

# Seasons of Life

Open Doors, Open Hearts



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Building A Cell Without Walls  
Dover Celebrates Christmas  
Remembering Joseph Chean's Commission to SJSM  
When Open Doors Lead to Open Hearts  
Championing Hospitality in SJSM  
Hospitality Bonds

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### From the Word

Understanding and receiving God's radical hospitality to us.

## Open Doors and Open Hearts

If I were to hazard a guess, some groans were suppressed when our Vicar unveiled the theme for our church this year: Radical Hospitality. Probably not the best news to a congregation that's naturally more reserved, but exactly the nudge that we need to step out of our comfort zones, and widen our hearts and our doors to 'proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:19). (So thank you, Ps Victor!)

What is radical hospitality, and what sets it apart from usual displays of kindness and generosity? How can SJSM, as one family, embody God's radical hospitality in our witness and welcome? These are some questions that our writers explore in the first issue of Seasons of Life (SOL) 2024. Hear from Ps Victor himself as he expounds on the theme, and from regular contributor Siew Ping as she examines the Word for the ways in which God has revealed and continues to show His radical hospitality towards us. You will find an assortment of stories from SJSMers who are earnestly challenging themselves to be not mere containers, but conduits of God's ever-flowing grace and love to the community He has placed us in.

From building cell groups without walls to volunteering in wider church-based initiatives such as with the Host Team ministry and Dover Celebrates Christmas, and even forming unlikely friendships in the SJSM Nursing Home, their stories paint a picture of what radical hospitality should look like: genuine and wholehearted embrace of people (Leviticus 19:24); generous sacrifice without any expectation of returns (Luke 14:12-14); and ultimately, as an act of worship unto God, our direct response to Jesus.

*"Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ... And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'" (Matthew 25:37-38, 40).*

May we be so filled with the knowledge of His incredible love for us, that it transforms everything that we do, and touches every person we meet.

**Amanda Chong**

On behalf of the SOL Editorial Team

# Radical Hospitality – The Year of the Lord’s Welcome

Revd Victor Teo

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*SJSM has set ‘Radical Hospitality’ as our theme and direction for this season. Hear more from Ps Victor himself on the meaning and motivation behind it, what it involves, and the various things we can do as a church to embrace this call as one SJSM family.*

## Recipients of the highest hospitality

The God of the Bible is a God of radical hospitality. He extends hospitality to His people, and requires that His people embody this same hospitality in our interactions and treatment of ‘outsiders’. Right from the time when the Israelites were wandering in the desert, they were told:

*“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”*

– Leviticus 19:33-34

The Israelites were called to exercise hospitality to strangers. And the reason that God gives here for hospitality to be exercised is the reminder that He first showed hospitality.

Likewise, God’s hospitality is reflected in His abundant grace towards us. He warmly welcomes us into His family, certainly not because of our goodness, but simply because He is God – and He calls us His friends and children.

This year, our church will be focusing on a sermon series from the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Both books contain a lot of language and elements related to hospitality. They mention food, meals, houses, and travelling, all of which illustrate God’s hospitality towards those who are lost, broken, needy, and often stigmatised.

This is the ministry of Jesus. He spent time with people who were often rejected by society such as tax collectors, sinners, and drunkards. Jesus showed radical hospitality through his actions. His ultimate act of hospitality was to die for the

sins of humanity, so that everyone could have the choice to be included in the household of God. Whoever trusts in Jesus finds a place in His family. We are no longer strangers and sojourners; we have our home in Him.

### **Our response to radical hospitality**

This year, I pray that our hearts will be open and ready to embrace and embody radical hospitality. As we declare the 'Year of the Lord's Welcome,' let us not simply open our doors, but fling them wide, dismantling the hinges of fear and prejudice!

While hospitality typically involves providing essential needs like shelter, food, drinks, and clothing, its ultimate goal is to establish a secure and friendly environment where strangers can easily become genuine friends.

Brother Stanley Tay directed me to Henri Nouwen's writings on Hospitality, which I find instructive. Nouwen writes:

*"Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines."*

I pray that this becomes a way of life for us – that we will constantly

choose love over fear, inclusivity over exclusivity, and grace over judgment.

**"Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines."**

### **SJSM village: Our vehicle for radical hospitality**

In this new season, the Lord has blessed us with SJSM Village.

In this village, there is the church, the nursing home (with over 270 beds), the senior care centre (with up to 100 elderly), and the childcare centre (with about 200 children). It is the beautiful coming together of the spring and winter generations in a single space. Here the symphony of laughter, stories, and wisdom echoes through our corridors!

What can we do as a church?

We can serve as befrienders and take care of the elderly people who don't have any support. We can visit them regularly, take them out for a meal, remember their birthdays. As a family, cell group, or zone, we



Rev. Victor Teo kicks off SJSM's Dover Celebrates Christmas

can also adopt a ward in the nursing home and provide them with care and support.

We can also work with the school as intergenerational facilitators, sharing stories, reading to the children and the elderly, and accompanying them on excursions. We can engage with the families, caregivers, and staff members here in SJSM Village.

It's all about transforming polite smiles into relationships, moving beyond fleeting encounters to genuine care, and breaking down the walls of indifference.

I pray that we can dismantle the invisible walls that we often build based on perceived differences, and choose to open wide our hearts and doors to welcome others as we venture into marginalised spaces. May we offer the gift of presence to those who are often disregarded, and

listen with intent, not presumption. Radical hospitality is not easy. It challenges our biases, demands vulnerability, and stretches us. Radically, the call is for us to not expect anything in return.

Henri Nouwen continues:

*"The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations."*

May the Lord give us the grace to open our hearts and our doors for His glory!



## Building A Cell Without Walls

Tricia Kuan

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When David Soltani and Christopher Foster first came to Singapore in 2023 on exchange at the National University of Singapore (NUS), they found the church community they were looking for in the warm welcome of two young adult cells in SJSM.

SOL speaks to David, Chris, and members of their host cell groups to find out more about how to build a cell without walls.

### Joining the SJSM community

Hailing from the United States (US), David came to Singapore from August to December 2023. The 22-year-old first met Song Yang, a member of SJSM, when the latter was doing an exchange in the US.

Inspired by the impact that Song Yang made after plugging himself into David's college church community, David decided to invest himself similarly in SJSM while on his semester-long exchange.

Chris' year long exchange also started

in August 2023. The 20-year-old from the United Kingdom (UK) was invited to join a cell when he came to SJSM, and the rest is history.

### Being welcomed by the cell groups

David found that being greeted in church, being invited to sit with the cell during service, being engaged in conversation and checked in on when he was in a rough patch were little gestures that went a long way in making him feel welcomed by the SJSM community.

