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***Church-based work with the homeless: A theological exploration
of the practices of hospitality***



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Abstract

This dissertation explores theological underpinnings of 'hospitality' in one London Churches Cold Weather Shelter [CCWS]. It asks: In what ways are hospitality practices at a CCWS connected to a living Christian tradition? Ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven church team leaders, the overall project coordinator, one volunteer and a church elder. Two theological metanarratives emerge as significant in the data: missiology and 'theo-anthropology' (Barth, 1967). Hospitality was unanimously endorsed by interviewees as an appropriate *espoused theology* for the CCWS, but data revealed implicit variations in how hospitality was being linked to mission, symptomatic of differing normative theologies. Yet despite these differences, churches cohered powerfully in their association of hospitality with transformative, human encounters. Data analysis reveals four types of human transformation of guests and volunteers which can be connected to a living Christian tradition – through seeing, conversing, eating together and discovering joys and abundance. These transformations converse remarkably well with formal theologian Karl Barth's work in *Church Dogmatics* III/2 in his surprisingly practical 'theo-anthropology' (Barth, 1967). In conclusion, hospitality is a profoundly theological concept, but it is humanly enacted through sometimes imperfect and multifaceted intentions at the CCWS. Nevertheless, the CCWS is an exemplary witness to the wider church and would benefit from deepened theological reflection.

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Introduction

Churches Cold Weather Shelters [CCWS] operate across 20 boroughs in London. Seven churches in a borough offer accommodation to homeless people for one night a week on a rota basis from January to March. Food and shelter are provided. Shelters are staffed by a project coordinator, team leaders and volunteers. CCWS is a robust example of church-based social action providing fertile ground for practical theological exploration.

This dissertation builds on research conducted in 2008 at a CCWS with the Action Research: Church and Society [ARCS] project at Heythrop College. One of several feedback reflections was the theme of hospitality, emerging as a 'light-bulb moment' for the CCWS. Hospitality seemed to distinguish *church*-based work with homeless people. It became their *espoused theology*. However, this dissertation 'tests' the theological robustness of the term by asking: In what ways are practices of hospitality at a CCWS connected to a living Christian tradition?

The term hospitality can be used so broadly that it empties itself of any meaning. Theologian Reinhard Hutter provocatively asserts that hospitality and honouring the truth are 'opposed to one another: to be concerned for truth is to be inhospitable, and to be hospitable means being 'mushy' on matters of truth' (in Newman, 2006, p.27). It would also be deeply inhospitable, indeed inaccurate, to suggest that hospitality is a prerogative of Christian faith alone. Whenever human beings come together there are choices to be made, hospitable or inhospitable. One must also contend with the state of religion in the twenty first century. Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007) offers a profound analysis of modern religious predicament: 'A secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within range of an imaginable life for masses of people' (Taylor, 2007, p.20). City life is marked by deep ambiguity, fear and distrust of strangers. Distorted uses of the term

hospitality are rife (Newman, 2007). How, then, is hospitality rooted in a living Christian tradition? My starting assumption is that the encompassing divine love of God, creator and redeemer, may be distinctively reframed as divine hospitality in all its dimensions. My interest is to ask team leaders how they construe hospitality.

Ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with: seven team leaders; one volunteer who had previously experienced homelessness; one Church Elder who led an Alpha Course for the homeless; and the overall project coordinator. Transcripts were read theologically and insights were rich.

This dissertation adopts a theological framework used by ARCS called 'Theology in Four Voices', defined in chapter two. First, it allows practice to 'speak'. This theological method assumes that careful reading of raw data can disclose implicit '*operant theologies*' which can be drawn into authentic conversation with *espoused, formal* and *normative* voices. My aim is to demonstrate how this holistic, integrated approach to doing practical theology: honours *practical wisdom* inherent within practices; nurtures renewed attentiveness towards and/or appreciation of existing practices; sharpens collective ownership/ discernment of meanings behind a group's articulated espoused theology; and sometimes, leads to a group or individual adjusting practices (or their espoused theology) to participate more faithfully in service of God's mission. Hospitality is integrated into my theological method through dialogue with theology, anthropology and sociology.

Two theological metanarratives emerge as significant: missiology and 'theo-anthropology' (Barth, 1967). Whilst there was unanimous endorsement of hospitality as *espoused theology*, data revealed implicit variation in theologies of mission operating on the ground, symptomatic of differing normative theologies (Bevans & Schroeder, 2006) Data also disclosed remarkable cohesion across churches in relation to what Karl Barth terms –a practical 'theoanthropology' (1967). Data analysis identified four types of

transformation of guests and volunteers permeating transcripts – transformation through seeing, conversing, eating together and discovering joys and abundance. These human encounters converse powerfully with Karl Barth’s work in *Church Dogmatics* III/2 in which he also identifies four practical steps to fullness of humanity through encounters with the ‘other’, in co-covenant with a Triune God. Data echoes St Irenaeus’s famous phrase: ‘The Glory of God is the man fully alive’.

