

How Welcoming is Your Parish?

There are as many ways of welcoming members into the Church as there are churches. What works for one parish, may not be as successful for another. Making sure the welcome is genuine, fits with your parish identity, and is all-encompassing are critical steps to make to ensure a successful, welcoming environment to our members – both existing and new.

Offering a Genuine Welcome

We have all been recipients of the half-hearted welcome. The one where we are made to feel not very welcome at all. Worse yet, are the times when we have felt as if we are intruding into someone else's space and are not welcome to join the group. Walking into an unfamiliar church can resurrect memories of inhospitable situations experienced in the past. Keeping the welcome genuine means keeping it simple and natural.



Options to consider might be:

- Utilizing teams of Greeters, who open the doors and provide a welcoming smile and a hearty welcome to people at Mass each week
- Nametags, filled out by Mass-goers
- Encouraging people to greet their “pew-mates” just before the start of Mass
- The presider begins Mass with a welcome to all members and visitors to join together in the celebration of the Mass
- A receptionist or staffed welcoming table to answer questions and provide assistance at all weekend Masses
- Walk into church as if you are someone new. Is there helpful signage so a guest can find his/her way, is there a calendar of events posted, are the doors unlocked, is the space from the parking lot to inside well-lit and inviting?

New Members

One group of parishioners that can really benefit from a consistent environment of hospitality is the new members. Welcoming new members is much more than offering a hearty handshake and handing them a registration form to fill out. Parishes need to do more than just “hope” that new members will find their way. Spending some time on encouraging new member participation in the life of the parish can result in new members who are more active and assist in building community within the parish.

Providing a genuine welcome to the new parishioner allows us to have the opportunity to see the

face of God in the person who walks through the doors of our church. We also have the responsibility of being willing to honor the gifts the stranger brings to the table just as we honor the gifts of those we know. New ideas and new ways of doing things can enhance the ministries and activities that already exist within the parish or even create new ways of growing in faith as a community.

Welcoming New Members Must Fit with your Parish Identity

What are the expectations of parish membership? We know that anyone who lives in the geographic boundaries of the parish is considered a parishioner of the parish, but registering to become a member of a particular parish is the beginning of a parishioner-parish relationship, one that needs to be nurtured to encourage growth. Things to consider: do you list the expectations for membership in your parish? What do the parish and existing members provide to the new member? What do you expect of the new members? Each parish will have their own determination of membership, but the guidelines must fit with the parish identity.

The parish may know who it is, but what about the new member? Let's start with who the new members are:

- Knowing the demographics of the area surrounding the parish can be helpful in determining the best ways to welcome the new member.
- Are schools filled to capacity or classroom size waning?
- What types of family housing are in your area? Single family homes or apartments? And what are the vacancy rates?
- Business and technology—who is the area's biggest employer and are they experiencing growth?
- Infrastructure—any new highways, parks, expansions in the community?
- Cultural changes—are there new communities of immigrants?

Each of these groups may respond to different styles of welcoming. For example, a parish located close to a large college campus may benefit by offering online registration, a regularly updated parish website with streaming video, blogs, and electronic bulletins to welcome new members. A parish located in a neighborhood near a large senior living complex might have better success with a new member welcoming coffee social after morning Mass once a month.

Besides who lives in the neighborhood, communicating your parish identity can provide the hospitable welcome you need to invite new members. What is your parish mission and vision? What does your parish do that sets you apart from other parishes? Perhaps you have a school, or your life-long formation offerings are exceptional at your parish; maybe you have a successful multi-cultural community or are invested in social justice causes like assisting the impoverished, working with the unemployed or underemployed. Embrace your parish mission and vision and use it to welcome new members who share those interests.

How About the Forms?

What does your member registration form look like and how long has it been since you have updat-

ed it? These days, email addresses and cell phone numbers are vital pieces of information to gather, so a parish can make use of all the latest technology to communicate with members. In addition, knowing the occupation of parishioners can be helpful in finding out interests, talents, or in pairing new members with mentor parishioners who work in similar fields. Ask your new members how they prefer to receive communication, i.e., electronic bulletin or mailed and encourage use of the less expensive electronic version.

Make sure your new member information packet materials include up to-date information about the parish. Suggestions include:

- Welcome note from the pastor
- Parish Mission and Vision
- Mass times, when the building is open, Adoration times, daily Mass, Reconciliation opportunities
- Faith Formation opportunities
- Maps of the building and grounds
- Calendar of upcoming events
- Contact information for staff
- Brief history of the parish
- Complete listing of available ministries and activities in the parish, along with job descriptions, and contact names to get more information
- Time and Talent Form to sign up for a ministry or activity
- Stewardship Intention cards for committing to regular giving as well as Electronic Funds Transfer forms or ability to sign up for envelopes; a few generic contribution envelopes to get them started.
- Information on any large-scale parish mission, festival, or campaign that is underway.



Who is Providing the Welcome to Your New Members?

