



Cultivate Mission

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WECOMING WORSHIP TIP SHEET

*"Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger's guise."*¹

-Celtic Rune

"Let brotherly (and sisterly) love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hebrew 13:1-2

Would we treat our guests differently, if we truly thought each one walking through the doors was the Christ? Or an angel sent from heaven with a blessing to give?

There's a great play on words in this Hebrew passage in the original language which we miss in our English translation.² Verse one admonishes us to continue in brotherly love (*philadelphia*). Then verse two admonishes us to show hospitality (*philoxenia*). *Philo* is the Greek word for love and *xenos* is the Greek word for stranger. So hospitality, or *philoxenia*, is the **love of stranger**, which is the opposite of *xenophobia*, fear of stranger. How can we live out this **love of stranger** on Sunday morning?

The choice begins with nomenclature; new people who visit are *guests* not visitors, because the word visitor emphasizes the fact that they are just visiting, and thus onus is on the new person to visit. By contrast, the word *guest* emphasizes the fact that they a highly important part of Sunday morning worship, and the onus is on the congregation to provide the hospitality for these guests. Hospitality is one practice of the church, defined as "things Christian people do together over time in response to and in light of God's active presence for the life of the world."³ Welcoming people on Sunday morning needs to be seen in the context of our wider calling to be a people who practice hospitality.

Welcoming people requires the church to engage in *technical* solutions and *adaptive* learning.⁴ Technical solutions are straightforward solutions for which the congregation currently has the know-how to implement. Thus, moving the site for serving coffee to the patio where people exit the sanctuary would be a *technical* solution. It's a matter of finding roll-carts, setting up tables in different place, etc. *Adaptive learning* means people need to change their attitudes and behaviors to thrive in a changing

¹Christine Pohl, "A Community's Practice of Hospitality: The Interdependence of Practices and of Communities," In *Practicing Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 134.

² Ana Maria Pineda, "Hospitality," In *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy Bass. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 32-34.

³ Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 5.

⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 13-20;55-64.

environment. Learning to welcome people who no longer understand our church traditions or have any prior church experience would be an example of *adaptive learning*.

These tips interweave technical solutions and adaptive learning that are needed as we seek to reverse our guests:

1. WE RESPECT THE VULNERABILITY OF OUR GUEST.

We are keenly aware of our own vulnerability. We feel fear in talking to someone new—we might make a fool of ourselves or say the wrong thing. But we don't let that fear cripple us into inaction, rather, we recognize that the newcomer feels even more vulnerable, because they have walked into our familiar space. No one is known to them.

We recognize that even if people look pressed and clean on the outside, right below the surface is often deep pain. They feel lonely, they feel new and often they've experienced a life crisis that motivated them to do something really weird—like attend a church service out of the blue.

Tip #1: Remember that your guest is more vulnerable than you. (See Appendix A for quick tip summary)

Key things to know about a guest:

- They often come either late or early.
- They dash for the exits when church is over.
- It's about first impressions, which are made quickly, but undone slowly.
- Most guests make their decision about a church in the first 5 minutes of their time on the church campus and in the worship service.
- Guests with children might make the decision about whether to attend church again based on the experience of their children. (i.e. If the children had a bad time—"Let's not try this again!")
- Many guests today are unfamiliar with church. They know nothing about our traditions, let alone any church's traditions. They know little to nothing about the Bible. They are not cultured in "Churchianity" nor "Christianity".
- Most guests come out of some level of pain—the loneliness of being new to the community, the pain of some traumatic life event, or just the general discontent that there must be more to life for themselves, or at least for their children.
- The discomfort that all guests share in common is that no matter how much of their life they've spent in church, it's hard to be new and unknown.

Tip #2: Train your members in the "5 minute" rule—look for guests to greet the first 5 minutes after the service ends.

The 5-minute rule points to the fact that guests usually leave rather quickly when a service is over. Therefore, keep reminding your members to follow the 5-minute rule, "Look for guests to greet within the first 5 minutes after the service ends." Then greet friends after that. The idea is that friends stick around longer than 5-10 minutes, guests do not.