What also made a big difference was that every member of the cell took the time to get to know him not only as a person, but also as a part of the culture he had come from. Differences were met with grace and interest, giving him the freedom to be himself without feeling the need to adopt the cell's mannerisms or customs to "fit in".

"I knew this cell group was a place I would receive encouragement and





David (front-row, third from the left) and his friends from SJSM cell group "Skadoosh"

feel safe to share my burdens and struggles. I sensed the love of Jesus. I sensed a community that loved each other and was committed to pursuing Jesus together through joy and sorrow," David said.

Similarly, Chris's experience in his host cell group has been nothing short of positive.

"Firstly, I've experienced the tender, intentional desire to get to know me, which is quite radical. To be valued and treated as a brother speaks the love of Christ right into my heart. Secondly, I have experienced radical hospitality through action. On multiple occasions, members of my cell provided things that I needed and some would welcome the whole cell into their homes and cook some really tasty homemade food."

Besides doing life together, Chris added that his cell went beyond the superficial in their sharings, which challenged him to think before he spoke and seek the Lord's will in many difficult areas of his life.



Chris (back row, second from left) and his friends from the SJSM cell group "Cool Cell"

## Hosting well

Wesley Koh is part of the cell which hosted David. To him, the most notable adjustment the cell

made was intentionally trying to help newcomers feel engaged and welcomed, even across the initial cultural divide.

The mutual effort from both parties to bring their own questions, experiences and perspectives while journeying together and pointing one another toward Christ was what made the hosting process a relatively smooth-sailing one.

“Something I learned from our cell’s hosting experience is to be patient, caring and to give others the space to speak. Through adapting to be more newcomer-friendly, we also learned to be better stewards of God’s kingdom in the way we carried ourselves,” Wesley said.

As part of the cell still hosting Chris, Kai Yi shared that he appreciated Chris’ fresh perspective, as he shared many new insights based on the cultural differences he experienced in Singapore.

To top it off, Chris also brings renewed energy to the cell, whether through quips about our unique Singaporean culture or initiating meetups. To Kai Yi, Chris has added plenty of life and perspective to the cell.

### **To host or not to host?**

In the past few months, Chris observed that radical hospitality always comes with personal sacrifice. He shared that for international



*Chris (middle row, second from left) at get together organised by SJSJ cell group “Cool Cell”*

students like himself who are away from home and family for an extended period, meals could make a big difference to their lives, since eating together and having a sense of belonging in family is important to almost every culture.

“Be willing to take people in as one of your family for an afternoon and share life together, because to those without a place to call home, this is what true hospitality looks like,” Chris said.

While the fear of cultural differences or inconvenience may hinder some from hosting international students, Kai Yi found that all it takes is an openness to include them into our lives.

“There are just under 40,000 students in NUS, of which about 25% - or 10,000 - are international students, and an additional 2,300 exchange students. SJSJ is really in such a prime location for hosting these students,” he said.

*"When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."*

– Leviticus 19:33-34

"I'm reminded that our call is to love those who reside in our lands as fellow sojourners. There is so much beauty in the international body of Christ coming together to love one another.

[When I was] on exchange, there was a Young Adults retreat hosted collaboratively by five churches. Once, we stood in a circle naming off the different countries represented. "Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, Chile... Singapore..." there were 21 nations represented in a gathering of less than 50 people. I remember the line that came to mind - "every nation, tribe, and tongue". Truly hosting our international friends allows us to partake in and witness the heavenly eternal reality here on earth in our present time."



## Dover Celebrates Christmas – Serving the community

Evangeline Lee and Tricia Kuan

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For youths growing up in the SJSM community, involvement in community events can sometimes feel more like a routine rather than a genuine act of service. But in 2023, when the youths in Heartbeat were given an opportunity to contribute to Dover Celebrates Christmas (DCC), we challenged ourselves to put on a different lens to the way we approached outreach to our Dover community.

Seeing the whole village come together to host the Christmas carnival really showed us what it meant to live out the Great Commandments in Matthew 22:37-40.

‘And he said to him, “ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”’

But most of all, we were able to truly

understand what it means to be a light to our immediate neighbours, the Dover community.

### Love the Lord your God

It was heartening to see members of SJSM from different generations step forward to fulfil their various roles in the carnival. From the food vendors to the Roving ambassadors, each and every person played an integral part in making DCC a success, and it all stemmed from our love for the Lord, which empowered all of us to serve out of the overflow.

Serving in DCC meant being on one’s feet for long hours and having to deal with the crowds that came in, which is not easy to accomplish. Despite the physical exhaustion, so much joy and energy that could be seen from everyone who was serving, especially the older members of our congregation. It was clear that they were not depending on their human strength, but on the Lord’s.

*My flesh and my heart may fail, but*

*God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

– Psalm 73:26



*As part of the band at the children's party, we needed a lot of energy to engage with the children in singing Christmas carols.*

When we depend on the Lord, we can find joy in even the most mundane and tedious tasks He has called us to. We may falter, but His strength never fails or runs out, and that is such an assurance as we set out to do His work.

Serving alongside the older generations showed us that with God, we can not only complete these difficult tasks, but also do them with the delight that comes from doing what He has called us to.

It reminded us, as youth, that no matter what age we are, when we trust in God and obey His plans, He will always be our strength and our provider. We can truly do all things through Him who strengthens us!

### **Love Your Neighbour**

Loving our neighbour starts from loving the people closest to us,

meaning our SJSM Community, and we could see this love for each other being displayed through our unity at DCC.

The event gave us a common purpose to unite across multiple generations, and this act of intergenerational service not only impacted our community, but also the people around us. Through DCC, we embodied the commandment to love our neighbours in the Dover community by extending radical hospitality towards them, and bringing some joy to them through the various events held.



*The children's party would not have been possible without the help of all the youths and adults who came together to help with the decorations and facilitation of the other games and activities.*

The theme for DCC 2023 was "One in Hope", and throughout the event, we could see that spirit of unity from each and every one of the volunteers. In the different areas that we served in, everyone had a clear view of our goal, which was to serve and bless the people who came.

With that in mind, we put aside our differences to work together, showing each other love and grace during the event, something crucial in high-stress situations! And the results speak for themselves, with a smooth-running carnival that all were able to enjoy.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of what unity looks like within the body of Christ,

*“But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”*

– 1 Corinthians 12:18-20

We all make up different parts of the body, and we bring various contributions to the table through our gifts and talents. Every single one of us is equally important, no matter how big or small our role.

As we all contributed to DCC in our various capacities, it really highlighted the importance of unity in the church and showed us in a very practical way how serving together in such a manner allows us to really be effective in serving and loving to our fullest potential.

