

## **HOSPITALITY BEATS FRIENDLINESS**

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A typical Baptist church is not 'gothic in architecture, arctic in temperature, where the deacons walk up and down like polar bears'. No, we are friendly people. Hence the hubbub before the service – we like to greet one another. I know that some older friends long for the day when there was 'a bit of reverence' – when people bowed their heads and prepared themselves to worship God. Yet I prefer a church in the moments leading up to worship to resemble a bar in a busy pub on a Friday night. For God wants us to be friends – friends with him, friends with one another.

Unfortunately churches can be exclusive in their friendships. People can be so busy greeting one another that they fail to notice newcomers. I remember an experience Caroline and I had. After a tough first year as BMS missionaries in Congo, I was invited to give some lectures at an Anglican college just outside Nairobi. Our hosts offered to look after our two young children so that we could attend an English-speaking church in Nairobi. We were so excited, and all the more so when we entered and sensed the vibrancy of this large church. But nobody spoke to us – neither before nor after the service. We sat there, longing for somebody to come up to us, but nobody did. They were all too busy chatting to one another. They failed to notice this lonely young couple – and as a result our loneliness was intensified. Perhaps we should have made an effort to speak to others – but we felt so low spiritually, that we hadn't the energy. From that time I have always resolved to ensure that nobody is able to visit a church of which I am the minister without getting a welcome.

But a friendly welcome is not enough. I was once away from home for two weeks, and on the two Sundays I went to two different churches. First and foremost, of course, I went to worship God. But I was also half-hoping that after the service somebody might invite me back home for a drink, or even better for a meal. On both occasions I was disappointed. The people were very friendly, but not hospitable. Fortunately, I was not looking for a church in which to settle – had I been, I would not have settled there.

Hospitality is what a church is called to offer. According to the New Testament hospitality is not an optional extra for those so inclined, but a duty for all. I think of one couple who before they went to church ensured that they had more than enough food for their Sunday lunch, so that they would be free to invite any stranger back home with them. That's what friendship is really about. The superficiality of after-church chat is nothing compared with the real thing – hospitality beats friendliness every time.

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