



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#48 - December 2014

A Royal Welcome: Some Secrets of Belonging (Update III)

A while ago, [GEMS #3 through #9 and #15 through #18](#) explored the role of welcome and hospitality within parish life as well as specifically in adult faith formation.

Since welcome is such a crucial part of who we are, periodically these newsletters will reflect again on the topic. This is the third of the Updates.

In Update I we examined - once again - the reality of the welcome/hospitality atmosphere of the parish itself; how each and every person is a recipient (and a contributor) to the spirit, feeling and reality of hospitality.

In this Update, we'll take a few moments to reflect on our **welcome to visitors and newcomers** (especially helpful, perhaps, for the coming Christmas season). We'll peruse ideas for:

- Some Things to Remember
- Don'ts: Some Things to Avoid
- Do's: Some Gems to Consider Doing
- A Few Resources

Some Things to Remember

- **Everyone is different** and nothing is ever straightforward. There is no one pattern for the way people come to a parish, engage and join as members. Therefore, uniformity, rules and guidelines that fit every situation are not pastoral. We're called to flexibility and improvisation as we welcome the diversity of the Body of Christ.
- **Not "joining" does not equal failure.** The end result of welcome and hospitality is not necessarily membership. If someone only comes once or twice (perhaps for now), we have ministered to them in some way.
- **Each individual transforms the parish.** Wouldn't it be wonderful if we reached the day when, in telling stories of the parish, they stories are not told about when pastors and staffs came and left, but when people found a home in our parish. Rather than "and then Fr. Brown came" but "then Karen and Ken joined the parish."
- **Hospitality is the foundation of evangelization.** "What good would it do to go door-to-door inviting people to attend our churches if what they found when they arrived were less than welcoming and hospitable communities?" asks Dr. William Pickett, author of *A Concise Guide to Pastoral Planning* (Ave Maria Press). "Clearly, the foundation to any evangelizing efforts needs to be creating more welcoming parish communities."
- **Some practices of hospitality might fit in some areas; they might not feel "at home" in others.** As in everything, leaders – as well as all parishioners – need to understand and appreciate the culture, the experiences, the needs of those in their parish, in the broader community. Donald Hill, St. Damien of Molokai Parish on the island of Molokai in Hawaii, relates that at each of the four liturgies (at three sites), someone greets new people (the tourists, the visitors). Each person is given a lei (each site gives a different one), and a kiss, and is shown to a seat, if necessary. The presider offers a special blessing for people visiting for the first time. (In the Hawaiian culture, the giving of a lei is very common.)



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- *See things from the point of view of a person coming to your parish for the very first time.* [This video](#) was made for church leaders to consider how they might come across to visitors in order that they might be more sensitive and more effective.



Don'ts: Some Things to Avoid

- *Avoid thinking of visitors; think of guests.* In our homes, we often think of visitors as people who drop by without an invitation. They show up; we're not prepared for them.

In contrast, how do we prepare for guests? Are there some differences in our responses to guests (as compared to visitors)?

- Guests have been invited.
- We're expecting their arrival.
- We look forward to their time with us.
- We make arrangements and preparations for them.
- Sometimes we do some extra cleaning. ☺
- We might have prepared their favorite meal or dessert.
- If they are spending the night, we've made the beds and put out our best towels.
- Their time with us is often longer in duration than that of a visitor.

How does this translate to parish life? Do we have visitors drop by for liturgy and various gatherings? Does this take us by surprise, making us wish we had been more ready? Do we prepare for guests each Sunday (and in everything we do), trying to make them feel welcome and comfortable?

- *Be sensitive to people's feelings.* This practice has pros and cons: sometimes parishes have guests/visitors stand to be welcomed. Many people are uncomfortable with being made to stand out. Be sure you know how this will work/not work for people who might be with you for the first time.
- *Name Tags.* Another practice which makes people feel like they are different than the others is to invite first-timers and visitors to fill out and wear a name tag – when no one else is wearing a name tag. Name

tags are crucial. Invite everyone to wear them on a given Sunday once a month – or all the time.