Hospitality is a profoundly theological concept, but as with all human practice, it is enacted through sometimes imperfect and multifaceted intentions. Nevertheless, the CCWS is an exemplary witness to the wider church in its attraction and openness towards large numbers of non-church going volunteers and it’s enabling of transformative encounters to take place between guests and volunteers, despite very real challenges. Embodied encounters – through ‘seeing’, ‘hearing’ and ‘acting/eating together’ – provide fertile ground for people to experience, share and respond to divine hospitality. Transcripts will be given to the CCWS for them to reflect on theologically to discover for themselves glimpses of the transcendent embedded within their ordinary hospitality practices. Much could be learned between these churches if normative, formal, espoused and operant voices were brought together in shared prophetic dialogue and to build up a much-needed theology with and for homeless people; benefiting wider London CCWSs, church practitioners and theological academy.

Conclusion

5:1 Learning for the shelter

“Through very practical tasks, like putting out beds and chopping onions, we generate a self-awareness and an understanding about who we are as individuals and as a church. The bedrock upon which that is built is hospitality” (Tom, Anglican church)

‘The challenge [to the shelter] is to live in ways that testify to the abundant generosity of God, our acceptance of it and our imitation of it’. (Ford, 1999, p.269)

Hospitality practices at the CCWS are a work of practical theology; a site where the Church lives out its beliefs. As with all human practices, they are enacted through sometimes imperfect and multifaceted intentions. Nevertheless, the CCWS is an exemplary witness to the wider church in its attraction and openness towards large numbers of non-church going volunteers and it’s enabling of authentic, grace-filled, transformative encounters between guests and volunteers, through ‘seeing’, ‘hearing’ and ‘acting/eating together’. This is fertile ground for a restoration of human dignity, reconciliation of humanity and new opportunities for a shared encounter with God. Most team leaders were attentive to the work of God at the shelter but aware of the multiplicity of motivations of their volunteers.

Overall, hospitality was unanimously endorsed as the right *espoused theology* for the CCWS. Despite its breadth, the term hospitality is rich in application and meaning. I believe data disclosed in this dissertation could encourage the CCWS to expound more confidently its espoused ‘Christian rootedness’. Engaging team leaders in discussions about how hospitality links to models of mission would be beneficial – starting, perhaps, with an exploration of ‘mission as prophetic dialogue’ (Bevans & Schroeder, 2006) to draw in differing perspectives. By first discovering and appreciating the theology inherent within *existing* practice (not just words) this might provide renewed incentive to unearth, albeit with some facilitation, riches available within and across normative

and formal traditions in relation to hospitality. This dissertation has demonstrated that even systematic theologians can be remarkably practical and accessible at times!

“It is exciting that we are working together as churches. Different churches give different perspectives but together we work so well. The Lord gave us different gifts and I believe it’s the same with the churches as well. We have different gifts to share with one another”.... (David)

Much could be learned across churches through reflection. It could also build up a much-needed theology with/for homeless people, benefiting recipients, participants, wider London CCWSs, and theological academy. Kenneth Leech recognised the urgent need for theological reflection in homeless work to generate a community bound together in joyful responsibility for those outside it:

‘It seemed particularly dangerous for us, working in the field of homelessness, to operate a crisis ministry, binding up the wounded and responding to one urgent need after another, but never to making time to reflect on what it was all about, what it had to do with the gospel, what wider social and political issues were, and what God was up to in the struggles and upheavals which confronted us’ (Leech, in Eastman & Latham, 2004, p.6)

5:2 Learning for the church

This data powerfully challenges all church denominations to keep outward facing, to “see” as Jesus “saw” on the move, to ensure connections are drawn between liturgy, *ad intra* activities and church-based social action which is, by its nature, *ad extra*. At its heart, ministry is *encounter*. To love you must encounter. Ministry is also *attending to* through being hospitable. There is a need to move beyond notional Christianity and discover how difficult it is truly to *encounter others* and to love neighbours as we love ourselves. This is exemplified vulnerably and in abundance at the CCWS (Gittins, 2006, xix). As Rowan Williams endorses, ecumenical church-based social action makes sense (Kessler, 2005). Current discussions to expand the CCWS to venues of other faith

communities would offer rich dialogue opportunities, honour the living *multi-faith* roots of hospitality and offer renewed incentive for Christian reflection.

5:3 Learning for Theology

I end with one of the most delightfully witty passages in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, which appears in his defence of angels (taken from Sunderland, 2006). After cataloguing opinions of fellow theologians such as Schleiermacher, de Wette, Lipsius, Kaftan, Nitzsch, and others, he says:

'The consensus of all these modern dogmaticians, both among themselves and with their master Schleiermacher, is overwhelming... These modern thinkers are not prepared to take angels seriously. It does not give them the slightest joy to think of them. They are plainly rather peevisish and impatient at having to handle the subject. And if we are told in Hebrews 13:2 not to be neglectful of hospitality, since some have entertained angels unawares, these theologians are almost anxiously concerned to refuse angels a lodging in their dogmatics, and think that all things considered they should warn others against extending hospitality to them' (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, p.415, in Sunderland, 2006, p.ix)

Poor angels! This quotation, for me, beautifully sums up a warning to be issued to all theologians not to get blinded by any sub-discipline but, rather, to keep attentive and hospitable to unexpected discoveries across the breadth of the Christian tradition. The 'theology in four voices' is one developing avenue to encourage this. Were Barth alive today, I might direct him cheerfully to a CCWS!