

AUSTRALIAN BAPTISTS AND HOSPITALITY: A RESPONSE TO DENOMINATIONAL DECLINE?¹

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is an interdisciplinary exercise in Practical Theology based on the findings of the 2016 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) for Australian Baptists. It briefly reports on the “standard” questions of the NCIS but also on the results from a series of special questions commissioned by Crossover Australia, the evangelism resourcing branch of the Baptist Union of Australia. These questions were particularly concerned with evangelism, faith sharing, invitation, and hospitality amongst Australian Baptists. A particular focus of this essay will be the practice of sharing meals with non-Christians. The practices of Baptists in these areas are then reflected upon theologically and sociologically to develop some suggestions for Australian Baptists.

A SNAPSHOT OF AUSTRALIAN BAPTISTS

Every five years most Australian Baptist churches participate in the National Church Life Survey (NCLS). The survey provides a snapshot of what Australian Baptists are thinking and doing. It also allows an examination of the trends in Baptist church life as data is compared to previous surveys.

In late 2016, 33,898 adult Baptists attenders aged 15 years from over 319 churches completed the NCLS. The average age of the Baptist attenders was 50 years, compared with 48 years and 6 months in 2011 and 46 years and 9 months in 2006. The 2016 figure continues the concerning trend: Australian Baptists are an aging movement. In part, it reflects the aging population of the entire nation, but it still signifies that Australian Baptists are not retaining or incorporating enough young people into churches to rejuvenate the denomination. The telos of an aging entity is death, and so the denomination needs to do something about attracting and retaining young people in churches.

Perhaps reflecting this aging, 43% of Baptists have a university degree (up from 39% in 2011 and 32% in 2006) while for the general population only 31% have a bachelor degree or above.² Baptists are generally more educated and, as a result, probably more affluent than the general community. Sociologists have noted the effect that the gospel has in “lifting” the socio-economic status of those it influences, as

¹ This article is an adaptation of a series of articles written for *PRAC* magazine which is a publication of Crossover, the evangelism wing of the Baptist Union of Australia. <https://www.crossover.org.au/ncls-prac-summary/> Used with Permission.

² ABS—Education and Work, May 2017 (cat. no. 6227.0)

disciples focus on relationships and education rather than less helpful pastimes.³ And so, this figure could be good news because it reflects the power of the gospel to transform lives but it also means that Baptists need to be careful not to be disconnected from the communities they are seeking to reach.

The NCIS also asks participants what it is that they value about their church and what should be a priority for the next 12 months. Although still the primary value, “Sermons, preaching or Bible teaching” was becoming less valued—53% in 2001, 50% in 2006 and 48% in 2011. However, in 2016, 52% of Baptist attenders indicated that the thing they most valued about their church was the ministry of the Word. This *may* reflect the reversal of a trend and a “returning to the roots” of the Baptists in Australia in an increasingly unsettled world.

When asked what should be the priority of their church in the next 12 months, “Spiritual growth (e.g. direction)” continued to be the highest rated response. Building a sense of community and encouraging people to find or use their gifts also featured. Nearly half (49%) of attenders agree that their gifts, skills, and talents were being used well at their local church, but 27% (over a quarter) wanted to be more involved at their local church. Australian Baptists are hungry to grow spiritually, to experiences community and to serve, and they are looking to their local church to be able to help them to do these things.

Australian Baptists continue to be an increasingly multicultural community. In 2016, 36% of attendees were born overseas, compared to 31% in 2011 and 23% in 2006. The percentage born overseas in the wider community in 2016 was 28.5%.⁴ Australian Baptist churches are a remarkable manifestation of the beautifully diverse picture of the church we see in Revelation 7:9. As such they can also have a powerful witness to the community of the power of the gospel to forge unity in an increasingly fractured society.

However, the influx of new people into Baptist churches may be slowing. Only 30% of attenders have switched from another church in the previous five years, down from 31% in 2011 and 34% in 2006. Similarly, the percentage of Newcomers (people who have joined the church in past five years but who were not previously attending a church) was 6%, compared to 7% in 2011 and 8% in 2006. In one sense, it is exciting to think 6% of Baptist congregations are “converts” in the past five years. However, the trend is concerning — it may be our missional effectiveness as a denomination is declining.

