

From Section 6: Living within God's Good Limits: **Making a Plan**

*"Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;
you have made my lot secure.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance." Psalm 16:5-6*

A Host of Ways to Be Hospitable

1 Timothy 3:2: "Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach..."

Cooking with Casseroles: Hospitality, Where Ministry and Home Mix

According to 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, hospitality is one of the qualifications for our husbands being elders/pastors. And because this is one of the most significant cross-overs between ministry and home, it deserves a session of its own.

Now you probably have some sort of stereotype of what hospitality in the pastor's home is "supposed" to look like. Generally, there's a spotlessly clean house and some really good food involved. This is often when the sweat starts forming on our brows: will our housekeeping and cooking be up to the required standard? But the truth is, biblical hospitality isn't about being an award-winning housewife or cook. It's really about love, and though I know I didn't need to tell you that, it's nice to be reminded.

Hospitality in the Bible

The Bible word for hospitality in the New Testament is *philoxenia*— literally, love of strangers. One of the reasons why hospitality was so important in New Testament times, was that there were very few inns where travelers could stay, and many couldn't afford to stay in them even if they were available. To make things worse, it wasn't always safe to just camp on the side of the road. These were known to take advantage of those who did this. That's why travelers would literally knock on the door of someone's house as sunset approached and ask for them to take them in for food and shelter for the night.

In the Old Testament, God's people were encouraged to show hospitality to strangers, and not just to those who are traveling through the area, but to those who were settling in your area. (See Leviticus 19:33 – 34). In the Gospels, we see Jesus and his disciples almost entirely dependent upon this kind of hospitality as they traveled from town to town.

In the early church, this continues as believers were urged to open their doors to each other (and especially so traveling preachers like Paul and Barnabas could be cared for), but also as places for believers to gather to worship, since there were no church buildings. Far from the idea of showcase, biblical hospitality meant welcoming someone into your home, not unusually unannounced, and offering yourself and what you have to serve them and to honor God.

Hospitality Today

Fast-forward early church hospitality up to today and what do we find? There are some fairly straightforward overlaps, but in the United States where I live, there are a lot of differences, too. Sometimes it still may mean welcoming someone to stay in your home overnight, but rarely a complete stranger, infrequently at the last moment, usually planned. Most often is welcoming your home for a visit, with or without the meal. Sometimes that visit might be an impromptu one like in Bible times, but many are scheduled in

advance. And, while many churches across the world have their own church building and are legally allowed to gather there, there were other places where Christians still rely upon meeting in homes like in the early church. And even when believers don't meet in homes for a main worship service, they still frequently use them for Bible studies, small groups, and other means of encouraging each other in God's word.

Perhaps the closest biblical version to what we most commonly think of as Christian hospitality today is found assumed behind the church life we see in the New Testament. Where would older meet with younger women to teach them Titus two principles for life? Where would the widows be provided food by the deacons like Philip? where did groups of believers gather to pray and to encourage each other to love and good works? The answer is the same: in homes. Or perhaps a la Deuteronomy 6:7, It would be as they come out and go in, to and fro through their daily life.

But whatever category of biblical hospitality our modern-day hospitality most closely emulates in form, it fails to serve the biblical purpose it was meant to serve if it is a showcase of our perfection, rather than a portrait of the gospel.

Showcase Hospitality

"Showcase" is the word that sums up what biblical hospitality isn't in my mind. On the outside showcase might mean presenting a perfectly clean house, perfectly behaved kids, and perfectly hot, steamy, homemade meal. The conversation is pleasant. the table manners are impeccable. The children are quietly seen and never interrupt to be heard. When someone comes over to your house, they see success. They see how things are done correctly. They see something that they aspire to one day. On the outside. What is that monogram I see on the hostess' apron? P.O.W.? We know who THAT is! The Princess of Wow! That's right. You met her at church in chapter 1 and now here she is greeting you at home.

Interestingly, not a single biblical account of hospitality that I could find described the quality of food served to eat or state of cleanliness of any house into which Jesus and his disciples, Paul and Barnabas, or any of the others who were shown hospitality for the sake of the gospel. No tableware is mentioned. No kids' behavior is mentioned. Many times, not even the hosts and hostesses are mentioned. The only passage that came close to any of these details is the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42. We know that Martha was rushing around, stressing out about preparing the meal for Jesus and his disciples, and she was scolded for seeing dinner prep as more important than discipleship. Not exactly a score for showcase hospitality.

