



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

# 47 - November 2014

## A Royal Welcome: Some Secrets of Belonging (Update II)

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, last month we did an “update” on welcome/hospitality. This issue continues these “updates.”

As important as practices such as

- greeting people
- calling people by name
- knowing and appreciating people are (some topics we explored in Update I)

welcome begins (and continues) even before that: with **the parish buildings and environment.**

**First we shape our buildings,  
then they shape us.**

*Winston Churchill  
in exhorting Britain about the urgency of restoring  
the bombed-out Houses of Parliament, 1943*

In [Five Simple Ways to Make Your Church Stickier](#), Geoff Surratt talks about his experience of visiting nine different churches:

“One way to solve the personal debt crisis in America is to make stores as difficult to navigate as many churches. Just figuring how to park is often an irritating early morning brainteaser. At a church we recently attended the main entrance to the parking lot was blocked by orange cones. There was no sign, no parking attendant, just orange cones screaming, ‘No room in the inn.’ Because we were determined to attend we found a secondary entrance and parked in the lot with the blocked entrance. ...

At one church we kept following signs and lot full signs until we were eventually dumped back out on the main street. Again, we eventually found ample parking on site, but we had to be determined. I have seen Do Not Enter signs on auditorium doors with no explanation or alternative. Can you imagine a sign on the entrance to Target “Store full, do not enter”?

Once we park it is often difficult to figure out where we should go....Where are the children’s rooms? .... does this church have onsite restrooms? These are the questions that many churches do not provide obvious answers to. On more than one occasion I have stood in the lobby and waited to see where the majority of the people seemed to moving.... Imagine standing with the family at the front gate of Disney World with no indication how to enter the Magic Kingdom. That’s how new attenders feel when they arrive at your church.”



Because we know that hospitality is a Gospel mandate, it is part of the role of the parish staff and parish leadership to

- look at the buildings and the environment with fresh eyes
- take care of the things that need attention

One of the best ways to look with fresh eyes is to do exactly that!

- Invite some people who have never been to your parish to do a walk-through with you (and some of your parish leadership).
- Ask them to give you their first impressions of what they see and experience.

With these invited-visitors to help you – or doing a walk-through yourselves (with parish leadership) - the following might be some questions to ponder.

As you take your journey, consider Sunday morning as well as the other myriad events that happen throughout the week which might attract long-time parishioners as well as people coming for the first time.

As you assess your buildings and the various aspects of the environment, hospitality can be evaluated through four lenses:

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- safety
- accessibility
- comfort
- attractiveness

## A First Look

- Is your parish easy to identify from the road?
- As you look at all your buildings/grounds, what message are you proclaiming to the local community? Is it positive and inviting?
- Are there signs on major roads near your parish?
- Are the buildings attractive to look at?
- In addition to general maintenance, does the landscaping enhance the buildings or hide them?
- Does shrubbery encroach on entry walkways, signs, exterior lighting or windows?
- Are walkways and entries clear and easy to negotiate? Or have roots, settlement or frost created broken slabs and safety hazards?
- Once people arrive at your building, how easy is it to enter the parking lot (or leave, especially when everyone is leaving at the same time)?
- What is the condition of the parking lot? Are there cracks and weeds? Is their adequate striping?
- Do the buildings show a connection to the surrounding community? To the care of God's creation? To the presence of various people and cultures from around the globe?

Appoint someone or some group to a “ministry of first impressions.” We can have the most exciting and creative ministry in the world going on inside of our buildings and a vibrant personality as a parish family. Yet, if the

exterior of our properties doesn't reflect all of that, we are delivering a mixed message.

One approach — particularly if we are in an older church building in an aging neighborhood and are feeling increasingly invisible — is to work to make the exterior of our building look different enough each week that passersby will turn their head and look.

- One example: If we want to non-verbally communicate that we are a child-friendly church, put children's artwork on a clothesline stretched across the church lawn. Use balloons, kites, banners, and streamers regularly.
- There are low-cost ways to highlight our buildings and grounds which can also be used to frame and define space when we have multiple buildings and parking lots.

Let us build a house where all God's children  
dare to seek, to dream God's reign anew.  
Here the outcast and the stranger  
bear the image of God's face.  
All are welcome in this place.