This decline in Newcomers is not because Baptists feel less at ease talking about their faith with others — in 2016 19% looked for opportunities to do so, compared to 18% in 2011 and 17% in 2006. Although only one in five feel comfortable about talking about their faith there does not appear to be a discernible trend in this ratio. Nor is the decline in Newcomers a result of less invitation to church: 36% invited friends and relatives to a church service in the last year, the same as in 2011. Given that Baptists are *not* less inclined to talk about their faith or invite others to church, there is another factor in play. I will argue in this essay that this factor is hospitality.

³ Donald Anderson McGavran (Revised and Edited by C. Pater Wagner), *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 211–16. See also, Rodney Stark, *America's Blessings: How Religion Benefits Everyone, Including Atheists* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2012).

⁴ ABS—Migration, 2015–16 (cat. no. 3412.0)

But, to summarise the 2016 NCIS, Australian Baptists are a culturally diverse and educated community who strongly value sermons and Bible teaching. They want to grow in spirituality, community, and service. However, this does not appear to be enough to reverse the decline of the denomination. The increasing average age of attenders and the decline in the percentage of switchers and Newcomers means that Australian Baptists face serious challenges. It is important to focus on inviting new people into faith and into the wonderful experience of being part of a Baptist church.

FAITH SHARING AND INVITATION AMONGST AUSTRALIAN BAPTISTS

As well as the “standard” NCLS survey questions, Crossover commissioned a number of “Baptist-only” questions related to evangelism in the 2016 NCLS survey that went to Baptist churches.

The first question related to faith sharing readiness. Attenders were asked how well equipped they felt to share their faith. Only 14% felt they were “very well equipped,” 30% felt “well equipped” and 4% indicated they were not at all equipped. The majority (36%) indicated the middle or “neutral” option on the five-point Likert scale. And so, even though it is encouraging that 44% felt equipped or very well equipped, the survey suggests that over half of Australian Baptists are not sure they are ready to share their faith. It has been postulated that one of the reasons that Christians do not share their faith is that they do not know how, and this finding may confirm that theory.

The second set of questions addressed another hypothesis: that the reason Christians do not share their faith is because they do not have many meaningful relationships with non-Christians. The first question was, “If a friend is defined as someone you share a significant personal conversation with at least once a month, how many non-Christian friends do you have?” Only 8% of Australian Baptists indicated that they had no such friends. The largest group (42%) had 1–5 such friends, while 18% indicated they had 16 or more such relationships! This would indicate that, at least on this measure, Australian Baptists are not disengaged with the non-Christian world, but have significant numbers of meaningful relationships through which the gospel could be shared.

The next question focussed on hospitality: “How often in the last year have you intentionally shared a meal with a non-Christian?” Of the respondents, 14% indicated never, 52% occasionally, 19% monthly, 10% weekly and 5% daily. Hence it appears that while 52% of Australian Baptists intentionally share a meal with a non-Christian “occasionally,” only 34% do so monthly or more frequently. This is problematic because when asked, “When are you most likely to share your faith?”, most (52%) responded, “In a relaxed environment with people I know (e.g. sports, meal, men’s shed, etc.)” In other words, two thirds of Australian Baptists are rarely intentionally putting themselves in the place where they are most likely to share the gospel with others.

Another question focussed on “frontline” evangelism. Attendees were asked how often in the last year they had shared their faith with someone they knew through a secular workplace, club, school etc. Most (61%) indicated occasionally, but 18% indicated “never,” and only 21% shared their faith on a monthly

basis or more often. Baptists were even less likely to invite their non-Christian workmates or colleagues to church: only 7% had done so on a monthly or more frequent basis.

Attendees were also asked, “How often in the last 12 months have you shared on social media/web content from your church for evangelistic purposes?” The great majority (92%) indicated occasionally or never. Given the great usage of social media by younger people, this is concerning.

A final hypothesis explored in the commissioned questions was that Christians are nervous about inviting their non-Christian friends and relatives to church because of the style of the church services. Attendees were asked: “To what extent do you feel that this church is a good one to invite a (non-Christian or enquiring) friend to?” The majority (61%) indicated that “It’s a great church for beginners.” Only 1% indicated “This church may do more harm than good to a beginner.”

