

Hospitality: the ministry of welcome

Hospitality – One Church's Approach

Reviews from the Vine

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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

John-Peter Smit

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.



member. People who came back come because of “the warmth, the love and ‘the realness’ of church members.” In other words, our job does not end the first week. We need to make a long-term commitment to nurture relationships with our new people. The final question is this: What is your procedure for integrating newcomers into your midst?

4. Next Week

- If they signed the guest book or wrote a cheque, was there follow up or a thank you from someone other than the minister?
- If they come again, will you remember their name? Their children’s names?
- Will someone take them under their wing?
- Are there appropriate “easing in” steps (e.g., don’t offer envelopes the next week, ask if they want to be on the mailing list)?

- Are the activities of the church accessible to first timers? (“This week’s Bible study will be held at June’s house.” Who is June? Where is her house? And would newcomers go even if they knew those answers?)
- Will anyone talk to them before the service or during the passing of the peace?

In my experience, coffee hour is the least friendly time for a newcomer. Typically we are so happy to see our friends that we forget to include people who are new. Too often newcomers are ignored during this time. This is where the church leaders must take the lead. It is your task to approach them, not theirs to come to you. It is your opportunity to be an ambassador for your church. Two things can help here: first, a commitment on the part of leadership to speak to at least one person they don’t know before they speak to those they do know, and second, a determination on the part of all the church leaders not to do business during coffee hour. This is a time for fellowship, not an opportunity to do work. The next question is this: How do new people experience your church when it is at fellowship?

3. After Church

- Do they know where coffee hour is?
- Did someone invite them?
- Will someone talk to them appropriately during coffee hour?
- Or will they be ambushed to serve on committees and sing in the choir and be intimidated?

The majority (60%) of people come to church the first time because of the invitation of a friend or family

Most people don’t just wake up on Sunday morning and decide to “visit church.” People come because they are looking for something. They could be looking for an answer to prayer or support with life’s challenges. They could be coming for community or peace in an uncertain world. Our task, our gospel calling, is to welcome those sojourners in our midst and to love them as Christ loves us. Hospitality is not optional. “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:1-2).

Suggestion: If you really want to know how you are doing, get a non-church friend to be a “mystery shopper.” They will tell you what you need to know.

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Hospitality - One Church's Approach

St. Columba by-the-Lake faces a challenge that it undoubtedly shares with some other Presbyterian churches. Established in the suburbs of Montreal during the 1950s (undoubtedly under the assumption “build it and they will come”), our church building sits in a hidden corner of Pointe-Claire with virtually no community presence. Many long-time residents will ask, “Where is that place?” when the name of our church is mentioned, because unless they accidentally happen to stumble upon it or have a specific reason to visit, they have no earthly reason to pass us.

Over the past three years, St. Columba by-the-Lake has been exploring how we can make our church building more integral to our community. We have named this vision A Centering Place to acknowledge that

- our faith is central to our human identity;
- our building is central to our congregation's life;
- we want our building to become a community centre for the neighbourhood.

The focus of our vision demands that we ask fundamental questions about hospitality. How can we welcome people who come here, whether visiting once for a music recital or coming weekly to participate in a regular event?

We have learned that hospitality is not a sidebar to the gospel - it is the gospel! Jesus invites us to participate in the realm of God. He makes a place for us all - no one is excluded. At communion, he is the host inviting us to share in his gifts of bread and wine, body and blood. He holds up for us the vision of the great banquet when God's children will be gathered together, made welcome by the One who searches the back roads to find the forgotten. From Genesis to Revelation, the scriptures tell the story of God's gracious welcome to all.

As his followers, we are compelled to continue this ministry. In the past, the church has sometimes given the impression that only certain kinds of people are welcomed and only under certain conditions. In a continuum between grace and judgment, we have tended to slide more toward the latter, looking at people with suspicion rather than with acceptance.

Because of our desire to become a community centre, we try to ensure that our building is used as much as possible, which means that it is busy almost every day from 8:30 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. While many groups rent space for their activities, we seek to treat them as guests, not as tenants. That has led us to think differently about our building:

- Hospitality is not the task of one committee but of every group. Each is asked to think about how they can extend a better welcome within their mandate.
- Our Property Committee walks through the building regularly looking specifically for things that need changing and updating to meet the needs of newcomers.
- A “Focus on Music” Committee includes childcare for its annual concert series so that children have a place to go if they grow tired of the music.
- A Communications Committee studies how the church website, bulletin boards and signs can be more informative to visitors.
- We ask groups what they need and try our best to accommodate them. When requests are made, our default answer is “yes”; then we adapt to make it possible. For example, when feasible, we give access



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

Reviews from the Vine



Giving and Receiving Hospitality

Review by David Phillips

Giving and Receiving Hospitality is a series of 10 books ranging from *Giving and Receiving Hospitality for Young Children* to *Giving and Receiving Hospitality for Adults*, as well as books on specific topics.

Each of the 10 books has the same chapter breakdown. The books begin with "Introduction: Forming Community by Giving and Receiving." The introduction is followed by six chapters: Discovery, Scripture, Discipleship, Christian Tradition, Context and Mission, and Future and Vision. Each book ends with an "Appendix: About Faith Practices." The books are in some cases age specific but also have titles such as *Giving and Receiving Hospitality: Daily Life*; *Giving and Receiving Hospitality: Worship, Music and Arts*; and *Giving and Receiving Hospitality: New Church Participants*.

To gain a better understanding of the contents of the books, here is a brief example from one of the books entitled *Giving and Receiving Hospitality: Multiage*. In this book, activities and suggestions are offered for ways children ages 5-14 can experience practices of faith together. These activities take into consideration the needs and abilities of all the children involved and recommend steps for leading and learning across the age span.

In the section "Discovery," the learners are asked to gather items available from various cultures to allow guests to feel welcome. Then they talk about the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Zacchaeus. From here the learners can take part in a game of Bean Bag Hospitality. This game allows for activity as well as questions at the end of the game that relate to hospitality - for example, the importance of knowing names in order to be welcoming. There are other activities that help learners understand the various aspects of being hospitable. These activities will vary depending upon the age and ability level of the class.

The recommendation is to look at these books or check the website at www.circle-books.net.

Available from
The Book Room

1-800-619-7301, bookroom@presbyterian.ca

www.presbyterian.ca/bookroom