Welcoming the STRANGER
Welcoming the Stranger
How should the church respond to the outsiders and strangers in our communities?

For most of us, a stranger is simply a person we’ve never met before. As awkward as it can be to start a friendship with a newcomer, once we do, the term stranger no longer applies.

But there is a second type of stranger. These people are strangers not just because we don’t yet know them, but because we have an internal barrier stopping us from wanting to know them. There are people around us who, based on our perceptions and assumptions, we label as “different”, “scary”, “untrustworthy” or even “dangerous”. We easily let it become someone else’s job to talk with them because they make us feel uncomfortable.

And yet, we are stuck with the fact that such strangers are all around us, all the time. Every town or city has
clusters of ethnic minority groups. There are literally thousands of homeless people sleeping in our streets. Not a day goes by when there isn’t a report on TV or online about the increasing numbers of people fleeing their homelands to find refuge in our country. Debates continue to rage over how these situations started, and how they can best be resolved. Some argue about how to bring stability to the war-torn or poverty-stricken parts of the world. Others are constantly striving to end poverty within our own country. Politicians prepare speeches about what can be done to improve living conditions. Others look for someone to blame because of social inequality.

That’s not what this booklet is about. We haven’t written this to pick sides, debate politics or point the finger. This is about the fact that, right now, there are strangers in our communities. It is also about the fact that, as Christians, we have a responsibility to respond in a certain way. The love of God should motivate us to have a genuine and active concern for the homeless, refugees, outcasts and all strangers, whether we feel comfortable about the idea or not.

But we struggle to love and care for those who are different. It can be because of something simple
like their accent, and other times it’s to do with their religion, age, gender, sexual orientation or any number of other things. No matter what the barrier is, God tells us to love and welcome all the people He has created—no matter how different they may appear to be.

Those of us in the church need to take a serious look at how we react when we see a ‘stranger’. What is our default position when we come across a refugee who doesn’t speak ‘our’ language or understand ‘our’ culture, a dishevelled person on the street, a teenager with every possible thing pierced and tattooed, a prostitute, a beggar or someone who seems strange?

Do we shudder and shut down in discomfort or fear? Do we, through gritted teeth, try to be nice, even though we feel incredibly awkward? Or do we see these people as God-given opportunities to present His care, His love and the hope of the gospel?

God tells us to love and welcome all the people He has created.

Are we prepared to welcome strangers with biblical hospitality and love, just as God does?
Throughout the Bible, God makes His welcome towards strangers unmistakably clear. One key example of this is how God instructed His people Israel to treat the foreigners who lived amongst them.

*The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.*

—Leviticus 19:34

God starts off by saying foreigners are to be treated as “native-born”, which in itself goes against our cultural instinct to protect our local way of life. But then He goes to the next level, saying “love them as yourself”. Foreigners and strangers in our communities aren’t just to be viewed as someone else’s problem. They are people who need care, hospitality and honour. In many cases they are people in need of safety and protection.

God also reminded His people that they “were foreigners in Egypt”. Jacob and his sons had fled as refugees to Egypt to escape famine in their own land. Initially they became part of the Egyptian system, but after a time their descendants, the people of Israel, were effectively cut off and forced into slavery. Having been outsiders and ‘undesirables’ themselves, the
Israeli people should have had compassion for the strangers in their midst.

God finished the command with “I am the Lord your God”. This command shows God’s character. His love and compassion for outsiders is something He wants His people to imitate. It is part of His very nature.

It wasn’t just the people of Israel who knew what it was to be strangers. Let’s look at Abraham for example. God told him, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). From that day, Abraham never had anywhere to call home.

Let’s consider Ruth as well. She was from Moab, yet abandoned her ‘gods’ and people, saying to Naomi, her Israeli mother-in-law: “Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). The Bible later describes the kindness, compassion and genuine concern Ruth received from Boaz, once she was in Israel, despite the fact she was a foreigner and an outsider. Through his actions, Boaz characterised the love of God towards those who have no support or protection of their own. He doesn’t turn them away; He welcomes them in and provides for their needs.

Throughout the Bible, many of God’s people lived as strangers to ‘normal’ society in some way. It’s no coincidence that so many of God’s people lived as outcasts and foreigners. They are a pattern and example given to us so we might understand what it actually means to belong to God and to love strangers as He does.
God's welcome for us

We see God's attitude towards strangers most clearly when we look at what He has done for each of us. Jesus left His home in heaven to become a stranger on earth.

In fact, soon after Jesus was born, Joseph was commanded to take his family, flee the persecution in their home country and find refuge in Egypt. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were political refugees, seeking safety from persecution in their homeland. Even as an adult Jesus said He had “no place to lay His head” (Luke 9:58). What does that mean? It’s not just that Jesus was homeless, a refugee and a stranger in this world. He didn’t fit in anywhere! Society rejected Jesus, but at the same time, He never sought to align Himself with the culture and expectations of the people around Him. As a stranger on earth, His focus was on His real home in heaven. In many ways, He wanted to be ‘out of place’ here, because that made it clear He was heading for a far better home; one that welcomes people of all cultures, backgrounds, wealth, health and needs.

What does that mean for us?

