

I Was a Stranger and You Let Me In

Would you let immigrants from another country live under your roof? These families say they had no choice but to show Christian hospitality.

Melody Pahlow misses her house-guests from Africa.

The pile of 40 shoes by the front door is gone. There is no aroma of brewing chi (tea), and toothpicks no longer are scattered across the dining table. No voices are singing out the greeting, "Good-a morn-a-ing!" The dancing in the kitchen has ceased.

Her guests – a Somali Bantu family consisting of mom, dad and nine kids – moved into their own apartment after living 10 days in the Pahlows' suburban Chicago home. It was the African family's first days in America. They had arrived directly from a primitive refugee camp in Kenya.

It was the second time Melody and husband Ben, both 35, had welcomed a family of newly arrived African refugees into their four-bedroom home. Both experiences, they say, were unforgettable.

With four children of their own, ages 7 to 13, the Pahlows had all the reasons not to host a family of 11 strangers. Too busy, too crowded, not enough beds, not enough bathrooms – the potential entries on the excuse list were endless. Not to mention the single mom with two kids already living in the Pahlows' basement and the lodger in their spare room.

After the Bantu family arrived – with one days notice – there were 21 people staying at the Pahlows'. The minority language was English.

The Pahlows' willingness to open their home to complete strangers – many of whom don't speak English – is remarkable.

"We call it 'Hotel Pahlow,' Ben quips.

But Melody says she's no Martha Stewart. "I don't know anything about being a hostess," she says. "In fact, I'd say I'm domestically dysfunctional."

The Pahlows agreed to temporarily host the Bantu family in February, and a similar family last year, because they want to obey Jesus' call to practice hospitality toward strangers: "I was a stranger and you took Me in" (Matt. 25:35, NKJV). In this passage, Jesus links hospitality with true discipleship. Hospitality might involve providing lodging, sharing a meal or simply hanging out.

"Hospitality doesn't necessarily mean cooking meals and doing people's laundry," Melody says. "It can be just giving people the chance to be who they are in your home."

Still, Melody admits, with 21 people jammed into every corner, there were times when the slightest thing irritated her. She got cranky at times.

"The sound of my son brushing his teeth made my skin crawl," she says. "It was like a mirror to the soul, revealing all my flaws."

There were moments of comic relief, too. The Africans had never seen deodorant.

“Within a few days, we knew each other so well that I’d lift up their arms and roll it on,” Melody says.

While the Pahlows observed their guestsí sometimes seemingly odd behaviors (cooking chicken and pasta for breakfast, for example), the Bantu family eyed their hosts with similar bewilderment.

Ben recalls how the 45-year-old Bantu dadóperplexed by modern appliances -stuck his head inside the microwave to try to figure out how it worked.

Melody kept a diary, documenting the highs and the lows, and shared it by e-mail with members of her church. For them, the Pahlowsí daily log took on all the intrigue of a reality-TV show.

Two years ago, the Pahlows say, the notion of hosting a family from Africa was for them unthinkable. Then they met Providence, a refugee who had been forced to flee his native Rwanda and had been torn from his wife and family.

Alone in Chicago, Providence had no one to turn to. He frequented the local library, where one day during a conversation with Melody he shared his story. Thatís when the Pahlows extended the hand of hospitality and invited Providence in.

“It truly was ‘providence,’ Ben recalls. “God used our Rwandan friend to wake us up. Here was a chance for us to ëbe Jesus’

to someone in need.” Since then, Ben and Melody have also taken in a single mom with two children.

The Heritage of Hospitality

For most of church history, hospitality was central to Christian identity. The concept of hospitality, especially toward strangers and foreigners, is woven through both Old and New Testament writings. In early Bible times, to share food was to share life. Other acts of hospitality included allowing strangers to harvest the corners of one’s fields (see Lev. 19:9-10) and including the alien, or foreigner, in Passover celebrations (see Ex. 12:48-49).

For the early church, hospitality was an expression of lovingkindness, an attribute of God. Paul instructs believers to practice hospitality (see Rom. 12:13); the writer of Hebrews urges Christians not to neglect hospitality toward strangers (see Heb. 13:2); and Peter challenges believers to give hospitality ungrudgingly (see 1 Pet. 4:9).

As recorded in Acts 16:15, Lydia invited Paul, Silas and Timothy to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house” (NIV).

However, according to a Barna Research Group survey, only 3 percent of born-again Christians in the U.S. today say they have the biblical gift of hospitality.