The Show Inside

But unfortunately, showcase isn't just about the outside. Showcase starts on the inside. Your mouth might be inviting people into your home, but your heart is looking to showcase to create a barrier of safety that keeps things from getting too real. The desire to score high in someone's eyes overtakes the risk of showing someone the real you and your real kids, in your real house, in your real life.... And how you really need the gospel to be a faithful follower of Christ every day. Perfect feels like a very safe position when people's opinions, and where they might be voiced elsewhere, are scary big to you.

Hopefully, this version of showcase hospitality is not one you have seen much or put on much. I wish I could say that I've never done it nor think about it. But I certainly have, and I still certainly do. When I welcome people into my home, especially for the first time, I can still detect all too strong whiffs of showcase hospitality oozing out of my sinful heart, desiring to do a double check around my house and repeat the "we're having company over" pep talk to the kids. Or, if something or someone is not ship-shape, there's temptation to explain why it is messy or why they are fussy is almost impossible for me to

not give into. I want my visitors to think well of me in a very worldly-shaped view of good housekeeping. My smile says "come into my humble abode" when I don't want them to look around and think anything about my abode is humble. Ugh!

Repent on Repeat

I wish that repenting of showcase hospitality was a "once and done" kind of sin. I recognize it, I confess it, I'm cleansed of it, and I live free of it, happily ever after. But it is not. And because it is not, I have only two choices concerning hospitality. I could choose not to do it and avoid the temptation. Or, I can choose to go ahead and be hospitable, despite the temptation. Avoiding the temptation seems easier and cleaner, but oh, what good fruit would never see the light of day if I did that!

Some of the most deeply nurturing and strategic ways we support our husbands as ministry partners happen when we welcome others into our home. No wonder showing hospitality to others is a requirement for those being considered for the pastoral ministry. Our lives at home are like a megaphone that broadcasts the gospel our husbands preach from the pulpit.

And when I say gospel, I mean full gospel. Holy God. Sinful people. Sufficient Savior. Repentant lives, empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is a place where others can see the reality of all four aspects of the gospel in living color. You may have talked with others about living a gospel-centered life at home. You may have asked them to pray for you for more grace to do this better.

But when you practice hospitality, you encourage others to watch you and even be wrapped into your lives as you struggle and strive to live it out. You provide them with an example of what gospel living looks like, and what it does not. You allow church members to see that, by God's grace, you are not living in duplicity --you actually live out (and need to feed yourself on) what has been preached. You are imperfect. You are sinners. But you are saved and you are helped by your Savior to love both him and others as he desires.

In 2 Corinthians 2:15, Paul says of Christians: "for we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." Sometimes I think we act like that aroma is something intrinsic to us. As if somebody smells us and they will smell Christ's perfection as if we've arrived at that. The reason why we need the aroma of Christ infused into us is because we have the stench of sin upon us. It is only by His grace we were cleansed of sins smell of death once and for all by Christ.

And yet still, our sin stinks as we live in the now and not yet of sanctification until face-to-face, we are completely transformed. It helps others to see our daily stink of sin in our daily return to be bathed in Christ to find what we need to live as he calls us to live. This is the aroma of Christ, too. It is so encouraging for others to see and hospitality in our home is a wonderful place in which to see it in our lives. The power of the gospel is sinners saved. But who can see that power if we do not show ourselves to be sinners in need of salvation? This takes great humility and invulnerability, but it can exponentially multiply the impact of everything your husband preaches.

Showing Honor Rather than Showing Off

Now, about that perfectly clean house, quiet, well-behaved cherub-like children and homemade cuisine. I'm not saying they are not nice to have. And I'm not saying that for some guests, or for certain occasions, they are especially appropriate or actually add to the appreciation you show towards them and your hospitality. For example, perhaps you're having someone over for dinner and it's your birthday. You might decide to point out what their favorite meal is or bake them a special cake.

Perhaps you having a Missionary couple home on furlough over and you hope they can share about their lives in an un-interrupted manner, you might want to think strategically about how not to make your dinnertime yet another battle in the war of your willful toddler learning not to throw their food, as most nights are in this season with this child.

And, I'm not saying you're supposed to not put it in any effort to clean your house or train your children in good manners or put time in your dinner prep. What I am saying is look to your heart. And, look to the opportunity. If your heart struggles with showcasing, monitor how much of your cleaning up really has to do with honoring your guest, and how much has to do with your guest honoring you. And if an opportunity for hospitality arises and you know it would be a good fruit, but you know you don't have time to clean or prep like you would like to, don't turn it down because of this.

