



Baptist Churches of South Australia team member, Tabor College lecturer and top-shelf preacher Melinda Cousins gives a challenging take on what hospitality really looks like.



A few years ago I had a disagreement with a politician about words. He was using a phrase that was understood in the popular media as a kind of 'slogan' with a particular emphasis. I made an assumption about what he meant by using this phrase; he assured me that he had a more nuanced perspective to communicate. The key to our disagreement was that he then said it was my responsibility to understand what he intended to communicate and it was my problem if I didn't get what he meant. Conversely, I suggested that it was his responsibility to understand how I would hear what he was saying and to use words to ensure that I would receive his intention. In the end we had to agree to disagree but it is a conversation I have often thought about since.

Does the onus lie on the speaker or the hearer to make sure communication is clearly understood?

And what does that have to do with hospitality?

Missiology 101 tells me that as someone who has a good message to proclaim, the onus is on me to make sure that my words are being heard and understood by those I am seeking to communicate with, rather than expecting or assuming that they will know what I intend. We call it 'contextualisation'. To me, this is a form of hospitality. **I invite someone into the conversation in a way that is welcoming when I focus not so much on what I want to say but on what they will hear.**

I think hospitality is often misunderstood. The mental picture many people have is of inviting someone into their home. However, there is an important caveat. In many ways, our home is our 'turf'. It is the place where we feel most comfortable and where we do things our way. If we invite someone in to that but expect and assume that they will 'fit in' with us, are we truly being welcoming?

Or is hospitality about making the other person feel comfortable, choosing to accommodate ourselves to their way of doing things and making sure they feel at home?

True hospitality is the attitude of making someone else feel at home rather than simply being in our home.

What would it look like to live that kind of hospitality in speech and in action?

My church has recently started partnering with a Christian community who speak a different language to us, many of whom are refugees and have left everything they have known behind. I see joy in their eyes as they come into a place where they can speak their own language, eat food that is familiar to them and feel comfortable knowing that they understand what is expected of them. I imagine that in nearly every other aspect of their lives this is not the case. Everywhere they go they are expected to fit in with us, speak like us, do things our way. And yes, that is part of the process of learning to live in a new culture. But, what if, instead of the church being just one more place where they as outsiders are expected to find ways to fit in, we as followers of Jesus chose to be the ones who learned their language, ate their food, did things their way? **What if we went out of our way to be the ones who were uncomfortable so that they might feel at home?**

That's a challenge. That's what is difficult. That's the kind of hospitality that is costly as we sacrifice our own comfort and ease for the sake of the other. That's the kind of hospitality of a church whose early leaders chose to become like outsiders in order to share their hope with those on the outside. That's the kind of hospitality of a church whose head is a God who condescended to become a human being in order to demonstrate His great love for humanity.

For more of Melinda's works, subscribe to www.melindacousins.com.