

Creating a Place of Welcome

This article is part 2 in a series, based on lessons learned by Tanya Moxley and Colleen Tizzard at the Start Up! Start Over! Conference held in May 2008. Start Up! Start Over! is a conference designed and led by the Congregational Development staff of The Episcopal Church, USA.

Does your congregation 'do church' with the expectation of welcoming the stranger? Can a newcomer find your service times easily – on the Internet, from your road sign while passing at the speed limit, by calling a phone number that is readily available? Is there space for them to park outside? Someone to welcome them when they arrive? Is it clear to anyone who arrives (possibly with no church background at all) where to sit, what is happening, and what is expected of them?

Can your building be seen from the road, and do the building and surrounding property look well-kept? Is there a sign in your parking lot that says something like "Church Parking Only – Violators Will Be Towed"? What does that say to the stranger? How about just "Church Parking Lot"? Is your road sign recently painted and easy to read? As I drive around the Diocese on vacation and on work business, there are a lot of Anglican church signs that I have to either slow down the car or squint to read. Does this invite or encourage a stranger into your worship service? Is it possible to enter your building from the door that is most accessible to the parking lot? This might sound weird, but I know several churches where the big main doors are always locked - the 'regulars' know that you have to go around the side and in the smaller door. Strangers will not know this! Does your service leaflet make sense to someone who doesn't know what these acronyms mean: BCP, BAS, CP, HB, HC, HE, PWRDF, ACC, NS/PEI?

Why not ask a non-Anglican or non-Christian friend to play 'secret shopper' for your congregation, and give you their answers to these questions? Are you ready for the answers?

When someone new comes in the door, are they considered a guest, or a visitor? Think about what those terms mean to you. In our workshops we learned that places that treat new people like 'guests' tend to be more vibrant and welcoming than those that use the term 'visitor'. 'Guest' seems to imply something more hospitable, and also that you might like the person(s) to stay! 'Visitor' seems to imply that the person isn't planning to stay.

Some things to consider:

- Ask those who attend regularly to park in the spots furthest from the door (those without accessibility needs) and leave the seats at the back for guests. People who are 'trying you out' may want a way to arrive late, leave quickly, and seem unnoticed at the back. This may seem counter-intuitive, but making space for people to feel comfortable when they are brand new makes it more likely they will come back and want to find out more.

- Have some of your ushers / welcoming team reflect the demographic of the people you want to attract.
- Make sure the clergy / ministry team do some of the welcoming.
- Assign long-time members to welcoming new people who sit in their 'section' of the worship space.
- Make a rule (announced to the congregation regularly) that for the five minutes following the worship service all the 'regulars' will talk to someone they don't already know.
- Ask Council and committee members to try not to talk about church business after the service – this is the fellowship time, and you don't want those who aren't part of the 'IN' group to feel left out.
- Make sure everyone who attends regularly has a name tag and wears it. Enforcement of this policy might be a good task for young people. It will help older and younger generations learn each other's names, too.
- Always have some blank tags at the door for guests with a marker that can be used to fill them in.
- Review your 'promotional materials' looking for "we" vs "you" language. Try changing the point of view from what "we in the church" want the stranger to know or do to what "you the guest" will learn about or find beneficial about joining our congregation.

Remember, if an angel is a messenger from God, then we must remember to show hospitality to strangers, for at some point, we will undoubtedly have an angel in our midst – and surely we want to give him or her a good impression!

If you'd like to know more about these topics, feel free to e-mail us at tanya.moxley@ns.sympatico.ca and colltizzard@hotmail.com