

# Hospitality: Discovering Our Destiny's Mystery

by Paula Kline

*...the sacred at the centre of our destiny's mystery is where  
God is at once Guest, Host and Home...*<sup>1</sup>

—Louis Massignon

It was only 4 p.m., but it was December, and a blanket of frigid darkness was already descending upon the streets of Montreal. Eric had been expected at Project Refuge (PR)<sup>2</sup> by noon, but still no sign. Perhaps he had friends in the city and had gone to stay with them, as sometimes happens with newly arrived refugees. Late for a meeting, PR coordinator Sylvain Thibault left instructions with the residents to call him on the emergency cell if the new resident showed up. The call came at 10 p.m....two days later. Hungry, half frozen, and confused, Eric knocked on the door, escorted by two police officers who had found him on a park bench. The residents welcomed him like a long lost brother, prepared him a hot supper, and massaged his feet and hands. All the while, Eric kept murmuring *merci merci* as silent tears fell on his new orange terry-cloth bath robe. We would discover later that neurological problems had caused his disorientation, and a steep, difficult climb back to health awaited him. But, right now, the chicken was delicious, the bath robe warm, and the company—beyond belief. All was well in our little corner of the world. Eric was home.

The hospitality extended to Eric that winter night has long and deep roots. It runs throughout our Judeo-Christian tradition, defying cold dark nights with the light of human kindness. It erupts at times in unlikely places, and every time it does, we come just a little bit closer to “our destiny’s mystery.”

At the turn of the last century, in 1910, a group of evangelical Christians expressed their hospitality to strangers by establishing Montreal City Mission (MCM). Several decades of providing health, educational, and social services to newly arrived European immigrants have built a strong foundation upon which rests our ministry to refugees today.

Our response to the stranger in our midst, whoever he or she may be, comes not only from MCM staff, students, and volunteers, but from the entire church community, as has been the case for millennia. As I reflect back on 2008, I realize how we are all indeed one body. United Church congregations and individual members not only support the work of Montreal City Mission, but walk hand-in-hand with us as we live out the everyday challenge and gift of hospitality. The following are just a few examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Massignon, Louis, *L'Hospitalité sacrée* (Paris: Nouvelle cité, 1987), p. 30, quoted in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 373.

<sup>2</sup> [Montreal City Mission](#) currently runs three Project Refuge residences in the west, centre-south, and east end of Montreal, offering 48 newly arrived refugees shelter and support in the refugee claimant process.

## Partnership with St. James United

St. James United Church welcomed MCM into its historic building four years ago, providing space for MCM offices as well as our legal information clinic, Just Solutions, and summer day camp Camp Comos. Shortly thereafter, we launched a joint project, the Every Kid Choir, a multifaith, multicultural choir, with members from St. James directing and providing musical accompaniment and MCM taking care of organization and logistics. This joint endeavour has caught the attention and excitement of Montreal. The choir has sung at peace festivals, at International Refugee Rights Day, for the Montreal and Ottawa Conference, and for the Governor General. It has even contributed to a CD by popular indie rock group The Dears...and the invitations keep pouring in.

This past year, we began music lessons for kids in the choir whose families could not afford lessons. Talented local musicians from church and community networks agreed to accept a small honorarium in exchange for weekly sessions on the violin or piano. “We never would have taken the decision to invest in music lessons, nor would we have imagined her talent!” exclaimed one proud parent.

Joint worship services that begin in the square in front of the church to celebrate International Women’s Day, or to commemorate the victims of the 1989 *polytechnique* massacre, are other ways that St. James and MCM speak with one voice to the larger community. Three MCM governing body members, including the chair of our personnel committee, are members of St. James.

## A Commitment to Outreach at Cedar Park United

Their own financial challenges have not deterred the folks at Cedar Park United Church from making a solid commitment to outreach far beyond their doors. Support of St. Columba house, our sister ministry in Pt. St. Charles, and Montreal City Mission, are top priorities for this West Island congregation. In 2007, Cedar Park launched the Living Gifts Project,<sup>3</sup> affording congregation members the opportunity to become acquainted with and support different programs of the two missions. Since the project’s inception, several other congregations have signed on in their own area. The proceeds of the annual Cedar Park Christmas concert are donated to the mission as well as some of the sales from the new 2009 Cedar Park Organized Cookbook Agenda.

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<sup>3</sup> A Living Gift is a way to honour a person you care about by giving a gift that makes a social contribution. This gift represents services or goods you buy from a charitable organization in lieu of a material gift for friends and loved ones. [Click here](#) for more information on MCM Living Gifts.

The Cedar Park Mens' Group (and friends!) contribute their culinary talents and carol singing to MCM's annual interfaith holiday party. This past December, Cedar Park and MCM welcomed 130 guests to a delicious meal and a heel-kicking klezmer dance at our downtown St. James location. The chair and treasurer of MCM's governing body both come from this congregation.

### **The New Canadians Project at Mountainside United**

A hot supper on a cold evening and friendly conversation, followed by an English class at Mountainside United Church, is the way this congregation reaches out to newly arrived refugees from Project Refuge. The first course got underway last fall, and a sequel is being planned for February. Bonds have formed through what has become an exciting learning experience for all involved.

### **Support to a Refugee Family from Beaconsfield United**

When a Mexican grandmother and her three orphaned grandchildren faced deportation, the doors of Beaconsfield United Church opened and its members stood faithfully by, ready to help in whatever way was necessary. Pleas for compassion from the United Church General Secretary and extensive media coverage finally forced the government to change its mind at the eleventh hour. News came the day we had organized a solidarity concert in the historic east-end pub, Le Lion d'Or, and this quickly turned into a joyous *fête*, spontaneously bringing together over 100 Montrealers who had just heard the story on the evening news. And, of course, Beaconsfield members were on hand to celebrate this small but important victory with us. A member from Beaconsfield sits on MCM's governing body.

### **Pass a Hammer to Trinity and Anjou United**

When MCM opened its third residence for refugees in the Rosemont district of Montreal last fall, neighbouring churches Trinity and Anjou United quickly offered a helping hand. Assembling furniture, cleaning out cupboards, and making up 20 beds in preparation for the new arrivals kept our faithful east-end friends busy in the early days of October: the beginning of a new partnership, no doubt. The minister at Trinity is a member of MCM's governing body's executive.

### **The Green Church Project**

United Church Montrealers, Anglos, Francos, and Latinos alike, are joining hands and footprints to care for the environment. The Green Church Project/Église verte is an exciting new ministry of the United Church of Canada, partnering two missions, four congregations, and a theological college. Its mandate is "to empower congregations and ministry sites in adopting environmentally aware practices in their community operations as well as promoting a healing relationship with the natural world." The Green Church Project expands the age-old tradition of hospitality to the natural world and all its inhabitants. A dynamic bilingual website, [www.greenchurchproject.org](http://www.greenchurchproject.org) or [www.egliseverte.org](http://www.egliseverte.org), provides weekly tips, greening tools, and regular updates on the progress of our pilot project.

There are many more examples, some already in progress and others yet to be imagined, of how the different parts of the church body can move as one. The more we pool our resources and imaginations, the greater our hospitality will be and the stronger our collective voice for justice. And...have you noticed? It does indeed bring us just a bit closer to “our destiny’s mystery... where God is at once Guest, Host and Home.”

*Paula Kline is the director of [Montreal City Mission](#), a community ministry of the United Church of Canada.*