

Words on Welcome: Observations/Comments on Radical Hospitality
by Susan Bremiller

Due to two long-distance moves, I recently found myself in the unenviable position of searching for a new church home twice in the past 18 months. I've considered solely Episcopal churches because I was baptized in one, and because of the lovely signs in every town promising "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." As it turns out, each specific church seems to have its own concept or degree of welcome.

Church of the Truly Radical Welcome

I had moved to a different state and the first church home I found was through their website which promised radical acceptance and hospitality, and I was not disappointed. I first noticed the building and then decided to visit their exquisite formal garden and labyrinth which is open to the public. When I finally got up the nerve to attend my first Sunday service (newly arrived in town, I literally knew no one.), I was noticed and warmly welcomed immediately by a member of the congregation who firmly led my socially-intimidated self around by the elbow, introducing me to every member of the congregation we encountered. I was greeted warmly and with interest by all, and most folks earnestly invited me to the coffee hour after the service. She then invited me to sit by her, and helped guide and instruct me through the service. Later, staying for coffee was really not an option, and I was warmly ushered into the church.

Church A: Church of the Unguided

Having more self-confidence this time around, when I first attended I actively sought out others, introducing myself and explaining my search for a new church home. I was warmly welcomed by a number of parishioners, who introduced me to others. Some have become good friends and have remained so even after my novelty as the new girl has worn off. This church lacks a rector, however, and though the search continues for another, I definitely notice how the lack of a central leader effects all church activities (and lack thereof) in myriad ways. People tend to be very task-oriented and rather insular: Yes, the community meal gets served, the vestry keeps the bills paid and the building functioning; the music director and the choir function (beautifully!); but what are lacking are vision, and energy, and direction for the future. We need the inspiration of a capable and charismatic leader to motivate and inspire the sub-groups to function as a team, and to expand our concepts of what more or else our Church can be or do. Cliques/sections/committees of a church do not a church make. We are sheep, albeit dedicated, highly capable and functional groups of sheep, without a shepherd. Though I attend and feel a member here because of my love for and friendship with the people, I am concerned about and frustrated by the on-going lack of leadership. So I've looked into other local options, and this is what I've found:

Church B: Church of the Oblivious

Arriving early, I went downstairs to search for the restrooms. I encountered a group of senior ladies seated and chatting around a table. No one noticed or spoke to me even though I clearly didn't know my way around: Finally I meekly interrupted and asked where the facilities were. Without stopping her conversation, one of them merely pointed towards a door. When I was finished I went back upstairs. I was not approached by the usher or given a program, but after looking around a bit I approached him and asked where the holy water was. (In the Episcopal churches I had been in, there had been a vessel containing such near the entrance.) He said, "Oh, we don't do that, that's a Catholic thing!" His comment made me feel like an idiot, and that was the extent of his welcome. I took a seat for a few

minutes, but after being unnoticed by all the entering congregants, I panicked, fled, and raced back down the street to Church A. Their service started 30 minutes later, and at least there I was visible!

Church C: Church of the Numerous

I haven't yet had the courage to make it to Church C. Here's why: According to its website it's one of the largest congregations in the diocese, boasting 6 weekly services, 3 (three!) choirs, 4 clergy, 2 organist/choirmasters, 8 other employees, 4 pages of downloadable maps for visitor's convenience, and a partridge in a pear tree! I guess without the maps a new-comer might risk wandering lost on the 8 acres in search of a restroom, requiring the intervention of Search and Rescue teams. They also have Madrigal dinners...I have no idea what these actually are, but the photos show smiling folks in renaissance costume. Anyway, for an introverted girl with self-confidence issues from a VERY small town I'll probably stay home and succumb to the televangelists before I got up the nerve to try and find a parking spot at this place!

