

The 2009 Lenten Compact

What is a “Compact”?

A compact is a covenantal agreement among a group of people. Those who voluntarily enter a compact bind themselves to a set of guidelines and standards for the purpose of accomplishing personal and corporate goals.

A Communal Fast

Lent is often considered a personal time to fast, focus ourselves on God, and reflect on the idols that we have been told we cannot live without. Like last Lenten season, this Lent we are calling for a communal fast that focuses us not only on our relationship to God, but also on our relationships to those who are “aliens and strangers” in our lives, our communities, our nation and our world. We are joining with Kimball Avenue EC Church (Chicago, IL) in calling ourselves to a true fast – one that is not just the act of denying oneself of something – but a fast that creates justice and reconciliation, by breaking the yokes that bind us and the yokes that bind our neighbors.

In Isaiah 58, specifically verses 6-7, the Lord makes clear what a true fasting should accomplish:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

This Lent, we seek to reflect on our relationship to those who are strangers to us and to begin a fast that will focus us on our Christian responsibility to love for the alien and stranger, working for their inclusion and equality and opposing attempts to marginalize or disenfranchise them on the basis of social constructs.

Why a “Hospitality Compact”?

As people called by God to remember that we “were once aliens in the land of Egypt.” (See Exodus 23:9), we are called to practice love towards the alien and stranger, not just tolerance (Leviticus 19:34). Our experience of strangeness is meant to provide a reference point for our treatment of those different from us. Through the compact we will reflect on our strangeness and will allow that reflection to transform us and the way we treat those who are strange to us.

As followers of Jesus, who calls us to “love your neighbor as yourself” and specifically expands the definition of neighbor to include the alien and stranger – Samaritans, Gentiles, Prostitutes, and Heretics (Luke 10:25-37), we understand that we often fail to act as Jesus did and instead act lovingly only to those who we define as worthy of our hospitality. Through the compact, we will begin to see our neighbors through God’s eyes, not through our flawed perception.

As people striving to be the sheep of Matthew 25, we acknowledge that when we invite the stranger in, we invite Christ in. Conversely, when we do not invite the stranger in, we deny Jesus entrance. Through the compact, we will live the Good News that God is with the stranger and that his will for us is to practice radical hospitality in the now and not yet Kingdom.

As people called out of the world and into the Kingdom, we believe that part of living “of the world” is to live by the socially-constructed rules that define “in” and “out.” We are called out of the world into the Kingdom, where old circles and boundaries are to be dissolved and we are called to live a new order in Christ. Through the compact, we will work systemically for inclusion and equality, but we will also actively oppose attempts to marginalize or disenfranchise others on the basis of worldly definitions of who is worthy of our hospitality.

As people who know that God extended, and continues to extend, his arm to us in radical hospitality even though we were and continue to be strangers to him, we believe that God calls us act on radical hospitality. We are called to treat the stranger as a native-born, execute justice for the stranger, clothe and feed the stranger, and abstain from oppression of the stranger no matter why they are strange to us. Through the compact, we will work to build just relationships between strangers that will transform us and transform our communities.

Hospitality: A biblical definition

Do not mistreat or oppress the alien or stranger.-Exodus 22:21, Exodus 23:9, Leviticus 19:33

Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for... the alien. - Leviticus 19:10

Treat the alien or stranger as one of your native-born. - Leviticus 19:34

Have the same law for the alien and the native-born. - Leviticus 24:22

Defend the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and love the alien, giving him food and clothing. - Deuteronomy 10:18

I was a stranger and you invited me in – Matthew 25:35

Love your neighbor as yourself – Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 22:39

Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. – Hebrew 13: 1-3

STARTING WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2009, AND CONTINUING THROUGH EASTER, WE ASK EVERYONE TO JOIN IN A HOSPITALITY COMPACT

1. Abstain from personal actions that contribute to the marginalization of the stranger.

Although there are many ways that the stranger in our society is overtly oppressed through violence to persons or property, most of us do not personally partake in these actions. However, we may participate in this violence through personal actions that marginalize others through psychological, spiritual and emotional acts of destruction or harm.

These personal actions may include:

Discounting others – Words or actions that suggest someone is less important, valuable or meaningful than you are, assuming they are not your equal or not worthy of respect or justice

Negating others – Words or actions that suggest that someone's feelings or experiences simply do not exist or are not real

Accusing others – Words or actions that suggest that your discomfort or biases are the other person's fault

Negatively labeling others – Words or actions that suggest the other is flawed, stupid or some other negative attribute

Denying others – Words or actions that deny the plight of the other or deny their claims for justice or equity

Ignoring or abandoning others – Words or actions that isolated the other and that break the relationship or fail to forge the relationship due to apathy or ignorance

Strategies for a successful fast:

- Identify someone in your life who is a stranger whom you have discounted, negated, accused, negatively labeled, denied or ignored and take this time to reach out to them in meaningful, respectful, relationship-building ways.
- Aggressively seek out more information in an effort to enhance your own awareness and understanding of oppression by talking with others, listening to others and reading.
- Reevaluate and cease to use words, ways of communicating, or behaviors that may be perceived by others as degrading or hurtful.
- Openly confront comments, jokes, or actions that marginalize someone based on their difference.

2. Combat institutional actions that contribute to the marginalization of the stranger.

When oppression is expressed in corporate terms, it may be overt violence that draws blood (think war, torture, violations of human rights, police brutality) or covert violence that has psychological, emotional or spiritual effects (think racism, sexism, classism). Usually our personal acts of covert violence allow these corporate forms of oppression to continue. As Christians, biblical hospitality calls us to combat oppression of the stranger and alien and defend their cause.

Strategies for a successful fast:

- Read MAKING ROOM by Christine Pohl which specifically discusses Christian radical hospitality.
- Express solidarity with a marginalized group, personally or corporately.
- Contribute time and/or funds to an agency, fund, or program that actively confronts the problems of oppression for those who are systemically marginalized in our country or in other countries.
- Join Amnesty International's Freedom Writer's Network to write letters that can bring about a prisoner's release, secure vital information, launch an investigation, or even save the life of a prisoner of conscience -- people imprisoned solely for their beliefs, color, sex, ethnic origins, language, or religion, who have not used or advocated violence.