

Good Worship Starts with Good Welcome

The word *outreach* certainly conjures up fear with Catholics. Certainly, the easiest way for us to *reach out*, is when *they* come to *us*. Were we not all taught to welcome visitors into our homes? Why is it so hard to transfer those attitudes and actions to the parish?

New people arrive at our churches all the time. They come for marrying, burying and baptisms, whether or not they know how to say the prayers. They come on holidays and sit in *our* seats. And, while some parishes can tolerate a limited welcome campaign of a few weeks, we all know that it can get awkward to receive newcomers, strangers, returnees and visitors, constantly.

Perhaps, we should first ask ourselves, whether or not we really want newcomers and returning Catholics. A ministry of hospitality means more than just short bursts of occasional friendliness. In our gut, we all know how it feels to be a visitor or newcomer. Just recall the last time that you relocated, or traveled for a professional conference, family event or vacation. How did you feel when you first arrived, walked into the building, found a seat, and later left? It all depends on how we were treated. This is the best starting point for welcoming others. If we do not really want to deal with the messiness of welcoming newcomers, there is little that can persuade us to reach out any further than the doors of the church.

Maya Angelou was fond of saying that ‘people will easily forget what you have said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.’ It is a corporeal work of mercy. Jesus said, "I was a stranger and you gave me envelopes" (just kidding) ...and you welcomed me." Here are three good rules for effective welcome.

- 1. Take the initiative with strangers.** Take the initiative with a newcomer. The newcomer already took the risk of showing up. Do greeters take the time to learn your name and do they remember it later? Are greeters respectful and curious without prying? Do they let the visitor stay anonymous, if the person indicates that preference? Do greeters take the risk to share a bit about themselves with a visitor, or is it a one-way exchange? Do greeters offer to introduce a newcomer to others in the congregation, or to the pastor?
- 2. Discover commonalities with visitors.** We build a spirit of welcome when we identify and build on our similarities. There are less than six degrees of separation between any of us. But physical proximity does not equate with community. We share many undiscovered fears, hopes, desires, responses to embarrassment, and relationships. In one sense, good welcome can be as simple as nametags, smiles and food, but real welcome does not happen unless we hear people’s stories and form a sympathetic bond with them. Until we have that bond, we have not earned the right to share our own message with them.
- 3. Be curious about the expectations of newcomers.** Today most people do not just show up at church on Sunday morning for lack of something better to do. Coming out of the shadows is not easy for most people. Often, a newcomer feels an urge to attend church. They arrive with certain expectations. Expectations are like icebergs, most of

the matter is hidden below the water line and is best explored carefully. As a result, we can do significant damage if we do not respect the contours of a newcomer's expectations. These are best understood in a relationship of trust and trust takes time. Don't rush it.

There are several winning strategies for parishes interested in being guest-friendly. Consider these additional tips for success:

1. Be intentional within the existing Rites of the Mass. The liturgy begins with a Gathering Rite for good reason. Additional opportunities for welcome exist in the preaching, prayers and sign of peace. Preaching welcome invites the insiders and regulars to open their social circle. We can include prayers for those who have left the church and for families suffering from religious disunity in the prayers of the faithful. The sign of peace can be started by saying, "Hi, my name is Dennis, peace be with you." And, do not forget that opportunities in sacramental preparation programs for welcome, and getting re-acquainted.

2. Have the talk. The vitality of many parishes can be measured in direct proportion to the energy spent in opening social connectors and building relationships. As one pastor put it, the first step is to have "the talk". By this, the pastor meant preaching for a number of weeks about the centrality of hospitality in the Eucharist. The words host, hospice, stranger and hospitality all have the same root. So the act of healing, acceptance, and welcome are cousin ministries. This can easily be done in the summer (for example: Cycle B readings focus on Bread of Life) which can connect these themes at an ideal time. More newcomers relocate into our neighborhood during summer than at any other time of year.

3. Equip greeters. This is a far more specialized service than we realize. Greeters are the also the docents to our building. They are the faces of the parish – living displays of our customs and the storytellers of the community. Expert greeters know that in God's wisdom they received two ears and one mouth for a reason. They listen and learn about people twice as much as they speak about themselves. They dispense supplies (missals, facial tissues, welcome brochures, important phone numbers, pamphlets, and envelopes) upon request. They invite questions. As if in a dance, expert greeters know when it is time to lead and when it is time to follow.

4. Commission greeters and hospitality ministers at a liturgy. The importance of this ministry is overlooked in many parishes. Nothing affirms the validity of service in a church like a public commissioning at a regularly scheduled weekend Mass. This can be more important for what it says to that congregation, than for what it says to those who volunteer to be greeters. This ministry will always be at the margins until we express our support publicly.

