


Welcoming Strangers: A Newcomer Greeting

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by Kristin Sausville

While traveling, my family has taken to attending Episcopal churches on Sunday mornings, whenever possible and practical. During a college tour in Michigan with my older son this past February, we discovered there was one just ten minutes away from our hotel. Instead of sleeping in, we got up early and braved the cold to attend church.

It can be intimidating to go into a space where you know no one, but everyone else knows each other, even with the low stakes of knowing that this was a one-time-only visit. Would we be welcomed, or would we receive a cold shoulder to match the temperature outside?

We hadn't gotten more than ten steps inside the door when a priest approached us, handed us a folder, and apologized that most of the clergy and congregation were away as they were on a civil rights pilgrimage in Alabama. I glanced at the folder and noted that it was for newcomers who might become members of the congregation. I tried to give it back, explaining that we were traveling and this would probably be our only visit to the church. "Take it anyway," he said kindly, so I did.

Only fifteen or so people were at that service, and their welcome to us was so warm that I'm sure any of them could have told you later our names, where we were from, what brought us to town, and how we managed to find ourselves there that morning. This is because each of them introduced themselves and had an actual conversation with us. This warmth, along with reading through the folder that was full of information about the parish from past and present, made me determined to see what ideas my own parish in Delaware could use to enhance our newcomer welcome.

Working alongside our parish administrator, Cana Hartman, we put together folders for newcomers of our own. This was easy and inexpensive. They are now placed with our ushers, who are the most likely of our parishioners to recognize and interact with newcomers. Some of us can suffer from face blindness, or do not know if someone is a newcomer or a longtime parishioner returning after an absence, so the ushers are an ideal choice for this job.

The folders contain a lot of information about our parish for newcomers to read at their leisure. We were fortunate, timing-wise, that our annual meeting had just taken place and a report of all the ministries had been compiled for the meeting. We put this information into the folders. This allows newcomers to learn about all our ministries, guilds, and programs, along with the name of the contact person for each, should someone be interested in more information.

Our Children's Ministries director had put together a brochure for this year's Sunday School program, so we added this to our packet so parents could see the offerings we have available for children, which also

included contact information. A few of our newcomers who have stayed were parents with young children!

Our rector had previously made a small, folded card with multiple colorful photos of our parish life. It also included contact information and our worship schedule, along with his welcome letter, and a FAQ with answers to questions we thought newcomers might be wondering during their visit: Am I welcome? How are the services different? What do I wear? What do I call the clergy? Can I receive Holy Communion? It is important to remember that some newcomers may never have visited an Episcopal church before, or any church at all. Acknowledging that we understand that they may not know these things, and that that's okay, is part of a warm welcome.

We updated our pew cards and put one in the folder in case newcomers didn't see it in the pew or wanted to fill it out later. Not everyone has something to write with, so we also created an online form, placing the form's QR code on the card, allowing it to be filled out that way as well.

Lastly, we included a small sticky notepad with our parish name and website, thinking that it is the type of merch, for lack of a better word, that most people would find useful and therefore keep seeing our name and information. A pen would also work well for this. In the past, our parish had given mugs to newcomers; however, these are more expensive and bulkier, and besides, many people have a cabinet full of mugs they rarely use.

Since implementing our folders, we have had several newcomers stick around. It has been exciting to see new faces on Sundays, especially when they come back again and again. Our newcomer welcome has improved, and it has made a real difference.

Jesus taught us to welcome strangers, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Making sure that newcomers to our churches are seen and warmly received is one way that we can fulfill this teaching, and possibly even bring more people into our folds.

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