So, what can we conclude from this survey? About half of Australian Baptists feel equipped to share their faith and most have a good number of meaningful friendships through which they could share that faith. Generally, Baptists are comfortable about inviting a non-Christian friend or relative to their church. However, they are hesitant about sharing their faith on their frontlines, and, notably, appear hesitant to exercise hospitality, with only one third intentionally having meals with non-Christians on a monthly or more frequent basis even though they identify that setting is one where they are most likely to share the gospel.

We can conclude that Australian Baptists have not withdrawn from the world and have meaningful relationships with non-Christians. There appears to be a need to do more to equip church members to share faith with confidence, especially on frontlines (work, clubs, schools etc.) and through the use of social media.

However, the research also suggests that the missing piece of the evangelism process could be hospitality. Australian Baptists consider shared meals to be a good place to share the gospel, but only one-third of them are intentionally experiencing hospitality with non-Christians on a monthly or more frequent basis. This phenomenon is problematic because theologically, historically and sociologically, hospitality emerges as a crucial dimension of the church’s relationship with the rest of the world.

HOSPITALITY AND EVANGELISM

Domestic hospitality, and as a subset of that hospitality, the shared meal, is a hallmark of the people of God throughout the Bible. As Pohl points out, the father of faith, Abraham, and his wife, Sarah, offered hospitality from their home to the three strangers who turned out to be angels (Gen 18:1-16).⁵ Hospitality was also expressed through the laws to ensure the poor and aliens could find food in Israel (e.g., Lev 19:9-10; Deut 14:28-29, 26:11-13). Israelites were instructed to make a place for sojourners within their families

⁵ Christine D. Pohl, “Building a Place for Hospitality,” in *Hospitality*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz (Waco: The Center for Christian Ethics Baylor University, 2007), 27–36.

when they celebrated the feasts (Deut 16:9–15). Barton calculates that in the Torah hospitality is commanded twenty-four times.⁶

Because Israel was a stranger, she too was to offer hospitality to strangers (Lev 19:34). Israel's self-understanding was that of being a stranger, alien, and tenant in God's land. They were both dependent on God for welcome and provision and answerable to God for their treatment of aliens and strangers.⁷ The experience of being a stranger motivated the people of God to practice hospitality towards the strangers living among them. The self-understanding of being a stranger enjoying God's hospitality was both motivating and sensitising.

The New Testament Greek word usually translated hospitality is *philoxenia*. It is composed of two Greek words, *phileo* and *xenos*. *Phileo* is the love or affection for people who are connected by kinship or faith while *xenos* generally denotes a "stranger." The ideas of friend and stranger are thus juxtaposed. In Hebrews 13:12 *philoxenos* is contrasted explicitly with "love of brother" (*philadelphia*): "Let mutual love (*philadelphia*) continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality (*philoxenos*) to strangers." Hence, *philoxenia* can be defined as to "show hospitality to a stranger, that is, someone who is not regarded as a member of the extended family or a close friend."⁸ This leads Barton to conclude that hospitality can then be defined as "a social process by means of which the status of someone who is an outsider is changed from stranger to guest."⁹

Many of Jesus' activities were tied to hospitality. In Luke especially, he was a guest at numerous meals (e.g., Luke 4:38–39, 5:29–32, 7:36–39, 10:38–42, 11:37, 14:1–14, 19:1–10). Although these meals were not in his home, he sometimes acted as a host (e.g., Luke 9:12–17, 18:15–17, 22:7–23). The meals recorded in Luke were places of repentance (5:27–39) and forgiveness (7:36–50). Many of Jesus' most memorable parables were told during these meals, and the themes of abundance and hospitality characterise the narratives.

