To Our Brothers and Sisters in The United Church of Christ

We members of the Confessing Christ Steering Committee welcome our church’s decision to actively foster a ministry of hospitality in local congregations throughout our denomination. We firmly believe that we cannot be Christians without extending a sincere welcome to all fellow humans, neighbors and strangers alike, making clear the cost as well as the joy of discipleship. If we fail to offer our embrace to those beyond the doors of our local churches, including those whose cultures and habits are different from ours, if we cater only to ourselves and our own social kind, the vitality of our Christian discipleship will be grievously diminished.

We feel that this practice of hospitality is so crucial to the life of the church that it is wise to explore the motivation and foundation of Christian hospitality, and to clarify how Christian hospitality differs from generic friendliness and merely secular inclusivity. Hospitality demands more than acceptance and affirmation of the presence of the guest. To be any kind of host at all, we need to be so at home in our own house that we immediately recognize what distinctive nourishment and refreshment we have to offer our company. In other words, we need to be thoroughly conversant with the priceless treasures of the church, its core beliefs and values, so that we can present them as special blessings to our guests, and even nurture them into the family. Christian hospitality is not rooted in any pragmatic agreement to live-and-let-live, nor in any relativistic toleration of all ideologies and value-systems that happen to come down the cultural pike. To truly grasp how and why Christians can extend a hospitality more extravagant than anything the general culture can offer, we must recover the rich heritage that has sustained our mothers and fathers in the faith. Only when we have fully appreciated our own unique identity will we have anything of value to offer to the strangers beyond our doors (and within them). Only then can we joyfully offer to strangers the accommodations that were prepared for the family members.

How and why does Christianity foster hospitality? Most basically, Christians practice hospitality because hospitality is part and parcel of the very life of God. Strange as it may initially seem, any exploration of hospitality must get its bearings from the doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity’s primary and most foundational affirmation about ultimate reality. This ancient article of faith paints a very striking and even shocking picture of God. The theme of the existence of God in three Persons is not an afterthought that merely adds some curious supplemental information about a remote, static being who had already been understood exclusively in terms of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. If that were the case, the godness of God would be defined in terms of self-containment as opposed to relationality, and as controlling power as opposed to empathy. In short, God would be imagined to be the sort of self-reliant superpower that we would like to be in our most narcissistic fantasies. But, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, that is not who the Christian God is. Rather, our God exists not in self-enclosed isolation, not in monolithic stasis, but in the vibrant reciprocity and mutuality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To put it simply, God’s very life is a dynamic eternal dance of unity-in-difference. God’s omnipotence is the unconquerable vibrancy of divine love. The fact that God’s very essence is the relationality of the three Persons means that generous, extravagantly self-giving love beats at the heart of the universe.

Traditional trinitarian doctrine teaches us two things that are crucial for an understanding of hospitality. First, mutual generosity, sharing, and welcoming openness characterize the relations
of all the Persons of the Trinity to each other. From all eternity, they engage in mutual glorification and celebration, taking exquisite delight in each other’s sheer existence. Each Person is perfectly open and available to the others, welcoming the other two without restriction. The ancient teachers of the church referred to this as the three Persons’ mutual “indwelling” of each other. This embrace of otherness is built into the very inner life of God. Second, the individual Persons do not lose their distinctive identities through this co-inherence; they do not coalesce into an amorphous divine goop. In fact, their very ability to welcome the others depends upon the fact that their own respective identities remain intact.

Hospitality is not only a feature of God’s eternal dance of love, but is radiantly manifested in the out-working of that life in the creation, redemption, and completion of humanity and the entire cosmos. The strands of hospitality are woven throughout the Biblical narratives, as the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ so beautifully elaborates. God the Creator calls “the worlds into being,” welcoming all things into existence, creating humanity in the very image of the hospitable triune life. Tragically, God’s extravagant self-giving love is met by our stubborn ingratitude and inhospitality. Yet, while holding us accountable for our “aimlessness and sin,” God persists in seeking us out “in holy love.” God bestows gift after gift upon creation: promises, covenants, laws, and wisdom. Then, when we turn our backs upon this profligate generosity, God the Redeemer in “Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth,” rushes to embrace us prodigals, sharing our common lot, suffering the judgment upon our inhospitality, and “conquering sin and death.” God the Redeemer’s good hosting is writ large in Jesus’ healings, in his fellowship with lepers, tax collectors, and ostracized women, in his countless parables of the Reign of God, in his the feeding of the 5,000, and, most spectacularly, in his forgiveness of those who nailed his welcoming hands to a cross. The story continues as God the Holy Spirit guides, strengthens, supports, and comforts us as we journey to the lavish eternal banquet prepared for us. The Holy Spirit “binds in covenant” a church of hospitality, “a faithful people” invited from “all ages, tongues, and races,” bound together by baptism, nurtured at “his table,” trusting in “the forgiveness of sins,” and living out “the fullness of grace” in costly and joyful discipleship. And so our host leads us to the finale of this drama of unstinting hospitality: eternal life together in a world without end. Amen!

The practical implications of this doctrine for the life of the church are sweeping and colossal. If we are created in the image of this triune God, we humans are not autonomous, self-enclosed entities but exist as persons only in so far as we mirror as best we can the trinitarian life of mutuality. We humans are genuine persons when we transcend the confines of our paltry egos and lavishly open ourselves to our neighbors, including those who are very different from ourselves. I can be myself only in relation to others, and I can be in relation only as I welcome them with open arms and an open heart. This hospitality that reflects the very life of God requires honoring and cherishing the very otherness of the other, just as the Persons of the Trinity honor and cherish each other. The differentness of the other, the other’s sometimes jolting strangeness, must be respected. Surely it is no accident that the New Testament’s word for hospitality is “philoxenia,” the love of strangers.

The glorious workings of divine hospitality in our history reveal to us even more features of the proper shape of Christian hospitality. The saga from creation to final communion with God teaches us that we can only extend hospitality if we understand ourselves to be the recipients of
God’s hospitality. When strangers come through our doors, whether they are from a different class, culture, orientation, religion, or race, we must train ourselves to see them as God sees both them and us, as creatures created in the divine image. We must see ourselves, like them, as sinners, displaced and needy, as wandering Arameans, with nowhere to lay our heads. We must regard both them and us as recipients of the promise of glory, to whom the Spirit who dwells in the house is extending gifts of mercy, comfort and peace.

The saga of God’s three-fold hospitality also shows us the responsibilities of Christian hospitality. We must be prepared to not only love and greet neighbors and strangers, but to help them to grow in appreciation for God’s gifts, so that we can eventually introduce them to the refreshing bath of the baptismal water and the nourishment of the Eucharistic feast. Christian hospitality includes an awesome responsibility: to witness to the hospitality of our divine host so that our guests may grow into faithful, hopeful, and loving family members. Christian hospitality is not only profoundly tender but also extremely tough. The welcoming hand of hospitality is inseparable from the tongue that tells the truth that God’s hospitality intends our transformation, our sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is no “cheap grace” here! Our life together is costly as well as joyful, involving repentance and growth in discipleship as both we and our guests learn the disciplines of good hosting.

When we extend such profuse hospitality to the stranger we reflect, however ineptly and inadequately, the hospitality shown us by God. As we witness in word and deed to God’s generosity, miraculously and mysteriously we discover ourselves to be the full benefactors of all Christ’s blessings. Truly this is not only our calling, it is our great privilege.

–The Steering Committee of Confessing Christ, May 2005