

Faith and Hospitality
Faith Kelley

I have now been here at the William Penn House for two years. First as an intern and for six months as the “hospitality coordinator.” My job description contains what you would expect- check guests in and out, do laundry, make the House a welcoming place. Hospitality is an integral part of what we do here at the William Penn House and has been the main focus of our mission since the Corys opened their home to young peace protesters in 1968. But as I approach my two year anniversary with the House, I find myself wondering what exactly hospitality is and why it matters.

If hospitality is just giving people a bed and a meal, then it is easy and requires little of me or the rest of the staff besides showing up on time in the morning with a service-industry-required smile. And many hotels and hostels work on that level. But the William Penn House is a special place. Here we try to answer the question of what does God require of us in response to the stranger, the other, the traveler. At first the answer seems clear and easy. Jesus told a parable in which the faithful are commended by the King because “I was a stranger and you invited me in.” When we welcome others, we welcome God.

But the truth is it is hard to welcome the stranger who is demanding and angry, the guest who is needy and always seems to want more, and the guy who creeps you out just a little. It is hard to see that of God in those who are not grateful or treat me poorly. Also, in the day to day running of a hostel I tend to get caught up in the details and tasks. I can easily lose sight of the moment and brush the guest aside so that I can get my “work” done. But in fact, my work is in welcoming that stranger in, not in giving them a bed and breakfast, but by engaging with them, listening to their story and not just going through the motions of reception.

Every day here I am challenged to take what I believe to be true, that God calls us to reach out to the other, and practice it in my interactions with guests. I need to slow down and be willing to hear from a lonely traveler about where he’s been. I need to be patient in explaining six times where the bathroom is to the guest who doesn’t speak English well. And I need to be willing to give grace to the grouchy and rude guest who doesn’t seem to appreciate that I am bending over backwards to help her. In this, I hopefully grow closer to the individual that God calls me to be and our guests receive a tangible example of God’s love in their lives. This is hospitality.