Even though we rarely get the chance, as youths, to serve with the adults, this experience showed us that when we are united in our heart of service both for God and the people around us, we

can tap in on each other’s strengths and accomplish our goals.

## **A radical shift**

DCC also marked the start of our church’s efforts to show radical hospitality to people outside our community with more intentionality. This makes it even more significant that we are doing it together as an intergenerational community. While DCC gave us a common purpose and united us across our various generations, going forward it’s important to remember that perfect unity is found in Christ. When we take a step back to remember that we are all children of God and that God loves us, any small disagreements or differences in opinions pale in comparison.

As we continue into 2024 and with this call to find opportunities to practice radical hospitality both within our SJSM community and beyond, let’s maintain this mindset of unity and work together as a whole church to show God’s love to those around us.

## SJSM remembers Joseph Chean's commission to hospitality

Dawn Yip, Bernice Lee and Judith Xavier

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*"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality."*

– Romans 12:9-13 ESV

When I heard the news of Joseph Chean's passing, one of the first things I did was to return to my notes from the final time I had heard him speak. This was at SJSM Fest in July 2022.

It was an anointed time, and one of his key messages to SJSMers was to practice hospitality. Here are some of my key takeaways from his talks:

- *The missional church is one that represents Jesus incarnationally. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) So too, we reveal God's character to the nations, by embodying His*
- *presence to the last, the least and the lost. This is not about doing more but knowing God more, so that we represent Him well to the community.*
- *Project Spring Winter and Heartfriends will save us from ourselves. These ministries will drive deeper discipleship and missional community.*
- *The church is a place of worship and feasting. The pulpit of God's message has always been over a dining table, and through intentional conversations. Hospitality is "the art of showing love and friendship to strangers." It is both evangelistic and transformational - we seek the well-being of our guests, and are both a Martha serving them and a Mary serving the Lord.*
- *We facilitate a sense of belonging, before we invite guests to consider new behaviours and beliefs. Our natural approach to newcomers is to want them to believe first, then*

behave appropriately, before we let them belong to our community. Hospitality means we reverse this.

- *A missional church is one that has both top-down leadership and ground-up initiative.* The analogy of new and old wineskins speaks to the preservation of both.
- *Return always to the place of worship and prayer.* Don't run ahead and make plans. Always say "yes" to God before we even know the question. Align ourselves to God's agenda. When we obey, make it immediate, complete and cheerful.
- *Be a community that carries and reflects God's presence, not just His agenda.* It is possible to succeed with God's help but *without* God's presence. His presence demonstrates His pleasure, and is what makes our success distinct from how the world defines it.

Joseph's words were both prophetic and commissioning. Since then, SJSJ Village has gradually opened our doors to the community and welcomed hundreds of people in, most recently with Dover Celebrates Christmas, and fittingly, hosting the final days of Joseph's body on earth.



Joseph Chean sharing during a session at Family camp 2022

## **Living With Radical Hospitality**

### Bernice Lee

Joseph Chean's exhortation to minister incarnationally echoed our heartbeat - my husband and I have sought to connect relationally with others and, in so doing, to reflect our Saviour who intentionally sought out those whom society marginalised. You can imagine our joy when our Vicar declared a year of radical hospitality.

We have always been keenly aware that we may have entertained angels unawares, and continue to marvel at how God helps us to learn from others how to live radically. Our comfort zone for hospitality has always been to have friends (and their friends) over for a meal and good conversations. Some have dreamt





*Joseph Chean having a chat with some of the participants in between sessions*

dreams at our table, others have found solace and a safe space.

But some of our younger friends showed us what it is like to really be Christ's hands and feet when they asked us to host a meal for some homeless people. We tend to serve home-cooked meals, so we had to be mindful of dietary restrictions, whether for health or religious reasons. It was such a joy to see people heartily tucking into a home-cooked meal (perhaps for the first time in a long time) and enjoying the company of others without feeling judged or condemned.

Because we had heeded God's call to do this, we were blessed by a very real presence of the Holy Spirit moving in our midst. But that's another story for another time. For now, go ahead and incarnationally show Christ's love to someone.

It doesn't always have to be a slap-up feed. We have been warmed by the love of friends who shared with us a simple meal of canned tuna, mayo, cucumber and crusty bread under the warmth of a single light bulb. Radical, we call it!

For me personally, Joseph's words were a reminder to keep pushing past my comfort with familiar people and situations, to engage with strangers, make new friends, and help anyone who needs it. This is one important way I can carry God's presence into every situation.

### **Come Meet Jesus at the Well**

Judith Xavier

*Women at the Well*, SJSM's women's fellowship, began as a small group of women meeting informally around a dining table, sharing, praying and encouraging one another. Over time,

God opened the door to extend this fellowship to the wider SJSM family. As our gatherings got larger, questions naturally arose amongst us: Do we know the needs of our SJSM sisters? Can we adequately support them? Can we manage the logistics amongst ourselves? We did not have all the answers (and still don't!) but we moved ahead in obedience.

This was when we witnessed God at work as our SJSM ladies offered up their 'five loaves and two fish' to serve one another. When we put the call out, some offered to bring refreshments, still others led worship, shared testimonies, and came alongside to pray and encourage one another. The small gathering of a few women multiplied and precious bonds were forged.

SJSM's ladies showed us that hospitality can be quiet and simple but deeply powerful when we follow where God leads. As each one said "Yes, Lord" to being part of this fellowship, showing up to befriend and serve one another, we have seen God honour that posture. Our sharing and conversations have been authentic and open and we have experienced God's presence in a real way. Echoing Joseph Chean's words, we were being missional by connecting relationally and showing genuine care.

This year, God is leading us one step further. Responding to God's call to radical hospitality, we will open some

of our gatherings to non-SJSMers for the first time. Our prayer is that we will 'minister incarnationally', and that more women will experience Jesus through us, His Church.



## When Open Doors Lead to Open Hearts

Annabelle Bok

with inputs and contributions from John Cheong and Angelina Tan

### ALPHA: A TRIED AND TESTED TOOL

*Originating in the United Kingdom, the 12-week Alpha course found its way to Singapore in the '90s. Using materials from Alpha International, church communities met with seekers in homes, cafes, and even parks to explore the Christian faith together. Over the years, local momentum has grown, and the programme has proven to be an excellent and effective way to reach pre-believers. In 2022 alone, there were more than 800 Alpha runs and groups in Singapore, out of which SJSJMers hosted at least 9 Alpha groups in total. Fun fact: The first SJSJM Alpha Intro Dinner was held on 29th January 1999. This means that we are celebrating the 25th anniversary of SJSJM Alpha this year!*

### When open doors lead to open hearts

Hospitality is generally defined as “the quality or disposition of receiving guests and strangers in a warm, friendly, generous way”. In this new season of Radical Hospitality, we are seeking to better understand and

practise the hospitality that we all first received from the Lord in practical ways with all who set foot into SJSJM Village.

