

# GROWING Together

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## “A WELCOMING CHURCH?”

He was basking in the sun at noon. Their home was far from their nearest neighbour's, so when three strangers approached, he knew what he must do. He ran to greet them, inviting them to stay and eat. Once they were settled under shade trees with a breeze to cool their bodies and water to satisfy their thirst, he and the hired man killed a calf that had been fattening. In time fine steaks were roasting on the grill. His wife busied herself making bread and gathering the rest of the feast for the strangers.

While Abraham and Sarah prepared this festive dinner their thoughts centred on the three strangers. Who were they? What news of other places were they bringing? How would they impact their lives? Had God sent them? Abraham and Sarah knew what it was like to be dusty, thirsty, hungry, and lonely. They had travelled far in their time. The three strangers rested in the coolness of the shade, quietly talking and enjoying the aromas that aroused their hunger. (Genesis 18)



Standing at the open door of our church, we see a stranger enter. Those designated for the job greet him/her. They shake hands and give out information with a warm welcome. What is in our hearts, we who stand there also? If this stranger looks different, has an offensive smell, speaks in a strange language, or is gay, will we view him as desirable? How long will we allow her to sit quietly in a pew Sunday after Sunday before we encourage her to make suggestions for change, to become an intimate part of the church family? Why did we welcome him so well?

Abraham and Sarah showed hospitality to three strangers. The custom of those times dictated that one must be a generous and giving host to attain high social prestige. The Scriptures turn that idea of hospitality upside down. The strangers gave Abraham and Sarah a much greater gift than any they could give - a powerful blessing. God appears in the guise of

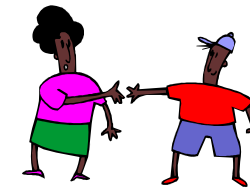
a stranger and promises that they will be the parents of a great family, the heirs of a huge inheritance – and they are! “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2)

*Perhaps God is inviting us to turn our idea of hospitality upside down.*

When we welcome a stranger *as if* that person is God instead of one who needs to be brought to God, something happens to us. We see this new person differently. She becomes important. Our hearts are open to a deeper knowledge of the other. Our ears are open to hear God's Word from someone who may not even profess to know God. Generosity flows from us, becoming contagious and life giving.

When we welcome a stranger into this building and community *as if* Jesus is the host, our attitude changes. How hard it is for us to believe that this house and the people in it actually belong to God, and not to Central Park Church! God is really the host and title-holder, God who is both Creator and Redeemer. We would not be gathered here if it were not for the God who became human.

Member and stranger, we are invited to gather and to feast by no ordinary host. This host eats and drinks with the stranger, the outcast, the poor, and those who are different, and expects them to love each other. We are all guests together – stranger, mother, father, cousin, child – and that makes all the difference. We are guests of a most generous, unusual and indiscriminating host.



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