The Lord's Supper is also an event of hospitality. Jesus' disciples are invited to his eschatological table by eating bread and drinking wine. However, "if our practice of the Lord's Supper is to imitate that of the early church, it would be an actual meal. The Lord's Supper was most likely not a sombre moment of silent reflection, but a joyful time spent over a meal."¹⁰

It was also recognised that in welcoming a brother or sister one was potentially welcoming Jesus himself (Matt 25:43) and may be the grounds for salvation, as it had been for Abraham, Lot and Rahab. "Hospitality to strangers was not an optional practice for the church but something that is deeply related to salvation."¹¹

Following the example of Jesus, hospitality became a central practice for the early churches (Rom 15:7; Heb 13:2). This perhaps reflects a self-understanding of being a stranger (1 Pet 2:11) and so offering hospitality to other strangers—mirroring the Israelite's motivation for hospitality. Their stranger-hood had

⁶ Stephen C. Barton, "Hospitality," in *The Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 502.

⁷ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 16.

⁸ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 453–54.

⁹ Barton, "Hospitality," 501.

¹⁰ Naomi Walters, "Lord's Supper and Hospitality," *Leaven* 22, no. 4 (2014): 187.

¹¹ Joshua W. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 7.

a specific purpose in this world: Christians, in their strangeness, were called to transform the world through love and hospitality.¹²

Therefore, “practice hospitality (*philoxenian*),” said Paul in describing the Christian lifestyle (Rom 12:13). Bishops, elders, and widows were required to show hospitality (1 Tim 3:2; 5:9-10; Tit 1:8). Although initially reluctant, the apostle Peter left behind his xenophobic upbringing to eat with gentiles because he realised God’s hospitality embraced all (Acts 10: 9–11:18).

As a result, Christians received others into their homes (e.g., Acts 2:44–47, 16:15; Rom 16:23; 3 John 5–8). Worship gatherings were often household-based, and the image of the church as the household of God was prominent (e.g., Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15). Because converts came from many backgrounds, shared meals were useful for building unity and a new identity, for transcending social and ethnic differences, and for making sure that the poor were fed (e.g., Acts 2:46; 1 Cor 11:17–34). “Hospitality was practically necessary and theologically central.”¹³

The parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15–24) illustrates the relationship that the church is to have with its neighbours. The church, like the great king, is to extend an invitation to those who previously were not the guests or who are marginalised on the edge of society. This invitation is to a messianic feast that has already begun. And like Jesus the church is to be simultaneously centrifugal—going out into the world and centripetal—drawing the world into the banquet.¹⁴

It is not surprising therefore that the Didache encourages Christians to be openhanded in their hospitality, especially towards the poor.¹⁵ In 1 Clement 10:1-12:8, Abraham, Lot, and Rahab are all described as having been saved by their hospitality (*philoxenian*). Benedictines received all guests as though they were the Christ.¹⁶ Calvin said, “let us therefore learn from this passage to be kind and dutiful to fugitives and exiles, and especially to believers, who are banished for their confession of the word. No duty can be more pleasing or acceptable to God.”¹⁷

Henry asserts that Baptist life has been characterised by hospitality from its earliest days, asking whether Baptist ideology would have found a home in English separatism if not for the hospitality that Thomas Helwys extended to the churchless and marginalised John Smyth, who both went on to be key figures in the establishment of the Baptist movement.¹⁸ The hospitality offered to Smith and Helwys’s Gainsborough faithful in Amsterdam by separatist pastor Francis Johnson’s congregation was also significant.

¹² Oswald Pearson Sichula, “Hospitality in Urban Baptist Congregations in Zambia and the Role of Pastoral Ministry” (unpublished Master of Arts Dissertation, North-West University, 2008), 42.

¹³ Pohl, “Building a Place for Hospitality,” 29.

¹⁴ Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 135.

¹⁵ Didache 4.5.

¹⁶ Rule of Benedict 53:1. See also Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2017), 72.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *John Calvin's Bible Commentaries on Isaiah 1–16* (Altenmünster: Jazzybee Verlag), 361.

¹⁸ Douglas V. Henry, “Can Baptist Theology Sustain the Life of the Mind?,” in *The Scholarly Vocation and the Baptist Academy: Essays on the Future of Baptist Higher Education*, ed. R. A. Ward and D. P. Gushee (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 226.

Indeed, Helwys's calls for religious tolerance were in part an expression of hospitality—an awareness of, and appreciation for, the stranger who holds a different opinion.¹⁹ Unlike many advocates of religious tolerance in the 17th century, Helwys did not just call for respect for his own views but for the freedom of all people, including Jews, to practise their religious beliefs.

