

ARE WE AS WELCOMING AS WE THINK WE ARE? A view from the pew - article

Without exception, the churches I visit deal with me with warmth and courtesy – they know who I am and why I'm there. But what do they do with my wife, Pippa? Who is she? And why is she there? On more than one occasion she has confessed on our way home that if she had been a non-Christian, she would have been unlikely to darken those doors again.

It's Pippa's disquiet that has got me thinking. No church wants a reputation for being unwelcoming, so why should we be welcoming and what does a warm welcome look like?

Why be a welcoming church?

We find the answer to that question in passages like Luke 15:1-2 in which the critics level this charge against the Lord Jesus:

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Just think of the extraordinary lengths that the Lord Jesus went to so he could welcome us: from God to man... from heaven to earth... from glory to a cross. He went to hell and back! And all so he could bring lost people home.

In Hebrews 4, the author urges us to draw near to God's throne of grace with confidence. We, with all our sin and shame, can do what should blow our minds – draw near to God. He does not tolerate us at a distance; he welcomes us into his intimate presence. The blood of Jesus has made the impossible possible.

Because we are ambassadors of the welcoming God – servants of the welcoming Saviour – we need to be welcoming churches. Outsiders will assume that the way we treat them in some way reflects the way God will treat them. We need to make sure it does. But, watch out; just as for the Lord Jesus, becoming a welcoming church won't happen easily.

How can we be a welcoming church?

There are several things we need to recognise:

- First impressions are formed well before a visitor even sets foot in your building. It starts with finding information, whether online, in the telephone directory or from the sign at the front of your meeting place.
- Every member of the congregation has a responsibility to engage with visitors and create a welcoming church. It's not just the job of a welcoming team.
- Visitors like to be noticed, acknowledged and greeted, but not smothered. Give them some space.
- Many of the things we do that are intended to be 'welcoming' actually turn newcomers off. Verbal notices are a particular scourge. What is intended to be warm and inclusive will probably sound totally excluding to visitors. Try to find an alternative way of communicating in-house information to leave your public meetings 'notice-free zones' as far as possible.

On the one hand, we need to recognise that welcoming is not about growing our church. Visitors, guests and newcomers all deserve special attention – even if we never see them again. On the other hand, it should be our desire to reach out to the lost. If an outsider has made the effort to walk into our strange building, shouldn't we make the effort to welcome them? After all, God may be at work here and wanting to use us. How exciting!

How will we become a (more) welcoming church?

Here are a few simple steps you can take as an individual church member:

- Pray for visitors to come, expect them to arrive – and be there to meet them.
- Ask for grace to see your church through fresh eyes. You're so familiar and comfortable with what goes on, you won't easily recognise how odd things may seem to visitors.
- Arrive at church gatherings early. Okay, we know things don't get started until the advertised time, but visitors don't. Do we really want them arriving 15 minutes early to an empty foyer? Be there ready to greet them.
- Encourage members to not sit at the back (so visitors won't have to walk all the way to the front) or in awkward places like the end of rows (so people won't have to push past).
- Make the effort – individually and corporately – to speak to newcomers before and after the service, rather than rushing off to speak with your friends. Be genuinely interested in who the visitors are, why they've come and share a bit about yourself.
- Most importantly, fight the urge to look at a newcomer as a prospective church member. See them as a person to whom you have the opportunity to show kindness.
- Chat with your church leaders about visiting another church across town to experience for yourself what it feels like to be a newcomer. Be adventurous! Try a church that's very different from yours.
- Tell a non-Christian friend that you're trying to assess how visitors feel when they come to your church services. Ask them if they would be prepared to help you by coming along on a Sunday, pretending that they don't know you, and then giving honest feedback afterwards.
- Feedback your observations. Get the whole church talking about how to become a (more) welcoming church.

If you are a church leader, reflect on everything that happens in your meetings. How do you train and encourage the congregation to be a welcoming community? What cultural assumptions do you make? What language is used in leading worship or in public prayer? Do you adopt any in-house habits that may exclude newcomers? Is there anything in the meeting that will cause embarrassment or offence other than the gospel message itself?

If we really want to see new people coming along – and staying – now is always the best time to think again. It might be appropriate to draw up a church audit at the start of this New Year.

Remember: our welcome matters! We are ambassadors of the welcoming God.