has been covert sanctuary for those of uncertain or illegal status, provided in the spirit of cities of refuge—protection for those in a legal grey area or who have fallen foul of immigration law.

When attempts by the Australian government to deport unaccompanied minors in detention centres to Malaysia were ruled illegal by the High Court in August 2011 Crossway Baptist Church, a conservative evangelical mega-church in Melbourne, urged the government to release all children and offered to house many of them at no cost to taxpayers. Crossway was supported by two Christian welfare organisations, Baptcare and Mission Australia (Crossway Baptist Church 2011). It was both a political and practical move by Christians who saw the need to protect vulnerable people—in this case children—who were in a legal "no man's land". There is now an opportunity for Christians to open their homes to asylum seekers for six week periods as the Australian government supports the Community Placement Network in placing asylum seekers in the community.

5. Welcoming Multicultural Churches

Christian churches are a sign of God's welcome when they are hospitable multicultural faith communities. In fact multicultural ministry is best seen in terms of creating a safe and welcoming space for those who are different from each other, especially those who are strangers to the dominant culture (Keifert 1991: 36). While we might expect that in multicultural contexts—such as most western societies are today—vigorous visions of multicultural churches would thrive, sadly there are still many churches that reflect only the dominant culture, unaware of its inhospitality to refugees and other migrants.

A hospitable faith community is intentional in its welcome, embracing difference as gift. It makes space for people's unique stories. It works to ensure diversity in worship styles, music, leadership, committees and ways of gathering. Food and laughter figure highly. It is more event-centred and celebration-oriented than program-centred (Foster 1997: 100–115). It goes out of its way to ensure that the lonely and least are included.

It sees the new community of Jesus as a place of safety and healing, knowing that when people come from everywhere they've probably been through nearly everything.

When a congregation is offering hospitality well it is extending God's hospitality in the way Jesus did and therefore is a holy place, a place of healing, of belonging and of shared meals. As such it is a sign of the gracious realm of God.

Here is another area where refugees so often lead the way in showing hospitality towards those of other cultures, including those in the dominant culture. They are often visitors welcoming locals. Perhaps it is because those who have been welcomed offer the warmest welcome to others. Another likely factor is that the great majority of non-western cultures seem to value hospitality more highly than do western cultures. My experience in a multicultural church is that I receive more hospitality than I give.

Many of the features of a welcoming congregation apply also to a welcoming denomination. The Uniting Church in Australia, for example, has declared that it aspires to be an intentionally multicultural church. It has taken many steps to be inclusive, to make decisions in ways that respect migrant congregations and to listen to the stories of refugees within its ranks (Uniting Church in Australia 1998). The Baptist Union of Victoria, similarly, has moved from merely catering for migrant and refugee congregations on its edges towards intentionally incorporating them into denominational life, seeking mutual enrichment and valuing the stories of its refugee leaders. Choosing a path in between the "mosaic" model (where different cultures co-exist alongside each other) and the "melting pot" model (where culture becomes lost in a process of assimilation), the BUV has chosen a "minestrone soup" model (in which the various ingredients keep their shape but all contribute to the rich flavour of the soup) (Langmead & Yang 2006).

6. Intercultural Learning

The first five aspects of hospitality outlined here emphasise the initiative and responsibility of the host, and carry the danger of assuming that the dynamics are one-way, in which "we" open up to "them" as gift. The next five complement them, by reminding us that hospitality always involves a two-way relationship, one that at times becomes transformative for both parties.

Christian hospitality involves not only opening up to "the other" but also to the other's world. Genuine hospitality involves genuine interest in guests, and refugees have amazing stories to tell of challenge, suffering and persistence. As the saying goes, the world comes to our door. We discover how much there is to learn. If we are open to it, we discover the holy and the divine in each person's story. We are likely to stumble over our ignorance and a bond will grow if our defences are lowered through friendship, humour and self-disclosure.

At the congregational level multicultural churches often hear stories and hold cultural events because there is so much to learn from each other. In fact, we need to listen a great deal before we jump in to help, in most cases, as we are likely to make mistakes in our ignorance.

7. Interfaith Dialogue

Most refugees happen to be religious, so the opportunity for intercultural learning is matched by openings for interfaith dialogue. While I prefer not to draw lines between Christian ministry and mission, the former is usually service to the church—pastoral care, worship, leadership, passing on faith, administrative service and so on—whereas mission is the church facing the world beyond the church, co-operating with God's purposes in the world. Much of the church's service to refugees is to those who are Christian, naturally, because we are to look after our "family". But it is a challenge to care for those who belong to other faiths. First we need to listen and learn in respect. A dialogical approach is the most appropriate for crossing great barriers. A greatly respectful approach is appropriate when there is a power difference or when people have been traumatised.

There is a dialogue of ideas, but more frequently there is a dialogue of daily life, or of political solidarity. Between two people who respect each other's journey of faith there is also the gift of sharing personal religious experience. Many churches fall to one side or the other—either evangelising directly, which is usually inappropriate, or being respectful in their relationships with refugees from other faiths but avoiding all talk of faith.