I have been amazed at how blessed visitors have been by the dog hair fluffs on my floor or the piles of laundry yet to be folded on my kitchen table when they came over to talk. I can hardly stop praising God for the blessing dirty dishes in my sink have been! Imperfect has a funny way of opening hearts. Perhaps that's because perfect rarely is anything but a still shot caught at a very rare moment in any of our lives, and even then, someone has probably had to doctor up the picture to get it to look as good as it does.

Imperfect. In process. Incomplete. Welcomes others in. And when you do, watch your opportunities multiply to speak about the things that really matter, rather than just a "Hey, howdy, have a good day," as you pass each other in the church hallway on Sunday.

101 Ways to Cook Chicken (Hospitality' Many Hats)

The stereotypical recipe for hospitality in my mind is our family plus guests plus a meal with conversation equals hospitality. No doubt, this is one of the most well-worn hospitality recipes used by our family. I can imagine how many people we have had the privilege of feeding around our table and the joy of building each other up with good gospel conversations.

But over the years, I found that this classic "recipe" is only one of many ways to show hospitality and enjoy a feast of fellowship, without necessarily any food involved. how did these other versions of hospitality come to be part of our lives? They were created as our goal of hospitality stayed the same, but our family, our schedule, our budget, our season of life, and our opportunities changed.

Let's take a look at some of these versions of hospitality and how they have been helpful. These can help even the busiest schedule find a spot for hospitality.

1. Hands-on Titus 2 iness

Titus 2 and Proverbs 31 are perhaps the two most frequently chapters taught on as biblical summaries of how godly women should live. I have seen these passages discourage women perhaps as much as I seen them encourage women. They see their lack of some of these attributes as a failing report card of their life. Perhaps we need to do a better job of emphasizing God's grace to strengthen us and bless our feeble attempts to live out any of these. And, to emphasize the Proverbs 31 bookends (seeking to do her husband good, v. 12 , and fearing the Lord, v. 30) more than all the specific activities listed as the point of these verses and the pointer to how to God wants them to live their lives.

But I find one of the best partners for any study from Titus 2 or Proverbs 31 is inviting others into my home for a realistic look at what living them out means and doesn't mean. It helps them to see all the failure and weakness. It helps them to see us asking God for strength to steward well all that he is giving you and him to grow your heart to better love him, your husband and your children.

It helps them see you stumble and watch you ask your husbands and kids for forgiveness, when we don't live as we should. There's no better time to talk with someone about how to not yell at your kids when you're frustrated, than right after you slipped into it yourself. There's no better partner for your words than your life. When someone sees you strive for the same thing you teach, yet not perfectly and not without a fight. There's an encouragement that comes with such a humble, honest pursuit of God by you, a sinner fully saved, yes. But being sanctified by God, only little by little. Sink or swim, you are headed to Jesus!

2. I help you as you help me

Many times, we imagine one-on-one discipleship being a sit down at the table with Bibles open study event. We certainly need our Bibles open and to seriously study the truth of God's Word and think about how to apply them to our lives.

But what if your schedule only allows 20 minutes in the middle of the day for such dedicated attention with another woman, and that on a good day?! What if you've got mountains of laundry the size of Mount Everest happened to be covering that table and will be eating dinner on a mountaintop of underwear if you don't get it folded and put away? Does that mean you cancel discipleship time because it doesn't fit the model? No, it does not! Discipleship can look a lot like a la Deuteronomy 6:12: "you shall teach them [God's laws] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."

Yes, this verse was written to parents teaching your children. But are not those we disciple our spiritual children? I think the Lord had Moses tell parents to capitalize on all the time when their hands are busy but their mounts are free because life takes so much time and there is so much truth to teach. Not only is this multitasking great benefit to the children, spiritual or biological, but it's great for the parent/discipler to spend their open thought time dwelling on the Lord. And on top of that, you are modeling that Titus 2/Proverbs 31 way of life... And at the same time, that extra set of hands turned your mountain peak into a molehill and half the time it would've taken if you did it by yourself. They help you while you help them.