To take out the vulnerability you feel in talking to someone new, remember ***The 50 million dollar question***:

Tip #3: “Are you new to the church, or just new to me?”

This takes the awkwardness out, and you always have a ready to go first-line. I’ve used this line for over 20 years and it’s amazing what I’ve heard. “No, I’m not new to the church; I’ve been coming for two weeks.” OR “I’m new to you; I grew up in this church.” Etcetera. There’s just no wrong answer. No egg on the face.

Tip # 4: *Introduce a new person to others.*

Many times the best thing to do is introduce someone new to someone else, particularly someone with whom they have common interests. I image Sunday morning as a dance floor. I consider who would be good conversation partners. I see my role as linking people up who should be linked. This can take the pressure off any one person and involves more people in the practice of making Sunday morning a hospitable space.

Tip #5: *A gift takes the awkwardness out of it for us...and our guest.*

Having a gift to give can contribute to the perception that we’ve prepared for our guest. Offering a gift is not necessary and can be gimmicky. It might be something to do in different seasons, like offering a free book during a certain sermon series. It actually does more for those in the congregation seeking to grow in hospitality than it might for our guest. It keeps the attention before the congregation that we are seeking to offer hospitality as a regular practice. A welcome packet in the sanctuary is more necessary, and can be done without too much hassle. See Appendix B for gift ideas, including the welcome packet.

2. WE REVERE THE WAY THAT GOD IS PRESENT IN THE GUEST-HOST RELATIONSHIP.

We overcome our fear by having a reverence for the way that God is present in the guest-host relationship. We recognize that God is at work in this person’s life. So with eagerness we anticipate being a part of what God is already doing.

Since God is at work, this is true:

Tip #6: *Better to bumble and do it awkwardly, than not do it at all!*

Many of us are perfectionists, and we’re not going to do something unless we can do it really well. Some of us have more natural gifts in this area than others. The people I’ve seen over the years who excel at welcoming others fit in every category (practiced socialite to bumbler). But they all have one thing in coming—they do it, and people ultimately appreciate it.

If you see someone in successive weeks, and you don’t remember their name, just admit it. “I remember meeting you, but I’m sorry that I don’t remember your name. Could you refresh my memory?”

Because we can rest in the knowledge that God is present in our guest’s life:

Tip #7: Leave judgment to God.

Given that I just wrote—“It’s better to bumble than not do it at all,”—about the ONLY thing we could do wrong is offer someone we’ve just met a judgmental attitude or unwanted advice. (See also Tip #8) If we’re honest with ourselves, there’s a little Pharisee deep down inside us all. The Spirit of God is the one who changes hearts, not us. The Spirit works in a person’s life over a long time. Our job is to welcome them, love them, and therefore creating a warm place where God’s Spirit can work.

3. WE REVERE THE BLESSING TO BE RECEIVED FROM OUR GUEST.

St. Benedict taught that the monk at the door should be ready to give and *receive* a blessing from the guest.⁵ He didn’t come up with this all on his own. Throughout the bible, the guest is thought to have a blessing to give the host. They are the angels we entertain, often unaware.

- ❖ Abraham offered a meal in the desert to three strangers, and received a promise that he would have a son.
- ❖ Jesus was a guest at a wedding, and blessed his host by turning water into wine when the supply ran dry.
- ❖ Rahab showed hospitality to some spies from Israel, and became the host who was blessed, as she and her household were saved when Israel invaded her city.

The Bible is filled with stories of hosts who are blessed by their guests.

Tip # 8: What does God want me to learn from this person?

I’ve learned so much from guests over the year. About professions I’d never heard of. About life situations I’d never lived. I’ve learned about how people from a different generation or culture experience life. It’s all been good!