Don't leave that welcoming to chance, or you may find that a new member feels unwelcome to join your parish. Some parishes offer new member welcoming weekends once a month to register new members, others have registration forms available online or at the reception desk in the parish office. *Regardless of how the registration form is received, it is vital that some personal interaction occur to take the new member registration to a higher level.*

In some parishes, the pastor enjoys scheduling meetings with new members to share information and provide welcome. A frequently used option to provide the personal welcome is the new member welcoming team. The welcoming team, staffed with seasoned members who are positive cheerleaders of your parish can answer questions, hone in on the person or family needs presented and make suggestions on everything from the different music offerings at the weekend Masses, ministries and activities that may interest the new member, or groups within the community the new member may find appealing. The new member welcoming team members can introduce the new member to the pastor, any staff available, and serve as mentors to keep the welcome going in the first few weeks or months. Some parishes take that a step further and assign

mentors to new members who then invite the new members to parish events and help them get acclimated to their new parish.

New Parishioner Events

Quarterly new member events such as *Pizza with the Padre*, where new members and a few existing members enjoy an informal dinner after Mass can help new members find welcome and can increase their engagement in the community. The pastor can answer questions in a relaxed environment and existing members can share information about the ministries and activities in which they are involved and what they enjoy about the parish. Sending out the invitation and following up with a phone call are also opportunities to welcome the new member, even if they cannot attend a quarterly welcome event.

If a welcoming dinner is not a good fit with your parish identity, consider providing a welcome phone call. There are members in every parish who truly enjoy making phone calls, having them share their time and talent to provide a welcoming phone call can be a positive ministry of hospitality in the parish.

Other Ways of Engaging New Parishioners

- Some parishes utilize neighborhood groups to provide a welcome. Sending a note to the neighborhood contact that a new parishioner lives close by can be a conversation starter when neighbors gather.
- Sending out a letter of welcome to all the new parishioners who joined the parish in the last month, inviting them to an upcoming community event or encouraging them to try out a ministry or activity, or a faith formation program, is a way to let the new member feel welcome and find their own way to embrace their new parish.
- Posting new member photos in the parish or listing all the new members who registered in the last month in the bulletin or newsletter is a great way to make sure existing members can welcome the new members.
- Checking in after a few months via a note or a phone call can continue the welcome to the new members.

Whatever the method selected to offer welcome to the new members in your parish, it needs to be genuine, fit with your parish identity, and be consistently offered. Rolling out the welcome mat can allow all of your members to grow together in their journey of faith as a parish community.

—by Mary Kennedy, Director of Stewardship at Pax Christi Catholic Community in Eden Prairie

Hospitality Worksheet

Basic Checklist for the Hospitable Parish

Start your visual audit from the street and go from the road to the parking lot to the exterior entrance to the church entryway to the church itself. Pay attention to how your eye travels. For each area, list the first five things your eye stops on. Are these the things you want to emphasize as most important? Complete the exercise below to consider how you may want to visually realign elements to draw attention to the elements that are most welcoming and central to your mission as a parish.

Outreach

- _____ local papers (or other available media) are used to publicize times of liturgies, educational programs and parish services, especially RCIA Inquiry Nights
- _____ mailings are sent to surrounding neighborhoods about the mission and services of the parish
- _____ news about the parish is sent to inactive households
- _____ new parishioner gatherings, coffees or informational sessions are scheduled

Outdoors

- _____ the location of the parish is clearly visible and signs are there to guide people
- _____ the name of the parish is clearly visible
- _____ within parish resources, the grounds are well maintained
- _____ snow and ice are removed promptly
- _____ the building (roof, gutters, windows, etc.) is well kept and attractive
- _____ there is adequate parking, well lit and well marked
- _____ there is adequate handicapped parking

First Contact

- _____ parish offices are easy to find and accessible
- _____ parish offices are open some evenings or weekends for people who work during the day
- _____ telephone contacts are personable and friendly
- _____ parish office staff is welcoming and friendly
- _____ Mass times are available by phone

_____ bulletin boards are attractive, useful and up-to-date

Church

_____ people are posted outdoors at steps and at heavy doors to assist those who need help

_____ greeters welcome people

_____ all are clearly welcome: all ages, races, cultures

_____ the space is handicapped accessible

_____ ushers have been trained to help people with disabilities

_____ ushers have been trained to deal with emergency situations

_____ large print liturgy guides are available

_____ assistive listening devices (ALDs) are available

_____ the entry or gathering space is attractive and warm, clean and uncluttered

_____ coat racks are available

_____ washrooms are easy to find, accessible and unlocked

_____ washrooms are clean and well stocked with supplies

_____ ushers help people find seating

_____ there is enough seating

_____ people who come early move to the middle of the row to leave room for latecomers

_____ materials for registering or finding out about the parish are readily available

_____ nave and sanctuary are clean and uncluttered

_____ all areas are well lit, not dreary

Worship

_____ liturgy guides are provided for newcomers, especially containing items the community knows by heart

_____ the sound system works well

_____ sight-lines to ambo, altar, chair and font work well

_____ aisles are roomy enough for processions

_____ there are enough hymnals or liturgy guides available

_____ all liturgical ministers are welcoming

_____ people are invited to sing

- _____ the Word is proclaimed with skill and clarity
- _____ the homily is inspiring and challenging
- _____ communion is offered under both forms
- _____ signs and symbols are used richly
- _____ most people come early or on time and do not leave early
- _____ refreshments are offered after Mass on a regular basis

Other

- _____ thank-you notes are sent whenever appropriate
- _____ gatherings outside of worship that involve food are scheduled
- _____ “time and talent” sign-up sheets are given out and staff follow up on them
in a timely manner
- _____ child-care is available when appropriate
- _____ bulletin information is available to those with eyesight disabilities