Some thoughts and practices regarding the use of name tags:

- [To \(Name\) Tag or Not to Tag?](#)
- [Nametags: Opposites Attract](#)

- *Some things not to say to people:*

- “You must be new here.”
- “How long have you been coming here? I've never seen you before.”

For things to say, see the Do's (listed below).

Let all guests who arrive
be received like Christ, for he is going to say:
I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

Rule of St. Benedict 53: 1-2

- *Avoid church lingo.* Be careful not to use churchy words, confusing names, and acronyms which tell a new person absolutely nothing.

Word choices that sound inclusive rather than exclusive help prevent an “us and them” mentality that might make visitors feel out of touch. (We'll explore this further in another update.)

- *Avoid giving the wrong message.* Brendon Hunter in [What ARE you saying?](#) recounts a statement he came across in a church bulletin:

“[Name of church] is an Accessible Church. For assistance, please ring the doorbell or ask for John.”

Hunter continues: “Here's a prime example of good intentions gone awry. I was sitting in a pew when I read this. Aside from the

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obvious fact that I'm already inside, the directions for how to get inside assume two things:

- that I know where the doorbell is (I don't remember seeing any signs on my way in) and
- that there is a way for me to contact John from outside.

What I believe the congregation intended was to be welcoming to persons with all types of abilities and to let us know how you can enter the church without having to climb stairs. The crux of the matter is that we can forget what it is like to be new to a church and even more so to our very own church. Words that we use, however well intended they are, can come off as meaningless or confusing or offensive. Other times it's the words we forget to use.

Since moving to New York, I've been visiting a different church every Sunday. And, while I've experienced amazing liturgies, met fabulous people, and learned of fantastic ministries, these visits have also reminded me of the value of paying close attention to the experience of being a visitor to our churches."

- ***Don't limit the ways*** that a visitor (as well as long-time parishioners) can obtain information. Are you utilizing:
 - your website, Facebook, Twitter, etc.
 - printed materials provided by the greeters
 - the weekend bulletin
 - bulletin boards and an information kiosk
- ***Avoid having the same people do everything.*** As newcomers/visitors look around, do they see the same people filling the roles of lectors, Eucharistic Ministers, greeters, etc.? Newcomers need to see "people like them" in all the ministerial roles: young and old, various cultures, etc.

In addition, having the same people do everything sends a message to many in the parish that their gifts are not wanted. When people are invited to participate in any way, they feel needed and welcomed.

To sum up many of our don'ts, you might want to read and discuss [Church Tips – Five Ways to Scare Away Visitors](#) with your leadership groups.

Let love be genuine...
love another with mutual affection...
extend hospitality to strangers.

Romans 12: 9, 10, 13



Do's: Some Gems to Consider Doing

- ***Maintain an expansive idea of community.*** People are part of our community without being members of this parish. We are one. If people are searching, they belong. If people are active Catholics, they belong. If people have been away, they belong. God has called everyone to the family of God.
- ***Make a good first impression.*** [Making a Good First Impression](#) will provide some practical ideas and questions to explore.
- ***Take time periodically to explore, as a Parish Pastoral Council, reasons why people give for not coming or not returning to church.***
 - In the April 30, 2012 issue of *America*, William J. Byron, SJ and Charles Zech wrote an insightful article, ["Why They Left,"](#) which is a summary of a survey requested by Bishop David M. O'Connell, CM of Trenton, NJ of non-churchgoing Catholics in his diocese.
 - [Ten Reasons Why Guests Don't Return](#)
 - [6 Reasons People Don't Visit Your Church](#)
 - [Why People Don't Attend Church](#)

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- [Why Nobody Wants To Go To Church Anymore](#)

(Although these last four are from Protestant denominations, do they present some realities which also might exist within the Catholic community?)

As your parish leadership explores these various reasons – as well as the reasons they hear from their relatives, friends and co-workers – might they provide an evaluation method – and a future planning tool – for your parish?

- **Take the McDonald's or Wal-Mart challenge.** Have each leadership person (Parish Pastoral Council, commissions members, etc.) casually ask one person at a local fast food place, gas station, or Wal-Mart a couple of questions:

- “Do you know where ___ church is?” and
- “So, do you happen to know anything about that church?”