The Bible says that we were all “separate” from God and “foreigners” to Him (Ephesians 2:12) when Jesus died for us on the cross to pay for our mistakes and wrongs. Even though we were strangers to God, He gave up His Son to make us His family again. This is our incredible example of what
God’s love looks like towards strangers, and what we should be imitating. God didn’t shy away from strangers and hide Himself. Nor did He judge us for living self-centred lives (which is what we deserve). Instead, He became a stranger, took on that judgement for us and offered new life. We are now God’s children and heirs of His kingdom (Galatians 3:26-29)! Our entire identity has changed to match that of Jesus. From being strangers to God, we are now strangers to this world, just as He was before us.

In the same way that Abraham left his home country and followed God’s leading to a new land, our cultural identity and social standing are no longer what defines us. We have left them behind and now belong to God. We are heading for our new home with Him in heaven.

Just as Israel did, so we also know what it means to be foreigners! Our home is no longer the country we were born in. As Paul wrote to the church in Philippi: “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). Our home is with God, by His side in heaven. If we know what it is to be away from home, we know what it is to be longing for a safe place.

We have much more in common with today’s strangers than first meets the eye. Like the homeless, we know what it is to be an outcast; like the refugee, we know what it is to feel the pain of being separated from our home; like the poor, we know what it is to be looked down on. Many of the strangers around us are hurting and lonely. We should be opening our lives to them so they can see the life, welcome and home that God offers!
National culture, personal safety, identity, social standing and upbringing can all easily become idols which shape our opinions and views of others. Judging others by these things will only highlight the differences between us, making us feel either fearful or superior towards them. But we no longer belong to the standards of this world.

Now, as heavenly citizens, we have the culture of Christ instead. This new culture should be what drives our thinking and perspectives, replacing the native cultures we may have been born into. This is especially important when it feels like our natural instincts are making us hide away from others. In Christ, we shouldn’t be held back by our culture or personal perspective. Neither should we view strangers with fear, mistrust or discomfort. We need to see them as Christ does. Jesus gave up His life in order to make strangers and enemies the very family of God. This is the reason we welcome strangers. We should want them also to enter the safety of God’s home. If we can see people through God’s eyes, putting aside our own preferences, we will want to give the lost and hurting real hope and friendship.

Are we ready to let this be what defines us and our relationships?
In any given town or city there will be ethnic minority groups, the homeless, the lonely, the frail, the cut off, refugees and many other ‘strangers’ who we often don’t give a second thought to. What about the people in our church who we see every week but have never spoken to? They too are ‘strangers’ to us. We need to remember that we have God’s Spirit within us; and He is full of concern and love for these people. If we do not share this concern we need to ask ourselves why. It is important that we talk to God honestly about our fears or discomfort so that He can help us change and remove whatever barriers we have.

The book of Hebrews reminds us that we are receiving a “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:28) and then goes on to remind us to show “hospitality to strangers”, amongst other commands (13:2). Because we are constantly getting closer to that kingdom, showing biblical hospitality is essential. But this isn’t just about inviting friends over for Sunday lunch.

In Bible times, due to the lack of housing, travellers and strangers were often invited to stay in people’s homes. The hosts would provide food and a comfortable place to sleep, along with safety and protection from harm.
This doesn’t necessarily mean we should open our front doors wide and allow anyone and everyone into our homes for as long as they want (although, of course, for some of us this may well be a way we can serve). But it does mean that we should be willing to open our lives to the people God puts in our path, so they too can see this approaching kingdom and home that cannot be stolen, lost or “shaken”.

Are we willing to open our lives to any strangers God brings to us, sharing God’s home and love with them? Or are we only prepared to see them as a threat?

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What is it to share Jesus with a stranger? Is it just giving them a pass to heaven and wishing them well on their way? No. Of course, Jesus did come to offer salvation to everyone. But that salvation is much more than just a golden ticket. It is about belonging to God and doing His work in this world as He leads us. It is about showing active, practical love and welcome for the people we meet, even if they are strangers. To be people of God is to actively seek to meet the needs of those around us (James 2:14-17), as well as explaining what Christ has done for us.

The people in our churches and communities are not there by coincidence. We are not among them by chance. God has put each of us in a specific place with specific people for a reason. Let us make sure we talk to Him earnestly about this, so He can direct us to the strangers He wants us to serve and care for. And then let’s be ready to act.

There are many strangers around each of us who need to see the love of God. We need to be intentional, and reach out. Perhaps it could be the start of your ministry to speak to your church leaders about how you can be working together to serve and welcome the people in your community.
Perhaps you could:

- **Serve the homeless or lonely** in some way, maybe by providing meals, opening your home, starting a ‘drop-in’ centre or setting up a food bank.

- **Serve those who are struggling** with grief, loss, illness or disappointment in the community. Provide meals for them, spend time with them, offer to pray for them and remind them of the gospel hope we have.

- **Set up language classes** for the ethnic minority groups in your town.

- **Make time to get alongside refugees** and their families, maybe offering practical welcome packs, advice for creating CVs or to help them navigate meetings and filling in forms.

- ** Honour the older members** of your church by visiting them during the week.

- **Introduce yourself to the people** in your church who you’ve never really spoken with, particularly those who are alone or ‘different’ to you.

The love and welcome of God is revealed in such ‘everyday’ actions! All these kinds of situations offer us the choice to shrink back in fear or to open our lives and the home of God to strangers.

This attitude of care and concern emphasises what the gospel is! And as we show God’s love to others and go about His work, we can be sure that there will be opportunities, and prompting from the Holy Spirit, to also explain God’s love in the person and work of Jesus.