

NAMBUCCA VALLEY ANGLICANS BOOK GROUP

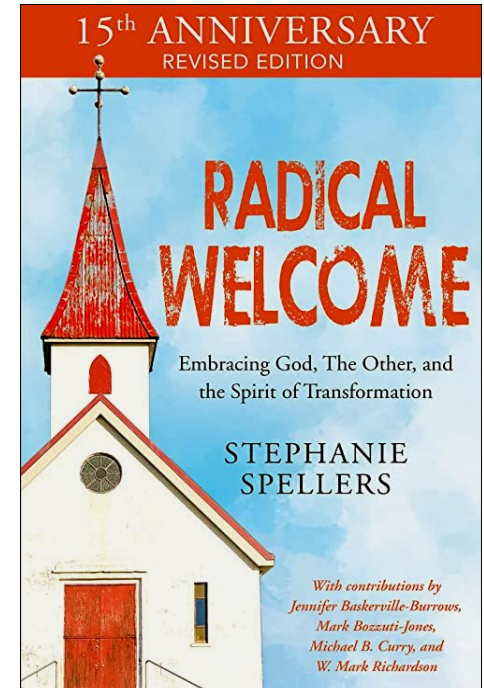
April 2023

At their Formation Day back in February our LLM's were led by Jonathan Sargeant from the Brisbane Diocese on the theme of Welcoming.

Defining Radical Welcome

It's time to bring a different set of questions. Not just how do we get more people, but how do we share power, how do you create a culture that is flexible and fluid enough to be open, constantly evaluating and reorganizing based on the reality around you?

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Just what is radical welcome? Most people hear the term and think it's about having a warm, dependable welcome at the door of the church and a really good cup of coffee and snacks in the church hall. They assume it's the province of the Hospitality and Greeters Committee or maybe, just maybe, the Outreach and Justice group.

Those are wonderful goals. But that's not where radical welcome is aiming. Radical welcome is a fundamental spiritual practice, one that combines the universal Christian ministry of welcome and hospitality with a clear awareness of power and patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Just look at the words. Radical. Welcome. Both terms are rich with meaning. Welcome says come in, sit down, stay a while; we are honoured to have you. It also says the door is open, a bit like, "You're welcome to whatever is in the fridge." And it indicates an openness of spirit, that what we do is a pleasure. When someone thanks you for a gift or kind gesture, your "You're welcome" communicates graciousness and ease and allows the other person to receive with equal ease and grace.

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf explores yet another avenue for understanding welcome: the concept of embrace. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf traces the four movements that comprise mutual embrace:

- **Act One:** Opening the arms.

This move telegraphs the desire to reach beyond yourself in order to connect with the other,³ to be part of the other and to have the other be part of you. The act of opening your arms also creates space for the other to come in—boundaries are down, the self is open. Finally, he says, open arms are an invitation. "Like a door left opened for an expected friend, they are a call to come in."⁴

- **Act Two:** Waiting.

You cannot force the other to come inside. You cannot reach out and grasp and coerce. You must wait at the boundary of the other, wait for him to open to you, hope that the power of your vulnerability and desire for the other will prove compelling, even transforming.

- **Act Three:** Closing.

After the other steps into the embrace, there is closing. This is mutual indwelling, holding the other within the bounds of yourself and finding yourself

received in kind. Such indwelling shouldn't be confused with disappearing, melting into each other or merging into undifferentiated beings. "In an embrace, the identity of the self is both preserved and transformed, and the alterity (difference) of the other is both affirmed as alterity and partly received into the ever changing identity of the self."⁵ Nor do you have perfect understanding of each other; the goal is not to master the other, but to receive the other on her own terms and continue to seek relationship.

- **Act Four:** Opening the arms.

Because the two have not melted into one, you may once again open your arms. Now you have the chance to look at yourself and rediscover your own identity, "enriched by the traces that the presence of the other has left."⁶ And you look again at the other, the one whose identity will continue to change, the one who will continue to be both friend and mystery. The one you may embrace again with your now open arms.

This is the drama of reconciling, mutual welcome. Think of the times you have been embraced, welcomed, received. We all know how good it is to come home like that, even if the territory is new. When someone carefully, lovingly sets a table for us; when someone thinks of us and our needs and hopes; when someone listens with full attention to our story and then offers their own, without seeking to master or co-opt; when someone sets aside their own preferences in order to joyfully, humbly defer to ours. When we are welcomed like this, we can experience the state of freedom and love I believe God wills for all people. It is a joy to receive this welcome. It is also a joy to offer this welcome, to say to another person: "May I know you better?"