Alpha has helped many cells learn and practise hospitality ‘on-the-job’, and we have heard many wonderful stories and testimonies from them. We hope that the insights and anecdotes we share here will inspire more SJSJMers to take up the call to be Alpha-ready:

### Hospitality – A team effort

“Alpha gives not only the host team but everyone in our cell the opportunity to be friendly and accepting to every guest who joins the course, whatever their background or posture towards the gospel,” says Larry Choi, Cell Leader (King’s Road). “The willingness of the guests to come and eat with us, watch the Alpha videos, and engage in discussion is often a courageous step of openness on their part, even if it is often unspoken.”

While the sessions introduce the gospel to the guests, “the hosting





Kin Nyen (second row, first from right) with his cell and their Alpha guests

team comes together to care for them, giving them a taste of the love of God that was first shown to us”, shares Wong Kin Nyen, Cell Leader (Trevoze 3).

“For those who did not drive, our team rallied to provide a shuttle service from selected MRT stations or even their homes to the Alpha venue. One of our guests, who was in her 60s, underwent a hip operation midway through the course and some of us took time to visit her during the two weeks that she could not be with us. And when she was well enough to join us again, she brought along her sister and her helper.”

Hosting Alpha is also an opportunity, Larry believes, “to practise sharing the gospel as a team rather than on our own individually”. “One host member may share something that stimulates discussion when the facilitator asks a question, and another host member may help clarify a point from the video that a guest may have difficulty grasping. We work as a team, both within

the cell and also with those who share through the videos. Such co-labouring for the gospel is what Jesus intended—He always sent the disciples out in teams of at least two to preach God’s Kingdom,” Larry says. “Even Paul, with his great learning and deep spiritual insights, was careful to travel with companions when embarking on his missionary journeys.”

### **Prioritising the guest experience**

“Guests open up the most when we are genuinely hospitable and seize the initiative to be the first to show love,” Kin Nyen says. “Some come with certain needs or are facing challenges, others are exploring [the Christian faith]. We pray weekly to seek guidance and discernment from the Lord to interact with and reach out to them effectively. We want to show genuine interest in these individuals, accept them as they are, and show sincere care to them—not least by listening attentively and patiently!”

Kin Nyen believes that acceptance means taking in any guest who joins the group, and refraining from any impulse to pick and choose, regardless of the effort and resources required. Providing a sumptuous dinner each week is also essential, as it provides a great opportunity to relax and interact freely. “Pairing guests with the most appropriate host member(s) for their needs really helps, too,” he adds.

“Prayer—and obedience to the Lord’s prompting—is key to sustaining the Alpha programme and letting the Lord work through us and in our guests,” he says, citing the impact that the weekly provision of transport made on his cell’s *Alpha* guests. “One 82-year-old lady was hospitalised the night before the 3rd session of our last Alpha run. She was discharged at 3pm the next day, and told us that she would be coming! We were astonished when she really did appear. So you see, radical hospitality—going out of our way to accept and reach out to others— really works. For all that the session material introduced the truth of Christ and His love to our guests’ heads, it was more often [practical] acts of love and care that connected with their hearts.”

**“For all that the session material introduced... it was more often [practical] acts of love and care that connected with their hearts.”**

## Gateway to discipleship

It may sound cliché, but cells who have run *Alpha* know that when it comes to showing love, action really does speak louder than words. It’s the personal touch and sincere care that build rapport and trust, and help guests to open up and share more about themselves.

“Unconditional acceptance of another is a very effective way of drawing a person to oneself and to God,” Kin Nyen says. “It has not been easy for some of my cell members to embrace guests who are different from themselves, and God is still discipling us. At times, it was difficult due to differing cultural backgrounds and viewpoints; what made the difference was consistent prayer and slowly growing to see Christ in them.”

“I want to commend Andy and Sophia Chan from a Young Adult Cell who wanted to run *Alpha* for the first time, and decided to partner my team as they had attended the 2018 run hosted by my cell. They were great inviters and practised wonderful hospitality, and have played a key role and done a fantastic job in the last run in 2023; Sophia even chaired worship for each session from the third week onwards.

“Their enthusiasm brought in Sophia’s grandma, aunt, uncle, and younger sister, as well as another young couple who are Andy’s friends. The grandma, uncle, and sister accepted the Lord

during *Alpha* Weekend, and the Chans are now partnering us to gain experience in following up with the nine Alpha guests who are potentially joining our cell group.”

“Our faith as a cell is continually built up whenever we run the Alpha Course,” Larry adds. “Forgetful people that we are, we need to be reminded again and again that we can trust Him when we endeavour to serve Him. Every step of the way, we have found that it is God who changes hearts—it does not depend on our own wisdom or powers of persuasion. This is true from the very beginning, when we pray and invite guests to join the course, through the very end and even after, when we do follow-up.

**“..It is God who changes hearts—it does not depend on our own wisdom or powers of persuasion.”**

“We have seen many instances of people we invited whose positive response surprised the inviter, and numerous examples of guests who appeared very resistant at first but made a decision for Christ at the end even though many of the questions they had were not fully answered. It is most reassuring that we only need to obediently sow, water, and reap (with the help of *Alpha* materials!). God is always the One who gives the growth!”





## Championing Hospitality in SJSM

Eleanor Que

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*“When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”*

– Luke 14:12-14

Many of us are familiar with what it means to show hospitality: to receive and care for guests, visitors and strangers. But what makes hospitality radical, and how can we show such hospitality as Christians? Jesus’ telling of the Parable of the Great Banquet gives us some insight. Rather than yielding to the standard logic of reciprocity, the host is encouraged to generously serve and embrace all guests, regardless of their status and ability to return the favour.

Radical hospitality is a step up from simply entertaining guests; it warrants sacrifice and putting others at the

centre of our actions. But are we willing to go the extra mile, even if it means losing out in the short run or potentially being taken advantage of? How can we, as a church, be hospitable towards others with Christ as our anchor?

With the church seeking to intentionally foster radical hospitality this year, SOL discusses the journey thus far with the main drivers of this movement: SJSM’s host team.

### Metamorphosis

The team recalled a time when the key “job scope” of ushers was to offer functional assistance at the main services – for example, guiding people to the pews, handling offertory, and managing the flow of movement for communion. While there were dedicated teams to welcome newcomers, they were not required to follow up with them.

