

by Susy Miller

The Personal Welcome

We believe that God is a God of love. We believe that every human being desires to know the God of love. And we believe that the God of love desires each of us all the time, whether we are connected with a faith community or not. We believe that we and all human beings are restless until we rest in the presence of the loving God.

We know when a person accepts an invitation or just shows up at church that God is at work, yet we sometimes denigrate that work with labels of “church shopping” and “consumerism.” The truth is it is never an accident when a visitor or stranger comes into the church, God is at work. To encounter a visitor is a holy moment; it is to be in the presence of God at work. Welcoming is participating in God’s mission to reconcile all people to God and one another in Christ.

Welcoming is assisting God in God’s work. It is to be aware and open to God’s presence at work in the life of another. We do not have to make it happen, God is doing that. We need to cooperate with what God is doing.

We are not welcoming a person to “our church.” We are acknowledging that God is doing a new thing and we are ready to accompany another person in naming God’s work in his/her life, claiming that we are God’s beloved children and are made in God’s image, and sending that person out with this Good News.

Our theology is clear:

- From the Baptismal Covenant... We seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. We strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.
- From the Catechism... The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Additional resources...

- New book... *Fireweed Evangelism: Christian Hospitality in a Multi-Faith World*, by Episcopal priest **Elizabeth Rankin Geitz**, Canon for Ministry Development in the Diocese of New Jersey (New York: Church Publishing, 2004).
“Fireweed, always the first flower to bloom in ruins and burned-over places, is Elizabeth Geitz’s metaphor for evangelism that comes from the heart. It provides the motivation that makes some Christians eager to welcome the stranger and invite people into their churches, while others hang back... She describes the nuts-and-bolts of outreach and newcomer ministry in a pluralistic society.”
- On-line... “Welcoming the Visitor to Our Churches,” from the Episcopal Diocese of New York, a resource developed in consultation with **Neva Rae Fox**, diocesan Director of Communications, www.episcopalchurch.org/adcollaborative.

continued...

Susy Miller was a national church consultant for more than 20 years before her death in June 2004. Her last writing efforts are contained in this resource. Widely known for her work in reforming congregations for growth, Miller was a co-leader of the “Start Up! Start Over!” Congregational Development Seminar in which she taught hundreds of groups the basics of welcome and how to incorporate new members. She co-designed and co-led the training event “Upward Bound: Leading Congregations Through Change, Decision, and Conflict” and also served for a decade as process consultant to the House of Bishops.

groundwork

WELCOMING THE VISITOR: A GUIDE FOR CONGREGATIONS

- The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.

Personal Preparation

We need to recall — to bring into consciousness — our own personal experience of God at work in our lives, our personal faith story. Recovering what those times are like will assist us in our welcome. Often those stories have slipped into our unconsciousness as our consciousness has been occupied with the busyness and business of being a member of a congregation. This is an opportunity to reconnect with our own experience of God's reconciling work and to embrace our first love and experience of being God's beloved.

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first" Revelation 2:2-4.

A guide for recalling God's mighty acts in our own lives follows. Nothing is more important than knowing that we are God's beloved. Our first work is to remind and remember. *This is work for every member of the congregation.*

Welcoming is far more than welcoming a person to a church that is friendly, it is welcoming that person as the person God has brought to us and being the guides in that person's continuing faith journey. We need to look at the entire Sunday morning experience and environment through the lens of the one who is discovering that she or he is a beloved child of God.

Becoming Aware of Sunday Morning

Quote from Susy Miller: "I do love movies. They give us such glimpses of our own behaviors, often with enough humor so we can take it all in." The opening scene of *Home Alone* is one of those moments. Remember the scene? The entire family is quite busy getting ready for their activities and journey. A couple of strangers appear at the door. They look harmless. Actually, they look safe — and they look like they might know why they are there. The family is really, really busy and everyone assumes that everyone else is taking care of the strangers... well, you know the rest of the story. I think that Sunday morning just might be a bit like that for many of our "strangers." We're really busy, you know, rushing here and there, tossing information to one another, catching a running child, making sure everyone is ready. We often assume someone else is paying real attention to the visitor.

Two stories demonstrate the kind of attention we *don't* want to pay to visitors...

The first is about a young man who visited a church several Sundays in a row. He arrived early and chose a seat on the side, near a stained glass window, thinking he could look at the window if he got lost in the service. After several weeks of this, a woman approached him and told him she had observed him and asked him if he liked the service. He responded that he did, that he found it meaningful. "Good," she replied. "Do you think you would like to join the church?" He replied that he would. "Wonderful," she said. "But now you have to find your own seat; you've been sitting in mine!"