- Marty Haugen

## Exterior Signage

- Is the name of the parish, the time of worship and/or another welcoming message easily read which driving at the speed limit?
- Are signs clear and well-coordinated? Or is the church sign that was so nice twenty years ago in need of replacement or new paint?
- Do the signs look professionally done or cheaply improvised?

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- Are all exterior signs clear, easy to read, lit at night and visible from the parking lot?
- Is there any peeling paint, broken structures, missing bricks or burnt light bulbs on the signs?
- Once parked, how easy is it to find the entrance? If you have multiple entrances, how does the guest know which entrance to use?
- Is it easy to tell which entrance to use for the offices? For faith formation sessions? For evening programs and meetings?
- For a short, but insightful, reflection on church signs, see [What's Your Sign?](#)



## Accessibility, Health and Safety

- Are your buildings, including elevator and restrooms, fully ADA compliant? (The “2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design” can be downloaded [here](#).)
- Are your locksets and door hardware ADA compliant?
- Are there curbs, steps, or other barriers which might be safety challenges?
- Is there an easily accessible spot for people with special needs, such as those with walkers, wheelchairs, babies, and small children, to be dropped off at a door protected from the elements?
- Is it easy to enter every building with a wheelchair, crutches or a stroller?
- Are hearing amplification or translation devices available, if needed?
- Do your buildings have a fire protection (sprinkler) system?
- During refreshment time,
  - do you have sugar free alternatives for diabetics?

- do you offer healthy options like fresh fruit?
  - Check these ideas: [How To Have Healthier Food At Your Ministry Event](#)

- Do you have mints available for persons who experience coughing or a dry throat?



## Interior signage

- Once inside, is it clear and obvious where to find things? Offices? Restrooms? Coat racks? The hall or room where scheduled events are taking place, permanently or on a particular day/evening?
- Are all rooms throughout the building(s) clearly marked?
- Watch for in-language. We may know that “Kingdom Kids” is the ministry for 3-5 year olds, but if the sign doesn’t include the ages, a guest could not only feel lost but also excluded by this “insider” language.
- During refreshment times, are there signs regarding peanut allergies if peanut products are served?

## Gathering Space

(Think especially of the gathering space connected to the worship space; consider also other gathering/waiting spaces throughout your buildings).

- How does the space “feel?” Is it warm and welcoming? Are people tugged to come and pray?
- Do people experience the positive “We” language of a parish mission statement?
- Is it large enough? Well-lighted?
- Is the area congested?
- Is the area free of clutter? Is the area continually monitored to keep clutter down?

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- Does the space enhance a sense of calm and reverence or is it the collection place for lost umbrellas, hats and gloves, dusty hymnals, dying plants, out-of-date bulletins?
- Does the gathering space invite the feeling and experience of fellowship?
- What do your wall decorations and symbols say about your parish? Your beliefs? Your priorities?
- Are there casual seating areas conducive for conversations and making new friends?
- Are there current, attractive handouts or brochures to give information about the parish and various offerings?
- Are the bulletin boards current?
- Do people see themselves in photo boards?
- Do the bulletin boards reflect the current ministries and outreach of the parish? Its inclusiveness and diversity?
- Does the coat closet and the ushers' room need to be cleaned and organized?
- What is provided for parishioners who have wet umbrellas?
- Is there a hospitality area nearby for serving refreshments?
- In the refreshment area do we use smaller tables (those we'd find in a coffee shop) to create a more intimate setting for conversation?

## Welcome Center

Once inside, does a visitor know where to go? Greeters at the door can assist with this, as can visible and attractive signage. In addition, a designated area where guests can find information about your church and its ministries can be a welcoming and helpful gesture.

- Is this welcome center staffed throughout all the Sunday morning activities?
- Are the people who staff the center well trained in the ministries of the parish?
- Do they understand the importance of connecting with guests?
- Do they understand the importance of escorting guests to points of interest rather than pointing them in the direction?
- Is the welcome center well equipped with updated information about current and ongoing ministries?
- Is printed information available for guests to take with them?



