

THE WELCOMING CHURCH
Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, New Jersey
The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes Him who sent me ...” (Matthew 10:40). What a powerful statement concludes the “missionary commission” in Matthew’s Gospel today. We are invited to think about what it means to be a welcoming Church, a welcoming community, a welcoming Christian today.

I was with a group of clergy this week. You know what clergy do when they get together, don’t you? We gossip about you, the laity! One priest shared a conversation that he overheard in front of his Church. A visitor came up to a parishioner and said, “What a beautiful Church you have!” The parishioner responded, “Yes, the Church is beautiful, but the people inside aren’t!” Is that the kind of reputation we want? Or is there something better for us to be? The Gospel points us towards something else today!

Craig Kocher (Pulpit Resource, June, 2005) talks about the Ministry of Hospitality. He points out that it is essential to be a welcoming person in order to be a Christian. Think about it. We are part of a Christian community that is called to respond to God’s grace. As Christians, we are to extend that grace to all people, especially those who are need.

Yesterday, the Vestry spent time composing a draft of a five-year plan. A significant part of the plan is growing the Church. If we are going to continue to grow, we have to be a welcoming Church. It is not enough to just open the doors and expect people to rush in! We have to earn a reputation for being those Christians who are caring and welcoming and invite people to become part of the community.

When people come to Church, the Holy Spirit has moved them. Something has happened to them, moved in their life to move them towards Church. Maybe a friend has invited them to come. Maybe some life experience has gotten them thinking about being part of a faith community. Whatever it is, God is prompting them to seek us out. The question is, what will they find when they get here? How will they be treated?

How many times have we visited some Church? We come in and take a seat ... only to have a parishioner come down the aisle and glare at us ... because we are sitting in their pew! So much for a warm reception! Or maybe worse, how many times have we visited a Church, only to be ignored the whole service?

Several years ago, on my sabbatical, I took the opportunity to visit 16 different Episcopal Churches. I went in my “civvies” to experience different parishes. When I encountered was amazing. Out of the 16 Churches I visited, I was completely ignored at 13 of them! No one spoke to me; no one expressed interest to me. I even tried a few coffee hours and met the same icy reception! Most of the ushers didn’t even speak to me ... they just threw the bulletins at me! It was pathetic! No wonder we are not growing our Churches!

Only three Churches expressed interest in me. Only a few made me feel welcomed and at home. Only three Churches made me feel that I wanted to come back! The first one was St. Andrew’s in Camden. This is a Hispanic congregation. I sat in the back of the Church. The service started, and I soon found my meager Spanish was not enough to

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keep up. A man came back and spoke to me in Spanish. I smiled and said in English that my Spanish was lacking. He sat with me and helped me follow the service. Fr. Guzman pointed out that a visiting clergy person, me, was in the congregation! The man blushed, but I thanked him profusely for his help. This was a welcoming Church.

The next positive experience was St. Barnabas Church in Wilmington, Delaware. I had gotten the service times off the Internet ... but they had moved to their summer schedule. I arrived an hour early for the service. I took the bulletin and literature, read, prayed and mediated. The people started coming for the service. An elderly woman came down the aisle and looked at me. I thought to myself, "Oh no! I'm sitting in her pew!" She took the pew ahead of me, knelt, prayed and turned to me. "Are you visiting us today?" she asked. After I answered yes, she introduced herself as "Martha" and asked if there was anything she could do to help me! I was pleasantly surprised by her kindness!

During the service, Martha pointed out things to me. At the peace, she introduced me to the eight or nine people sitting around me! After the service, she took me by the hand and introduced me to the Rector! She briefly excused herself, and I confessed to the Rector that I was a visiting clergy person! Martha returned and asked to take me to coffee hour. Now that was hospitality!!! Did I feel welcomed? You bet I did!

The third Church I would mention is the Cathedral in Philadelphia. This time, my family joined me. We arrived at the Cathedral and a tall, gray haired man greeted us at the steps. He asked if we were visiting. Next, he introduced me to the Senior Warden. The Warden introduced me to the ushers. The ushers gave us bulletins, briefly explained the unique service and offered to take us on a tour of the cathedral after the service! We took our seats, and the Director of Music came up and introduced himself! A Vestry person, another staff person and a "greeter" came up to us! Wow! Now that's a welcome!

The ministry of hospitality is such an easy and little thing to do. We all can do this ministry. It is a means of extending God's love to others. We need to remember that our guests are seekers. They are looking for God and we can help them find God! We can meet them, greet them, talk with them and make them feel part of the service and community. Remember that the Spirit is at work here. The ministry of hospitality talks about getting to know people.

I have asked you all to wear nametags today. Look around the Church ... do you know all these wonderful characters gathered here today? No? You have an opportunity to get to know some wonderful people. Take time to introduce yourself today. There is a risk involved here, and we have to be a little vulnerable. But with kindness and generosity we can grow in our knowledge of each other.

Now, the worse thing that might happen is this ... you introduce yourself to someone you don't know ... you ask them how long they have been coming to Grace Church ... and you find out there have been here 50 or more years! Don't worry about this! It is will

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happen a few times, but take the risk! Get to know the people here! The next step is to greet every new comer who comes through the door in the same manner.

There is a promise for us if we can be this welcoming community. We gain connection with each other ... and with God! The ministry of hospitality takes our small efforts and transforms ... both the visitor and us. We learn more about the presence of God in these little acts!

The ministry of hospitality is for all people. In my last parish, there was a family with a little girl who had Downs Syndrome. They were afraid to come to Church. When they came, they sat in the back. They were afraid the people wouldn't accept their handicapped child. I encouraged them to come and say. The little girl's name was Lydia. I remember how she loved to love in the pews. At the peace, she would rush down the center aisle and throw her arms around my legs! Lydia got it ... she understands that God wants us to show each other kindness and love. We can learn from those who visit us.

Jesus tells us today that whoever welcomes another welcomes him. When people come into Church, we need to greet them as if it was Jesus Christ himself ... because one day ... it will be him. The ministry of hospitality is made up of the small efforts we make. It begins with us reaching out to get to know those sitting around us. It continues with welcoming the stranger who comes through the door. If we are going to grow this Church, it depends on our being the welcoming presence of fellow seekers. Let's start today to make Grace Church that welcoming place. Let's make the transformation real in our lives ... today! You never know who we might me!