



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

#46 – October 2014

A Royal Welcome: Some Secrets of Belonging (Update I)

A while ago, [GEMS #3 through #9](#) and [#15 through #18](#) explored the role of welcome and hospitality within parish life as well as specifically in adult faith formation. Since welcome is such a crucial part of who we are, periodically these **GEMS** newsletters will reflect again on the topic. This is the first of these Updates.

Hospitality is the virtue which allows us
to break through the narrowness of our own fears
and to open our houses to the stranger,
with the intuition that salvation comes to us
in the form of a tired traveler.
Hospitality makes anxious disciples
into powerful witnesses,
makes suspicious owners into generous givers,
and makes close-minded sectarians
into interested recipients of new ideas and insights.

Henri J. M. Nouwen
in *Ministry and Spirituality*

In 2011, Bishop Howard Hubbard, at the time the bishop of Albany, New York, wrote several columns about social forces and cultural factors in the contemporary milieu which have contributed to the decline of faith practice in the United States.

In response to these articles, he received some feedback, noting that he neglected to acknowledge ways in which the Church itself has contributed to the alienation of many of its members and to its lack of appeal, especially to younger people.

Thus, in an October 6, 2011 column, Bishop Hubbard wrote of some of the Church's failings which his respondents had noted, along with some of his views about how the Church itself may be contributing to the alienation of Catholics.

One of the factors Bishop Hubbard explored was **an anemic parish life**:

“Parishes are meant to be places where people feel a sense of belonging and spiritual kinship; where theology comes alive; where the mysteries of birth, death and resurrection are regularly celebrated; where sacramental moments multiply as mysteriously as the bread and the fishes; where people are being nourished into an earthly image of the Body of Christ.

Yet many find parishes to be clique-ish. An insider crowd can develop, and some may feel that parish ministries are not open to them — especially newcomers, youth and young adults.

Some Catholics, relocating from one area to another, find it hard to connect and be accepted. Even long-time, active parishioners frequently find themselves being taken for granted, frozen out or ignored.

One woman wrote that she attended Mass regularly and was active in several parish ministries, including the parish's faith formation program. However, she became disillusioned with the Church's lack of strong opposition to the war in Iraq and, as a consequence, stopped attending Mass.

What stunned her was that, despite all of her active parish involvement, not one member of the parish staff or any parishioner ever reached out to acknowledge her absence, to ask if anything was wrong or to discuss the reasons for her non-attendance.

Another new parishioner had been attending weekly Mass for some time, yet no one ever welcomed or even spoke to him. One Sunday, he wore a hat and deliberately kept it on throughout the Mass. At one point, the presider sent the altar server to ask the usher to instruct the gentleman to remove his hat. ‘Thank God,’ the man replied to the usher. ‘I’ve been coming to this parish every week for the past six months, and it’s taken this ploy with the hat to get someone to acknowledge my presence.’

Many long-term parishioners understandably and appropriately treasure their parish roots, even using the term ‘family.’ But surely inclusiveness and

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hospitality should be high priorities in a parish without an erosion of this cherished identity and connectedness.”

The feelings described here aren't held only by adults who have been involved in church for many years or are searching to return.

In the [September 12, 2011 issue](#) of *America*, Jay Cormier, adjunct professor at St. Anselm College, Manchester, NH, recounts his experience of teaching the required freshman religion seminar. In spending the semester with these college students, he realized “Religion is not so much about believing as it is about belonging.”

When he assigned a reflection paper on “what parable of Jesus did you find most meaningful?” more than half wrote about Jesus’ admonitions on not judging others. Jay realized that this generation values acceptance, respect, welcoming.

The students were asked to design the “perfect” church setting. Jay was expecting more modern art and entertainment. “But what the students valued above all else was being welcomed, feeling that they had something valuable to contribute.” (“They also wanted liturgy that engaged them, prayer that enabled them to participate. And they wanted sermons that made sense on Monday morning.”)

...in these students I had the chance to see the future church. It will be a humbler and more welcoming church, a more engaged and engaging church, and, as a result, a more faithful and faith-filled church. ... that future church begins in our own church – now, here, today.

