



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#5 - January 2011

A Royal Welcome: Some Secrets of Belonging (Part 3)

The following is the confirmation note sent out recently from *CD Baby* (not your usual, routine confirmation notice):

"Your CDs have been gently taken from our CD Baby shelves with sterilized contamination-free gloves and placed onto a satin pillow. A team of 50 employees inspected your CDs and polished them to make sure they were in the best box that money can buy.

We all had a wonderful celebration afterwards and the whole party marched down the street to the post office where the entire town of Portland waved 'Bon Voyage' to your package, on its way to you, in our private CD Baby jet on this day, Tuesday, December 14.

I hope you had a wonderful time shopping at CD Baby. We sure did. Your picture is on our wall as "Customer of the Year." We're all exhausted but can't wait for you come back to CDBaby.com!"

You might say, "It's all about marketing and selling their product."

Yet, if you received a confirmation note similar to this...

- How would you feel?
- Would it make you stop for a moment?
- In this high-tech, impersonalized culture, wouldn't it – for a moment – be a bright spot in your day?

There's something different about *CD Baby*; something that leaves an impression, something that makes us say, "Yes, I'll come back. I'll try you again. I certainly will remember you."

CD Baby did their job.

Whose "job" is the ministry of hospitality in a parish? (We'll come back to that question in a moment.)

Our survey respondents answered that question in various ways:

Mary Robinson, OSU from St. Mary Mackillop Parish, Birkdale, Brisbane, Australia, believes that **"the parishioners who are involved at the grass roots level are those responsible for the welcoming spirit of the parish."**

Vicki Hawkins of Nativity Parish in Brandon, Florida, gives the credit to **both the people and the pastors**: *"an attitude of gratitude has long been a part of our parish since the 60's when our pastor emeritus, who was from Spain, came to our community ... now our present pastor's obvious appreciation of his faith, our parishioners respond positively to this type of leadership that puts gratitude, welcoming and belonging first and foremost in our outreach to others."*

Vicki went on to say: *"Another major factor is that a large percentage of our parishioners are relocated here from out-of-state...and we long-time parishioners always try to help them feel welcome and at home."*

Ubuntu!
I am because we are.
- African proverb

Throughout the surveys, some people stressed the role of the pastor and staff; others focused on the role of the whole community. As always, it's not an either/or, but always a **both/and**.

A Quarry Quandary: Yet, perhaps a slowing-down question as we spotlight this topic in these newsletters: "welcoming/hospitality" became – rightly so – a parish focus in the 1990's. We began newcomer gatherings for recently registered; we began ministers of hospitality; we encouraged ushers to brush up on their hospitality skills. **Did that have an unfortunate consequence?**

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- Does it allow the rest of us to see greeters and ushers as “owning” the ministry of hospitality?
- Does it take the rest of us off the hook?
- Does it allow us to be free to continue interacting only with the people we know?
- Are we just kidding ourselves?

So, we return to our question: **Whose “job” is the ministry of hospitality** in a parish? Has welcoming/hospitality been reduced to a “ministry of hospitality” or **are our parishes hospitable communities** ~ because **EACH AND EVERY PERSON** is living in **gratitude, inclusivity, welcoming and hospitality**?

Hospitality invites to prayer
before it checks credentials,
welcomes to the table
before administering the entrance exam.
-Patrick Henry
in *The Ironic Christian's Companion*

This issue, then, continues to explore some **best practices of parishes** striving to be **hospitable communities**.

The Atmosphere and Buildings

- What do people see first when they drive into your parish?
- Is the current liturgical season reflected anywhere?
- Are there signs – symbols – an atmosphere - of welcome?
- Are our buildings conducive not only for our community worship but do they also provide places for individual prayer, meditation and devotion?
- To the degree that it is possible, are our churches open for opportunities for prayer?
- Are some prime parking spots reserved for visitors only?
- Can the physically disabled easily negotiate the walkways? Open the doors and gates?
- Is there anyone who might have trouble negotiating your buildings, eg. the blind?

- Are the locations of restrooms clearly marked so that visitors know where to find them?
- Do you have to be an insider to know where the meeting rooms are?
- Are there signs of your Parish Mission along the way?
- What do people find out about your parish and your beliefs in the halls and the rooms that they pass through?
- Of course, spaces and places for adult faith formation ... we'll look at more at these in depth later!!!!
- Are photos of Parish Staff and Parish Pastoral Council members at each entrance of the church and parish offices, with emails and/or phone numbers under a headline: “We’re here - if you have any questions.”
- Do staff members and Parish Pastoral Council members wear name tags (28-point font) at every Sunday liturgy and every parish event?

In *Holy Places: Matching Sacred Space with Mission and Message* (Alban Institute, 2007) Nancy DeMott, Tim Shapiro and Brent Bill give many insightful ways of looking at our entire buildings and how they influence a community’s way of life. A couple of the suggested activities:

- Invite people – many people – to share ideas: “What about our facility leads people to deeper practices of faith?” – and – “What about our facility drives everyone crazy?”
- Take parishioners (in small groups) on a parish tour. In each room or space, stop and respond to these questions:
 - What goes on here?
 - How does this space help or hinder the activity?
 - What is the best thing about this space?

New Parishioners

We began an exploration of best practices for welcoming new parishioners in **GEMS #4** (see www.janetschaeffler.com). Let’s discover a few more from around the world:

- Numerous parishes commented that their intensive efforts at welcoming concentrated upon parishioners personally calling or visiting newly-registered parishioners within the first few weeks.