The answers you receive will give you a quick, insightful portrait of who in the community knows where you are located and what/how they know about you.

- **Especially at meetings of parish leadership, various parish ministry groups, pray [A Prayer for Hospitality](#).** Distribute the prayer cards to each parishioner.
- **Have some designated parking spaces** (near the door) for guests and newcomers.
- **Everyone is a greeter.** Some parishes no longer have official greeters: those people near the front door to welcome people. Sometimes, in people's minds today, in designating certain people for a role, it tells everyone else they're off the hook. Encourage everyone to find one way to be a greeter each week.

Some things to say:

- “Hi, I'm (name).” If the guests respond with their names, either write them down or have the guests write them down on your bulletin. Turn in the names. Follow up with them personally.

- “Good to see you.”
- “I don't believe I have had the pleasure of meeting you. I'm (name).”

- **Ministers of Hospitality.** While everyone in the parish has a responsibility to guests, a greeting team can be on the front lines, especially for visitors.
 - Are greeters strategically placed through the building, not just at the front doors?
 - Are they recognizable and approachable?
 - Are they knowledgeable about all the ministry areas of the parish?
 - Do they represent the demographics of the parish?
- **Super Greeters.** Even though everyone IS a greeter, some parishes have Super Greeters as well as greeters. Some characteristics and responsibilities of Super Greeters include:
 - Super friendly
 - Super nice
 - Super knowledgeable
 - Well-versed on security procedures in the building for children's sessions
 - Know the difference between nursery and preschool
 - Can answer questions about the various faith formation opportunities
 - Are equipped with church maps for the new visitors they encounter

Hospitality is not a function of
being friendly to friends
but of learning how to be good hosts and hostesses
to the strangers and seekers who come to church
in search of something they do not have.

Bishop Claude Payne in *Reclaiming the Great Commission*

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- **Afterward Greeters.** The first ten minutes of arriving at our parish may not be the most important for first time visitors. Dr. Charles Arn, a church growth researcher who has questioned over 50,000 church visitors, reminds us in [Second Impressions](#):

“First impressions are important to first-time guests at your church, but the half-hour after the service can determine whether they’ll come back—and stay. Our research reveals three insights:

1. ‘Friendliness of the people’ is the most important thing newcomers look for.
2. ‘Friendliness’ is based on how many people talk to them.
3. The most important time for ‘friendly talk’ is immediately following the service.”

To facilitate this, Arn and Gary L. McIntosh, in [Leading Ideas: The Ten Minute Rule](#) suggest: “After-service Hosts. This is a group of four to five people (for a congregation of around two hundred) who are on the lookout for people who seem to be new or who are standing alone. Their job is simply to initiate a conversation, perhaps invite the person to the coffee hour, offer to show him or her around the church facilities, and introduce the person to the pastor. In the overall visitor strategy, after-service hosts can perform a vital function.”

- **Follow-Up Communication.** Research also shows that the first twenty-four hours after an initial contact are the most important for follow-up.
 - Do our pews contain Newcomer/Visitor cards, inviting people to sign if they are interested in more information about the parish? How quickly do we respond to these cards?
 - Do our websites include a contact form that invites visitors and searchers to share their name and email address?
 - When newcomers introduce themselves to the pastor and/or greeters, do we have a pen/pad handy, asking them for their name and phone number? (If they don’t want to give it, they will

- politely decline; for many people this is a sign that we care about their presence – if we follow up.)
- Often, first-time visitors participate in our exciting faith formation events. Do we have methods in place to capture their names, emails and phone numbers – and any of their questions and interests for the future?
- Can we reach out to visitors and newcomers through emails, texts, phone calls, and home visits to assure people they are welcome, they are valued.
 - One immediate follow-up idea can be found in the comments at [Christian Hospitality - Radical Welcome: Embracing the Other](#): “One way to extend a welcome beyond Sunday Morning is to get your bakers in the parish to make loaves of homemade bread. Freeze them for future use. (My previous parish in New Mexico made jars of Cactus Jelly--really!) Get a team of visitors who are willing to visit unannounced any newcomers as early as Sunday afternoon, but not later than Tuesday. Visitors take a loaf or whatever has been homemade and call on the newcomers to thank them for attending the service. Visitors should be prepared to talk BRIEFLY (3 minutes) about what the congregation means to them and be able to answer or find out the answers to questions the newcomer may have. Leave promptly. Bet you’ll see them again in a week or two!”
- So many variables are in play with first and second time quests that we would not assume that a single follow-up really answered all of their questions or showed them the sincerity and friendliness of parish to really care about them.
- If searchers and first-time visitors become a fan of your parish’s Facebook page, post on their wall, let them know you recognize and appreciate them.
- Develop a system or data base for keeping track of guests, their contact information, and how often someone from the parish has contacted them.