The goal of the initial conversation(s) is to learn *from* the person, and learn *about* the person. Nothing communicates welcome better than genuine interest. It also gives you the information needed to tailor the welcome to their situation. I visit churches frequently. One time, in learning this fact, a woman declared to me that “You should commit to one church, that’s how you get the most out of church.” She hadn’t taken the time to learn more about why I frequently visit churches. I declined at that point from telling her, because I didn’t want her to be embarrassed. The conversation stalled. This story also illustrates Tip #7—leave judgment to God.

4. WE BEST SERVE OUR GUEST BY TOTAL SYSTEM THINKING

Welcoming is hard work, and requires looking at the life of the church in totality. It means looking at what happens on Sunday morning... in Sunday school with the children...in worship with adults...on the patio or other open mingling spaces. It means looking beyond the Sunday morning experience. What happens at every event in the life of the church? It’s about creating an inviting and initiating culture at all levels and times. This is the adaptive learning. It may mean Sunday school teachers are trained not

⁵ Pineda, “Hospitality.” 32-34.

just to teach the class, but to interact in welcoming ways with new children and their parents. It means cooperation between ministry areas and different staff and volunteers.

Tip #9: *Develop an I² culture—Initiating and Inviting.*

Encourage a culture where people are initiating conversation, and inviting people to...go get that cup of “fellowship hour” coffee together. Encourage a culture where people also invite others into deeper relationship, through joining a small group, coming to a church event or having coffee/meal together outside of church. This is especially important behavior for members to inculcate. People think that clergy or staff members are greeting them because they’re simply paid to do so. It speaks volumes when a volunteer does so.

Encourage people to engage in initiating and inviting behavior at all times and all places:

- At all church events
- At all community events
- When picking kids up for church programs

We all tend to come to events and hang out with people we know. If you find yourself at church events over and over again eating and socializing with people you know well---take this as a loving rebuke. Initiate eating and socializing with people who are new or whom you don’t know well. Every time you set foot on this church campus---you should have your antennae up for new or lesser known people.

Many people don’t think of children/youth programs as key times for welcoming new adults, but often that’s where new people are found. They may not be involved in much else, but they are found dropping off their son/daughter for youth group or waiting to pick them up. These are great times to engage in conversation.

The church I attend models this well. At an all church weekend camp the two MCs (Master of Ceremony) talked and joked about “hosting” each other throughout the whole weekend. The weekend fell right after the 2008 summer Olympics. They made Olympic participation the theme of “hosting” and encouraged everyone to be “champion hosts.” They started off the first large group session explaining what it means to “host.” Then they asked for those who’d never been to all church camp before to stand. They gave the new people an Olympic medal necklace so everyone could see who’s new (which works at an event, don’t try on Sunday morning—too intimidating.) They asked everyone to host these people standing. Then they asked the new people to host other people as well. They continued to remind us to host one another through the entire weekend. This made it so easy to just walk up and meet someone new. They intentionally created a hospitable culture.

Tip #10: *For Sunday morning, think from car and back again.*

What is it like for a guest from the minute they leave their car, find where the kids go, attend service and go back to the car again?

Check List:

- ✓ Is it easy to find the bathrooms?
- ✓ Is it easy to figure out where the kids go?
- ✓ Is it possible to find a seat if you're late?*
- ✓ Is it possible to find parking if you're late?
- ✓ Are there other people designated for welcoming besides the "ushers" and clergy/staff?
- ✓ Does the bulletin explain where kids go?
- ✓ Does the bulletin explain your church's traditions regarding children in worship/Sunday school? (e.g. The first Sunday of the month children 4th grade on up go to worship for communion, the other Sundays they go directly to their Sunday school.)
- ✓ Is the bulletin designed for those who know absolutely nothing? (e.g. The Lord's Prayer is written out in the bulletin.)
- ✓ Is the bulletin filled with "church-speak"? e.g. narthex, wise-owls. Could we spell things out better?⁶
- ✓ Do people have to walk too far to get the cup of coffee that makes it possible for them to stand around and socialize? Could we serve the coffee where people naturally come out of the service and mingle?
- ✓ How bad is our coffee and do we have real cream? (Or do we at least offer the liquid fake creamer instead of the powdered? My personal pet-peeve. Powdered creamer tastes ghastly!)