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- In addition, at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, Naperville, Illinois, the volunteer receptionist (of which there are many) who registers the new parishioner “**becomes the first ‘friend’** and the new parishioner receives a handwritten note from that volunteer within the first week,” according to Susan Francesconi, Coordinator of Communications and Welcoming.
- Many parishes throughout the country – and around the world - invite new parishioners to socials, wine and cheese, morning teas or lunches, etc. to welcome them to their community. A unique characteristic of St. Francis of Assisi, Ann Arbor, Michigan, is that the **entire family** is invited (through snail mail and email) – and a special program of welcome is planned for the **children and youth** with their own menu, chicken fingers, french fries, etc.
- St. Therese of Lisieux Parish, Shelby Township, Michigan, gives each newly-registered parishioner a gift. Each **gift is chosen to benefit a particular ministry**, to illustrate outreach/our connection to others, such as:
 - chocolate from Catholic Relief Services
 - a bag of coffee from the Canticle Café (a hospitality ministry in the city of Detroit serving anyone and everyone in need)
 - a candle from EarthWorks Urban Farm (a Capuchin ministry in the city)Along with each gift, there is a small write-up of the ministry of the place, a way to take advantage of the catechetical moment.
- Nativity Parish, Brandon, Florida, recognizes that some people initially have a “fear of commitment.” Thus, “*these people can pick up Welcome Packets in the parish library (open after all weekend Masses) **without the necessity of ‘registering in the parish.’***”
- Most parishes are unanimous in their approach that to help new parishioners (*all parishioners*) feel welcomed/experience belonging the key is to help them discern their gifts and invite them to **become involved** – “*within the first six months.*”
 - One of the keys is to remember that **all types of involvement** count! As Anne Pratchett, from St. Quivox, Prestwick, Ayrshire, Scotland, commented: “*Some people*

don't like to 'join' groups but are happy to offer their time and talent in other ways. We welcome people to be responsible for the gardens around the church, flower arranging for masses, church cleaning (which includes a lot of chat and much tea and coffee!) and odd jobs of minor repairs or decorating. We don't have one sacristan. Instead we have a rota with people taking responsibility for a particular day or, in the case of Sundays, a particular Mass.”

- In addition to an invitation to service, in welcoming communities, new parishioners have every opportunity to learn of the various ministries, activities, and events of the parish, especially **those which suit their age group, interests, and/or needs** (which, of course, means, that the parish registration form is designed so that these things are communicated, enabling the parish to reach out in “individual customization” to each and everyone).
 - Many parishes immediately give new parishioners’ names to Moms’ groups, the seniors group, young adult group, a new book club forming, the support group for caregivers, etc.

Who practices hospitality entertains God himself.
- Source Unknown

Ministers of First Impression

Caller: “I’d like to have my baby baptized.”

Parish Secretary at St. Expeditus Parish: “Are you a member here? What’s your envelope number?”

Parish Receptionist at Our Lady of Welcoming Arms Parish: “How wonderful! How are you feeling? Did you have a boy or girl? Your first? What are you naming her/him? How much did she/he weigh?”

Which parish is more welcoming?

In whose hands does the first impression – for many first-timers, for many parishioners – lie?

That's an easy question; for many people their first (and sometimes only) personal contact with the parish is the parish secretary, parish receptionist.

One of the preparations for the evangelization effort, *Catholics Come Home*, in the archdiocese of Chicago, was a **strengthening of the hospitality ministries** (ushers, receptionists). The diocese of Joliet then followed their lead.

Receptionists, in these formation processes, were affirmed in their role as **Ministers of First Impression**. With suggestions, guidelines, and tips of what to do – when and how - as well as a reminder of how important they are in the life of the parish, in the lives of each individual they meet or talk with, they left these sessions saying **no one had ever made them feel so important**.

- If they feel that way, how will they, then, respond to and act toward others? (*Pay it forward!*)
- And in the reflections of Joyce Donahue, Catechetical Associate, Diocese of Joliet Religious Education Office, *"This brought a dignity to who they are, what they do."*

Some Nuggets of Suggestions: Hospitable qualities, skills and techniques for receptionists:

- Answer the call on the first ring
- Treat every caller/visitor as if they were the only person, the most valued person, in the world
- Get the caller/visitor's name right away and use it often
- If a message is left, give the caller an idea how long before someone gets back to them
- Confidentiality
- Good listening skills to communicate with angry/upset callers that they are being heard
- Know the limits of your expertise; know what questions to answer, which ones to refer; and to whom very complex ones should go

Priceless GEMS: Since most (all?) parish secretaries/receptionists are probably overworked and underpaid, how else can all those around them hospitably – and continually - thank and affirm - them?

- Continually thank and praise them, mentioning all the good things you see them doing, ways they respond to people
- Praise them in front of others
- Provide leadership/skills-building days
- Provide days of retreat
- Send up-lifting and grateful email greeting cards
- Thank you notes sitting on their desks – or tucked away where they'll find it in the middle of the day
- Bottle of wine on their anniversary
- A day off on their birthday
- Flowers, for special days, but also for no reason
- Gift card for a hot fudge sundae
- Have a surprise lunch (or brunch) delivered – just because

More Sparkling Nuggets: For more ideas on "The Most Important People on Your Parish Staff," see the article by that title in the January-February 2011 issue of *Today's Parish*. James N. Reinhardt shares practical and significant best practices related to the all-important receptionist, parish janitor/custodian, church sacristan, and rectory housekeeper.

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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*.

