



January 2016 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ –

Throughout 2016 I invite you to reflect with me on the theme of “Practicing Our Faith” as you gather for church council, adult study, youth group, coffee group, choir rehearsal and are engaged in learning, discernment and reflection together. Dorothy Bass has edited an excellent resource published several years ago by Jossey-Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, which I will be using as a primary resource. Together with Don Richter, Dorothy Bass has also edited a second book, *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, published by Upper Room Books, which is also an excellent resource. Each article will include a Scripture reference, thematic reflection, questions for consideration, and a prayer.

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Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to the stranger. Romans 12:13

En nombre del cielo, buenos moradores, dad a unos viajerosposada esta noche.

(In the name of God, we ask those who dwell here, give to some travellers lodging this evening.)

Traditional Song for *Las Posadas*

Hospitality

For many decades, this particular congregation and neighborhood has been a home and a welcome *posada* (shelter) for a diverse group of people. The various cultures which make up the neighborhood create a rich and vital community.

On this December evening, children of every age process down the street, some with lighted candles in hand and others carrying on their shoulders statues of Mary and Joseph. Each Advent, the young and the old re-enact the story of Joseph seeking lodging for his young wife, Mary, who is weary from travel and heavy with child.

For nine nights in a row, children and adults assume the identity of the weary couple or of the innkeepers, processing around the inside of the church or throughout the neighborhood, moving from one designated location to the next. This is the cherished ritual of *Las Posadas*.

At each site an ancient exchange is repeated. Those playing the role of Joseph approach the inn, knock on the door, and say in a loud voice: *En nombre del cielo, buenos moradores, dad a unos viajerosposada esta noche*. From inside a chorus of voices responds: *Aquí no es meson sigan adelante; yo no puedo abrir no sea algun tunante* (This is not an inn; move on – I cannot open lest you be a scoundrel). As Joseph moves from one inn to the next, the innkeepers grow angry and even threaten violence, while

the night grows colder and the couple's weariness turns to exhaustion. *Venimos rendidos desde Nazareth, yo soy carpintero de nombre José* (We are tired travelling from Nazareth; I am a carpenter named Joseph), Joseph anxiously implores. Finally, he even reveals Mary's true identity, begging for *posada* for just one night for *la Reina del Cielo*, the Queen of Heaven – to no avail.

Finally, on the ninth day, the eve of Christmas, Joseph's request moves the heart of an innkeeper, who offers the couple all that he has left – a stable – and this humble place becomes the birthplace of Jesus.

In an outpouring of love and festivity, those gathered on the final night celebrate the generosity of the innkeeper and the *posada* given to Mary and Joseph in song and dance, food and drink. Candy and treats from the *piñata* shower the children, and the community recalls anew how the stranger at one's door can be God in disguise.

In January we move through the season of Christmas to Epiphany where we discover that Christ is the light of the world. Although *Las Posadas* is an engaging ritual in preparation for Christmas, the reality it addresses is a painful one year round: the reality of human need and exclusion. The ritual affirms the goodness of taking people in, and those who once needed *posada* are reminded to offer it to others.

We know only too well the reality of the need to give and to receive hospitality. I am thankful that many individuals and communities within our Synod, and across Canada, are working to provide *posada* and a welcome to strangers – to those weary and exhausted.

This is a lesson that is needed in all our communities for just as the human need for hospitality is a constant, so, it seems, is the human fear of the stranger.

Hospitality was a crucial practice among the early Christians. One word in the New Testament incorporates a profound truth: *xenos*, the Greek word that means "stranger", also means "guest" and "host." This one word signals the essential mutuality that is at the heart of hospitality. No one is strange except in relation to someone else; we make one another guests and hosts by how we treat one another.

Las Posadas is more than a ritual. It crystallizes the community's experience of being nourished and challenged daily by a central Christian mystery – namely, that the stranger at our door can be both gift and challenge, human and divine – every day of the year.

Read and Reflect: Romans 12:9-13

Discuss and Reflect:

What in this reading leads you to say, "I wonder about...", or, "I noticed..."

Share a story in which you experienced being a stranger, describing the situation and emotions you experienced. Did anyone receive you with hospitality? If so, what concrete forms did the hospitality take?

Comment on the following: One Greek word in the New Testament incorporates a profound truth: *xenos*, the word that means "stranger", also means "guest" and "host." This one word signals the essential mutuality that is at the heart of hospitality. No one is strange except in relation to someone else; we make one another guests and hosts by how we treat one another.

Pray together: Gracious God, let your grace enfold us in confidence and peace, that we may welcome every stranger as guest and host. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

In Christ Jesus –
Shalom,
+Larry

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Spirit -Led Leadership - Hope-Filled Discipleship - Innovative Tradition - Collaborative Partnerships