The second is about a man and a hat. A gentleman sat in church, in the back row, with his hat on. An usher inquired about putting the hat in the narthex, reminding him that it was customary to remove one's hat in church. He did not remove his hat. The usher found the senior warden, who also greeted the man and asked him to remove his hat. He did not. Up the chain of command it went, to the directress of the altar guild who

informed him he was in sacred space. He did not remove his hat. Following the service all three approached him to confront him with his behavior. He told them he had visited the church several times and no one had spoken to him. Today he managed to get the usher, the senior warden and the directress of the altar guild to speak to him, unfortunately only to get him to conform to their standards.

Knowing You Belong

People become members of a church for a variety of reasons. One big reason that they stay is how well they feel welcomed and included in the life of the congregation.

Individually reflect for a few moments about what helps you know in a group that you belong. What do people say or do that communicates to you that you are a valued member? Write your thoughts on a piece of paper. Share your personal reflections in small groups.

Characteristics of Effective Greeting

- Greeters offer a natural spoken greeting.
- Greeters make eye contact and smile.
- Greeters do person-to-person work; no congregation is too small to do it.
- Greeters reserve their conversation for those they are greeting — and do not engage another greeter in conversation.
- Greeters stay on duty after the service begins and after the service is over.
- Greeters remember, record, and introduce visitors.
- Greeters reflect many generations.
- Common sense is operative: When it's raining, have umbrellas, etc.

Ideas for a Welcoming Church

1. **Pay attention to who answers the church phone and how they answer.** Often the volunteer receptionist needs some training. There is no excuse for sighs when a caller asks to speak with someone or for responses like “I don't know what is going on back there. They never tell me anything.” Have some people call in and test your phone message for its welcome factor.
2. **Keep your recorded message current and helpful.** Hearing about the Easter schedule in June isn't helpful. Does the message imply that the church is the place you only call in an emergency? The first thing the message might say is that we are glad you called and we are sorry there is no one there to answer your call and when the phone will be answered by someone in person. Work on the recorded message and remember tone and pace often say more than the words. Some think a female voice works best here.
3. **Provide training for everyone in how to welcome.** While we know how to exclude, we need to be taught how to include. Most members admit that they do not know how to introduce themselves to a visitor. For instance, do not say, “Welcome to my church!” or “You must be new.” Say, “Good Morning, my name is ...”. Don't save the welcome for new people only. Welcome your members, too; many of whom have not been welcomed or felt included.

4. **Provide targeted training for parking-lot hosts, greeters, ushers, coffee hosts, and follow-up callers.** Most people can figure out how to do this if they are challenged to do so in a small group setting.
5. **Have a greeters/information table** with a banner of welcome, flowers, and a person attending the visitors. It should be the best appointed area with fresh materials. Consider a special visitor bulletin, a visitor register to sign, and asking the visitor what would be helpful.

The Bulletin and Worship

Desktop publishing has opened up new possibilities for creating bulletins and leaflets that are clear guides to liturgy, and which offer helpful explanation of the service. Resources: “Rite Song” and “Rite Brain” are available from the Church Publishing Group: www.churchpublishing.org.

- **Take a fresh look at your service bulletin with the visitor and stranger in mind**, or better with someone unfamiliar with how we worship. The goal is to make the bulletin simple and readable. An exercise that might be helpful is to describe what happens in the service from beginning to end *without* notes. You will likely discover that you cannot get the sequence and order right. Remember a visitor doesn’t know the sequence. Ask yourself what simplifies and organizes a complicated liturgy; compare your description with the bulletin.
- **Printing the lessons, hymns, and entire liturgy in the bulletin is helpful for visitors.**
- **Give clear directions for congregational responses and actions.**
 - ◆ Announcements might be made at the beginning of the service so there is opportunity to give verbal instructions.
 - ◆ Give “stand, sit, kneel” indications.
 - ◆ Explain the Peace, processions (at the beginning of the service and at the gospel), bowing, facing the Gospel, receiving communion, making the sign of the cross, and any of the other devotional practices exercised by the members.
 - ◆ Give bridge explanations between parts of the liturgy.
- **Avoid insider language.** This isn’t the time to teach Latin or the vocabulary of medieval cathedral architecture. Do not use acronyms in bulletins.
- **Include information about, and a calendar of, weekly events.**
- **Include a welcome on the front of the bulletin.** Address the welcome to the visitor directly and in the second person, “We are glad you are here today...” Talk to visitors not about visitors. Don’t say, “We want to welcome our visitors today”; say, “To those of you who are visiting today, I/We want you to know that you are welcome...”.
- **Have a variety of voices give the announcements.** You might design a formula for announcements — first and last name, how long you have been a member (everyone was once new), and a *brief* announcement.
- **Consider inviting visitors not to give, inviting them to be guests for the day.** Explain that giving is the privilege of those committed to God’s mission, giving back to God’s purpose some of what God has given to us all.
- **Include an invitation to good coffee for adults and juice and cookies for children.** Address strangers’ fears about going into coffee hour. Explain the welcome you have planned, make sure the visitors know what to expect, and make sure you deliver on your promises.

