



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#3 - November 2010

A Royal Welcome: Some Secrets of Belonging (Part 1)

Jacquelyne Witter, EdD, tells us (*FaithWorks, March 2005*) that at the completion of an adult faith formation series, a participant told her that she didn't always come because of the topic or the speaker.

"Sometimes I just came because I knew the room would be beautiful and the food would be good and that's what I needed that day," she confessed.

She also then commented, as she thanked Jacquelyne, that even though she might not have come for the content, she usually discovered something new or grew in some way.

This anecdote reminds us about a significant consideration in adult faith formation: hospitality. A couple of our survey questions related to "hospitality" in adult faith formation, an important component. At the same time, this question resides within the reality of something much larger. The entire environment/"persona" of **a welcoming parish which invites belonging** comes before everything else, sets the stage for all else, permeates all that is done.

As we looked at the best practice survey questions – as well as talked with other adult faith formation and parish ministers - to decide upon the topic for this newsletter, we had intriguing discussions.

Many questions surfaced (and surfaced and surfaced...we could have gone on forever):

- Do people understand welcoming/hospitality as food/drink and greeters for weekend liturgies – and that's all there is?
- Is hospitality/welcoming seen as a 'Martha-thing;' therefore, something to be put-up with, if we must? But let's get on with the more important things.
- Do people think that they already know welcoming/hospitality is important; that there's nothing new to explore?

- What really is this practice – attitude – foundation of welcoming/warmth/unconditional acceptance ... and is it really all that important?

God did not create (us) for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity. So also it has pleased God to make men (and women) holy and save them not merely as individuals, without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people. ... This solidarity must be constantly increased until that day on which it will be brought to perfection."
- *Gaudium et Spes*, #32 Vatican II

Top Ten Reasons Why We're Looking at Belonging/Welcoming

Thus, given fascinating lengthy conversations, here are the reasons why this – and several subsequent issues -- will explore the reality of **a parish being rooted in belonging/welcoming**, with many practical ideas and suggestions in the following issues.

1. **You told us many intriguing things** about hospitality (welcoming/belonging) in the best practices surveys. (Thank you!)
2. More and more books, articles, websites and blogs are discussing the importance of and suggestions for parishes **nurturing an atmosphere of belonging for all**. It must be needed more than ever.
3. Many **parish mission statements and practices** include welcome, inclusiveness, and gathering-in. (See **GEMS** #2.)
4. Welcome and hospitality have deep **foundations in Scripture**.

5. In these economic times, many parishes might be limited in some things they can do. Welcoming, a sense of belonging – for the most part - **does not cost money**.
6. People **will engage in the life of the parish** (e.g. respond to ministerial calls, participate in adult faith formation) **because of the atmosphere/environment** of the parish. One of the key features of this environment is feeling welcomed/a feeling of belonging.
7. In most cases, belief does not lead to belonging, but rather, **belonging leads to belief**, according to current research by the Gallup Organization (*Growing an Engaged Church* by Albert J. Winseman, Gallup Press, 2007).
8. The welcome that is extended, constantly portrayed in everything, is **a reflection of the theology of the parish**. The wise and ancient proverb “*What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say*” rings especially true when it comes to **how we live and what we do** day-by-day in parish life and how that welcomes people (or turns them away).
9. Welcoming/Hospitality provides **the basis for spirituality, for relationships**. People are searching for safe, sacred places where they can share their stories and experience God in community.
10. **Baptism calls all of us** to create a community of welcome rather than just leaving it to the pastoral staff and clergy.

Wondering Nuggets:

- Do we (parish staff, Parish Pastoral Council, Commissions, Adult Faith Formation Committee) realize that **all the facets of parish life**, the reality of **parish life itself**, all that we do, has the potential to be welcoming, to prepare the way for belonging, to be hospitable?
- What is **our** parish’s theology of welcoming?
- How is it practically lived out?

“We need to really know people as human beings. We have to give all the opportunity to share their story, creating a relationship that goes beyond just waving to them at Mass.”

- Tom Zanzig

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Why Today?

Is the need for belonging/welcoming something that has become a necessity because of our postmodern world; is it a result of the renewal of the Church since the Second Vatican Council?

