

Friendly, Yes; Welcoming and Hospitable, No

CHARLENE J. SMITH



SITTING ON A NEW YORK SUBWAY TRAIN was a young teenager no more than fifteen years old, precariously holding a newborn infant. I overheard her tell someone that the baby was only a few days old. Less than a week old and the mother had this tiny thing, my guess is, no more than five and a half pounds on a subway train. Although it was a warm day, the baby had no blanket, no shoes, and nothing on her head. The mother was just a child herself. Nevertheless, she looked at the child with love and affection. And doing what she could, she was being protective of the baby. However, the way she was holding the baby, you could tell that no one had showed her how to properly hold an infant. Did she have any idea how those few minutes of pleasure would change her life forever? I couldn't help wonder if she herself had been born to a teen mother. I thought about the cycle. Children with no parenting skills having children, raising children to raise children when no one has any idea about how to handle a child, much less the responsibilities of a parent. All they know is that a child is born, and they are now a part of their life.

Our churches are much like this young girl and the cycle of dysfunction. Churches decide they are going to concentrate on gaining new members. Oftentimes the reason for increased membership is not based on their mission or mandate to bring new souls to Christ but to be larger than the church down the street or to increase the budget.

Therefore we see many churches and generations of Christians thinking that they are friendly and in reality not being welcoming or hospitable.

Churches get high on the idea of church growth. They develop extensive programs to reach out to the unchurched, dechurched, and overchurched. They strategically place signs around the neighborhood with directions to the church. Visitor parking

spaces are identified next to the handicapped spaces, parking-lot greeters are in place, rain or shine, cheerfully directing the visitor to the entrance and describing the person they should see to fill out a visitor card. Signs are placed with directions to the sanctuary, church office, rest rooms, and other key areas of the church. The bulletin boards are updated weekly. The inside greeters ask if they can worship with the visitors and sit with them while explaining the nuances of the service that are not clearly spelled out in the bulletin. Other members of the church smile and welcome the visitor with a friendly handshake and a genuine kind word. The visitor is given a bag of popcorn and asked to "pop back in." Fellowship hour finds more people coming over and introducing themselves and holding conversations. The visitor is introduced to other members of the church that might have similar interests.

The church members feel good about themselves and pat themselves on the back. They really are the friendliest church in the town, in the state, maybe the entire denomination. They certainly know how to be friendly to visitors and potential members.

Unfortunately more often than not the members, although making a conscious attempt to be friendly are not hospitable. They have no idea how to make the visitor-turned-member feel truly welcome and even less of an idea of how to be hospitable and make them feel immediately wanted and welcomed into the family.

When a child has a child, there are times when the child-parent wants and needs the attention that must be given to the infant. In families with multiple children, sibling rivalry exists. This is a fact of life. No matter how hard the parents try to prepare the older children for the arrival of the new baby, there will come a time when the siblings resent the

attention given to the baby. Too often we in the church are the child-parent who needs attention or we are the older sibling, feeling jealous and resentful of this intrusion into the family.

We have done such a good job of being friendly that we give the new member the idea that they are welcomed into the family. However, in reality the new member has just been allowed to sit as a spectator in our show. We want to remain the star, chairing the committees, doing things the way they have

always have been done, and maintaining control over all aspects of church life. The attitude that prevails is that we are the empowered ones who have paid our dues and deserve to hold the offices we hold. We really are the only ones in the entire church who can effectively do the job we are doing. The new member is just that—new. They don't know anything about the church. They don't know how the church should be run. Therefore their job is to sit back and praise us and build up our self-esteem. Besides, hospitality is the responsibility of the committee that organizes the potluck.

People coming into churches today have many corporate and secular skills that would be extremely beneficial to the ministries of the church. It is the responsibility of the entire congregation to assist them in their spiritual growth and to accept them as equal members, integrating them into full involvement in the life and ministries of the church.

Somewhere along the line we have lost the mandate from Christ to be disciples and to make disciples. In some instances we have stopped being disciples and have become only church members. Somehow we no longer see the need for any changes in the way the church functions because we are comfortable with how the church is run. After all, we are in control. The church needs to grow in numbers but not in ministries. With this mindset, our churches run into a situation where we have a revolving door. New members come in and leave disillusioned and discouraged with church.

Our society has changed; our clothes have changed; our ways of communicating has changed. But we have not changed our approach to ministry or how the church functions. Now is the time to

look at hospitality as an ongoing function of church life.

To break this cycle and to become a truly hospitable church, the desire and responsibility must be owned by the entire church. It is the responsibility of the whole church to develop welcoming techniques to become hospitable.

Church leaders, lay and clergy alike, must be consciously aware of the jealous feelings that arise in our churches when new members speak up and want to become involved. Frequently people feel pushed out and overlooked over the ideas of the new kids on the block. Just as when a new child is born, sibling rivalry in the church becomes a reality. As a visitor you were allowed to sit in my seat. As a new member you are told that that is my seat. This is just one of the unconscious examples of how we act towards new members and live out our fears and insecurities as church leaders.

One of the many qualities of strong leadership in the church, beginning with the pastor and including the entire leadership of the congregation, is being able to walk that fine line between the old and the new, constantly empowering both groups to be active in the church and to continue to grow spiritually with a solid scriptural base. We must be rooted in reality, improving on the present paradigm while stepping into the future, creating and designing tomorrow's church with new paradigms.

As Christians in growing churches, opening our hearts and minds to and welcoming change is necessary. The mission of the ministry does not change, only the way in which we express and carry out our mission and some of our vision objectives will change. Adopting the attitude of the hungry mother with a hungry child, the hungry mother takes care of the needs of the child first; the seasoned Christians willingly empowers and supports the ideas, suggestions, and leadership of the new member.

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So, what are some of the things that churches can do to become more welcoming and hospitable?

1. Pray. Every thing in the church should begin with prayer; therefore we must be in intentional prayer for the church, ourselves, the ministries that are taking place in the name of God, and for the integration of the new members into the fold.
2. Ask the church to pray for new members.
3. Assign a prayer partner who will contact the new members and pray with them daily.
4. Someone other than the pastor should telephone the new members during the week to welcome them into the congregation.
5. Send the new members a welcome card or letter signed by the pastor and church moderator.
6. Have new-member classes.
7. Have a member of the various ministries contact a new member to explain the mission and mandate of the committee and invite the new member to the next meeting.
8. Introduce the new member to other parishioners each Sunday for a least a month.
9. Socialize with the new members during the fellowship hour.
10. Send e-mail messages or telephone with information about the church activities and mission programs for at least a month.
11. Be open to new suggestions, ideas, and ministries and support them.

12. Provide leadership-training sessions for persons interested in becoming more involved in the life of the church.

13. Be willing to step back to allow the new member to chair a program or ministry.

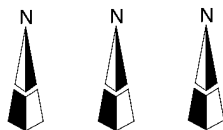
14. Mentor the new member in an area of ministry that is interesting to them.

This is not a comprehensive list but suggestions on how to develop a positive climate for spiritual growth and hospitality.

We have the opportunity to break the cycle of dysfunction in our churches. It takes an open mind and respect for all persons, whether young or old, new members or seasoned Christians. When we let everyone know that their opinions are welcomed, appreciated, taken seriously, are vital to the over all ministry of the church and the future existence of the church, they will feel welcomed and excited about participating in the total life of the church.

Our churches will no longer pride themselves on being friendly but will know that because of prayer and being in tuned with God they are welcoming and hospitable places for all of God's children.

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See previous E-word resource packets for more information on welcome and hospitality.

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