Jay Cormier in *America*, September 12, 2011

Many of these comments speak of being:

- welcomed and accepted
- spoken to
- known by name
- noticed and/or missed

- appreciated and valued for who they are and what they can contribute

In this Update we'll look at some reminders and some practices to make hospitality second-nature to who we are, to how we live in our parishes, responding to people's desire to go “where everyone knows your name.”

As we do this, two foundational principles which undergird our living of welcome and hospitality within the parish:

- Often when we think about – or look for resources for – hospitality, visitors and newcomers come to mind. As important as they are (and we'll look at some specific ideas on this theme in our December issue), **all people** need to feel welcomed. Sometimes we pay attention to the visitor, but ignore the faithful parishioners of 35 years.
- At times, too, we think that welcome and hospitality are the responsibility of the pastor, the staff, the greeters, the hospitality committee. It is; but hospitality is **the role of each and every person**. Those who “sit in the pews” are the best ambassadors for the parish. Some of the following ideas might be specifically addressed to particular people or groups; the main goal is to form a community in which each person lives hospitality (within the parish and within their 24/7 days).



Called by name. In *Vibrant Faith in the Congregation* by David W. Anderson (Vibrant Faith Publishing, 2011), this idea is shared. It is specifically about youth. How might we apply it to all parishioners?

“...his experience as pastor in a congregation in Florida. At one council meeting he projected pictures of all the seventh graders. It was a large congregation and there were scores of seventh graders. He asked that the council members call out the names of the youth as they appeared on the screen. About the only youth that were named were the ones who were children of council members. ...

How many adults would return to a congregation week after week if no one but their family members and closest friends called them by name? Probably not many. Why should we imagine that our youth feel like coming back week after week when nobody calls them by name either?”

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Train Greeters and Ushers. Train people in these ministries to introduce themselves by name and to learn the names of parishioners.

Some reminders for greeters and ushers:

- Your primary role is to welcome and converse with everyone, not just your friends.
- Watch your conversations which might be overheard by anyone: no complaining, criticizing, gossiping.
- When giving directions: take, don't point. Have you ever asked for directions to a product in a store and had the customer service agent walk with you until you reached the department which you needed? In most of our parishes, this kind of personal assistance only takes a minute. Don't point them in the direction of the nursery or restrooms, take them there.
- Make a point of introducing parishioners to one another.
- Be on the lookout for a bewildered look, being attentive for ways to help.
- Be aware of – read the body language of – people and avoid being “too friendly” to those who seem more reserved or prefer to remain anonymous.
- Greet people after liturgy (and after events) as well as when they are arriving.

You might want to develop distinct roles/job descriptions for greeters and ushers. One possible model:

- Greeters begin in the parking lot or on the sidewalk, seeing to the immediate comfort and needs of the parishioners and visitors. This may mean offering an umbrella, helping them get a wheelchair or stroller out of their car, pointing them to the drinking fountains and restrooms, and introducing them to an usher.
- The ushers then take on the role of seating people, providing them with worships aids/hymnals, introducing them to staff and other parishioners, and helping people find their way to the coffee hour or faith formation sessions.

- Encourage staff and liturgical ministers to be greeters who roam the church, the gathering space, refreshment areas and hallways, introducing themselves to parishioners they haven't met before.



Create a “special forces” greeter team. Invite as many parishioners as possible to be members of this team. Their task is to make sure they talk only to people they don't know for the first ten minutes after they arrive (at liturgy or a parish gathering) and for the first ten minutes after liturgy or gathering is over. Their primary role is to find people who seem disconnected and extend welcome and connection to them.



Adopt a “neighborhood.” Divide your church – and parish hall for gatherings – into sections. Invite various parish leaders (Parish Pastoral Council, Commissions and various committees, etc.) to “adopt” a section as their neighborhood. They commit to participate in the same weekend liturgy each week, sit in their neighborhood, and watch for new people and/or parishioners who might be alone.



Pay attention to the little things (which aren't always so little).

- Provide umbrella escorts from the parking lot in inclement weather.
- Place hand sanitizers around the building.
- Provide chairs in the women's restroom.
- Scatter comfortable seating in the gathering space(s).
- Provide name tags for everyone in the parish, not just newcomers and visitors.