Fast forward to a decade later, and SJSM’s culture of hospitality has evolved drastically, alongside the



*SJSM's SES service hosts*

church's physical landscape. With infrastructural additions to the SJSM Village, there have been many opportunities to lean into our identity as a church without walls. The kitchen, community hall and nursing home all became fresh grounds for sowing and reaping. In particular, the ample space of the community hall made it more conducive for congregants to mingle after services, and ushers to engage newcomers. These conversations also enabled the hospitality team to better attend to the needs of guests, be it plugging them into cell groups or introducing them to various people in various ministries.

Another fundamental change is that hosting is no longer solely a weekend affair. The SJSM Village now receives daily visitors, many of whom are nursing home residents' next of kin, caregivers, or both. Knowing

that caregiving can be a lonely and exhausting journey, the hospitality team introduced the weekday Tea Terrace programme. Free snacks and beverages are catered for all, and most importantly, volunteer hosts are present to build rapport with this group of individuals. The main aim of the initiative is to provide a safe space where visitors can unload their burdens and confide in compassionate people who support their emotional and social needs.

### **Bearing fruit**

Ultimately, our concerted efforts to anticipate guests' needs and extend extraordinary pastoral care are all part of reflecting God's love onto the lives of others. While not everyone may be immediately receptive to the gospel, seeds can be sown through these radical acts



of kindness and hospitality.

Our endeavour to go above and beyond has not been fruitless, as shown through many encouraging encounters and situations where lives were transformed. A host team member recounted an experience where they invited a caregiver to the Sunday Mandarin Service after getting to know her through Tea Terrace. The caregiver did not show up to the subsequent services as she lived far away and was unable to make the weekly commitment. Yet, she returned one day to thank the host for helping her and introducing her to Christ. She had become a regular attendee at a church near her house and was waiting to be baptised!



*Our friendly refreshment hosts!*

## Heart work

SJSM has also switched from using the title “usher” to “host” in recent years. Ps Kim Yien, our hospitality head, explained that “usher” brings to mind a sterile, functional role, while “host” is more all-encompassing and

captures our role as ambassadors for God. Hosts should be catalysts for fostering a welcoming and warm culture, she says.

Ps Kim Yien adds that the hospitality ministry is a “low barriers to entry” ministry that anybody with a willing heart can join. It is also not limited to the people wearing green shirts. She quips, “The church is the house of God and as a family, we are all hosts!”

All SJSMers can play a part in building a culture of radical hospitality, which is not only meant to be shown towards newcomers, but also to others in the church. Do we acknowledge the familiar faces that we see at the concourse and approach someone we often notice sitting alone in the pews, or do we remain comfortable in our cliques?

Inertia and the fear of rejection or awkwardness are our biggest obstacles. We may hear countless rousing sermons, but what good are they if we do not move our hands and feet? It is natural to gravitate towards people who are like ourselves, but radical hospitality demands that we bridge uncomfortable differences to receive everyone. At the root of it, we are all individuals equally valued and cherished by God. When we adopt that perspective and allow God to transform us by renewing our minds (Romans 12:2), it becomes easy to overcome self-consciousness and move beyond shallow interactions.



Ps Kim Yien (back row, most left) with her hospitality team, after CNY 2024 service

## To bless and be blessed

It is no secret that radical hospitality often comes at a cost. There have been instances where our Tea Terrace tables have been vandalised, as a result of them being left outside for public use. The discouraging reality is that our generosity can be taken advantage of and abused. But rather than turning to cynicism, Matthew 5:39-41 reminds us:

*“Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”*

At the end of the day, we are called to respond with grace – the

extraordinary kind that intrigues others and makes them wonder about the God we believe in. We act generously in faith, trusting that our treasures are laid up in heaven and that God does not shortchange those who build His kingdom.

With this anchoring mindset and motivation, may we draw strength from God and be joyful hosts who offer our gifts and time as instruments for His glory.

## Hospitality Bonds

Yeo Hem Joo

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As the Covid-19 pandemic eased into a new normal over the past one and half years, activities organised by volunteers for the residents at SJSJ Nursing Home have gradually ramped up. On most weekday mornings and afternoons, groups of volunteers turn up to facilitate activities such as arts & craft, music & movement, Pawfriends (animal-assisted activity), Bingo, and more. These social programmes are conducted to engage them and bring cheer to the elderly residents.

Over time, many heartwarming stories have emerged from the interactions between staff, volunteers, befrienders, family members and residents. This article highlights a couple of them to show how hospitality and grace is extended in SJSJ Village, and how everyone is valued and welcomed.

### An Unexpected Friendship

On New Year's Day, I interviewed two ladies whose mothers are residents of the nursing home. Katherine Tan, in her 60s, spoke little English so our

conversation was in Mandarin and Cantonese. She was very friendly and candid, readily sharing the story of how her mother, Mdm Poon, 85, came to our nursing home.

Katherine had been the sole caregiver to her mother till some time in November 2021, when she unexpectedly fell so ill that she had to be hospitalised for a month. In desperation, she asked for her elderly mother to be hospitalised as well since there was no one else who could take care of her.

With the help of AIC (Agency for Integrated Care) and other related organisations, her mother who had mild dementia and was wheelchair bound was eventually given a place at SJSJ Nursing Home.

When Katherine recovered, she visited her mother daily. In fact, she had become so much of a familiar figure that throughout the interview, she smiled and greeted nearly everyone who walked past us at the church concourse area!



*Ps Dino is flanked by Katherine on his right and Linda on his left, together with their mothers, and also Trixie.*

“My mother is very used to seeing me here. It keeps her in a happy mood,” she said in Cantonese.

She is thankful for the care that her mother has received at the nursing home. Mdm Poon enjoys spending time with the friendly dogs that are brought in during Pawfriends sessions, and she regularly attends Wednesday fellowship gatherings held by the Chinese congregation. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Katherine gets to know volunteers from the Tea Terrace ministry. They provide beverages and snacks while befriending visiting family members.

At some point in our conversation, Linda Tan, in her early 70s, turned up and joined us. Her mother, Mdm Cheong, 97, is also a resident in the same ward as Katherine’s mother. She smiled as she related to me how she had gotten to know Katherine over a Subway cookie. Fluent in

both English and Cantonese, she conversed easily with Katherine and they soon became friends.

In October of last year, Katherine had a bad fall and was warded at Ng Teng Fong Hospital for a month. Her mother missed her visits, became fretful and could not eat. This caused distress to Katherine who had to undergo physiotherapy and other treatments. After Linda visited her and learnt about this, she thought of setting up a video call between Katherine and her mother. She broached this with Trixie Chin, one of SJSN Nursing Home’s associate chaplains. Together, they made efforts to coordinate the timing of these video calls. They would wheel Mdm Poon down at a time when Katherine was available. On top of this, the nursing home staff also connected the video call whenever Katherine called the ward. Mdm Poon’s anxiety lifted when she ‘saw’ her daughter and her

appetite was restored. Katherine was grateful for the kindness extended to her and her mother.