But there is more to radical welcome, as the word radical signifies. Radical, in this instance, should not connote the unreasonable, undisciplined action some people associate with the term. Instead, radical amplifies the welcome, broadening and deepening and launching it to the next level. It also indicates a deep,

fierce, urgent commitment to some core ideal. That's not just any ideal, but one at the root of a tradition, a movement, and, in our case, a faith. As Bill Tully, rector of St. Bartholomew's in New York, told me: "Radical is Jesus. Radical is getting down to the roots."

If welcome is the drama of embrace, then a radical welcome is the embrace that is hardest of all, requiring the broadest extension and opening of self, even as it draws us back to our core values. It is the embrace of the marginalized, silenced, oppressed Stranger. "Here is the core of hospitality," according to Father Daniel Homan, OSB, and Lonni Collins Pratt. "May I know you better? Will you come closer, please? No, it will not be easy, but make no mistake about it, your life depends on this saving stranger coming to you and stretching your tight little heart."

Who is this "saving stranger," The Other, who is at once a full, complex, individual human being with a unique story and perspective and a member of a larger group that exists within the

social hierarchy, as we all do? It's best to take on this question in two chunks. Let's begin closer to home. Depending on who the dominant, empowered groups are in your parish, The Others are the ones you have the power to systemically marginalize and/or oppress. They are, to borrow the language of the Visions Group, the targets of oppression, while those who hold certain privileges and power are nontargets.⁸ It matters not what you as an individual feel you have done to The Other, or even whether there are particular ways you as a congregation have consciously hurt another group. Identifying The Other requires only the recognition that, within the social system in which we all function, some groups have been given social, economic and political power over other groups.

Now, we can widen the circle. Every church is a social institution, woven into a complex cultural and historical tapestry that operates beyond but has great implications for the individual congregation. So we all have to ask, "Who are The Others in relation to our tradition or denomination—the groups

the self-centred consumerism or corporate, customer-service expectations currently sucking the life and gospel out of many churches. Radical welcome is not simply a matter of making new or marginalized people feel comfortable, fashioning church in our own image, or hopping onboard for the next cultural trend.

- Radical welcome is not reverse discrimination. There is no need to toss out the gifts of tradition, or to ignore the needs and voices of people who have enjoyed certain privileges. An abundant, radically welcoming attitude says there is room for everyone to be heard, and that there is something beautiful, valuable and holy that everyone brings to the holy banquet, including those who've sat at the head of the table for a long time. In reality, there's bound to be some relinquishment and loss on the part of the empowered groups, but only so that each group can speak and help to shape the community they now share.

- Radical welcome is not a conventional church growth

strategy. You are quite likely to grow if you take it seriously. But that's because it is an expression of Christ's New Covenant, a way that is rooted in the gospel. Should you engage this transformation, others will surely find your community attractive and compelling, because they will see the passionate and compassionate spirit of Christ at the centre of it, and because your hearts will be so open, radiant and fearless, they will prove irresistible.

- Radical welcome is not political correctness or a haphazard, reactionary throwing out of the baby with the bathwater. It is deeply faithful, deeply committed to welcoming and participating in the continuous, powerful, surprising in-breaking of the reign of God. It's about finding yourself utterly accepted and embraced by God, and then running into the world and your community to see how you could extend that hospitality to others.

Spellers, Stephanie. *Radical Welcome* (pp. 42-44). Church Publishing Incorporated. Kindle Edition.

welcomed and still welcomes all.

- **Faithful:**

They honour radical transformation not as a necessary evil or as change for the sake of change, a response to misplaced liberal guilt or a church growth strategy, but instead because they are saying “yes” to God’s gracious invitation to welcome as Christ welcomes.

- **Compassionate:**

They prioritize the work of creating “space for grace”⁹: small groups, forums and other settings where people can develop, express and hold their dreams and their fear of change, even as they deepen their commitment to radical welcome.

- **Real:**

They acknowledge they will not be perfect or consistently, radically embrace every group. A radically welcoming congregation is one where the members are becoming God’s radically welcoming people.

Radical Welcome Is Not . . .

As you seek to understand radical welcome, get crystal clear on what it is not:

- Radical welcome is not an invitation to assimilate. We must move beyond the traditional inviting church paradigm, beyond inviting

people to come inside and take on what we’ve already packaged and nailed down (as you will see in part 2). We are offering an embrace, and that means we have opened ourselves, offered ourselves. The risk is great, but embrace requires us to gird ourselves with the love of God and to say, “Come, bring who you are. My arms are open to you. Would you open yours to me?” We will receive one another, not losing our unique identities and histories, but releasing the rigid boundaries so that our stories can connect and a new community might be born.