Scripture and our tradition would answer those questions in the negative. Today, within our culture, we expect to pay for our own hospitality (hotels, restaurants, etc.). In the world of Biblical times, hospitality to others was considered a personal responsibility.

Scripture offers insights into the welcoming/hospitality beginning with Abraham (Genesis 18:1-8) and running through the invitation to the messianic banquet of Revelation.

A parish of welcome and belonging is patterned on the life of Jesus who welcomed the children, the sinner, the healthy and unhealthy, the doubter, the searcher, the outcast, the repentant and unrepentant.

Some New Testament passages which indicate the code of welcome, warmth and community at the time of Jesus:

- “...enter a house, stay there...” (Mark 6: 8-10)
- “I was a stranger...you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:35)
- “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening, and the day is almost over.” (Luke 24:29)
- “Be hospitable to one another without complaining.” (1 Peter 4:9)

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Perhaps the primary New Testament quote is: “**Do not neglect hospitality**, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.” (Hebrews 13:2)

Just what is this welcoming, this nurturing of belonging, this practice of hospitality?

At times, perhaps, we presume it is the added little touches that we do; the extras to make things a little warmer and friendlier. It is much more than that. It is the bedrock, the **grounding of who we are**, everything we do.

Being a *place of belonging* might be

- A safe place for conversation with food and drink
- The offering of solace
- A place where all can share doubts, ask questions
- The walking with another in pain
- The providing of an emotional space in which to heal
- A place where God can always be discovered anew

This...”has led us to organize differently. In (today’s) generation when we make decisions, learn, create, and build, we instinctively construct a network to do it.....Almost everything we do has taken on a communal quality, and our most popular technologies fuel a social sense of the collective. Those spiritual communities that welcome these shifts of power will be the ones that will thrive in the years to come....

Growing churches will be centered on sharing conversations among those journeying a path together. Effective church leaders will not look at the networking occurring in a new generation as superficial, rude, narcissistic, or indiscreet but will begin to understand the deeper realities of what’s occurring in this larger conversation.”

- Carol Howard Merritt
in *Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation*

Often, also, we speak of welcome and hospitality geared to the newcomer, the visitor, and the seeker. Certainly this is crucial (a good exercise is to look at all we do through the eyes of someone who is coming to the parish for the first time). Yet, **hospitality/belonging extends to all:**

- the newcomer who may never return again
- the registered parishioner of 56 years
- the active parishioner who has served in every ministry of the parish
- the parishioner who is always there for liturgy but has never come forward to be involved
- the five year old squirmy youngster
- the 93-year old who is hard of hearing
- singles
- families
- couples
- widow(er)s
- divorced, separated, remarried

More Wondering Nuggets:

- Does the parish staff, the Parish Pastoral Council and the Commissions regularly evaluate the procedures, the buildings, the activities, etc. of the parish through the lens of welcome and belonging?
- How would a newcomer feel if they called our parish? if they participated in liturgy? if they attended an adult faith formation offering?
- Does our theology and practice of welcome/belonging/hospitality become so focused on the newcomers, the returning members, etc. that we forget to nurture and appreciate those who are always present?
- What’s our parish’s attitude toward the “infrequent visitor” – those who might participate only on Christmas and Easter?

A Related Wondering GEM:

A recently published book, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* by Nicholas A. Christakis, MD, PhD and James Fowler, PhD (Little Brown and Company, 2009), though not about church, parish or welcoming, certainly has implications for this theme of **GEMS**, since we are a social network (among many other deeper realities).

Consider these statements from the book; what might they say to us in parish life, especially about being connected, belonging:

- “To know who we are, we must understand how we are connected.” (page xiii)
- “...our world is governed by the Three Degrees of Influence Rule: we influence and are influenced by people up to three degrees removed from us, most of whom we do not even know.” (page 28)
- “As part of a social network, we transcend ourselves, for good or ill, and become part of something much larger. We are connected.” (page 30)
- “The good news is that people very often ignore their selfish tendencies when interacting with people to whom they are connected.” (page 218)

Going Deeper Into...

This is the first of several issues on **A Royal Welcome: Some Secrets of Belonging**. We will look at hospitality in adult faith formation, but also at the reality of **a parish being rooted in belonging/welcoming**, with many practical ideas and suggestions in the following issues.



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com.

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Best Practices can be found at www.pastoralplanning.com. Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation*.