I'm hoping that this bumpy journey of mine may provide some useful insights for those of you who might be interested in attracting and retaining new members. Here are my humble suggestions for Radical Hospitality:

1. First impressions are important. Many prospective members will check out a church's website to acquire information before even visiting the church. Please make sure it is simple, but appealing, and expresses what you intend. Most importantly, make sure it is up-to-date regarding service times, the church calendar, and activities. I'm embarrassed to say that Church A's website was outdated and inaccurate when I first attended 6 months ago and has yet to be updated.
2. Have a number of folks, a committee even, to identify and personally welcome visitors. This need not be overly-complicated. Make conversation, be gently inquisitive (without seeming intrusive) about the circumstances bringing them to your church on that day. Have something like a simple little gift bag to give out, maybe including a scented candle, a booklet describing simply the history of the church, our faith, and our beliefs. Definitely include a card they can fill out with their personal information and return in the collection plate if they would like someone to contact them. Make sure someone is designated to follow up! Offer a specific contact person & phone number to field any questions that might arise. Maybe offer to assign a mentor/sponsor-type person, not just to answer questions, but to let the newcomer know about upcoming activities they might be interested in. Personally invite them to a concert outing or to help at the church supper. Newcomers can be shy, or tentative...I certainly was.
3. After the service, invite them to stay for coffee. Aggressively! Don't take maybe for an answer! Then escort them back personally and keep them company/captive, and introduce them around. Don't let them get cornered by the hard-of-hearing older member who will torture them with bombastic tirades regarding church politics! And beware of the special interest sub-groups aggressively promoting their own limited/exclusive agenda: they can be off-putting in their enthusiasm and inquisitiveness.
4. If/when they return, greet them again, and tell them you're glad they came back. If they miss a week, tell them you missed them and that you're glad to see them again.

5. Don't assume they know about or understand concepts or symbolism that may seem familiar to you. They might be of an entirely different faith, or of no particular faith, seeking knowledge and information. Explain things if you're not sure they understand.

(I remember my first advent season at the church where I was welcomed after decades away from church, my faith, and the bible. The priest had set up what she called "Jesse's Tree" in the back of the church, and had handed out ornaments representing individual members of Jesus' family: we were to go up and place them on the tree. I had no idea what she was talking about, but never shy about brandishing my ignorance, I said to her, "Did Jesse bring in the tree?", referring to a member of our congregation named Jesse. She laughed and without making me feel like a complete idiot, recounted the story of the Jesse tree to me. So, if someone, new or otherwise, asks a question, please answer it without sounding superior and making them feel dumb. People do not feel welcome in a place where people make them feel stupid for trying to learn. They will leave and not come back.)

6. In general, make all inquiries feel welcome. I asked and continue to ask about the vestry and their function for instance, or what the process is for finding a new rector.

7. Invite newcomers to meetings (vestry, committee), group work days, social functions, bible study, outreach activities etc. I would have loved to have been invited to such to get an idea of how church structure functions.

8. And Please, Please, if they offer to volunteer say unequivocally and enthusiastically, "Yes, we'd love your help!" as opposed to vaguely murmuring "Well, we've kinda got that handled." Embrace their efforts and offers to serve, and consider it your gift and obligation to them to make them feel important and needed.

(Some folks seem to be rather territorial about their duties, or maybe just unaccustomed to having extra help. And this is my experience with churches and other social groups: Often a great deal of the work is done by a relatively few number of individuals who are functioning on autopilot. Often these individuals complain about doing all the work, but are the most reluctant to accept help when it is offered. I've heard such people actually say, "It's more trouble to train someone than to just do it myself."

At our church suppers some people complain when there are too many volunteers, in my case, I happen to be single, unemployed, new to the area, and empty-nesting: I'm very eager/a little desperate to be more involved in church activities as a way to serve God and build connections with people. At the church I attend now I find I am haranguing people on a regular basis in an effort to get them to let me help, to be involved. I beg folks, some of them repeatedly, including one of our visiting priests, the office folks, the cooking folks, 3 or 4 members of the vestry, and the outreach ministry lady, pleading for some way to be useful. I should not have to be imploring people to include me, to accept my service.)

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