

# OUR DOORS WERE OPEN

I am thankful to have grown up in a hospitable family. When I was four, my father brought home a man from work that he had found was sleeping in a railroad car. I remember peeking into his room through the keyhole to see what this stranger looked like. He was to stay a few days until he "got on his feet." Instead, he stayed with us for five years and became part of our family. He also became a Christian, although he later fell away. Until his death, my family was the only one Bill had.

During the depression of the '30s, few had money to spend on pleasure, and as a result our homes served as centers for our social life. Often in the evenings, friends would show up at our house with instruments and we would spend hours together in song and laughter. Frequently on weekends, friends would "sleep over," or we would take our blankets and pillows and pass the night with friends. I treasure those memories!

For many years our congregation had only weekend preaching, and our house was usually the place where the preacher stayed. That was partially because my mother was an excellent cook, but it was mostly because people were made to feel at home. My parents were convinced that their home was a primary place for their ministry to the Lord.

Since my wife Frankie came from a similar background, it seemed natural that our house should be a hospitable place. During our many years of mission work in Italy, we found our home to be an excellent tool for bringing people to Christ. When we arrived in Florence, Italy with the mission of beginning the church, we immediately started having open house on Sunday afternoons. We invited everyone we met to come to our home to visit with us and tell us about their country and their culture. We discontinued this when our interested contacts were so many that we were fully occupied in teaching them about the Lord. Friendship evangelism became such a successful approach throughout Italy that our national missionary motto became, "First a friend and then a brother or sister in Christ." Italians frequently remarked on the help it was to them to see a Christian family in action.

In many ways, hospitality had its finest hour in our family as we encouraged our children to bring their friends to our house, to eat, to sleep, or just to "hang out." Granted, we at times thought we might end up in the poor house in the process. I remember one of our sons remarking about a lingering cold and asking if I had an idea why it was hanging on so. I replied, "I think it is the cold air from the refrigerator." He said, "pretty funny, Dad." With three teenagers and their friends making frequent trips to our refrigerator, we marveled that they did not all have colds, and we marveled at the large volumes of food that vanished from our house. But, it was well worth it! Today, our children's closest Christian friends are those same companions of the "growing up" years.

Offering hospitality is one of the most loving, Christ-like things that we can do. By opening our lives and our homes to others, we demonstrate a profound level of caring. Hospitality communicates to others that their presence counts more than the comfort of our privacy, that offering ourselves and what we have to others is our precious gift to them, and that we value people above things. In many instances, inviting others into our homes will be the quickest way to create a relationship which gives us the right to speak for Christ!

It is my impression that the decline of conversions in our local churches is directly related to the degree to which our homes have become private, often inhospitable places. When the Hebrew writer exhorted Christians to be hospitable (13:2), he mentioned that some in the past had, in so doing, entertained angels without knowing it. It comes to mind that we too are in a position to be in a special partnership with God by opening our homes to those that He will send our way for His purposes and for His work.

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