



# An outward facing community

## Sliding doors

When it comes to our homes, sometimes we welcome the opportunity of retreat to that familiar place, with the people we know and love, to close the door behind us on the problems of the outside world. Home becomes a place of comfort, safety and security. At other times we open our homes to others, welcome them in with all the chaos and baggage their presence brings. Home becomes a place of refuge, shelter and support. In our home life, there is a balance to be struck between the closed door and the open door and a value in both.

### FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

**Q.** Thinking about our home life, are our doors more often closed behind us or open to others?

We often use the Bible's picture of church as family. We expect it to provide a spiritual home. However, what kind of family and home do we usually expect it to be? Is it a family that closes ranks around us and ours? Is it a home to which we run to escape the challenges of living in a broken world, rather than be equipped to engage with them together? Do the doors of our church life more often slide closed behind us or open in invitation to others?

### FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

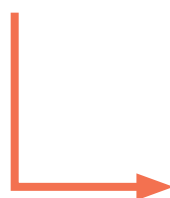
**Q.** Thinking about our life as a congregation, are our doors more often closed behind us or open to others?

## Something that is easy to forget

The writer of the Book of Hebrews reminds the early Christians that it is very easy for our church family to become very inward looking. It is not that fellowship, pastoral care and love for one another is unimportant. It's just that it needs to be balanced by welcoming others, reaching out to those in need and loving those who are different than we are. In his concluding remarks in chapter 13:1-2 he urges the church, *"Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it."*

Church as family is there, we are to love and care for one another as brothers and sisters. Church

as home is there, in that it is a place in which we gather to love one another, but also open up to entertain strangers. In fact, the overspill of our fellowship with one another in Christ is to be hospitable to those who are strangers to us and to knowing him. However, the reminder not to forget this balance is necessary, because church, like every other group of which we are a part, can so easily become inward focused and unwelcoming to outsiders. However unintentionally, the strength of our fellowship together can become a weakness in our ability to extend his love to others.



### FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

**Q.** In what places in our congregation's weekly life would outsiders find it easiest and most difficult to come in and feel at home? Why?

## Encountering God in the stranger

How and through whom do we expect to encounter God in church life? Often our answer is in the familiar routines and patterns of worship, Bible study and prayer and the depth of relationship we build with others with whom we seek to follow Jesus closely. Of course, this is often the case. Church is a community of faith in which we travel together as the people of God towards fulfilling God's ways for us. However, the idea of entertaining strangers – and sometimes

entertaining angels without knowing it – suggests another way we can, and need to be open to, encountering God.

We might not know what to make of this strange reference at the end of verse 2. However, the first readers of the letter were steeped in the Old Testament. Their minds would immediately have turned to the story of Abraham, Sarah and their three unexpected visitors in Genesis chapter 18.

# READ GENESIS 18:1-15

Abraham’s hospitality, shown so naturally to three complete strangers, led him to unknowingly entertain messengers from God. He received an important message from God through them. It turned out to be confirmation of the direction of the next stage of God’s mission for himself and Sarah in that they were to have a son despite their old age. The message sounded so unlikely and ridiculous to Sarah that she laughed it off. But the final verses show that it was indeed the Lord’s unexpected message, which came from unexpected people, in an unexpected way. Some interpretations of this event see the three strangers as an appearance of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However we read it, Abraham and the writer to the Hebrews encourage us to be open to God speaking through the outsider to whom we show welcome and warmth.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

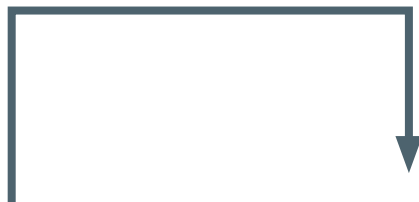
---

---

---


---

---



## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- Q.** What lessons have we as a congregation learned from those who have come from a different background, culture or country than most of our congregation?
- Q.** What areas of church life are we finding especially difficult? While always making God’s Word the first and final point of reference for everything we do, how might someone coming from outside help us to see what we might be missing?

 Watch this short clip that challenges us to think about creating space to welcome, receive and learn from outsiders as they come to feel at home in the wider family of church life.



---

---

---

---

---

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

**Q.** Do you know people who don't know the Christian story and didn't grow up in church? What are the particular challenges of reaching them with the good news of Jesus?

**Q.** What spaces are there in our church activities in which outsiders can come in and observe the life of the people of God close up and feel something of its warmth without committing to anything at first?

**Q.** How might we strike a better balance in our congregation's life between fellowship among ourselves and hospitality to outsiders?

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER



- Pray that we would reflect on the challenges of becoming a more outward facing community.
- Pray that we would begin to take and develop some of the opportunities presented by being church in a more secular society to show the difference the good news of Jesus makes.
- Pray for an openness to learn how to create environments in which outsiders can experience the welcome of our congregation as the family of God.
- Pray for those around the edges of our congregation, that what they see and feel of God's presence in our church life would create curiosity and draw them to explore following Jesus.