“Hospitality is not optional for Christians, nor is it limited to those who are specially gifted for it,” counters Christine Pohl, author of *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Wm. B. Eerdmans). “It is a necessary

practice in the community of faith.”

Pohl, a professor of Christian social ethics at Asbury Theological Seminary, points out that one of the key Greek words for hospitality, *philoxenia*, combines the general word for love or affection for people connected by kinship or faith (*phileo*) and the word for stranger (*xenos*).

“Hospitality’s orientation toward strangers is more apparent in Greek than in English,” she notes. “We, like the early church, find ourselves in a fragmented and multicultural society that yearns for relationships.”

In Romans 15:7, Paul urges believers to “receive one another” (NKJV) as Christ has received them.

“Jesus’ gracious and sacrificial hospitality – expressed in His life, ministry and death – undergirds the hospitality of His followers,” Pohl says. “Jesus gave His life so that persons could be welcomed into the kingdom and in doing so linked hospitality, grace and sacrifice in the deepest and most personal way imaginable.

“People are hungry for welcome,” she continues, “but most Christians have lost track of the heritage of hospitality.”

According to Valorie Burton, a speaker on Christian living, hospitality means going out of your way to be compassionate. “Demonstrating Christ’s love means opening our hearts and serving others,” says Burton, who has spoken at T.D. Jakes’ Potter’s House church in Dallas and Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston. Burton adds, however, that people should seek God’s guidance and exercise Spirit-led discernment before

inviting strangers into their homes.

Who Is a “Stranger”?

A “stranger” can be defined as anyone in need of friendship and Christian fellowship. Hilary Patterson was flustered when her husband, Dwayne, called home to say heíd met a recovering drug addict who had nowhere to stay. Yvette, a 23-year-old from San Diego, had come to Kailua, Hawaii, for rehab treatment and needed shelter.

“It was raining hard, so I told Dwayne, ‘Just bring her home,’” recalls Hilary, 30, who co-pastored a Salvation Army church in Kailua with her husband, 36.

“We lived in a small fixer-upper and I was kind of embarrassed about the condition of the house,” Hilary told Charisma. ‘I made up a bed in the back room, but the only spare blankets belonged to my 2-year-old daughter and had teddy bears on them.”

Yvette stayed with the Pattersons for nine days. Hilary and Dwayne took her to the beach and showed her around the island. “We got talking about life, and I was able to share the gospel with her,” Hilary says. “She started to cry and said she felt like she had lost her soul and she had no hope.”

Before Yvette returned to California, Hilary bought her a Bible in which she inscribed a personal note of encouragement. The seeds of kindness and hospitality were sown. A few weeks later, Yvette called from San Diego to tell Hilary she was going to church and had been baptized.

Refugees and foreigners are perhaps the personification of those whom Jesus had in mind when He commanded His followers to welcome the stranger – the most alienated, marginalized and vulnerable individuals in society.

In 2004, 52,000 refugees – victims of war and persecution predominantly from Africa and Asia – were admitted to the U.S. Thousands of them, including many from Muslim backgrounds, were welcomed by Christians.

The Holy Spirit empowers believers to be hosts, even when they feel inadequate, says Joshua Sieweke, a trainer with evangelical agency World Relief, which links refugees with hosts in the U.S.

“Without the love of Christ, it’s very hard to find in yourself a love for people who might come across as strange or smell bad,” Sieweke says. “I am in awe of host families and their willingness to jump right in.”

Sieweke, who works alongside Christian host families in Atlanta, says nearly all are enriched by the experience. But romantic notions of hospitality, he says, sometimes end abruptly.

“One couple pictured everyone sitting around the table as one big, happy family,” he says. “Instead, they found they couldn’t communicate verbally and their guests tucked into the spaghetti without using their forks..”

Taking the Plunge

Barbara Cocchi has immersed herself in the world of refugees, convinced that hospitality is absolutely pivotal to the Christian walk.

“It is about being willing to put Christ’s desires ahead of our own and not allowing any barriers between the Holy Spirit and ourselves,” she says.

As director of World Relief’s refugee program in Atlanta, Cocchi has had plenty of personal experience with the joys and frustrations – of welcoming strangers from lands where life is primitive. She has taught new arrivals how to turn a doorknob, flick a light switch, use a toaster and flush a toilet.