Pay attention to the children.

- Greet them, not just their parents.
- Get down on their level when talking with them.
- Find out (and remember) their names.
- Give small children (who might not be going to the nursery or preschool) a small activity packet (with stickers, etc.)

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Teach about hospitality. Hospitality has always been a hallmark of Christianity, a call of the Gospel. Preaching about the theology and practice of hospitality reminds us, challenges us, because we realize that our promises about “seeking and serving Christ in all persons” can begin at coffee and doughnuts. A smile, a word, showing interest, noticing someone with respect can change a person’s day.

Since welcome and hospitality is the responsibility of each and every parishioner, take time to reflect on and teach ways and skills to be hospitable in the parish, at home, in the workplace. Infuse the ideas in various other themes of discipleship; spend some times to specifically highlight the call to be hospitable (in homilies, on the website, in the bulletin, etc.).

Invite parishioners to ask themselves: how welcoming am I?

- I greet people as I approach the church.
- I greet people in the gathering space of the church.
- I acknowledge people near me as I enter the pew.
- I often sit in a different place so that I can meet new people. (Being creatures of habit – and wanting to be comfortable – it’s easy to sit in the same place all the time. Sitting in different areas and introducing ourselves to new people genuinely contributes to a sense of hospitality.)
- At the Sign of Peace, I joyfully extend the peace of Christ to all those around me.
- When I see someone new at church, I
 - introduce myself
 - introduce the person to the presider of the liturgy
 - introduce the person to at least three other people
- I remember the rule of 3 to 1. I talk to three people whom I do not know for every person who is a friend or acquaintance.
- At parish gatherings, rather than sitting with people I know very well, I go to a table/area with people whom I do not yet know.
- At parish gatherings, I introduce people to other parishioners.

- I am sensitive to the needs of people with disabilities.
- When making plans to attend a parish event, I call someone else and invite them to go with me. I call the parish office and ask for the name of a new member, calling and inviting them.
- I engage in ministry and/or small group activity. Scripture groups, ministering as a catechist, serving at funeral luncheons, etc. are opportunities to serve as well as get to know others. Meeting new people, knowing people by name, goes a long way toward creating and sustaining a welcoming environment.

At times people are hesitant to introduce themselves to someone at church; sometimes it is because they are afraid of embarrassing themselves by mistaking a long-time parishioner for a newcomer. An easy way to get around that fear is to introduce yourself with a question: “Hi, my name is _____. I’ve been coming here two years. How long have you been a parishioner?” This open-ended question doesn’t presume that the person you’re speaking with is a newcomer a visitor or a parishioner. It allows them to reveal which and to begin a conversation.

Perhaps, too, hospitality, on the part of all, includes hospitality from parishioners toward the pastoral staff. See [Ten Commandments for Welcoming a New Pastor](#).



Continually let people know that everyone is welcome. Several Catholic parishes have adopted this whimsical, but with-a-crucial-point, message which appears on the website of [All Saints Lutheran Church in Aurora, Colorado](#):

“All Are Welcome!

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor. Y no habla Ingles.

We extend a special welcome to those who are crying new-borns, those skinny as a rail, or could afford to lose a few pounds.

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We welcome you if you can sing like Andrea Bocelli or like our pastor who can't carry a note in a bucket.

You're welcome here if you're "just browsing," just woke up, or just got out of jail.

We don't care if you're more Catholic than the Pope, or haven't been in church since little Joey's Baptism.

We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast.

We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters.

We welcome those who are in recovery or are still addicted.

We welcome you if you're having problems, or you're down in the dumps, or you don't like "organized religion" – we've been there, too.

If you blew all your offering money at the dog track, you're welcome here.

We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or came because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church.

We welcome those who are inked, pierced or both.

We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid, or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake.

We welcome the flexible, inflexible, tolerant and intolerant, those who laughed as well as those who gasped at this welcome card.

We welcome tourists, seekers, doubters, bleeding hearts, and you!"

You might also want to check [How to Welcome Everyone to Parish Life & Sunday Mass](#) by Bill Huebsch.