Many churches have a "welcome table" for guests, where they can get information and receive a simple gift. This can be effective, but still leaves the onus for initiation on the guest. More effective might be to have some "roving greeters," those who are roving around and greeting new people, looking for lost people and helping them find where their child goes, etc. It's very helpful for these roving greeters to not get involved in lengthy conversations with one person, but introduce guests to others. (see Tip #4)

*Encourage members to sit in the sanctuary in a way that creates a welcoming space. For example, sit in the middle of the row in order to leave convenient seats on the edge. Or sit toward the front or middle of the sanctuary so there are convenient places to sit at the back. (Remember, guests tend to come late). This is an example where hospitality involves everyone in the congregation. Even something as simple as how the regular members sit in the sanctuary offers a welcome or put-off. Scott Cormode tells the story of attending worship in a small congregation, and sitting in a woman's "pew." Though her pew was usually empty, she didn't want anyone to sit there for the rare occasions when her family would be joining her.⁷ This classic story illustrates the adaptive nature of the learning needed from all people within a congregation. Seeing the adaptive learning as part of the spiritual practice of hospitality is helpful, and could be more motivating than just "making room for new people."

The more that welcoming people can be rooted with a larger practice of hospitality, the more people can experience this learning as growth in their faith. Patterns will develop that are less dependent on programmatic solutions, and more naturally knit into the DNA of the congregation and its behaviors.

⁶ Andrew Weeks, *Welcome: Tools and Techniques for New Member Ministry* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 1992), 1-13. Weeks provides tools for doing sign, property and print/bulletin "audits."

⁷ Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville: Abingdon 2006).

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Appendix A: Quick Tip Sheet

Tip #1: *Remember that your guest is more vulnerable than you.*

Tip #2: *Train your members in the “5 minute” rule—look for guest to greet within the first 5 minutes after the service ends.*

Tip #3: *“Are you new to the church, or just new to me?”*
(The 50-million dollar question!)

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Appendix B: Welcome Gifts

Generic Gifts:

- A book or booklet
- A candle with a verse (Jesus' "I am the light of the world") and church name
- A candle in a simple candle holder
- A serenity kit: Sea shells, candle, devotional booklet (OK, very feminine, but lots of guests are women!)
- A pen with church name and simple "You matter to God." Or some other short statement
- A Starbuck's gift card for one latte

Gift Bag for Children:

Today's parents are more child-centered in their decision making. This means that their child's experience will play a large role in their decision regarding future church attendance. They may try another church, or they may just continue their pattern of non-church attendance after one bad experience. A gift bag specifically designed for children can help that experience be positive, and can be given out in worship or in Sunday school class. The routine of giving out the bag helps teachers remember to warmly greet new children. The idea is to find a colorful small bag and fill it with inexpensive, age appropriate trinkets. Enlist parents with kids various ages to help figure this out. Oriental Trading Company has lots of this stuff, to be purchased in bulk. www.OrientalTrading.com

Some ideas:

- A small box of raisins (for young children)
- A small candy or little store-bought bag of cookie/snacks (for older children)
- A pen with church name on it
- A fun little toy
- A colorful pencil or little pack of crayons
- A brochure about the church (for the adult!)

Welcome Packet

Great variety exists regarding how to go about this. There are standard packets that can be purchased as the shell with which you can fill in with particulars.⁸ Simple yet elegant is the way to go. A church brochure is a necessary filler. Flyers about specific programs are helpful, but if they contain date specific information, there needs to be a mechanism for updating this. Better to leave that out if there is no system for updating. Googling "visitor welcome packet" will produce different sites to explore and learn from.⁹

If you make it a bag, it can be filled with a gift. Usually a folder can still fit a pen, and pens are good because people tend to keep pens.

⁸ <http://www.ijgraphics.com/specials.htm> (Just one example.)

⁹ http://www.ag.org/top/office_of_public_relations/articles/200405_visitorpacket_long.cfm This is a helpful site from the Assemblies of God.

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