However, it would seem that this early prominence of hospitality did not remain as a key Baptist distinctive. A glance through the indexes of a range of books on Baptist history and distinctives did not reveal a single reference to “hospitality.”

But not only is hospitality with non-believers theologically valid, it makes sense sociologically as well. The word “hospitality” shares its linguistic roots with hostility, hostage, and enemy.²⁰ Historical studies of hospitality have identified it as a way of managing the stranger who represents a potential for danger. Visser observed that table manners are actually a system of civilized taboos that developed to reduce tension and protect guest and host from one another!²¹ The laws of hospitality deterred host and guest from attacking each other with knives or other implements at the table.

From an anthropological perspective, hospitality is associated with the ideas of exchange and reciprocity. Sharing and exchanging the fruits of labour, together with mutuality and reciprocity, associated originally with hunting and gathering food, were at the heart of collective organization and communality.²²

However, as Selwyn concluded, one of the principal functions of hospitality is also to either consolidate recognition of a shared moral universe or to enable the construction of a moral universe acceptable to both the host and the guest. Hospitality converts “strangers into familiars, enemies into friends, friends into better friends, outsiders into insiders, non-kin into kin.”²³ This anthropological insight highlights the compatibility of hospitality with faith sharing. The creation of a mutually shared understanding is one of hospitality's core functions.

Hospitality also carries with it the notion of slowing down, resting and stopping for a while.²⁴ In ancient times travel was dangerous, and to be without shelter for the night would mean exposure to the elements, wild animals, robbery and murder at the hands of highwaymen. Hence in order to allow travel and trade, societies developed an ethic of hospitality to allow safe rest for travellers. The harsher the physical conditions, the greater the obligation to hospitality.²⁵ Thus hospitality became associated with not just the provision of shelter and food but psychological safety.

¹⁹ Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1611/1612), vol. 1 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Paul Lynch et al., “Theorizing Hospitality,” *Hospitality & Society* 1 no. 1 (2011): 5.

²¹ Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: Open Road Media, 1991), 92.

²² Lynch, “Theorizing Hospitality,” 9.

²³ Tom Selwyn, “An Anthropology of Hospitality,” in *In Search of Hospitality: Theoretical Perspectives and Debates*, ed. Conrad Lashley and Alison J. Morrison (Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 2000), 19.

²⁴ Lynch, “Theorizing Hospitality,” 7.

²⁵ Carol A King, “What Is Hospitality?,” *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 14 no. 3–4 (1995): 219–34.

Hence, from biblical, historical, and sociological perspectives, domestic hospitality is an ideal place for the sharing of Christian faith. It is an ancient and profound practice whereby humans slow down and encounter each other in safety even when they are strangers to one another.

THE DECLINE OF HOSPITALITY

Given that hospitality was a feature of the early churches and the early Baptists, its decline in the Australian context is worthy of exploration. However, further empirical research will be needed in order to determine why many Australian Baptists are not more inclined to share hospitality with non-Christians. However, it is possible to make some tentative suggestions.

Robert Putnam²⁶ in the United States, and Andrew Leigh²⁷ in Australia have demonstrated the growth of individualism and its contribution to the decline of social capital during the 20th and 21st centuries. Increasingly Australians are “bowling alone,” to use Putnam’s metaphor. People are less likely to share community, let alone a meal, with those outside the nuclear family. It is quite likely the spread of individualism has undermined the spirit of hospitality that marked the early Christians and the early Baptists.

Another contributor factor may be time poverty. Australians are amongst the most time-poor in the world.²⁸ As mentioned earlier, hospitality implies slowing down. For many Australian Baptists the idea of slowing down in order to share a meal with another person, especially one who is not a member of the family, may be too high a price to pay in the midst of their time poverty.

Another factor may be the emergence of restaurants. Even though early restaurants were basically homes which invited and charged “strangers” to share the family meal,²⁹ over time they have been professionalised and commercialised. Hospitality is now an “industry” where excellence or “fast food service” are the object. However, these notions stand in contrast to the traditional concept of simple Christian hospitality. Perhaps the self-imposed expectation about the quality of the “dining experience” they need to offer the guest is a disincentive for Australian Baptists to practice hospitality.