3. Halfway house hospitality

Sometimes, there's a man who desperately needs to talk to our husband, or a wife who desperately needs to talk to me, but it's during family time and the kids (either theirs or ours or both) are running wild. Mark and I have learned to figure out whether it's the husband or the wife who most needs some quiet, private conversation with us without the kids around, and the other takes charge of the kids. While this means half the house is being shown one version of hospitality, such as our husbands loving and leading our kids, the other half of the house is pointing into the couple with another kind of hospitality. Sometimes we invite a couple over knowing ahead of time that we are going to divide and conquer. Sometimes it only becomes apparent after they've come over. The quiet word on the side with each other helps make it clear when this halfway house approach to hospitality would be helpful.

4. Boys night in/girls night out or the reverse

Not everything has to be intense in order to be helpful. There's much good done even by inviting small groups of men over for dinner (especially young, single men, in our case) for time around the table, a little rough housing with your kids, then hanging out with your husband and maybe playing a game of Settlers of Catan or two-on-two basketball. Or, inviting small groups of women over for dinner (especially young, single women, in our case) for time around the table, a little playtime with their kids, and hanging out with me maybe watching a movie or playing music. Perhaps deep, spiritual conversations will arise, and perhaps they won't. Perhaps you will all just enjoy fellowship of being together and laughing a lot.

I've been amazed at how many people who we've invited over this way have later shared how foundational those times were to their view of family and marriage. We didn't do anything particularly intentional. We just wrapped them in. I think sometimes we underestimate how powerfully the landscape of the gospel in our homes, in our ordinary life can speak to others, especially those who did not grow up in Christian homes, themselves.

5. While the cats away, the mice will play or maybe pray

My husband and I have found using the times when the other has a meeting away from home at night as a great time to fill with inviting men (in his case) and women (in my case) over to spend time. We also do this on nights when my husband is working on his sermons or grading intern papers. Even though most of that time is spent with him quietly working, other guys love to come to work on their Sunday school class notes or seminary online class work, or Sunday evening service devotionals, or just to sit in there and read.

My husband's study takes up most of the second floor of the large Capitol Hill rowhouse the church has kindly given us as the parsonage. So I can tell you, that while a lot of good work gets done quietly, I can hear the faint sound of conversation and laughter, too. Many a man has profited from their time in that study. Many gospel conversations have arisen; many friendships forged in that study. It has been a hub of hospitality, evangelism, and discipleship for over three decades.

This has also been a great time to invite a few women friends over during that time, as well. This was especially useful when the kids were still at home, giving us opportunity for (fairly) uninterrupted fellowship.

6. Home away from home

For many of our years before kids and after kids, and a number of our years while the kids were at home, we welcomed singles and sometimes couples to live with us, sometimes for weeks, but not unusually even for months or years. Usually this was because of some special financial need or some other personal need on their part.

Since these people were to become such an integral part of our lives for a long period of time, we thought carefully before we invited them to live with us. Particularly, we had to think through how to continue to foster good marriage and family time even with them living with us. In the time when our kids were at home, we would bring them into the conversation. Sometimes, it would be us discussing with them what effect hosting this person might have on their lives. But more often, it would be discussing with them how they felt about adding a person or a couple to our household.

We learned the hard way how important it was to discuss ground rules with any potential long-term live-in guests. And, to express upfront that if the situation turned out not to be a good fit from either side, to not be offended. We love these visitors and desire to care for them, but our primary responsibility was Mark's and my relationship and our relationship with the kids. If they were willing to come and stay with us on those grounds, we were happy to have them.

Hospitality of this nature is a lot riskier, but the fruit can be a lot deeper, too. I admit, with almost every person/couple who stayed with us long term, there's had to be some sort of "heavy, deep, and real, conversation as our lives rubbed up against each other. As hard as those conversations were at times, they deepened our relationship with these dear friends. And the blessings only began there. Some of our kids' favorite memories are related to these friends becoming family. Some of my favorite memories are, too! And God kindly blessed his gospel witness as these people observed day by day our relationship as

husband and wife and with our kids. And not always because we were doing everything right and they wanted to duplicate everything we chose to do in our family life. Sometimes, it was because they learned lessons about what NOT to do that God graciously helped us be humble enough to allow them to see. Ah, imperfect people! All around us, and in us!

"With every guest, there is a blessing" became my unspoken motto as God always blessed us or the guests in ways, both expected and unexpected. through this adoption-like hospitality.

7. Same old, same old hospitality

In the pre-kid years and now in the empty-nester years, the who's and when's and what's of hospitality are easy. We simply decide together who to invite over to our house. They can be as quirky and complicated, or serious and straight-forward, stranger or old friend.. It didn't matter.

