

Being a Truly Welcoming Church

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IT IS OUR TASK AS NEW century church folks to remind ourselves that we are called to call others, whomever, to the table that Christ shares. We are called to receive those who are perceived as unapproachable, unclean, to welcome those who claim differing cultures, traditions, and exhibit differing priorities and hopes than the majority of those present in our churches today. Young and old, the poor as well as the affluent are called and should be welcome. We are called to receive those who are fearful, abused, those who have been betrayed and left out. Race or orientation should not matter. Those wounded by other churches are called too. It is our call to let the outsider, inside. It is our duty as people of faith in our day.

This command of Christ to welcome all is not the impossible work we make it out to be. It is faithful work though, to be sure. It is work that has benefit to those who are called and to us in the United Church of Christ. It is the work of dissolving the fears and anxiety that the world brings.

In the church that I recently served, Faith UCC, Dayton, Ohio, we decided to welcome all in any and all ways that we saw that we could. We made the building less a hindrance to people differently abled. We used music from various traditions. We kept the pipe organ and received a Hammond that was donated, too. We updated the older sound system, improved the lighting, and put some fresh paint on the walls. We developed programs for children and started activities that we thought would be fun for various ages. Each thing we did was with the notion of welcome at its core. These were steps of faith.

Many of our churches today should consider opening themselves to all, before it feels congregationally too late. To be open to all and mean all, felt bold for us. The question was, should we hang on to our past, to what felt draining, with the ways we had known or be bold in our future? The question seemed hard until we quickly realized that being open, inviting, and welcoming was really not as hard as we collectively imagined it would be for us to do. It was spiritually right, the right thing to do.

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We studied the biblical text to understand our fears. We talked about our anxieties in workshops that were sometimes blunt and sharp in tone. We offered our worship as moments for us to cast the fears and the anxieties we held, out of the church that we loved. We weighed the fact that we very well could have lost our corporate life, but if we succeeded we would gain enormously in our corporate and, more importantly to us, spiritual lives. We determined that to be fearlessly open was a result, a gift of generations past speaking to us, saying to us in and through the history of the United Church of Christ, that it was our sacred turn to raise the bar of faithfulness and be witnesses of a faith that is alive and wholly dependent upon God's sustaining love. We determined that whatever gifts and skills we lacked, would come as new people came into our midst.

To say we were "open to all" was easy. It took a few decisive congregational votes to affirm our faithful determination, but became challenging when we welcomed two men who ventured into our church one Sunday morning soon after. Advertising our new faith determination in the local paper and producing a visitor tape of the Faith Church experience were attempts to define ourselves for ourselves, resulting in visitors being present. Ready or not, it was now time to walk the talk we had pon-

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dered and proposed earlier. We were now different. One or two visitors joined per month, out of the six plus visitors who came per month. Most of those who joined, came to us by confession of faith. By God's grace, we all felt different. We celebrated that we could feel something different, and named it the presence of God among us. We knew we were somehow better.

The two men came to Faith Church from the community that surrounded the church. Most of the members were from beyond the area of the church, having lived in the vicinity many years before. Debilitating change was the result of suburban flight. One man was white and the other black. They came together, as a couple. They came after searching for a place to call their church home. They came into our midst with humility, but expecting more rejection by yet another church community. It was courageous for them to venture in through our doors. I am thankful that one of the oldest members of the church smiled and welcomed them warmly.

Later we found out that they came to us from a church that drew mostly gay people. They decided that they wanted a church that talked about life and vitality, not just gay issues, but the struggles of humanity and life, justice. The church they knew was burying so many due to the horror of HIV/AIDS, and that particular ministry was not offering a sense of life even in the midst of death around them. They revealed to us several Sundays afterward that both men had contracted the disease years earlier; we again welcomed them.

After visiting for over two months, they decided to join the church. It was a day of celebration for all of us. Not only was our celebration for their presence, but also for the evidence of God moving among us in new ways. They had endeared themselves to us quickly and now were saying yes to God and to us. Quickly they assumed the work of the church as their own. When they spoke, told their unique stories, we sought to listen. They taught us, and we shared our stories with them. Their story, we found, became our story. One of the men is now the president of the congregation, delighted to use his considerable gifts in service to the Christ.

From that moment of these two men's entrance into the life of Faith Church, the church was experiencing real, not imagined, renewal. We knew it because it looked different, more real. It was somehow more faithful. People were excited about coming to church again and being the church in this day and generation. The older members provided wisdom and increased their financial commitment. The young gave energy and time for the task now emerging. The middle-aged people offered vitality, stability, and needed leadership for our common walk of faith, in partnership with all others. Faith Church was being faithful rather than floundering. As a pastor, I was gratified to witness a congregation's faith come alive, to be a partner/leader in this church's life.

Many more people with a variety of stories have come to Faith Church since those early days. When they have received similar welcome, often they have joined too. It is expected of all who are members of the church now. "Welcome others as you have been welcomed" became a covenant among the people. "All are welcome, and we do mean all!" became the church's mantra. The church has tripled in size since that time of decision. It is the spiritual mandate of the church to be open to all, to sincerely welcome all. The decision was easy, the work was hard, but the rewards have been spiritually tremendous.

Go and welcome all into the life of your church. Do it your own way, but do it! The benefit will be exciting, life-giving. Welcome all in the spirit of Jesus Christ and the great commission that has been left to us through the holy book. Uniquely, the UCC ought welcome in the spirit that reminds that our goal is still making all one, all welcome at our table. The table itself should be set for a feast. We should expect people will come, if we sincerely invite. Evangelism is not about preserving our prestige or wallowing in or protecting our self-interests. It is not being passive and silent, but boldly vocal and engaging. Evangelism today is about our need to build bridges for all and for whomever to cross. Let us bind up our wounds, take a few responsible risks for Christ, and share our faith with others. Demonstrate the substance of our faith in ways that welcome. Be the evangelist, grow your church.



To find ways to bind wounds, take risks for Christ, and be a truly hospitable church, contact:

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