Through this, Katherine and Linda's friendship grew and they chatted on the phone almost nightly. "I always ask God for wisdom so that I can encourage Katherine when she shares her problems with me." This was Linda's way of sharing God's love with Katherine who was not a believer.

At this juncture of our conversation, Katherine wheeled her mother down from her ward and Linda proceeded to show the elderly lady a few entertaining YouTube dog videos on her phone. This got her smiling and laughing.

"Ever since my fall last October, I haven't been able to visit her every day. Now I come about three to four times a week," Katherine said regrettably. I noticed her limping and she revealed that she has been diagnosed with Parkinson's. Her fortitude through a story of personal health and financial challenges and her devotion to her mother left a deep impression on me.

Linda's mother came to the Nursing Home in early 2022. Prior to that, she had been living with her son. However, after a major operation and short stay at a community hospital, Linda's brother felt that their mother would be better cared for in a nursing home. Besides being wheelchair bound, she had dementia and was

not very communicative. The warmth and care of the people and the conducive environment Linda found at the nursing home dispelled her fears and misgivings about her mother residing in one.

She was effusive in her praise: "Everyone is so friendly... the nursing home staff, the volunteers, church members I come across!" The unexpected hospitality impressed her so much that she joked to her son that should she ever need to be in a nursing home, it had to be SJSM Nursing Home!

Living alone in Pasir Ris and having rather severe motion sickness, she did find it a challenge to visit her mother via public transport. However, inspired by Katherine's dedication to her mother, she found herself visiting more frequently these days. "If she can do it, I should try as well."

**"The unexpected hospitality impressed her so much that she joked to her son that should she ever need to be in a nursing home, it had to be SJSM Nursing Home!"**

### **Serving Together**

Rachel Loh volunteers as a befriender at the nursing home and got to

know Jessie Lua who is in her late 60s. When the portering ministry began (portering residents to attend SJSM's Sunday service at 8.15am), Rachel brought Jessie along as she had indicated interest. However, there were times where she was unavailable. In those instances, she asked her cell leader, Jolyn Lau, for help. Soon, her group of six cell members were taking turns to porter Jessie to Sunday service, after which they had breakfast together at the community hall. Knowing that Jessie had certain food preferences, they would occasionally bring her food she enjoys. They even celebrated Jessie's birthday together last October, which delighted her greatly.

"Jessie is always very appreciative of what we do and whenever she sees us, her eyes brighten up. She will take hold of our hand and place it close to her heart. We know that this is her way of expressing her love to us," Jolyn shared.

Over time, Jessie shared with them her personal challenges in settling down at the nursing home. Throughout this period, the group provided an empathetic listening ear, encouraged and prayed with her. She was open to the gospel so the group read a children's Bible with her every fortnight. There was much rejoicing when Jessie eventually received Christ!



Jessie (bottom row, 2nd from left) with Rachel (top row, 3rd from left), Jolyn's cell members and other church friends after E1 service

Serving together, showing hospitality and care towards Jessie has strengthened the bonds among the cell members. To Jessie, this is a weekly routine that she looks forward to. And to them, Jessie is now a part of their cell group family.

## 5 Questions with Revd Calvin Tan, Next Gen Pastor

Tricia Kuan

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### **The call to full-time ministry**

Joining the church as a full-time staff member was the only thing that Revd Tan really ever wanted to do. He had a burden for the young people in the church and started working with youth when he was 18. The Lord was gracious to Revd Tan and gave him the gifts of leadership and the ability to connect deeply with the young people. Revd Tan served as a lay leader for 20 years before being sent by his home church St. Hilda's church to Trinity Theological College (TTC) at the age of 40. At this time, he had served in the worship ministry, youth and young adult ministry, as well as the PCC. It was only after graduating from TTC that he joined St. Hilda's church as a parish worker.

### **God's hand at work**

There were some very difficult times in ministry, but in the midst of the struggle, God was Revd Tan's source of strength.

Just when it seemed like everything

was fine and the people under his care were happy, Revd Tan found that there were accusations and harsh statements being made against him out of the blue. These comments snowballed until Revd Tan found it very tough to carry on serving. There were even rumours that he might be removed from his post. He thought it was very unfair because he and his team had been faithfully serving the Lord. In the low points and difficult moments, Revd Tan sought refuge in the Lord and persevered in faith. Eventually, all the accusations were proven to be untrue, and everything turned out okay in the end.

The experience helped Revd Tan realise that ministry, especially full-time ministry, is not a walk in the park. But he also walked away from it knowing that God had his back and that he could trust Him.

Revd Tan said: "When they say God makes a way through the water, it means the flood is still there, but He either helps you walk on the water or through the waters. Even though

things may seem difficult, you will walk through it.”

### Highlights of serving in SJSM

To Revd Tan, the biggest joy of serving is to be able to journey together with people.

SJSMers are generally supportive and accepting of others, which is refreshing, he said, adding: “People’s kind words have generally been very encouraging to me.”

“Being able to work with the next-gen team to help the younger generation grow and transition into adulthood, where they grow their own faith, is very essential. It is also very fulfilling to serve the Lord with people who carry the same passion and fire.”



Revd Calvin Tan with his family on holiday in Japan (his favourite country)

### Fun facts about Revd Tan

He doesn’t take himself too seriously and enjoys a good laugh.

“My wife and I have two grown kids whom I try to keep at home to serve my every need,” joked Revd Tan, who has earned himself the nickname of “Reverend dude bro” among some of the youth.

He also shared that he had his gallbladder removed 12 years ago, and that he went for a Lasik procedure because he was vain.

### Out of office

Revd Tan likes writing, watching movies, and travelling, but only to Japan.

He is also fascinated by social media posts on barbecue content as he appreciates the precision and technique on display when butchers prepare and cut meats. He also likes to watch people cut hair. At one point, he wanted to take up a hairdressing course.

He said: “You can do it as a ministry and it’s quite cool, but I haven’t gotten around to it yet.”



Lessons in Life:

## Experiencing God's love through grief

Prisca Ang

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My Yorkshire Terrier Libby died last September at the age of 13. She was eight months old when she joined our family. I was a teenager then, and as an only child with working parents, I found a lot of comfort in Libby's company.

Libby had many strengths – she never bit anyone, and she always dumped her entire body on your lap to show how much she loved you. However, she was a very fussy eater. I fed her by hand twice daily for 12 years, which made me see her almost as my own child.

When she passed, I had my first taste of deep grief. I had lost relatives before and experienced other sad moments, but none of these events hit as hard as her death.

Even so, I clearly experienced God's great love for Libby, my family and me through it all.