She recalls how members of a family from Africa watched with great concentration as they were shown how to operate the stove in their apartment then proceeded to build a fire in the backyard to cook dinner. Such memorable experiences, Cocchi says, are part of the deal when one welcomes strangers from far-flung corners of the globe.

In Seattle, Eric and Sarah Showell took the plunge to host a young couple from South Asia. The Showells were in the midst of a difficult transition: adjusting to parenthood with a 6-week-old daughter.

“We were dealing with night feedings, and Sarah was still recuperating,” Eric recalls. “We could have waited for a better time, until everything was perfect, but that time never comes.

“It is hard for us in America to seek out people who are not the same as us, ethnically, socially or economically,” he

adds. "Like Jesus, my focus needs to be on others and their needs, not me and my wants."

Meal times were a challenge. Their guests had never eaten pizza.

"Fortunately, a Vietnamese work colleague came over and fixed curry one night," Sarah recalls. She points out that, for a host family, a willingness to show friendship is what matters most.

"You could think: I can't cook their food; I don't have a big house or enough blankets, but the real issue is, will I welcome a stranger as my friend?"

The Showells forged a friendship with their guests.

"We fell in love with them," Sarah says. "I thought that after 10 days I'd be saying to myself: 'OK, it's time for them to go,'" but actually we didn't want them to leave."

In many non-Western cultures, hospitality is provided to all – practiced with sacrificial generosity by the poorest families who have very little materially to share with their guests.

During a short-term missions trip to Costa Rica in February, Maryland farmer J.C. Lowery, 19, was bowled over by his hosts' reception. The family of eight lived in a tiny single-room house and slept on mats on the floor. At meal times, they didn't have enough chairs, so some perched on wooden blocks. Lowery was seated in the best chair.

The next day his hosts had cut branches and made him his own chair. “It blew me away to see how much they cared for me – a stranger – with the little they have,” Lowery told Charisma. “Their love for Christ just spilled over.”

It is time for Christians in America to rediscover the biblical call to hospitality, the Pahlows believe.

“I feel that the church in America needs to get real,” Ben says. “Most American Christians are totally self-focused. We need to develop an outward focus and invite the stranger in.”

Julian Lukins is a staff writer for World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals. In 2004, World Relief volunteers helped welcome 6,290 refugees to America. To learn more, go to <>.

Open Hearts Open Homes

One Chicago couple has learned that genuine hospitality opens huge doors for ministry.

Rick and Desiree Guzman have befriended many strangers. Their response, Rick says, is born out of a Spirit-led desire to reach out to people.

“For me, hospitality is summed up by Jesus in Luke 6:31: ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you,’” Rick, 27, says. “As a baby, Jesus Himself was a refugee in Egypt. His family had to depend on the hospitality of strangers.”

Rick and his 29-year-old wife, Desiree, a teacher, have come

alongside several refugee families in their hometown of Aurora, Illinois-visiting with them, having them over for meals, taking them out on trips and even inviting them along on vacations.

Sharing their faith, Rick points out, is a natural progression. They befriend refugee families, many of whom have Muslim backgrounds, not with the “ulterior motive” of witnessing but because Jesus would have done the same.

Neither is the relationship a one-way street. “Our experience helping refugees and just doing life with them has probably had a larger impact on us than it has on them,” says Rick, who works for the Illinois Department of Corrections and hopes to attend law school.

He and Desiree launched their own nonprofit group, The Tolbert Refugee Assistance Foundation. They cut back their wedding expenses and requested donations in place of gifts so they could expand their outreach to strangers.

The bond with one family in particular, refugees from eastern Africa, has grown especially strong. Last year, when the mother, Halima, was about to give birth, she called and asked Desiree and Rick to come to the hospital with her. During labor and the delivery, Desiree was at her side while Rick paced the floors “like a nervous dad.”

When the baby was born, Halima announced his name: Rick Jabril Musa. Rick and Desiree, members of Community Christian Church in Aurora, were stunned.

“There’s little doubt in our minds that the bonds we have formed are lifelong,” Rick adds. “They are more like family to

us than anything else.”

Although Rick and Desiree do not have children of their own, they bought a minivan fitted with three child seats to transport their refugee friends.

The Guzmans’ dream is to buy a boarding house to accommodate refugees and others at a reduced rent. Their idea is to set the rent money aside and later give it back to their renters to help them make a down payment on a house of their own.

Says Rick: “The most important thing, in my view, is reciprocating Christ’s love through practicing hospitality and loving others.”