Reach out to the missing. Elaine Menardi, on her [blog post from February 11, 2013, *The Parable of the Lost Peep*](#), reminds us that "When we lose track of family / friends / loved ones, we usually make the effort to find out what's going on... what has happened to them... what they are doing... why they haven't been around... if they are okay."

Elaine challenges us with these questions:

- "What do you do when you notice someone is missing from your weekly congregation?"
- What would you do if you saw that someone Un-Friended / Un-Liked / Un-Linked / Un-Followed? Do you even keep track of that?
- What would you do if your lost Peep never returned your phone calls or emails or text-messages? Would you be worried about them?"

Many of the new databases used by parishes provide the capacity to track "activity" of your parishioners. If, then, there is someone who has dropped out of sight for a while, staff members can give a call and reach out to reconnect, to make sure that person is doing ok, etc.



Go to the people. Most often we expect people to always come to the parish site for everything. Perhaps "church" is everywhere; it is where the people are.

What are some ways the parish and parish leadership can go to the people?

- Visits to their workplaces. See [GEMS #1](#).
- Adult faith formation sessions in senior citizen complexes.
- Rent a small store in a neighboring mall; make it a place for prayer, for learning, etc.
- One pastor, newly assigned to the parish, announced that he would be (especially during the good-weather months) walking through the parish one evening a week and stopping to bless the homes of those who were at home.

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Research and compare. Invite some of the parish's leaders to worship (or attend an event) at a parish/congregation to which they've never been.

Later, in a debriefing session, talk together about:

- How was your experience in the parking lot?
- Did you know where to enter?
- Was it easy to find the restrooms?
- Did anyone greet you?
- Did the parishioners smile at you, introduce themselves?
- At the coffee hour, how many people spoke with you?

Then ask, "Do you think there might be any similarities with how a guest or long-time parishioners might experience us? Might there be anything we need to change, amplify, deepen?"



Pay attention to those in servant leadership. This [December 27, 2013 article, "The Secret to Delighting Customers"](#) is, of course, from the business world. Even though our mission is much more than "delighting people," is there a message here for us?

The article begins: "Disney tells a story about a little girl visiting a theme park who dropped her favorite doll over a fence. When staff retrieved the doll, she was covered in mud, so they made her a new outfit, gave her a bath and a hairdo, and even took photos of her with other Disney dolls before reuniting her with her owner that evening. The girl's mother described the doll's return as 'pure magic.'

The theme park team didn't consult a script or seek advice from managers. They did what they did because going the extra mile comes naturally at Disney. Such devotion to customer service pays dividends. Emotionally engaged customers are typically three times more likely to recommend a product and to repurchase. With an eye to these benefits, many companies are making customer experience a strategic priority. Yet they are struggling to gain traction with their efforts.

Why is customer experience so difficult to get right? The main hurdle is translating boardroom vision into action at the front line. That's even more

important in an era when optimizing individual customer touchpoints is no longer enough — when you have to focus on holistic customer journeys, instead.

There's only one way to create emotional connections with customers: by ensuring every interaction is geared to delighting them. That takes more than great products and services — it takes motivated, empowered frontline employees. Creating great customer experience comes down to having great people and treating them well. They will feel more engaged with the company and more committed to its goals."

Are there ways we live the four habitual activities described in the article:

- Listen...
- Hire for attitude, not aptitude, -- and then reinforce attitude.
- Give people purpose, not rules.
- Tap into the creativity of your front line.



The One Thing Never to Say. This crucial reminder is for all of us: parish pastoral staffs, ushers and ministers of hospitality, all parishioners. When we someone returning to church, perhaps someone who hasn't been there in a while, what do we say? Perhaps there is a natural and quick – and meaning-to-be-welcoming response - but is it the best one? Read this challenging advice: [The One Thing You Should Never Say to Someone Returning to Church](#).



Janet Schaeffler, OP
www.janetschaeffler.com
jischaeffler@adriandominicans.org

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- <http://www.ecatechist.com/ebooks/> Scroll down for *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation*
- www.pastoralplanning.com Go to Adult Formation: *Nuts & Bolts: Planning and Best Practices for Adult Formation*.