

Hospitality: the ministry of welcome

Hospitality – One Church's Approach

Reviews from the Vine

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Hospitality: the ministry of welcome

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Over the years, I have been in many different churches throughout the country. Almost without exception I have concluded that while we all claim to be friendly, most of the time we really are not. This is frustrating, partly because we still regularly do have people come to our churches for the very first time, but mostly because the Bible is very clear that hospitality is the task of Christians. “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4: 9-10). In other words, hospitality is important for church growth but crucial for the expression of our faith.

The more I consider hospitality, the more I realize that it is a primary task for leaders, especially elders, and the more experienced members of the congregation. You are the hosts and these are your guests. To ignore or mistreat them is rude and to assume that someone else will do it ensures that no one will. Hospitality is not rocket science, it is treating

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people as courteously and as respectfully as if they were guests in your home; for truly they are, guests in your church home.

There are many aspects to hospitality, but I would like to focus on just a few. The first is before church even starts. Studies show that most people have decided whether they will return before the service even begins. In other words, we only have one chance to make a first impression. Thus the first question is this: Are you ready for new people to come to your church?

1. Before Church

- Is your facility clean and bright?
- Does it smell musty?
- Is there parking close by?
- Are there clear and helpful signs?
- Will they receive a warm welcome at the door and the offer to be shown to where they need to go (like the nursery)?
- Is the nursery up to code?
- If they are five minutes late will there still be somebody there to greet them or will the door be locked and the ushers seated?

More and more people coming to worship for the first time have no experience with the Presbyterian Church or any church at all. The worship service itself can be very mysterious and intimidating to those who have never been. As well, people come to church because of a spiritual need - worship is not for fellowship, it is for addressing those needs, ours and those of others. The next question is this: Will new people experience the presence of God as they worship with you?

2. During Church

- What happens if they sit in the “wrong” pew?
- Would someone invite them to share a pew?
- Is the bulletin “user friendly” even for people who don’t know our prayers and creeds by heart?
- Is the language clear and Presbyterian jargon free?
- Are there “inside jokes” that exclude?
- Does the worship speak to people’s needs?
- Will someone help a new family find the appropriate church school space? Is a parent welcome to stay and watch the class?

Natural Church Development

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Over the years, we have tried to grow the church by using a variety of different methods. Natural Church Development is not a method for church growth. It is instead a process that measures the health of a congregation to help it determine the steps needed to improve congregational health and to provide the conditions needed to grow. Christian Schwarz, the founder of NCD, has realized that there are eight characteristics essential to the health of churches:

- **Empowering Leadership** (leadership that empowers others to lead)
- **Gift-Oriented Ministry** (ministry that recognizes and uses our God-given gifts)
- **Passionate Spirituality** (people who are passionate in their personal faith)
- **Effective Structures** (structures that help rather than hinder the church)
- **Inspiring Worship** (worship that matters – where we encounter God)
- **Holistic Small Groups** (groups that care for the whole person in the group)
- **Need-Oriented Evangelism** (that is, the need of the person being evangelized)
- **Loving Relationships** (relationships with depth – friendliness is not enough)

When a congregation takes the NCD survey for the first time, the results become the benchmark of your congregation’s health. Then, over the next months and years, the leadership of the congregation would focus on improving the health of the congregation according to these eight health characteristics and grow naturally as they improve their congregation’s health.

For more information, please check out www.ncd-canada.com or www.ncd-international.org.

to sound and video equipment and an internet connection. We invite a group of intellectually challenged adults who meet daily to use kitchen space, lounge and halls. We open outdoor space to a women's centre for picnics and play groups.

- When new groups come, a volunteer greets them and orients them to the space. The volunteers treat each group with courtesy and warmth and understand they are representatives of the congregation.
- We rethink how people are using the building and try to find ways to make them feel more welcome.



For example, when we realized that parents were waiting for their children who were participating in various activities, we set up a seating area for them with comfortable chairs, adequate lighting, and magazines (including the Presbyterian Record). Another volunteer ensures that, unlike too many

waiting rooms, the issues are more current than November 1996!

- Our building is a rabbit's warren that makes little sense to visitors. We have installed new directional signs so that people can find washrooms, meeting rooms, the kitchen and offices. Since churchy words are no longer part of many people's vocabularies, the "narthex" has become the "foyer" and the "sanctuary" is now the "worship space."

St. Columba also understands that part of hospitality is inviting the community to participate in the life of our congregation. Therefore, we explore ways to inform newcomers about our church, especially those with no church exposure, and we consider how we can make them feel more welcome when they come.

- We are planning to renovate the entrance that is used by the largest number of community people. It will include a video monitor with a continuous slideshow of church activities and announcements. Since we cannot be physically present when many of the groups are here, we can at least use photos to demystify and humanize church life for those not exposed to it.
- Hymn holders in our worship space display a FAQ pamphlet answering basic questions for newcomers and visitors - things like "What kind of a church is this anyway?" (In Quebec, the Presbyterian Church is not well known among francophones and many aren't sure if we are even Christian!)
- Greeters get together for workshops to think through how better to make newcomers welcome. Greeters understand that their role doesn't end once worship begins: they introduce guests during coffee hour so that the guests can get to know other members of the congregation and make connections.

We realize that we have much to do and that many challenges await us. However, through developing the practice of seeing our congregation and its building from the perspective of visitors, we are learning to make St. Columba a place of warmth and welcome where every guest is made to feel important.

Ian Fraser is the minister of St. Columba By The Lake in Pointe Claire, Quebec. To get a glimpse of St. Columba, check out the congregation's website at www.stcolumba.ca