But in the years when we had kids, this no longer worked. Our kids needed to be a part of welcoming others into our home, even if just for dinner, especially if it was for a weekend or longer stay. When our kids were young, they didn't mind that we had lots of different people over for meals.

But especially when they entered junior high and senior high, they mainly wanted to us to host they were comfortable with at dinner time. I guess we could've just told our kids they needed to be happy with our choices and force them to cooperate against their comfort level. Sometimes we did; but, only when we talked to them about it. Mostly, we realized that our kids were the top-priority "strangers" we hosted and disciplined in our home for 18 or so years of their lives. Here, we would share with them and live out before them the gospel and the good, loving ways of the one, true God. They would be gone before we knew it. They would remain our top hospitality priority while they were at home.

And because of that, we used their teenage years as an opportunity to see more of the same people they were comfortable with to share our dinner table. Not only did this show our kids the high priority they were in our hearts, but it allowed them to build friendships with these other Christians, too. Some of these friends didn't just share meals with us, but they wound up going on vacation with us and even doing things with our kids without us. And not only did they bless us by their more frequent, deeper friendship, but once more, they were blessed by watching us even more closely as we tried to love each other and love our kids. Many of those friendships with our kids that have lasted even up to today, decades later!

8. Hospitality delivery

Sometimes you are snowed under, but someone still longs to meet up with you at home. The thought of finding something to feed your family let alone an extra or to sounds impossible. You're just hoping there's enough eggs in that lone egg carton to fill everyone's belly! This is a great time to suggest hospitality delivery: having the people who want to meet up with you bring the meal and even clean up afterwards. Sounds a little audacious, doesn't it?

But the beautiful thing about asking somebody else to bring the dinner is you show them your limits. Limits can be one of the very best things we show others in this showcase world of ours. Sometimes we get so caught up with the blessing of caring for others that we forget it can be an even bigger blessing when we let others care for us.

9. Late-night liaison

In my mind, classic hospitality is inviting someone over for Sunday lunch or some evening for dinner. But if mealtimes are your most important family time, you might feel like it's better to reserve them just

for your family. Or, you're happy to include others to join you for mealtimes, but the kids need so much attention or cheerfully involve themselves in the majority of the conversation (after all, it is family time), you might do better to add in time to talk more on interrupted Lee after the kids go to bed; or, simply invite your guests to come over later in the evening, with or without dessert and coffee, for more focused time. Either way, not only does this give you good time for deeper conversations, but it teaches those who come over the priority you set on time with your kids.

We do this frequently even now, though the kids have all left home, when a single man wants to meet with Mark. It protects our couple time together earlier in the evening. Often I go to bed much earlier than my husband. He feels freer to schedule meetings with a single man later at night after I've gone to bed. He will invite him to come over to our house (his study in our case since it is in our house) and talk then. I could do the same thing, though usually I don't because I'm the one going to bed earlier.

10. First steps towards friendship

Finding good friends that you can open up to deeply can be quite a process, especially when you're new to the church. Inviting singles and couples over to your house can be a great way to get a better sense of them as friends. It's sort of like dating in groups before you enter a one-on-one courting relationship. You can find out a lot in the context that provides you with closer interaction but with less expectation.

Many of the best friends that I have made in the churches in which Mark has been pastor have started out by having couples over for dinner. And even if it turns out neither the husband or wife winds up being someone you think might become a very close Confident, you didn't lose anything! You still got to know someone better in order to encourage them, and they got to know you better to encourage you, too.

11. Reverse hospitality

There is something very special about you hosting hospitably. It gives people an opportunity to learn more about you as they see you in your home environment. But the same is true in reverse. When you and your husband except an invitation to go to someone's house, it gives you an opportunity to understand them better in their own home environment. There is a whole different set of conversations that can be started as you learn about them. But if it's possible, get a babysitter if you have kids, unless you know their house, and the potential conversations you'll have, to be very kid-friendly. It will allow you to focus on your hosts instead of whether your child is about to pull their cat's tail or lay their hands on fragile vase.

12. Same house, separate door

As I mentioned above, my husband's study takes up most of the second floor of our four-story Capitol Hill parsonage. And when I say study, I don't mean a small room like space that has room for a few bookcases and a desk. I mean a space as big as some people's whole dining room and living room combined. Not only is my husband's desk the size of a dining room table (it actually IS a dining room table!), but there's a whole separate section that has a couch and more chairs as well. The walls are lined all around with bookcases.