Whatever the cause, Australian Baptists need to be reminded of the theological and historical imperatives that resulted in the name of the early churches and early Baptists being synonymous with hospitality. It is another place where Australian Baptists need to consciously be countercultural — deliberately overcoming their individualism, time poverty and self-imposed expectations to offer an experience which powerfully manifests their Christian faith.

²⁶ Robert D Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

²⁷ Andrew Leigh, *Disconnected* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010).

²⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, “General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014 (Cat. 4159.0)” <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4159.0>.

²⁹ Michael Symons, “The Rise of the Restaurant and the Fate of Hospitality,” *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 25 no. 2 (2013): 247–63.

CONCLUSION

It has been said, “Something special happens when people’s legs go under the same table.” Sharing a meal together is more than a biological convenience. It is a powerful social activity which expresses acceptance and openness. Little wonder that it is the ideal venue for faith sharing. The sharing of food is a symbol of the sharing of the spiritual bread of life.

In describing the practices of missional Christians, Michael Frost identifies hospitality (the “E” for Eat in the B.E.L.L.S acronym) as one of the essential habits.³⁰ When it comes to Australian Baptists sharing hospitality with non-Christians, time poverty could be perceived as a major issue. The beauty of hospitality is that it is not an additional “church thing to do.” It is simply the modification of something that will be done anyway. The self-imposed expectation of creating a special banquet for guests needs to be countered. The beauty of hospitality is that it invites non-believers to join a community of faith as they just “do their thing.” It is an invitation into authentic life, not a stage production. If we think hospitality is about impressing our guests with our food or the beauty of our clean house, we have missed the point.

The link between hospitality and evangelism has been identified before.³¹ There is perhaps even a biblical precedent. In Mark 2:14–17, just after his call, Levi has a dinner in his home where his tax-collector friends are joined by Jesus and his disciples. Hybels labelled this a “Matthew Party.”³² It provided the perfect environment for Levi’s friends to encounter Jesus, just as he had.

Further, as N. T. Wright points out, “most writers now agree that eating with ‘sinners’ was one of the most characteristic and striking marks of Jesus’ regular activity ... Jesus was, as it were, celebrating the messianic banquet, and doing so with all the wrong people.”³³ Whereas Israel was to maintain separateness and holiness, Jesus went out of his way to eat with the unholy. In fact, he inverted the relationship between hospitality and holiness: hospitality became the means of holiness.³⁴ His hospitality and table fellowship was an enactment of the kingdom of God.

The growing awareness of living in a post-Christendom world should create in believers greater understanding of themselves as strangers in a strange land. Following in the footsteps of the Israelites and the early church, Australian Baptists may increasingly see themselves as strangers in the world, offering hospitality to other strangers. Such hospitality would see the flourishing not just of the Christian communities but those with whom they engage.

As we have seen, 34% of Australian Baptists intentionally share a meal with a non-Christian monthly or more frequently. What if we could double that figure over the next five years? Imagine the faith-sharing that would go on if *most* Baptists intentionally and regularly opened up their homes to non-Christians and

³⁰ Michael Frost, *The 5 Habits of Highly Missional People: Taking the Bells Challenge to Fulfill the Mission of God* (NP: Exponential Resources, 2014).

³¹ See for example Kel Richards and Barbara Richards, *Hospitality Evangelism: A Practical Step-by-Step Handbook* (Lane Cove: Beacon, 1994); Joseph C Aldrich, *Life-Style Evangelism: Crossing Traditional Boundaries to Reach the Unbelieving World* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Press, 1981).

³² Bill Hybels, *Just Walk across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 196.

³³ Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 431.

³⁴ Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 130.

made their faith manifest in deed and Word. What if Baptist churches could challenge their attenders to make a habit of offering hospitality to their non-Christians friends and relatives one Sunday a month after church?

According to Isaiah 25:6 Yahweh will host the messianic banquet and it will be marked by the best of meats and the finest of wines. Here is the great Host offering the ultimate hospitality to people from all nations. Australian Baptists are well-positioned to experience a foretaste of this kingdom consummation. Their relative wealth, ethnic diversity and their commitment to the Bible with its missional imperative should combine to produce a people marked by their hospitality.