



WELCOMING WAYS

Often, one of the first words congregations use to describe themselves is “friendly”. However, the experience of several “Sneaky Visitors” has shown many of our congregations to be less friendly than they think.

Being friendly and welcoming goes beyond the look that acknowledges a new face, and beyond a smile from across the room. It even goes beyond the greeters who welcome people at the door, and beyond the ushers who hand out bulletins. Friendliness is measured just as much in the small talk that happens as worshippers wait to exit the sanctuary or gather for coffee in the Fellowship Hall.

It is perhaps the fault of our stoic ancestors that the value of small talk and how to do it has not been a priority. However, conversing with people we have only just met does require some intentionality, and yes, friendliness.

Below are just a few tips to get you started talking with the visitor in your midst:

~Good morning. I don't believe I've met you yet. My name is.....

This allows that the person you don't know may have visited before. They may even be a member who hasn't been to worship in awhile. It is a way of greeting without making any assumptions or offending someone who considers themselves a member.

~Do you live in this community?

This is a low risk question that simply asks about past residences. If they've lived forever in whatever community you're in, then it gives them a chance to talk about it. If not, then it opens up the conversation to more questions about where they have lived before and what brought them to this community.

~We have coffee and treats now, would you like to have a bite to eat?

In other words, invite them to coffee, and sit with them. If coffee fellowship is before the service, invite them to arrive earlier the next time they come.

~Do you have family in the area? What brings you here today? I love your scarf, where did you get it? Thank you for joining us today, I'm glad you're here. Would you like to serve on the Council? (just kidding 😊).

~What are you looking for in a congregation?

This is a question that brings the conversation to a deeper level, and allows the person to reflect more meaningfully.

If you are a greeter,

~Position yourself to greet people as they come into the building, and not just as they enter the sanctuary. Especially if there is some distance between the two.

~Say "Welcome". "Have you been here before?" If not, show them where they can hang up their coat. Let them know where the nursery is, the restrooms, the sanctuary.

If you are an usher,

~ Do NOT say, "Where were you last week?" It will be experienced as accusation, not concern. Rather say, "Nice to see you again. Glad you're here."

~If necessary, help people find a seat. Be sure they have a bulletin. Indicate where you will be should they need anything. If a person should leave the sanctuary, make yourself available. Feel free to ask, "Can I help you with anything?"

If you are the pastor,

~Especially if you notice a visitor, please give verbal instructions as to your communion welcome. If you offer an alcoholic alternative, make this clear, even if it is written in the bulletin.

~Consider offering a non-alcoholic alternative to the wine, and providing gluten-free wafers. More and more, people have very real dietary restrictions and valid aversions to what has been standard wafers/bread and wine.

~Please do NOT make visitors stand up and introduce themselves, unless your congregation is in a tourist area where people might expect to be noticed and called upon to speak. (such as First, Grand Marais. Jacobsville Chapel. Shepherd of the Seas). For your average, non-traveling, visitor, they do not wish to be put on the spot and forced to speak to the whole congregation.

~More and more, the unbaptized adult who is only beginning their faith journey may come to the table since that is what every other adult in worship is doing. Consider what you will do in that moment. Before that moment comes, if it hasn't already, consider a study of The Use of the Means of Grace along with congregation members to clarify your response to cultural shifts that brings unbaptized faith seeking adults to your communion table.

Other tips for being a welcoming congregation:

Pretend you are a visitor entering your church for the first time.

~Is there adequate parking? Handicapped parking?

~Is it clear which door is the main door? What do you smell when you come in? Is it musty? Is the entryway cluttered? Is the narthex used for storage? Do the walls need painting? Is it clean?

~Are there signs pointing the way to the sanctuary? The nursery? The restrooms? The coatroom?

~Are there busy bags for children? Is it clear what ages are welcome in the nursery?

~Is everything that you expect the congregation to say during worship either printed in the bulletin, clearly referred to in the hymnal, or projected on the screen? (For example, when the minister says, "The word of the Lord." Is "thanks be to God" printed anywhere, is it assumed that they'll know it? Same for "The Lord be with you." Is "And also with you" printed anywhere? Not everyone knows the Lord's Prayer or the creed or the melodies to the hymns. Please, if possible, print the musical notes if you are not using the hymnal.

~Do you expect the congregation to sing the Psalm? Then print out the music that will be used, and instructions for who should sing what part.

Some follow up ideas:

~Send a card to your visitor expressing how glad you were that they joined you for worship and your hope that they found it meaningful.

~Try a phone call, simply touching base, asking if they have any questions or any ways that the pastor/congregation could be praying for them.

~Some churches even send a note with a gift card for Starbucks coffee.

Other ideas:

~Your town or township has a record of who is new in town. Drop them a note, drop off a Welcome basket, send a postcard that welcomes them to the neighborhood and to worship at your church.

~Buy doorknob hangers before some event (Rally Sunday, Vacation Bible School, an outdoor worship service, Homecoming Sunday) and place on neighborhood doors.

~Send a postcard to your zip code and invite folks to Christmas/Easter worship.

Resources:

Evangelism bulletin inserts and devotions: www.elca.org/dcm/evangelism

http://www.elca.org/en/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Faith-Practices/eTips?_ga=1.201481553.1555249452.1456331964

Study for the Use of the Means of Grace:

http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/The_Use_Of_The_Means_Of_Grace.pdf?_ga=1.25302781.1555249452.1456331964

http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/The_Use_of_Means_of_Grace-Why_It_Matters.pdf?_ga=1.25302781.1555249452.1456331964