But this study is more than a man-cave for Mark. Our house sits across from the back door of the church, and his study serves as a regular workspace for the many, large meetings he holds during regular work hours, some evenings, most weeks. There is almost no place in the house where others cannot hear me and I cannot hear them. I don't mean I can hear every word of their conversation, but I can hear enough to know that they are there.

On the other hand, they can hear if the kids and I are playing or fighting; if I'm crying up a floor in our bedroom, or practicing steel drums or hammered dulcimer down a floor in main living area. Really, the unfinished basement is the only area that is soundproof from my husband's study on the second floor. But even then, my husband's overflow books are down there and sometimes men are working there.

In some ways, this is the most invasive, pervasive hospitality we practice. Our back door is almost always open and most people who frequent my husband's study feel no need to knock. Many have their own key to our house. The second-floor bathroom gets pummeled as much as any commercial bathroom over at the church. When you think of DC, perhaps you think of locking your doors to protect yourselves from thieves or other kinds of bad guys. When I think of DC, I'm thinking of "When do we need to lock our doors to protect our personal time and make sure no one comes into our home unannounced?" We are talking about major hospitality here.

I have LOVED my life in their crazy house with this super-sized study and revolving door of men. I wouldn't want it any other way. But that's not to say there's no downside or difficult days. It is easy for me to feel overwhelmed by the constant traffic. Sometimes, I feel like I have no place to call my own. This has especially been true in these last decades as I've gone through cancer, and now an autoimmune neurological condition that sends me into paralysis and has made my bedroom the dining room, right underneath part of Mark's study. Sometimes, I just need a place to weep without feeling that everyone is listening. But on the other hand, if I need some instant help, there's almost always someone there to supply it.

I'll just say this right now: my husband loves his study! He loves to have his books around him. He loves to have his crazy, eclectic music blaring out. He loves having a place to have lots of guys in to study, to grow, and to talk. But, it can also be super tempting for Mark to pull a "Mr. Bennett" from *Pride and Prejudice*, who escaped to the study (and away from the family) every night. As someone who is regularly holding discussions and grading papers for the class of 6 – 9 interns twice a year, and who has many speaking engagements outside our church, Mark has a lot to do.

Mr. Bennett went to his study to escape from his family, but Mark is usually going there to work --work that we've together decided is good for him to do. So, is the study really the problem, when I get upset that he's not around as much as I would like? Or is it our management of his schedule and some sort of change that we need to make and how much work he does? Hmmm....

There is something that makes a huge difference in Mark being able to have his study in our home: a separate staircase that goes directly up to the study from our back door. This allows the dozens of people who go back and forth from my husband's study without coming through our personal home space. The only place where there is a crossover into personal home is when they go from his study to the bathroom. But even then, they're only using the hallway.

Think carefully before your husband puts his study/working office in your home. Is this the kind of hospitality you and your husband want to take on? As you can see, there are pros and cons. In our case, I would rather have Mark have a study at home, especially if he's going to be doing work after regular office hours. Far better to have him nearby, either because I or the kids might need him. And, well there's never been even a hint of temptation like this in his life, I think it's better for us to be aware of who is meeting with him and/or what he's doing in his study during those after-hours. And, having made the choice to have a study at home, we become aware of the pitfalls and over the years have gotten much better at communicating when changes need to be made.

Come up with your personal list of costs and benefits. So much in this decision depends on the specifics of your church, what your husband's workload is like, what would be best for your family, how many people would be regularly visiting your husband and when, and how disruptive it would be for him to have his study in your house. Talk through these pros and cons and come to an initial plan.

Some people, like us, have the luxury of choosing one or the other. Others may not. Church plants or churches in closed countries often have no building of their own. These pastors have to work from their homes, whether they like it or not. While you may not have the luxury of a separate office space outside the home, like we have, you still can talk through how to both make the most of the hospitality opportunities and make the best atmosphere for your husband to get good work done, while also caring the best you can for your family.

13. Fountain of youth (group)

Most of the hospitality we've been talking about thus far has been centered around adults. But there is something very special about opening your home to the youth of your church. Teenagers are full of so many questions. The world bombards them with so many reasons to think the sacrifices, let alone the truths of Christianity, are worthless.

If these teenagers grew up in a Christian home, hopefully they have seen their parents live out to the best of their ability their faith. But how much of what they are seeing is just something their parents do, and how much is what Christians do? And what do they do with some of those awkward, burning questions that they want to talk to some adult about, but rather it not be their parents?

