25 ‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” The Gospel of Luke

The Party

Based on my experience of visiting our congregations in the Diocese of California, I suspect there are many, many modern-day Bay Area versions of the elder son in Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son – folks who hear a lot of rejoicing and partying going on in our congregations. Rejoicing that people who have experienced disappointment and suffering in their own version of a “distant country,” have now “come home” and are receiving a welcome.

I’ve witnessed and taken part in many of these happy homecomings – we call them Confirmation, Reception and the Renewal of Baptismal Vows. There are other homecomings that I know take place on many days throughout the week - bible studies, pot lucks, youth events, choir, gardening, “hikes”, among others. The community gathering and welcoming.

I am in my thirteenth year of serving the Church as a bishop, and thus, naturally I’ve performed many, many Confirmations and Receptions, and have heard the Reaffirmations of many Baptismal vows. Whenever I visit one of our congregations I make an effort to spend a significant amount of time to talk with the Confrirmands.
During these conversations, I talk about the rites for that day in terms of the pattern of Baptism – the death of the false self, or the old self, and the gift of new life from God. After this framework, I ask those present to give voice to their own reasons for preparing and being willing to step forward for one of these rites. Always, always what they have to say is honest, authentic, vulnerable, thoughtful, and meaningful. It is one of the greatest privileges of my ministry to hear what members of our congregations have to say about why they are being confirmed, received or why they are reaffirming their Baptismal vows.

While there is great variety in the answers given, reflecting the unique history and character of each person, there are also remarkable similarities. These similarities have allowed me to begin to see a pattern – what it is that draws people to your congregation.

The common elements are: welcome for people as they are; the courage to stand up for people’s rights in our civil society and within the Church; care and understanding for them in suffering, illness and loss; and, the importance of community during life transitions such as new jobs, new relationships, and new beginnings.

As I look at this pattern, the qualities of the Christian community to which we invite people, it looks to me as if the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist are doing what God intends them to do – shaping us to reflect God’s image. Baptism is shaping our congregations to die to selfishness and live compassionately. To live compassionately means to
be forgiving and loving towards oneself, and to those who share the community with us, but also to make the effort to make room for newcomers and to warmly welcome them.

The Eucharist is helping us think about what having a place at the table for all people and for the Creation means. We are learning to remove barriers to come to the table, and once at the table to make the meal available to all those who come. Recently one of our seminarians, who grew up in one parish from infant Baptism onward, said that having attended a different congregation as part of the discernment process has taught a most important life lesson- to know first hand how hard it can be to enter a congregation as a stranger. This experience has resolved this seminarian to be attentive to how genuinely welcoming the congregation is to the guest, the stranger, the newcomer.

The heartfelt, grateful witness of the hundreds of people I’ve Confirmed or Received, or whose Reaffirmations I’ve heard since I’ve been your bishop show me that there is a “there there” in our congregations – you have created and are sustaining attractive, healthy congregations to which you can invite the spiritually hungry with great pride.

And I feel certain that a major reason that our congregations feel so substantive, full of the qualities of “home” as we hope and pray they should be, is that those of you who are there each week have made your own prodigal son journeys – that is, you too may have found yourself suffering and in some kind of pain or new beginning in life, and
Christ welcomed you through our Church. All of us, at some point in our lives, know what it means to be on the outside because of pain or loneliness or transition.

The impact of a community that can identify with people in need can be dramatic. A vivid example that comes to mind is from the village of Les Chambon-sur-Lignon, in France, wherein villagers sheltered some 5,000 Jews during World War II. After the war, one of the elderly villagers of recounted that when the first Jewish refugee knocked on his door in the middle of the night, this French Protestant said, “We Protestants have wandered in the wilderness here in France, and have suffered persecution, just as your ancestors did in Egypt and in the wilderness – I recognize you – you are like us.”

This is the kind of beautiful mystery that I see happening in congregations across the Diocese of California. Whether through the action of an individual or of a church community, I believe visitors to our diocesan congregations find the welcome of wounded hearts, loved by Christ and being healed by him.

I’d love to extend the conversations I am privileged to have with Confirmands to the whole of our congregations, so that I could hear about more journeys from far distant countries, journeys that took you to the brink of your resources, and perhaps beyond, and how Christ welcomed you into a capacious home that is our Church.
I also suppose that if the elder brother and I could listen to the excited conversations going on inside that homecoming party, and the contemporary equivalents in your congregations, we would hear how the weary travelers enrich your lives with the story of their journeys. We are changed and enriched by the life journeys of those who join us.

*Invitational Church*

We know that there is no more secularized region in the United States than the Bay Area. In the light of this statistic, it is all the more remarkable that in 2011 no Episcopal diocese in the Western region of The Episcopal Church had smaller attendance declines than we did. It is clear that you have helped your communities know who you are and when they have visited you, you have welcomed them.

