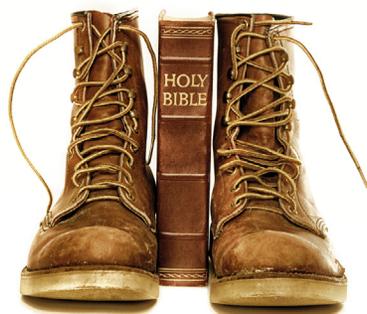


WELCOMING THE STRANGER



bring Jesus

Making sense of mission

by Rev Dr Steen Olsen



Steen also blogs at LCA eNews. To sign up to his newslist go to www.lca.org.au/enews, insert your email address and tick the box next to 'bring Jesus'. He would also love to hear your thoughts and stories about mission in your context.

You can email him at steen.olsen@lca.org.au with 'bring Jesus' as the subject line.

For three months we worshipped at a different church each Sunday. Ruth and I had just moved back to Adelaide so I could begin work as the SA/NT Director for Mission. When we arrived for a service I would go and stand by myself in a corner and wait to see what happened. In those days, if I could manage to avoid the pastor, more often than not, no-one else recognised me.

Being a stranger is, well, strange. I am not going to reveal names, but in some places I managed to stand by myself until after the service started. I then found my own bulletin and joined Ruth in a pew. It seemed like I was invisible. People looked right through me. They were busy greeting their family and friends. Others obviously had important tasks to complete. It was clear that they thought their tasks were much more important than talking with a stranger. Sometimes the person who came up to talk with me was another stranger.

In other places I hadn't even managed to put on my 'vaguely disinterested' face before someone was there introducing themselves and asking where I was from. Even then, I didn't make it easy for them. My face was less recognisable than my name, so I didn't part with my name unless I was specifically asked. If someone just wanted to know what I did, I mumbled something about having been a grazier—you know, I ran sheep. Oh, and a few goats.

The writer to the Hebrews says, 'Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it' (13:1,2). Obviously, as

my story shows, I am no angel. But this is still about hospitality to strangers.

It was a deliberate attempt to experience being a stranger in our congregations. You should try it sometime. Like me, you might find that it makes you more conscious of others, particularly in places where you feel at home.

How do we form a Christian community that is open to the world and inviting to others?

A good place to begin is by asking how we think of our congregation. Often the answer is, 'We are one big happy family'. St Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, does refer to the Christian church in the world as 'God's family' and the 'family of faith' (Galatians 1:2 and 6:10). Scripture declares we are sisters and brothers with the same heavenly Father. In spite of this, I don't think 'our church family' is a good way to describe a local congregation.

Families can be awkward beasts. They are all about intimacy and privacy. Joining a family is difficult. Even if we join by marriage, it takes a long time to really become an insider. Families have their own peculiarities and processes. There are often 'in-jokes'. If you are at someone else's family gathering it is easy to feel like an outsider. A family is about belonging. But it usually takes a long time before you belong.

What would happen if, instead of thinking of our congregation as 'one big happy family', we thought of it as 'a company of strangers'?

We are part of a congregation because we have something in common with others who are there. That 'something' is



not that we particularly like each other—though I guess it is nice if we do. It is not that we agree about politics or about which team to support. Sometimes our idiosyncrasies annoy others (just ask me about yours!). It is not that we all have the same levels of responsibility at work or that we move in the same social circles. In church the labourer meets the company director as an equal. In many cases we would not choose to be friends, let alone family members, with those with whom we worship.

We are a company of strangers who have all been baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is what we have in common. That is what unites us. A healthy congregation is a company of strangers who depend on God's hospitality. That gives us a stronger bond than the ties of family or friendship. We are one for all eternity.

Belonging is certainly important for a congregation. But a congregation also needs to be joinable—it needs to be open to strangers. That is why

even healthy families make lousy congregations. Most families have clear boundaries. Unless we are related, I am not part of your family.

A congregation, on the other hand, needs to be fuzzy-edged. People come and go. Sometimes it is not entirely clear who belongs and who doesn't. Both wheat and weeds are present, as Jesus teaches. A stranger can come and be invited to participate as an equal.

Families are fundamentally private entities. A congregation needs to be a public space. You are welcome even if you haven't been before or don't come very often. **Our bond is Jesus.** He is the one who makes us one. Not all those other things. Unless we build a missional community—that is, one that is focused outwards as well as inwards—then our congregation will just be 'one happy family' that looks after its own. Mission brings life.

Steen Olsen serves as the SA/NT Director for Mission and as a member of the LCA Board for Local Mission.

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The Board for Local Mission has applied for funding for all LCA congregations to participate in the 2016 National Church Life Survey.