Time in your home can be invaluable to these young men and women! Teens are so relational. If they get a chance to know you and for you to know them, their names and ask about their lives, the more reason they want to pay attention to what your husband says as he preaches.

For teens who attend your youth group, but do not come from a Christian home, your home provides insight into life they have never known. Watching your life at home can be such a powerful megaphone for the gospel. It's especially helpful for you as the wife to be on hand for intimate conversations with the teenage girls. It is not you, perhaps some of the youth group volunteers or leaders who are women.

It may seem unthinkable that inappropriate things can happen between teenage girls and pastors or male youth group leaders, but it does happen. And even if that were not the case, there are so many conversations that these girls can have with you about things it would be awkward if not inappropriate to with the men.

Our first three years out of college was spent up at Gordon Conwell theological seminary as Mark was pursuing an M.Div. He filled his required on-the-job ministry experience by volunteering to assist with the youth group of a local church that was quite liberal, but which had hired a conservative, evangelical youth pastor. We were young and full of energy and dove in headfirst with these high school students. Wednesday nights quickly became Bible study and homemade chocolate chip cookie night at the Devers' house.

The inductive Bible studies opened their eyes to the truths of Scripture in new ways. But how amazing was the fruit that came from the conversations over the chocolate chip cookies after Bible study! Kids came to know the Lord. He changed the course of their lives. We still have contact with a number of these youth group kids, now in their 60's like us, and by God's grace, they are faithfully loving the Lord.

14. Small group setting

In the New Testament, we see the church gathering together for fellowship, worship, and prayer in homes. While church buildings may have replaced the need for many churches to meet in homes out of necessity, most still use members' homes for Bible study and small group meetings. Meeting in a home can make a huge difference in fostering honesty and open communication, especially for those new to the group. Often, your home provides more than a backdrop for gospel conversation, but is actually a display of it as small group members observe your interaction as husband and wife in your interactions with your kids, as well as how you will come others into your home with its less than perfections.

These are just fourteen of many possibilities for hospitality. I'm sure you will come up with many more in your own experiences. The important thing is whether your hospitality opportunities look like ours. The important thing is whether they showcase the gospel, not showcase a façade of perfection.

A Few More Tips and Cautions on Hospitality

Cooking prep

Cooking in batches and freezing meals ahead of time can go a long way in keeping meal prep from being what prevents you from having someone over for dinner. There are lots of great books as well as websites that can suggest easy make ahead and freeze meals. Cooking in batches has been one of the best things I have done in making hospitality low stress.

They aren't coming for the food

Even if you don't make ahead, don't let your hospitality be hindered by meal prep. Everybody enjoys a homemade dinner, but the truth is, most guests would rather spend time with you eating deli meat slapped on to bread with a side of chips and pickles than not get to spend time with you at all. You might have to let your pride down a few notches, but then again, we talked about how that is usually nothing but helpful for authentic hospitality.

Halving or doubling your husband's ministry

Hospitality is wrapping people into your family life, but it shouldn't overwhelm your family life. Think carefully about what your family needs. Add hospitality only where you are still able to care well for your family. Am I saying you never have anybody over if it's not a good time for your family? No, I am not. There may be times when someone else's needs trumps even the regular needs of your family. But that trumping should not be a regular occurrence. If it gets to be, then you need to regroup and reconsider how much hospitality you are extending.

Mile wide, inch deep

One of the biggest considerations is your kids. Like I mentioned earlier, you only have two decades with your kids at home. Make sure your home feels like their home, and that your heart is for them even over the members of your church. This is especially important if your church holds a lot of meetings in your home, or, if like my husband, his working office is in our home and lots of young men come over to hang out in this study, after hours. You may need to withhold other forms of hospitality to make sure the kids have enough time alone with you to as parents.

If our history is anything to learn from, don't wait until you're old enough to communicate the feeling of neglect. If anything, err on the holding back. And if members of the church complain that they don't see you enough, hopefully explain what you're trying to do. This may not be a fun conversation, but it may be helpful to those members to see your husband leading your family well. Once more, you were showing yourself to be finite and trying to be a good steward of those who God has entrusted to you in

a way he has entrusted them to none other. This also may be a time to meet a couple at a restaurant for dinner on a date night rather than bring them home to be a part of your family time. It means your kids don't have to acclimate to get more people in your house, but gives you the opportunity to fellowship with them, nonetheless.