I wonder, though if we couldn’t model ourselves even more on the figure of the Loving Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I wonder this because, while you are doing such demonstrably great ministry in your neighborhoods, the need for spiritual homes in our area is acute. Perhaps, like the Loving Father, we needn’t wait for the traveler to make her or his way to us, perhaps we should go out to meet the sojourner and make the invitation, the welcome where the traveler *is*.

And so this is my hope - that the Diocese of California will make a concerted, year-long (for starters) effort to become an invitational church
during 2014. Becoming an invitational church is the next step beyond the excellent efforts you have all been making to both embed your congregational lives in your neighborhoods and to be welcoming congregations for newcomers.

Our effort to becoming invitational might have these areas of action:

- Learn to use public narrative in order to tell people in your life why Jesus Christ and the Episcopal Church are important in your life, ending with your personal invitation to join you at your church.

- Create invitational materials that give the mission of the Episcopal Church and your congregation, some basic information about services and programs, and contact information. These materials should be prominently available in your church when different groups gather to use your space – concerts and community organizations, for instance.

- Show up at the beginning of events and meetings in your church to make a warm, simple welcome that issues an invitation that contains something about who you are, your mission and reason for being.

- Create an advertising campaign that is put forward through both social media, local print media, radio and television, and that also utilizes flyers that local businesses will display. The advertising campaign will culminate in a weekend (not just a Sunday) of events – services and programs – to which you and the other members of your church will specifically invite people
to attend. The congregation will be prepared to welcome newcomers to this weekend designed for guests.

The excellent ministry team of the Diocese who work with me, particularly Stefani, Joseph, Julia, Francesca, Jennifer, and Eric are all prepared, as am I, to partner with you to meet the goal of becoming an invitational church. I’ll mention the excellent online curriculum that Julia and Joseph created last Lent, Pro/Claim!, and our ongoing work of supporting your Church vitality through the Equipping the Beloved Community events, just two ways we support your own good efforts to invite and welcome all.

And at the level of our diocese being home, I have to mention and applaud you all for the tremendous success of Sing With Haiti. You came to the sublime, rapturously beautiful concert on October 2, 2013 in this, our cathedral. And not only did you come, but you invited people to the Sing With Haiti concert, and together we invited the larger Bay Area. And the Bay Area attended, filling Grace Cathedral. To me, the success of Sing With Haiti shows us how we can extend an invitation to our neighbors on a scale that would be difficult to do in any one of our congregations. We worked together to extend an invitation which proclaimed that “home” is not only the intimate, the local church, but equally we can be at home in all the levels of the world, for God is present to it all, in its entirety.

I view all of the above as the living out of the Loving Father’s eager rushing forward, out of the home to meet the long-lost son, who was
uncertain of the welcome he would receive. There was no question when the prodigal son was met with overflowing love in the street! We too can rush forward, as a diocese, churches and people - with an invitation to home.

**Grace**

Lots of what I’ve said above points to our work, our ministry, our action. This can be misleading, I realize. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is only derivatively about our action; it is importantly about the divine welcome, the love of God.

The sacraments that have shaped our churches’ characters are, as the Catechism teaches us, channels of God’s grace. It is really God who is the source of our wonderful church communities, and you have responded to God’s grace in making this grace manifest, available, and known.

It is so right that our cathedral points to God’s love for the world as directly as possible – Grace. Grace Cathedral, originally Grace Church when it was founded in 1849 has been proclaiming in every way that God’s love is poured out for the world through the instrument of the Church. When earthquakes and plagues drove people to “a distant country” of suffering and alienation, Grace Church/Grace Cathedral actively welcomed the many who needed to be at home, in this locality,
in this world, in God. I use our cathedral as example of what each of your congregations, venerable or new, have done so well, responding to God’s ever-present grace in our lives.

Finally, wonderfully, it is participating in the very life of the living God, through God’s grace experienced in Christian community, that we are inviting people to come and be part of our churches.

I began today remembering “the party” of one who was welcomed home, because the homecoming - our life in Christ and in community - is essential.

It is my prayer that we also remember the invitation that brought each of us home, and that our hearts can remain tender with that memory.

Let us grow the party, Diocese of California, through God’s grace, with 2014 as our year for invitations where we, like the servant welcoming the prodigal son home - rush forward - filled with joy and confidence and expectations!

May God bless the party, may God bless our invitations and may God fill our hearts with gratitude for the grace that will give us, always, more than we can hope for or imagine.

+MHA
Questions:

1) Can you share a time when you rushed forward to greet the other, in your congregation or at a diocesan event?

2) Can you share about a time when you were welcomed?

3) When have you experienced a home that is larger than the local community (the diocese, the Episcopal Church, the cosmos)?