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- Continually review your parish registration procedures.
 - Who does the registration: the parish secretary? A member of the parish staff?
 - What kinds of question are asked: the basic information and facts, or questions that illustrate our interest in them as individuals, such as:
 - ✓ What are your hopes in joining this parish?
 - ✓ What activities or ministries were you involved in at your last parish?
 - ✓ What types of things do you enjoy the most? What makes them enjoyable to you?
 - ✓ What one or two things have you done that have been very important or significant for you? Why did they energize you?
 - ✓ What can we do for/with you?
 - How do we help people feel comfortable – and welcomed – during the registration process: taking the time that’s necessary to listen, offering coffee and a muffin, etc.?
 - Give a gift with the parish name on it (a custom calendar, magnet, coffee mug, a journal book, a bookmark, a tote bag, etc.). Don’t forget gifts for the children: books, Frisbees, etc. Also provide practical tips for the neighborhood such as pizza places, cleaners, auto repair shops.
 - After registration – and perhaps after the new parishioner welcome – ask people their reflections on the beginning days of their membership in the parish. What were the things that helped them to feel welcomed? Were there things that might not have been the best practices of hospitality?
 - This is what I noticed first
 - This is what I liked best ...
 - This is what I liked least...
 - This is what I’m looking for most in a parish...
- ***Provide an information packet for newcomers and guests.*** In addition to a letter from the pastor/pastoral staff/Parish Pastoral Council, include:
 - A general brochure about the mission/vision of the parish
 - A “Meet our Staff” flyer that provides pictures, background information and contact numbers and emails
 - A DVD that highlights ministries, special events and short welcomes from other parishioners
 - Information about faith formation opportunities (for children, youth, and adults)
 - Service and outreach opportunities of the parish
 - The steps on how to receive the parish’s blog postings, how to listen to homilies via podcast, how to receive weekly e-newsletters and Facebook notices
 - Suggestions for living faith at home – and in the world
 - Perhaps a prayer cube or some unique gift that they will regularly use, thinking of the parish.

For additional ideas, visit [How to Identify and Welcome Visitors – Make Welcome Packets](#)

An old Italian proverb says,
“One barrel of wine can produce more miracles
than a church full of saints.”
That’s the power of hospitality!

- Timothy Mullner

- ***Be open to questions, new ways of doing things.*** Often new parishioners are highly curious. Do we squelch that with some version of “We have always done it this way?”

David L. Odom, in [In Praise of Questions](#), reminds us that as continually growing disciples – and parishes – the art of asking and attempting to answer “good questions can help us to:

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- Keep tradition from lapsing into traditionalism. Asking about a practice or idea doesn't mean the questioner necessarily doubts its value. Talking about why we do what we do and believe what we believe can remind us of its importance and help us to reaffirm our traditions.
- Make unlikely connections. Once we start inquiring about something, we see how it connects or might connect to other things in ways we didn't notice before. ...
- Re-envision our purpose. When we ask, What's that thing?, we're really asking: What's that thing for? ,, Through questions we can connect – or discover the disconnect between – our plans and God's purposes.”
- **Host New Parishioner Get-Togethers.**
 - Parish members join the new parishioners: pastoral staff, representatives from the Parish Pastoral Council and invited people from various parish ministries and age groups.
 - Perhaps it's not possible to pre-set these dates; how do you know when you'll have another new-comer group? You don't want to make newcomers wait ten months before a welcome get-together. Schedule these as soon as, often as, there are a number of newcomers.
 - Be sure to include children in this get-together.
- **Begin a companioning/mentor program.** Parishioners can be matched up with newcomers to be “the face of the parish” in their early days, sharing information with them, introducing them to people, inviting them to various parish events.