What to do with drop ins

Drop ins are tricky. They're especially tricky at my house because our back door, the door most people use to enter our house, faces the church parking lot and is usually unlocked. So instead of having the choice of whether to answer the door not, if for some reason it's not a good time. Often, people just come into my kitchen, and sometimes, they have even come all the way up the top floor of our four-story house, in our bedroom area (!) to see if I'm available for visit! Not much time or privacy to come up with a game plan!

Your case is probably not like mine. Your house might not be next to the church parking lot and even if it is, your back door might be locked because your husband looks over at the church not in your house. Or, your church members might not be prone to impromptu visits like a number of our church members are. So, the first thing you need to do is assess whether last-minute drop ins are an issue in your situation; and if so, what makes them an issue.

Is it that you are a homeschooling mom, and visitors like to come during key classroom time, disrupting learning and perhaps frustrating the visitors?

Is it that, like me, you struggle almost daily with illness, and it really helps for you to have a heads up before somebody comes to your door? Are you an introvert with traffic stream of visitors that might make even the boldest extrovert want to go hide in the closet?

Or is the issue so much timing, but more of the desire to make sure your home looks like a showcase? Logistics. Heart issues. These are just four of the different types of things it helps to think about as you come to a good plan for spur of the moment visitors.

In some ways, logistics are one of the easiest issues to deal with. Some of my homeschooling mom pastor wives' buddies have made signs that they stick on their doors saying something like "No visitors right now, thank you. School in session."

I have learned that I can lock the door to our kitchen, even when we must leave our back door open for meetings in Mark's study. We've had a number of awkward "wrong turns" into our private living area, especially now that my physical condition makes the dining room my bedroom. I've learned to be honest with people dropping by for a visit and I'm not feeling well. I am more of an introvert, and our house does have such a traffic stream of visitors that sometimes makes me want to hide in a closet! I've learned that it's okay not to be available at the drop of a hat, if I am frazzled.

But I've also learned could take an honest look at my heart when really everything is an embarrassing mess, and I just don't want the visitor at the door to see it. It's at times like those that I have to remind myself that God may have brought that woman to my door because the very thing she needs to see is the "state of emergency" of me and my house. Welcoming her to come talk to me while I let it go, or even let her help me as we talk, may do her such good. Other times, physically I feel terrible or I'm exhausted from so many visitors, but God wants me to be available to someone else. He uses these times to rely more fully on His sufficiency in light of my weakness. It's not easy to balance all of these factors. Give yourself enough grace to set up healthy boundaries. But ask for wisdom AND grace for those times when what is needed falls outside of the boundaries.

But the bottom line is, in a vibrant church you may have for more people who want to meet with you and it times that are awkward for you then you can ever meet with and still be a good steward of those most important things that God is giving you to do, like caring well for your family. You can expect to disappoint people even when you're doing the right thing. And while that's part of the time, showing them that you were finite and you are thinking in terms of being the best steward you can be might also be the very thing God sent that visitor to your door to learn because they need to learn that, too. In all cases, be gracious to those you turn away from your door. Even if it's not a good time to meet with them, you can send them away with a smile on your face and empathy in your heart.

Do I have to be hospitable to everyone?

I think you certainly want to try to be hospitable to everyone in your church, but sometimes after a pattern of gossip or judgmentalness becomes clear and you and your husband may decide that having these people over is actually not helpful. Your husband is the shepherd of his church, but he's also the shepherd of his family. He can decide to keep shepherd difficult sheep at church but shut the "barn door" to your house, if that's what's best.

Bed-and-breakfast or serve yourself?

Everyone loves to be pampered and served. How relaxing is it to be asked over someone's house to enjoy the dinner they cooked, on the place settings they set, enjoying nice conversation followed by leaving the dirty dishes in their sink as you head home. Sometimes hospitality looks like that.

Mark and I decided that if we include people in the cooking preparation, setting the table, and doing the dishes... And if they spend the night letting them change the sheets in the towels... We are able to have more people over for dinner because it takes less of a monumental effort from us. Francis and Edith Schaefer, who basically made their home a retreat center, practiced this more informal kind of hospitality. Not only was this what made their volume of hospitality possible, but it was part of what helped those who stayed with them feel like family. So, when you're considering how much hospitality you want to have, consider where you are on the spectrum of formal to informal hospitality. It may be that you are able to do more with very little additional cost, and with a lot of hidden benefits.