



On the door

We never get a second chance to make a first impression

Most congregations operate a rota system for who is 'on the door'. Meeting and greeting is such an important role. We never get a second chance to make a good impression. So what happens in the vestibule or entrance area can be make or break. It is so much more than handing out the hymn books, announcement sheets or orders of service. Eye contact and a friendly smile go such a long way, especially as arriving as an outsider is the moment of greatest anxiety in entering any new situation for the first time.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Describe a time when you had to enter a new place and found yourself among new people for the first time. How did you feel?

Come on in

In Matthew chapter 25, verses 31-46, Jesus talks about welcoming us into his kingdom. What follows is a picture of how those who inhabit and will inherit his kingdom treat other people – a kind of spirituality of social awareness, love and care for others.

READ MATTHEW 25:31-46

In his picture of the division of the sheep from the goats on his return, Jesus emphasises the importance of simple things in the way we treat others in his name. Noticing others, reducing their discomfort and going out of our way to meet their needs, are expressions of his love. We do so by responding to hunger, thirst, nakedness, sickness and captivity by providing food, drink, clothes, care and company. And right at the heart of this list of examples lies welcome – “I was a stranger and you invited me in” (v35). Coming into any church or its activities from the outside for the first time is a huge step for most people to take. The welcome we provide is crucial to quickly overcoming the strangeness of it for others.

A warm welcome

Welcome is better experienced than described. We know it when we feel it, because welcome is a felt thing. We either feel it, or we don't. It can be overdone, or leave us cold. We are made to feel welcome. It is something others make for us, but it is something that they can't fake. Done well, welcome sets the right temperature for the comfort of everyone. It offers a warmth to step into from outside.

Just as in the passage where neither the sheep nor the goats were very aware of what they were or weren't doing for others, we can be oblivious to the power or poverty of welcome. It can be something that becomes second nature in our church life or something that is obviously absent to anyone who crosses the threshold. Ultimately, the warmth or weakness of our church's welcome is a reflection of our love for Jesus for “whatever we do for one of the least of these brothers of his, we do for him” (v40). So, considering how welcoming or not our church can be is something of enormous significance.



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Describe a time when you felt especially welcomed? What did others do that made the experience feel like that?

Words of welcome

Well-chosen words of welcome can also make all the difference. They include us, incorporate us and make us feel at home. Think of these three words and how they either draw us in or make us feel like we stick out like a sore thumb: **Stranger, Visitor, Guest.**

Although Jesus uses the word stranger in this passage, he does so only to emphasise how the outsider feels and the value of love expressed through the simplicity of a welcome gesture. To describe someone as a stranger, is hardly making them feel part of a new group they have just come in to.

What about visitor? It is better than stranger, but it still conveys that someone doesn't belong among us, that their presence is not permanent, that they are not at home among us.

How about guest? That has a whole different feel. To say someone is our guest is to honour their presence among us. It is to put ourselves out to make them feel at home. It puts us in the position of being hosts, which is a very biblical position of welcome to adopt.

Welcome area

Some churches have a welcome area, a specific space into which those coming to the building are met and greeted. However, our whole church building is either a welcoming space or isn't.

Welcome doesn't start or finish with those 'on the door'. It maybe begins with your church website. It is conveyed by the look and appearance of the premises. The visibility of the signage. An open door. Disability access. An uncluttered vestibule. A comfortable pew. A warm, well-lit worship space. Words on a screen that are big enough to be read from the back. Clear instructions about children's church. A roomy area in which to get your cup of tea or coffee and have space to chat to others while drinking it. Clean toilets.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Which word – stranger, visitor or guest – do we most naturally find ourselves using in our language in church? What difference would it make to be described as 'our guest in worship today', rather than 'a visitor'?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Many church buildings were built in an era when most people went to church each week. They were not designed with the need to welcome in mind. What minor changes could we make to our church environment to make it more welcoming?

Welcome team

As people move through their experience of being in church they have multiple opportunities to be made welcome. From handshake to hello. From stepping in the door to standing in the coffee queue. From encountering a smile to being engaged in conversation.

This is why every member needs to see themselves as part of the welcome team every Sunday. We can all play a part. We are all better at different aspects of welcome than others. Some of us are great at striking up a conversation. Others excel in simply explaining what is happening in different parts of the service in which they are leading. We all know the value of a good cup of coffee.

Sunday by Sunday, who knows when a guest will slip in beside us where we sit? In that moment we become a key person on the welcome team.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Which aspects of welcoming are we good at? Which do we struggle with? Describe how you feel when someone you don't know slips into the seat beside you in church? What can you do to welcome them?


Welcome back

While it is true that we never get a second chance to make a first impression, the kind of welcome someone receives when they return for a second time can be equally important. Do we remember that we have seen them before? Do we remember their name? Do we remember some of the details that they told us about themselves? Or does our forgetfulness make them feel like they have to make the first move to come in all over again? They will never get to know people and be known here? They will struggle to break in from the outside?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. What practical steps can you take to remember faces, names and what you have been told before by someone returning to your church for a second time?



 Watch this series of mini dramas about welcome in the church and talk about how welcome is done well and badly.



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

TEN QUESTIONS TO ANSWER ABOUT THE DEPTH AND BREADTH OF YOUR CHURCH'S WELCOME.

1. How up to date is your church website?
2. What little thing could you do to make your buildings more attractive?
3. Is the entrance to the church building obvious and clearly visible?
4. Does your welcome team represent a mix of ages, genders and types of people in your church and surrounding area?
5. When someone passes through into the area you use for worship and sits down, is it likely that anyone would speak to them before the service starts?
6. Do those who lead worship explain the various parts of the service, or do they just assume everybody knows what is happening?
7. Can what is happening in worship be clearly heard and seen?
8. Is the service accessible to all ages?
9. After the service, are all your members likely to talk to one another or go out of their way to chat to a guest?
10. Have you ever asked the last people to join your church what they found easy or difficult to navigate in feeling at home?

POINTERS FOR PRAYER



- Pray for those who live in the area surrounding your church but never come, asking that God will help you create opportunities for them to see and experience your church's life.
- Pray for your church's profile in the community, asking God's forgiveness for any ways in which an unwelcoming impression has been created in the past and for his welcome to be obvious as you go forward.
- Pray for those who have specific responsibility for expressing welcome on the door, from the front or after the service, that they would display the heart of God for others.
- Choose one of the 10 questions which highlighted an obvious place to start in improving your church's warmth of welcome and ask God to help you make progress in that area.