5. Begin welcoming before the event begins. Invitations and reminders can be extended in a phone call, text, email or Facebook. We can assure a newcomer of meeting logistics, confirm our time and place of arrival, and share a description of ourselves, so that they can find us more easily when they arrive.

6. Welcome newcomers at the curb. Some churches do not let a visitor get to the door before they affirm a newcomer's decision to attend church. Why not assign a smiling concierge to the parking lot to make the process of arrival as easy and pleasant as possible? Newcomers can be noticed, and not overlooked. Greeters can pay special attention to them and provide a warm welcome and guidance to the facility. Some churches go so far as to develop a VIP card that has a greeter's name, essential information about the facility and contact information for making a return visit natural.

7. Welcome new neighbors. When a new family relocates to the neighborhood who greets them with a plate of cookies and a word of welcome? Can our church be the one to send over the welcome wagon? Why not arrange to have an automatically generated postcard delivered to those who relocate into the neighborhood. Paulist Evangelization Ministries and Outreach.com offer a very affordable outreach services to new neighbors. This also allows your welcome team to follow up by dropping by with banana bread, and be ready to share the location of such community resources as: the library, location and hours for the department of motor vehicles, a list of favorite restaurants or local churches and a personal invitation to the next parish event?

This might also be accomplished with the help of a parishioner who is also a realtor, because realtors know who is coming and going. Some parishes go all the way by giving out a coupon booklet with discounts at a dozen or so (parishioner-managed) businesses which is a win-win. And why not add a coupon for a free palm on Palm Sunday, a free hot dog at the parish picnic, free ashes on Ash Wednesday and a free cup cake at the Mardi Gras party? See, welcoming can be fun. The coupon book can be published as a downloadable document at the parish website, making it easy for every parishioner to download and use to welcome newcomers in the community.

8. Host welcome events throughout the year. If new parishioners are so important to us, why do some churches give so little priority to receiving them. Jesus said, "I was a stranger and you sent me envelopes". Why do we still send out a form letter with a pack of envelopes as their way of welcoming a new family to the community? Why not welcome newcomers at a gathering for getting acquainted. The theme of the gathering is simply how belonging to this parish can make a difference. Make the logistics as simple or lavish as you desire. It can be a simple breakfast on the first Sunday of a season. A successful welcoming event has the following ingredients:

- warm welcome
- brief prayer
- a simple personal witness from a parishioner - perhaps preceded by a short video of the parish in action, and which highlights the diversity, warmth and accomplishments of the community.
- a staff member on hand
- parish information and activity booklets

- ample time to get acquainted
- ministry leaders available to answer questions about ways to get involved

9. Offer events online. Some parishes conduct a book study, a prayer network, a discussion group or a bible study online through the parish website or Facebook. Busy people and digital natives appreciate the opportunity to receive spiritual support from a place of security and comfort. Spiritual materials can be shared through tweets, posts, in online groups, in posts or comments. Online gathering spots are the least intimidating places for people to get acquainted on a point of common interest, from the safety of their own device.

10. Host an event in a neutral setting. Jesus went out and met people on their own terms and in *their* places of comfort. Most parish programs and services are reserved to those who come to *our* place of comfort. These services and events are publicized most often at Mass and in the bulletin which is distributed at Mass – again the venues of comfort for insiders. A neutral setting is a place off church property where newcomers would feel less intimidated. This can be a voluntary online group, coffee shop, internet café, community center, public library, or a restaurant. These groups succeed because they take evangelization off-campus to where other people already congregate. Once people gather in a neutral setting, they can feel at ease to build relationships of trust, grow spirituality and develop curiosity for relationship with our Lord, and our parish.

11. Get feedback. Almost every time I am invited to a parish to discuss evangelization, I ask about the current strengths of the parish. Almost without fail, the speedy reply is: “We are certainly welcoming!” But insiders always think this about themselves. But, insiders naturally consider their own church hospitable, because it is “theirs”. Would outsiders concur with an insider assessment? That is the question.

So why not find out how welcoming we are from the point of view of outsiders? We can do this quite easily with a guest survey. Consider the survey available at www.EvangelizeBuffalo.org. Why not gather some volunteers and send them out to be guests in a neighboring church? Ask these spies to come back with a report on how they were treated. You might even ask a few outsiders of your acquaintance - family members or friends, to visit your own church and complete the survey for you. Report your findings to the pastor, parish welcome committee or pastoral council. The insights might surprise you.

Parish vitality does not just happen. It is the result of intentional choices. Vibrant parishes give high priority to helping their parishioners to become welcomers, and helping welcomers to become inviters. For more ideas visit www.EvangelizeBuffalo.org or contact Dennis Mahaney, Office for Evangelization and Parish Life by email: dmahaney@buffalodiocese.org or call: 716-847-8393.