

# Welcoming Elders

## Session Starter #23

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### Prayer

Our Lord and our God, we give thanks that we are not strangers or aliens in your sight, but citizens with the saints and members of your holy and eternal household. Guide our ministries so that strangers in our midst may become friends and journey with us along paths of righteousness. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

### Introduction

The session is responsible for seeing that the congregation develops and maintains programs of mission and outreach both related to its immediate community and beyond.

*Book of Forms, 113.2*

### Scripture

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

*Romans 12:9-13 NRSV*

### A Brief Commentary

This portion of Paul's letter to the Christian community in Rome begins by stating the need for authentic love. Paul then provides examples of authentic love and maintains that this love is to be extended not only to people we know and like, but also to strangers by extending hospitality.

### Reflection

Some of us tremble at the thought of venturing beyond the safe and familiar walls of our sanctuaries to invite people from our community to worship with us. While this can be an effective form of outreach, there are instances when there is no need to invite people to our church, because they invite themselves and simply appear as strangers in our midst.

How important it is for the session to have a system in place to identify and welcome visitors. This is a kind of

outreach that doesn't require us to reach very far. All that is needed is a willingness and readiness to offer love in the form of hospitality.

There was a congregation that once used the term "Duty Elder" to identify the person responsible to make sure there was a glass of fresh water in the pulpit, to begin each worship service with a word of welcome and an overview of announcements, and to greet worshippers with the minister after the service. When reflecting on the responsibilities of the Duty Elder, the session decided to change the title to the more suitable "Welcoming Elder."

For this congregation, "welcoming elder" is a technical term with specific responsibilities. Imagine broadening the definition. Imagine if every elder agreed to be as welcoming as possible. Recognizing that some elders are more gifted in the area of hospitality than others, this could still make a wonderful difference to the spirit of any congregation.

Most of us can recall a time when we visited a church and felt virtually ignored - apart from curious glances. There is no need for this. The session can set a positive tone and reach out to regulars and visitors alike with genuine love and hospitality.

### Discussion

1. Invite elders to talk about a time they visited a worship service and felt ignored.
2. How can we better identify visitors in our church?
3. What aspects of our welcome, our worship or our fellowship time could we improve to show our guests better hospitality?