8. The Ethics of Welcoming

Creating space for vulnerable people involves being aware of the power we hold. Anthony Gittins reminds us that Jesus' teaching was full of power reversals, so we should beware. "It is fairly natural, and easy (at least in theory) to see the other as stranger, guest, outsider, needy, or outcast. But such astigmatism distorts, and may produce a theology of control, a 'magisterial' approach, and a tendency to indoctrinate" (Gittins 1994: 399).

A deliberate strategy is usually needed for people in power to become aware of its dangers and to counter them as much as is possible. Russell characterises a feminist hermeneutic of hospitality in three steps: paying attention to the power quotient in what is said by whom, giving priority to the perspective of the outsider and rejoicing in God's unfolding promise (Russell 2009: 43).

Even the act of hospitality can unwittingly hold guests back from freedom to be who they can be in a new culture. The act of hospitality, like the act of embrace, has four movements, described well by Miroslav Volf. We open our arms in offer (or open the door). We wait for a free response to accept. We close our arms in embrace (or invite others into our house and make them at home). But finally and most importantly, we open our arms again (or let the guest go), symbolising a recognition of difference, a willingness for the other to be themselves, though perhaps now in a new space. These are the ethics and dynamics of hospitality and embrace (Volf 1996: 140–147).

9. Meals and Personal Friendship

Christian hospitality nearly always involves eating together and the development of personal friendship.

Everybody knows that the path to multiculturalism goes through the stomach. Appreciation of difference so easily begins with taste and learning about other cultures through their cuisine. But the significance of table fellowship goes much deeper, as the practice of Communion shows. It allows the host to serve. It puts people in the same space, hopefully at the same level. It provides the context and the time for conversation. It is relaxed, allowing conversation to range naturally from the superficial to the deep. If it is an inclusive table it is a potent symbol of the diversity and richness of the gracious realm of God. There is abundance in the food and drink, enough to share. There is inclusiveness in the welcome. And there is enjoyment in the time together. Abundant living in good relationship is truly symbolic of God's kingdom.

Despite the need for public and political friendship of refugees, all solidarity must contain a personal element (Bretherton 2008: 159). We do not really understand what refugees go through until we deeply understand what at least one good friend has gone through. Friendship is costly because it is open-ended and involves listening and action. But it is one of the richest paths towards understanding between hosts and guests in the dynamics of hospitality. When we are friends, we lose the distinction between host and guest, which leads to the final and perhaps most important observation.

10. Unexpected Divine Presence

Perhaps the greatest mystery of Christian hospitality is that in extending God's welcome as a host we so often become the guest, both because our guest becomes our host or because, more profoundly, the Jesus we serve through the poor and hungry (Mt 25) becomes our host. Hospitality often becomes a holy or divine moment and the occasion for the transformation of all involved. These dynamics are often hidden until afterwards or they become apparent in an epiphany. Hospitality can be the occasion for unexpected divine presence (Russell 2009: 82).

This thread occurs at several points in the biblical tradition. Abraham and Sarah welcomed three strangers at Mamre, who turned out to be messengers of the Lord, bringing the miraculous promise of a son, though also predicting the downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18). The prostitute Rahab of Jericho showed hospitality to Joshua's two spies and in return her family was spared in the battle of Jericho (Josh 2). The widow in Zarephath who had hardly any food offered hospitality to Elijah in his extreme hunger and was rewarded by jars that didn't run out and the miraculous healing of her son (1 Kgs 17). Most clearly, the followers of Jesus who were returning to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection offered their walking companion hospitality and discovered, as he broke bread, that their guest was their divine host. In opening their home they had been brought unexpectedly into God's presence.

This is the meaning of the advice in Hebrews 13:2 to show hospitality to strangers because some who have done so have entertained angels without knowing it. As we noted earlier, Matthew 25 puts it in even stronger terms—in welcoming the most vulnerable we welcome Christ himself.

Conclusion

In seeking to frame a theology of mission towards refugees and asylum seekers I have turned to the metaphor of mission as hospitality. I began with a sketch of the

presenting challenge of asylum seekers in the world, in particular the numbers who are now arriving in western countries. I outlined the special concern of the gospel for the most vulnerable and marginalised, suggesting that in the reversals that fill the Gospel accounts those on the margins are at the centre of God's concern.

I explored what mission as hospitality might look like, emphasising its strong, public character, its relationship to the Hebrew concept of salvation as creating space, its function in complementing mission as always "going out", and its theological significance as extending God's hospitality.

Finally, ten aspects of hospitality towards refugees and asylum seekers were spelt out, from justice seeking to opening our homes and being welcoming faith communities. The last of these noted that hospitality is often the occasion for unexpected divine presence, for in responding in love to the world's most vulnerable people we are responding in love to Jesus Christ himself.

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Dr Ross Langmead is Professor of Missiology at Whitley College, Melbourne, Australia, in the MCD University of Divinity.