Music

Music is everyone's second language. Make sure you are singing a musical language that the visitor understands, and to which she or he responds. (There is the story of a life-long Methodist who visited an Episcopal Church on Christmas Day and did not hear one recognizable tune.)

If music defines you as a church, what does it say? Start by asking if the music you use matches the tastes of the congregation, then ask what are the musical tastes of your larger community. When expecting visitors, it is wise to emphasize what the congregation knows and sings well. This is no time to attempt music. Non-churchgoers are not likely to listen to Christian music at home. The music has to be good in the visitor's judgment. The best way to make it good for the visitor is for the visitor to become involved, actively participating in its singing and presentation.

Coffee Hour

What is the nature of your typical coffee hour after services? Is it rushed? Are there lines for coffee? Are there small closed groups engaged in conversation? If that is the case, you might remind visitors of the skills needed to navigate the dreaded coffee hour: the ability to queue for bad coffee and the ability to barge into a closed conversation. It doesn't have to be that way. The truth often is that many members find coffee hour awkward. It can be even harder for visitors.

Imagine coffee hour as a party with both guests you know and guests you do not know. Plan the party around enhancing relationships. Do not plan the party around your personal convenience.

- **Clean house for the party.** Parish halls are notorious for the junk and clutter that build up through the year. Clean out and clean up!
- **Use your good table cloth.** Have fresh flowers. Make the room have good energy.
- **Put the table out in the room where it becomes the focal point** and where people easily reach the coffee.
- **Serve good coffee and good food.**
- **Note:** A basket for donations to cover the cost of coffee is an act of inhospitality.
- **Have trained hosts** whose job is to help people make connections and introductions. Their job is not to make the coffee and set up the room; that is a task for others.
- **Have something for children,** perhaps a children's area with small furniture.
- **When weather permits, have coffee hour outside the door of the church.** The best place to have coffee is between the altar and the parking lot.

Event Evangelism

Attending worship on Sunday is not the only way to visit and check out a church. Think about non-Sunday events and activities that would be attractive to your demographic area.

Outreach opportunities

- Habitat for Humanity
- Feeding the hungry

- Shelters
- Tutoring
- After-school programs
- Road and park clean-up events

Events for the community on days other than Sunday

- Picnics
- Sporting events
- Story hour for children and a parent
- Ice cream social
- Cookie tasting for children
- Other supervised activities for children

Personal Evangelism

While advertising will reach many people not known to you or your congregation, do not forget those people known to you who are not active in a faith community. Personal evangelism is as simple as inviting and accompanying someone you already know to go to church with you. Start easy; invite when there is something special going on at church, like a baptism where there are likely to be many visitors, or on a major holiday. If attending worship seems a stretch for your friend, invite her or him to a non-worship event.

Just ask!

- Do you go to church (or do you have a faith community)?
- Do you ever think about going to church? Research shows people who do not attend do think about it often. If you went, what kind of church would you go to?
- Do not try to convince someone; rather, explain why you find it meaningful to belong to a faith community. Be sure to describe those times in your life when you cannot imagine having been without a community to celebrate joys and to grieve sorrows. See the “Faith Story” exercise in *Groundwork* booklet.
- When someone accepts your invitation to go with you to church, focus on making that person as comfortable as possible. Ask where she or he would like to sit. Shepherd her or him through the service. Pre-service conversation about what to expect is always helpful, especially about communion and the whos and hows. Ask whether she or he would like to go to coffee hour.

Remember: Welcoming is not just an advertising project. *We are throwing a party every Sunday; who are you going to invite?* ■