- Radical welcome is not feel-good ministry. We are not pandering to

whose voices and gifts have not been part of shaping our collective identity, the ones who have not held much power or been welcomed with open arms?”

This level of discernment is crucial, if a little tougher to grasp. Suppose your church has lots of working class members; do you need to think about whether you’re sending exclusive, classist signals? What if you’re a largely black church in a multicultural neighbourhood: why would you need to worry about radically welcoming blacks and other people of colour? Why? Because when people who have been marginalized see the sign hanging on your door—Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, Methodist, you name it—they may automatically leap to a number of assumptions about who you are, who is welcome to fully share your common life and who is not. Despite your diverse membership, you may still be participating in many of the exclusive patterns of your tradition: music that is culturally limited, leadership structures that reflect the

expectations of European, privileged, older, or straight communities, and so on. It takes extra vigilance and care to reverse the effect of the exclusive stereotypes and patterns your tradition has laid on you. It takes understanding who your congregation and your tradition have pushed to the margins. It takes a recognition of who is The Other and why.

Those are hard words for most of us to hear and process. If you’re in a non-target group, you may feel the guilt and resistance creeping in: “I see where this is going. I’m now the enemy. Same old story.” If you identify strongly with a target group, you may feel yourself somewhat objectified: “Surely I’m more than my group, more than my victim or oppressed status.”

I can only promise you that this is not about guilt trips or victim complexes, but a statement regarding reality. We cannot transform systems without naming them. We cannot work for freedom and embrace unless we acknowledge what forces keep us from the reconciliation and

compassion we know God is holding out for all of us. Part of what makes radical welcome radical is that it goes into the roots under relationships and systems, clearing debris and maybe even rewiring the motherboard so that we can live and welcome in new ways.

Radical Welcome Is . . .

How do all those elements finally come together at the congregational level? When I describe a church as “radically welcoming,” it means the community seeks to welcome the voices, presence and power of many groups - especially those who have been defined as The Other, pushed to the margins, cast out, silenced, and closeted - in order to help shape the congregation’s common life and mission. Few communities could achieve the vision of radical welcome in its totality. Radically welcoming communities are the ones committed to transformed life, a life that aims to be:

- **Hospitable:**

They seek to offer a gracious, warm space to all people, especially those who have been defined as “Other,” systemically dis-empowered and oppressed, pushed to the margins. In the Episcopal Church and most mainline churches, that could include people of colour, poor people, children and young adults, gay and lesbian people, seniors, people with disabilities, and many other groups.

- **Connected:**

They link to their neighbours, to their neighbourhood, to brothers and sisters beyond their neighbourhood with whom they actively practice what it means to embrace and be changed by Jesus.

- **Centered:**

They possess a clear, compelling sense of Christian identity. That self-understanding is based in part in their cultural and denominational heritage, but primarily in the unapologetic and clear call to live out the dream of

God as they have discerned it in light of Scripture, tradition, reason, and their context.

- **Open to conversion:**

They attempt to listen carefully to, make room for, share power with, and learn from groups who’ve been silenced, closeted and disempowered, and they are open to genuine conversion and transformation based on this encounter with The Other. On the ground, that means they allow God’s Spirit and the gifts of The Other to enrich and transform their understanding of who is inside and who is outside, what ministries they undertake, how they select leaders, how they do business, how they worship, what they claim as their mission and purpose, and how they partner with other groups.

- **Intentional:**

They engage in training, research, active listening, strategic planning: some conscious, contextually appropriate effort that addresses individual, congregational, institutional, and systemic change.

They realize radical welcome does not come merely as a matter of goodwill or a by-product of enthusiastic outreach programs.

- **Comprehensive:**

They recognize that the work cannot be left to a specialized ministry area, like the Outreach Ministry, the Social Justice Team or the Hospitality Committee; it is a way of being, and should eventually be cultivated by the chief leaders through formation, worship, mission, and other areas of congregational life. • **Becoming:** They realize this journey is never finished, so they are always becoming, always looking beyond the congregation to see who has been left out or pushed out, always aware that the stranger’s face is the very face of Christ.

- **Beyond diversity:**

They understand that radical welcome is not merely about diversity, evangelism, multiculturalism, inclusion, or getting it “right.” It is simply, profoundly about being faithful disciples of the Christ who