One parish has a “Welcome Ministry” which also seconds and expands into an ongoing “Neighborhoods of Care Ministry.”
- Hospitality is more than greeters; more than what happens on Sunday morning. In [Three Keys for Welcoming Newcomers at Church](#), Tim Schenk reminds us of three areas: welcoming, events, and incorporation.

- **Radical Hospitality.** In [Are You Humbitious Enough to Lead?](#) Dr. William Taylor describes the culture at a fast-growing software company, Rite-Solutions, headquartered near Newport, Rhode Island.

He writes: “For example, a “welcome wagon” delivers flowers, a fruit basket, and a greeting card to the family of new employees as a way to signal that life at Rite-Solutions will be different from what they've experienced elsewhere. New employees complete a “birth certificate” before they report for duty, which describes their career, hobbies, pets, interests, nicknames, and other personal stuff. A nifty piece of company-developed technology displays the birth certificate whenever an employee interacts by phone or Web with another employee—a quick way to find common ground and start a conversation. At 9:00 AM on the first day of work, each new employee gets a welcome-to-the-company bash, complete with pats on the back, all sorts of wrapped gifts, and a general feeling of good cheer and camaraderie.”

- Does this shed any light on, ideas for, our spirit of welcoming for new parishioners?
- What about new staff persons, new persons in leadership roles within the parish?
- **We're all this together.** Often when we think of welcome we talk about what the staff can do; what long-time parishioner can do. As in everything, we're all responsible; we can all take the initiative.

Peggy Ekerdt writes in the Our Caring Church pamphlet from Abbey Press, “Welcoming All to our Church Community”:

“Some of the responsibility in creating a welcoming community belongs to new members as well. Many years ago, our family moved cross country from New England to a Midwestern city and new church.

Our beloved New England pastor's parting words to us were: ‘Go introduce yourselves to your new pastor.’ That introduction opened a door to a church community that certainly shaped and enriched our lives.

New members need not sit back and wait to be noticed. If anything, they should take the initiative by introducing themselves and offering to get

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involved. Every 'branch on the vine,' every person in the community, has a gift to give and a role to play in creating a welcoming church community."



Some Resources

- Have you ever thought of gathering ideas from Disney, Starbucks, or from hotel chains to see how they make people feel valued and welcome?
- *What Every Pastor Should Know: 101 Indispensable Rules of Thumb for Leading Your Church* (Baker Books April 2013), by Gary L. McIntosh and Charles Arn.
- *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church* by Nelson Searcy and Jennifer Henson (Regal Publishing, 2008).
- *Get Their Name: Grow Your Church by Building New Relationships* by Doug Anderson, Bob Farr and Kay Kotan (Abingdon Press, 2013).
- *First Impressions: Creating WOW Experiences in your Church* by Mark L. Waltz (Group Publishing, 2013).
- *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully Engaged Members of your Church* by Nelson Searcy and Jennifer Henson (Regal, 2008).



Golden Nuggets from You

"I really appreciate the newsletter and have used it in my classes often. Thanks for your good work."

- Michael McCallion,
Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit

"This [\(GEMS #33\)](#) is certainly a gem, Janet. Thanks so much!"

- Jean Marie Hiesberger, writer, speaker, facilitator and consultant
who has worked extensively with parish leaders, Kansas City, MO

"I LOVE this idea [\(GEMS #37\)](#)! I already have an email in to our music minister to see if this is something in which we can collaborate. To extend the experience, I'm wondering if we could put the PowerPoint on our website too with the words to the Stations. There might be a way for folks to reflect on it at home if they can't make it out that night. Thanks!

- Kris Rooney, Pastoral Associate for Adult Faith Formation,
St. Kateri Tekakwitha Parish, Schenectady, NY



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Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found at:

- <http://www.ecatechist.com/ebooks/> Scroll down for *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation*
- www.pastoralplanning.com Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation.*