## Rest rooms

- Can visitors find the restrooms without having to ask for directions?
- Are there lotions, tissues, extra toilet paper and air fresheners in the restrooms?
- Have motion sensor lights that might trap someone in the darkness while using a stall been removed?
- Are there appropriately sized fixtures for small children?
- Are there diaper changing stations in appropriate locations (including for dads)?

## Nursery

For guests – and parishioners - with young children, this is a critical area.

- How easy is it to find the nursery? Is it conveniently located in relationship to the worship space?

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- Is it clean? Is the furniture updated and safe? Is it child-friendly?
- Is the décor appealing to the entire family?
- Does it have a direct egress to the exterior of the building, for fire safety?
- Is there a hand sink? Approved cribs?
- Are there staff trained with appropriate child-to-caregiver ratios?
- Has the staff been given a background check?
- Is there a check-in and check-out process?
- Is there a system to reach parents during liturgy if they are needed? If so, is that process explained to the parents?

A Twitter post on January 25, 2014  
from the authors of *Rebuilt* and  
*Tools for Rebuilding*:

**“Dirty ministry space communicates quite  
a lot,  
and none of it good.  
The words that come to mind are  
disregard, disinterest and disrespect.”**

- Michael White  
and Tom Corcoran

## Worship Space

Church is like home. When it is warm, inviting and safe, everyone feels better. When company is coming, we want them to feel neither intimidated nor discouraged, but at home. And at church, company is always coming. The

welcome our buildings extend mirrors God’s love. Our parish facilities are places from which we go to do the things the Gospel asks us to do.

- Can everyone see clearly?
- Does the seating work for everyone? Is space allowed for wheelchairs?
- What is the quality of sound and light? Can people everywhere see and feel like they’re an integral part?
- How are the acoustics? Bad acoustics discourage people from singing. Sound does not turn corners. An acoustical consultant can help find solutions, including more resonant surfaces, baffles, and sensitive amplification.
- Is the floor covering dangerously worn? Torn, frayed or bunched carpets are a safety hazard.

Sometimes it happens that our churches are only about a third full when everyone is seated. This can, of course, feel empty, not creating an atmosphere where people feel comfortable singing and participating. If the space is at 80% capacity, it will feel full.

- Is our worship space comfortably full or awkwardly empty?
- Do many (most) sit in the back and nobody up front?
- Do most all sit on one side?

If your worship space doesn’t create the feeling of critical mass, these are some strategies that others have tried:

- Remove a few pews in the back to create some gathering space or hospitality space. Place rocking chairs there for new parents.
- Do some pews need to be removed or shortened to create some special access space?
- Are there too many liturgies for the number participating? If so, can the schedule be changed/reduced to bring more people together?
- Spread the pews out. Pews are traditionally spaced 18 inches apart. People were smaller when many churches were built, so consider removing some pews to allow instead for 24 inches of spacing between pews.

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- Use large banners or fabric streamers in the pews to move folks forward and sit nearer to the front and together, especially if the size of the worshipping assembly varies dramatically between the various scheduled liturgies.



## Other rooms/facilities

- Are the various rooms – including offices – inviting for conversations, reflection and prayer?
- Is the lighting harsh or soft?
- Are there plants, statues, natural lighting, and attractive wall hangings that convey welcome and God's grace and peace?
- Do we periodically review our mission statements, assessing if the buildings complement or resist the vision?
- Do the rooms suggest to people, “Come as you are, stay and grow, go forth to live the mission” – or some other message?
- If we make our buildings available for use by community organizations:
  - Do we have clear and printed, readily available policies about who can use the facilities, and under what circumstances?
  - Is it clear who can use them with or without a fee, and why?
  - Do these usage policies themselves feel welcome and inviting, or exclusive and exclusionary?
  - Do we advertise that our facilities are available to others? How?



## Golden Nuggets from You

“This issue ([GEMS #33](#)) is fantastic! Thanks for your thoughts and hard work to put this together.”

- Lorraine DeLuca, Director - Office for Evangelization and Catechesis, Diocese of Beaumont, TX

“Janet,

Again, thank you! This ([GEMS #37](#)) is so helpful. Will pass it on to our liturgy planning people.

- Nancy Mason Bordley, Pastoral Associate, St. John Fisher Chapel University Parish, Auburn Hills, MI



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[www.janetschaeffler.com](http://www.janetschaeffler.com)

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found at:

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