



## About “The Other”<sup>1</sup>

Who is this “saving stranger,” The Other, who is at once a full, complex, individual human being with a unique story and perspective *and* a member of a larger group that exists within the social hierarchy, as we all do? It’s best to take on this question in two chunks.

Let’s begin closer to home. Depending on who the dominant, empowered groups are in your congregation, The Others are the ones you have the power to systematically marginalize and/or oppress. They are, to borrow the language of the Visions Group, the *targets* of oppression, while those who hold privilege and power are *non-targets*.<sup>2</sup> It matters not what you as an individual feel you have done to The Other, or even whether there are particular ways you as a congregation have consciously hurt another group. Identifying The Other requires only the recognition that, within the social system in which we all function, some groups have been given social, economic and political power over other groups.

Now, we can widen the circle. Every church is a social institution, woven into a complex cultural and historical tapestry that operates beyond but has great implications for the individual congregation. So we all have to ask, “Who are The Others in relation to our tradition or denomination—the groups whose voices and gifts have not been part of shaping our collective identity, the ones who have not held much power or been welcomed with open arms?”

This level of discernment is crucial, if a little tougher to grasp. Suppose your church has lots of working-class members; do you need to think about whether you’re sending exclusive, classist signals? What if you’re a largely black church in a multicultural neighborhood—why would you need to worry about radically welcoming blacks and other people of color? Why? Because when people who have been marginalized see the sign hanging on your door—Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, Methodist, you name it—they may automatically leap to a number of assumptions about who you are, who is welcome to fully share your common life and who is not.

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1. From Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other and the Spirit of Transformation*, pp. 14–15.

2. Valerie Batts, *Modern Racism: New Melody for the Same Old Tunes* (Cambridge, MA: Episcopal Divinity School Occasional Papers, 1998).

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Despite your diverse membership, you may still be participating in many of the exclusive patterns of your tradition—music that is culturally limited, leadership structures that reflect the expectations of European, privileged, older or straight communities, etc. It takes extra vigilance and care to reverse the effect of the exclusive stereotypes and patterns your tradition has laid on you. It takes understanding who your congregation and your tradition has pushed to the margins. It takes a recognition of who is The Other and why.

Those are hard words for most of us to hear and process. If you're in a non-target group, you may feel the guilt and resistance creeping in: "I see where this is going. I'm now the enemy. Same old story." If you identify strongly with a target group, you may feel yourself somewhat objectified: "Surely I'm more than my group, more than my victim or oppressed status."

I can only promise you that this is not about guilt trips or victim complexes, but a statement regarding reality. We cannot transform systems without naming them. We cannot work for freedom and embrace unless we acknowledge what forces keep us from the reconciliation and compassion we know God is holding out for all of us. Part of what makes radical welcome *radical* is that it goes into the roots under relationships and systems, clearing debris and maybe even rewiring the motherboard so that we can live and welcome in new ways.