Libby had been having chronic liver issues, so we rejoiced when a blood test in early September showed

that her enzyme readings finally fell within a normal range. We had no idea that things would take a drastic turn two weeks later. Her stomach swelled like a balloon and she could barely walk. Libby's vets said the cause was likely protein-losing enteropathy – her body was unable to absorb sufficient protein, causing fluid to leak from the circulatory system into the abdomen.

Her vets had to drain the fluid twice. Although they were gentle, the procedures caused Libby to scream and struggle greatly in discomfort. Several hours after the second session, she was still unable to stand. My husband and I cried desperately to God, asking Him to heal Libby. Immediately after praying, she lifted her head, took a few steps, and was soon able to walk properly again.

But it was not over. The following night, she woke up crying in pain. We put her on our bed, gently stroked her and sang songs of worship to God. Soon after, Libby slept soundlessly until morning.

God's undeniable peace washed over us even as we ached for her.

For several days, we wrestled with the decision between ending her suffering and waiting to see if she would recover. But on the morning of September 20, my husband, mum and I separately felt it was time to let her go. God confirmed the decision when, later that morning, Libby's condition deteriorated sharply. She cried and whined non-stop and could no longer move by herself. With heavy hearts, we asked the vet to put her to sleep and said our final goodbyes.

For months after, I was often overwhelmed with guilt and doubt. Did changes in her diet cause the protein-losing enteropathy? Could I have done anything to prevent what happened? Do animals go to heaven, or did Libby vanish forever?

There are so many questions I still don't have answers to. However, I found peace in knowing that God is always good, and His will sovereign and perfect. *"For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth... And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."* (Colossians 1:16-17)

Looking back, God knew our needs months before Libby passed. He closed the door to an opportunity earlier in the year, allowing me to spend more time with her and take a full week off when her health worsened.

But more broadly, I know that Libby was God's creation and a blessing on loan to us. If her Maker decided it was time for her to go, who am I to question that?

I loved Libby so much, even as an imperfect human. This made me realise that until my own time comes, and I see Him face to face, I'll never be able to grasp fully how much my perfect heavenly Father loves me.

**"For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth... And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."**

(Colossians 1:16-17)

## Youth Camp 2023 Reflections – Dwelling Place

John Cheong

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Every year SOL dedicates a section of the magazine to cover the end-of-year Heartbeat youth camp; as it always brings about great stories of “divine encounters”, friendships and the Lord’s building. This year, being my tenth year as a youth camp attendee, I have the unique opportunity to not only report from the grounds but also, reflect on what makes youth camp such an integral part of the Heartbeat experience.

### Every heart a dwelling place

*“I will not enter my house or get into my bed, I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob.”*

– Psalm 132:3-5 (ESV)

Youth camp has historically been conducted in a “4D3N” fashion outside of SJSM. For the past decade, Majodi Campsite in Johor Bahru has become the designated “perfect” location to hold it. A spacious hall, a large field of grass and dormitories

that house over 200 campers, make for great communal time and bonding moments. Granted, some are not quite used to the basic amenities and challenges of toilet sharing but in the end, these experiences add to the growing collection of hilarious and unforgettable camping stories!

To add on, paradoxically, the poor internet connection of the Majodi campsite means fewer distractions and an unhurried extended time to seek the Lord. As a guest preacher once said, “God often speaks to us at youth camps not because He is the youth camp God but because our hearts become good soil when we spend three days focusing on what He is saying to us, away from distractions and social media”. For a generation that cannot seem to live without our phones, it is strange but heartening that everyone seems to cherish the chance to go offline for 3 days (uncomfortable as it is), to have meals together at a table, play rowdy physical games and have open and deep conversations through the night.



*Starting the day with morning bible devotion before breakfast*

Last year's camp theme was prayerfully discerned as "Dwelling place". On the first night, SJSM's Next Gen Pastor Revd Calvin Tan opened with a message on making room for the Lord. Sharing from the rich young ruler's encounter with Jesus in the gospels, we were reminded that we cannot serve God fully until we make room for Him in our lives. The first session ended with a challenge: with each revelation of God will come the prompting to surrender more of our lives to Him; will we say "yes" to God's way or insist on our own way?

### **Serving one another**

*"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"*

– Psalm 133

Besides the sessions of listening to the invited speaker, Pastor Amos Tan,

last year's camp featured workshops conducted by SJSM's very own for the very first time. Every camper chose two workshops to attend on the second day of the camp. Topics ranged from "Dance as a Worship", "Hearing God's Voice", "Friendship Evangelism" and "Boy-girl Relationships"; just to name a few. While campers were initially apprehensive and unsure about this new segment to camp, everyone had great feedback afterwards. Hearing from what took place, campers in the dance workshop were given a space to express their worship through dance. Campers in the "hearing God's voice" workshop spent time lying on a canvas, staring up into the starlit sky quietly and hearing God's voice. Everyone's experience at workshops was edifying and beautiful and reminds us that different members come with their own giftings and journeys with God. And when applied correctly, there

is so much equipping and learning that we can take from the community God has given us.

For many of our young people, the youth camp is their first foray into leadership. Many are encouraged to serve as a camp leader or assistant leader. They are given the responsibility to take care of those in their group - who range from 11-year-old pre-teens to young adults in their 20's. Whether it is guiding the 12-year old on how to clear the Malaysia customs or explaining to the pre-believer visiting the camp what prayer and worship is, youths learn on the job what biblical leadership is. From examples of leaders staying awake at night to accompany first-time campers feeling homesick, or some waking up at the break of dawn to prepare for devotion sharing, there is a mature understanding that biblical leadership serves others.

Another group of leaders at youth camp is the camp committee of young adults and teenagers, mostly students taking time from their lives to serve the wider body. Besides the operations and logistics of a 4D3N camp and coordinating with a campsite outside of Singapore, the camp committee also spends time in prayer, to discern the Lord's direction for the camp theme, the speakers to invite and various key decisions. At camp, they are also the ones first to wake up and the last to sleep, behind the scenes, taking

care of the operations so that the campers can focus on the Lord and the work He is doing in their lives. Because there are no professional event planners involved, there might be the occasional hiccup but youth camp, by God's grace, always turns out to run very smoothly. Even without expensive props or elaborate set ups, the segments of youth camp always connect with the campers, simply because they are planned and run by youths who have a personal relationship and genuine care for the community. Lastly, it is hard to complain when God always seems to hold the rain when it comes to the games segment at youth camp!



