

# Hospitality: The Ministry of Welcome.

**-John-Peter Smit**  
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Over the years, I have been in many different churches throughout the country. Almost without exception I have concluded that while we all claim to be friendly, most of the time we really are not. This is frustrating partly because we still regularly do have people come to our churches for the very first time but mostly because the bible is very clear that hospitality is the task of Christians. (Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4: 9-10)) In other words, hospitality is important for church growth but crucial for the expression of our faith.

The more I consider hospitality, the more I realize that it is a primary task for leaders, especially elders, and the more experienced members of the congregation. You are the hosts and these are your guests. To ignore or mistreat them is rude and to assume that someone else will do it ensures that no one will. Hospitality is not rocket science, it is treating people as courteously and as respectfully as if they were guests in your home; for truly they are, guests in your church home.

There are many aspects to hospitality, but I would like to focus on just a few. The first is before church even starts. Studies show that most people have decided whether they will return before the service even begins. In other words, we only have one chance to make a first impression. Thus the first question is this: Are you ready for new people to come to your church?

## 1. Before Church

- Is your facility clean and bright?
- Does it smell musty?
- Is there parking close by?
- Are there clear and helpful signs?
- Will they receive a warm welcome at the door and the offer to be shown to where they need to go? (like the nursery)
- Is the nursery up to code?
- If they are five minutes late will there still be somebody there or will the door be locked and the ushers seated?

More and more people coming to worship for the first time have no experience with the Presbyterian Church or any church at all. The worship service itself can be very mysterious and intimidating to those who have never been. As well, people come to church because of a spiritual need – worship is not for fellowship, it is for addressing those needs, ours and those of others. The next question is this: Will new people experience the presence of God as they worship with you?

## 2. During Church

- What happens if they sit in the “wrong” pew?
- Would someone invite them to share a pew?
- Is the bulletin “user friendly” even for people who don’t know our prayers and creeds by heart?
- Is the language clear and Presbyterian jargon free?
- Are there “inside jokes” that exclude?
- Does the worship speak to people’s needs?
- Will someone help a new family find the appropriate church school space? Is a parent welcome to stay and watch the class?
- Are the activities of the church accessible to first timers? (This week’s bible study is held at June’s house. Who is June, where is her house and would someone go even if they knew those answers)
- Will anyone talk to them before the service or during the passing of the peace?

In my experience, coffee hour is the least friendly time for a newcomer. Typically we are so happy to see our friends that we forget to include people who are new. Too often newcomers are ignored during this time. This is where the church leaders must take the lead. It is your task to approach them and not they you. It is your opportunity to be an ambassador for your church. Two things can help here, first, a commitment on the part of leadership to speak to at least one person they don’t know before they speak to those they do know and second, a determination on the part of all the church leaders not to do business during coffee hour. This is a time for fellowship, not an opportunity to do work. The next question is this: How do new people experience your church when it is at fellowship?

## 3. After Church

- Do they know where coffee hour is?
- Did someone invite them?
- Will someone talk to them appropriately during coffee hour?
- Or, will they be ambushed to serve on committees and sing in the choir and be intimidated?

The majority (60%) of people come to church the first time because of the invitation of a friend or family member. People, who came back, come because of the “warmth, the love and ‘the realness’ of church members.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, our job does not end the first week, we need to make a long term commitment to nurture relationships with our new people. The final question is this: What is your procedure for integrating newcomers into your midst?

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<sup>1</sup> Resse, Martha Grace. *Unbinding the Gospel*. (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2007).

#### 4. Next Week

- If they signed the guest book or wrote a cheque, was there follow up or a thank you from someone other than the minister?
- If they come again, will you remember their name? Their children's name?
- Will someone take them under their wing?
- Are there appropriate "easing in" steps? (i.e. Don't offer envelopes the next week, ask if they want to be on the mailing list)

Most people don't just wake up on Sunday morning and decide to "visit church." People come because they are looking for something. They could be looking for an answer to prayer or support with life's challenges. They could be coming for community or peace in an uncertain world. Our task, our gospel calling is to welcome those sojourners in our midst and to love them as Christ loves us. Hospitality is not optional. "Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:1-2)

PS. If you really want to know how you are doing, get a non-church friend to be a "Mystery shopper." They will tell you what you need to know.