*Celebratory team photo of group "Blanket" after winning a station game*

## **Touched by God**

As someone who has the unique opportunity to pray for campers during altar calls and response segments, it has been an immense privilege to get a front-row seat to see what God is revealing to individuals, to see His love and pursuit of them. Even after quite



*Team photo of the camp committee who organised this year's camp*

some years as a Christian, I am still floored when I become fully aware of the depth of God's love for me and just what the cross means for my life. For all the fun we have and the novelty of camping together as one big group, Heartbeat loves their youth camps because it is a time of drawing near to the Father and to commune closely with Him. A space to worship for as long and as freely as the Holy Spirit leads. Even after camp, these moments remind us to look to Him in our valley points; they inspire us to know His word and grow our heart for our community.

Lastly, touching on everyone's favourite segment of camp – worship. At the height of worship, it prompts repentance, reverence, and gratitude, where people cannot help but sing

and dance out of an overflow.

Campers are more attuned to the Holy Spirit's call to surrender our hearts and bring God the praise that He alone deserves. The tears and joy while worshipping together – we catch a glimpse of what it would be like when we get to heaven.



## From the Word: God's Radical Hospitality to Us

Khaw Siew Ping

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As we explore the notion of God's hospitality, we begin with the premise that God's ways will ultimately remain impenetrable to us, even with the revelation of scriptures because He and we are of different categories – He is Creator and we are but creatures. Our creatureliness means that while we may speculate at the reasons, we will never fully understand our Creator God.

### Creation

God's revelation to us in holy scriptures begins with His act of creation. This is where we discern the first aspect of God's hospitality to us: all the conditions necessary to our physical survival were put in place before humans were created. Indeed, creation is a primary aspect of God's hospitality to us.

In fact, God created infinitely above and beyond what is necessary for human survival and thriving. This is why we often find ourselves in awe at His amazing creations. His creations sustain us not just physically, but also

emotionally. From family and friends who laugh, cry and dream with us, to pets that are always there for us; each fellow creature has been emplaced in God's plan. From the songs we listen to - written and performed by fellowmen who have been given these gifts and graces by God, to brilliant sunsets and majestic scenery – all these sustain us emotionally, filling us afresh with hope and strength for the journey of life.

### Incarnation

And then, the Incarnation. In the Incarnation, God became man. God took on the limits of flesh in a once-and-for-all act of Redemption on the cross so that whoever believes in Him might eat at His table for eternity. As the Baptist theologian Matthew Barrett puts it, "The One who comes as visitor and guest in fact becomes host and offers a hospitality in which human beings and, potentially, the entire world, can become truly human, be at home, can know salvation in the depths of their hearts."

This is the radical aspect of God's hospitality. No metaphor – not even the oft-used ant vs man comparison - can convey the depths to which God stooped to redeem us. We, like the ant, belong to the same category of created beings and are inescapably dependent on external factors to exist. God on the other hand, is uncreated and needs to rely on no one or anything to exist. The uncreated Being chose to die the most gruesome and humiliating death to redeem those He created, the same beings who not only rejected Him but also betrayed him.

Even after Jesus' ascension, He enjoins us to experience His hospitality every time believers come together in the Eucharist. SJSMers are used to the liturgy of the 1995 Diocese of Singapore Prayer Book,

but at the recent Covenant Service on New Year's Eve, God's radical hospitality to us in the Eucharist was brought afresh when we gathered and affirmed using the Kenyan Liturgy as a congregation:

Christ is alive forever.  
**We are because he is.**

We are one body.  
**We share one bread.**

Draw near with faith.  
***Christ is the host and we are his guests.***

### **The Invitation**

In Luke 14, we read of Jesus being invited to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees on a Sabbath. Despite the less than friendly





intentions of those present, He went on to heal a man of dropsy and also reminded guests present that “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 14:11)

Turning to the host, Jesus proceeded to exhort him to “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” because he would be blessed, being “repaid at the resurrection of the just.” (Luke 14:13,14).

In sharing with the Pharisees the Parable of the Great Banquet (14:12-24), Jesus hinted that despite God’s generosity in inviting them to His great banquet - His great redemption plan, they would fail to appreciate it and make excuses not to attend.

Commentators agree that the reasons for declining the master’s invitation were dubious – would not those who bought a field or oxen have inspected them *before* they closed the deal, rather than *after*? It speaks of either their indifference towards, or lack of respect for the host in snubbing the invitation.

At the same time, these excuses revealed the condition of a self-centred heart: material possessions, personal affairs mattered more than the kingdom of God. Similarly, it reflects the universal tendency to allow the gifts that God lavishes on us to usurp first place in our lives (vv 18-20). In the parable, when belief in God, gods, or evil spirits was the

norm, excuses such as attending to land, oxen, and one’s marriage were sufficient to decline God’s invitation. Today, when belief in God is the exception rather than the rule, few recognize God as the Giver of all good gifts but make idols out of these gifts instead.

This is the case even for us Christians. Our jobs, our gifts and talents, domestic felicity – these are all gifts of God which we are so apt to make into idols. Yet on this side of eternity God continually holds His hand out to us. The father of the prodigal son is himself prodigious in his compassion and grace; there is opportunity to repent as long as one has breath.

To continue the parable, the refusal of the first group of guests led to the instruction to invite “the poor and crippled and blind and lame”. And when there was still room, the master commanded that people from “the highways and hedges” be brought in to fill his house. All would partake of the great banquet.

It should be made clear that Jesus was not saying that the latter group was an afterthought; in Luke 4:16-19, He had categorically declared he had been anointed to “proclaim good news to the poor... to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”. He had come for the poor and needy.

## **Our Response**

As long as we do not see ourselves

as part of the “poor”, “crippled”, “lame” and “blind” group, suffice to say, we would not be able to appreciate the full magnitude of God’s love and hospitality to us.

We need God’s help to see the brokenness deep within us and around us. Then we will jump for joy at the chance to join in the great banquet. As we glimpse the inconceivably astounding hospitality of God, we respond in overflowing gratitude. Just as the line in a hymn goes, the radical hospitality of God ought to *“dissolve my heart in thankfulness / and melt mine eyes to tears”*, forming the motivation for all our acts of hospitality.

Gratitude for God’s radical hospitality will set us free to exercise hospitality according to the grace that God has uniquely gifted each of us, because then it is not so much about our hospitality as it is about pointing to God’s hospitality to us. We will never mirror God’s hospitality perfectly. Though we are made in His image, sin has so marred our motives, our instinct for self-preservation, our very wills, that we can never fully emulate His radical hospitality and generosity.

To conclude, let us be mindful that the parable ends with these sobering words, referring to the initial group of invited guests: “For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.” (v 24) God’s great hospitality does not indiscriminately include everyone and anyone. It

comes attached with the condition of acceptance of the invitation.

Therefore, as faithful servants of God, let us obey what we hear clearly from God in scriptures: seek out those who have not tasted God’s radical hospitality or grace, and in our limited and humble ways, extend this hospitality in practical ways to them.

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