


Pierre-Alain Giffard

Diocese of Pembroke (ON, Canada)

pierre.alain.giffard@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8071-8212>

More Than Hospitality: A Reflection on The Parish Ministry of Welcoming and Hospitality

 <https://doi.org/10.15633/ps.27206>

Pierre-Alain Giffard – Dr., is currently the Director of pastoral work in the diocese of Pembroke (ON, Canada). He holds a Ph.D. in practical theology and specializes in evangelization, Church growth and parish revitalization. Besides holding various pastoral positions in dioceses across Canada, he also served as Saint Paul University’s Director of Practical Theology.

Article history • Received: 26 Jan 2023 • Accepted: 18 Apr 2023 • Published: 30 Jun 2023

ISSN 1428-5673 (print) • **ISSN** 2391-6575 (online) • Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

Abstract

More Than Hospitality: A Reflection on The Parish Ministry of Welcoming and Hospitality

This article explores the vital role and practice of hospitality and welcoming in parish ministry within a missionary setting. Despite its importance, hospitality is often poorly executed, particularly towards newcomers to the church. Visitors who enter a parish church may be ignored, no one speaks to them and their presence may even go completely unnoticed. This article examines the biblical and traditional understanding of hospitality as well as strategies employed by mission-minded and thriving churches to effectively practice it. Through theological reflection, we uncover overlooked and essential aspects of this ministry. Parish leaders and volunteers will find many practical and innovative ways to implement welcoming and hospitality in their parishes in an evangelical and missionary way.

Keywords: parish, evangelization, welcoming and hospitality

Abstrakt

Więcej niż gościnność. Refleksja na temat parafialnej posługi przyjmowania ludzi i gościnności

Artykuł ten bada istotną rolę i praktykę przyjmowania ludzi i gościnności w duszpasterstwie parafialnym w środowisku misyjnym. Pomimo swojego znaczenia, gościnność jest często źle realizowana, szczególnie w stosunku do nowoprzybyłych do kościoła. Osoby wchodzące do kościoła parafialnego mogą zostać zignorowane, nikt z nimi nie rozmawia, a ich obecność może nawet pozostać niezauważona. W tym artykule analizujemy biblijne i tradycyjne rozumienie gościnności, a także strategie stosowane przez prosperujące wspólnoty kościelne nastawione na misję. W refleksji teologicznej odkrywa się przeoczone i istotne aspekty tej posługi. Liderzy parafii i wolontariusze znajdują wiele praktycznych i innowacyjnych sposobów wdrażania powitania ludzi i gościnności w swoich parafiach w duchu misyjnym.

Słowa kluczowe: parafia, ewangelizacja, przyjmowanie ludzi i gościnność

Over the past twenty years, many Roman Catholic parishes in North America and Europe have initiated evangelization programs aimed at reconnecting with lapsed Catholics and reaching individuals who are unfamiliar with or do not follow Christ.¹ This is in response to the call for the New Evangelization issued by popes and bishops since the 1980s, as well as Pope Francis' urging parishes to adopt a missional mindset and actively strive for change through creative pastoral initiatives.²

One crucial aspect of a parish's missional conversion is the welcome and hospitality ministry. To effectively encourage first-time visitors to return, a church must provide a warm and genuine welcome. A simple handshake and smile are not enough. This article examines how welcoming and hospitality can truly be missional and provides suggestions for leaders and volunteers to improve and enhance this ministry.

In the first section, we look at the traditional understanding of hospitality in the Bible and in the Roman Catholic Church. To whom should Christians extend hospitality? What is the importance of this principle in the Church? What are some ways to practice hospitality in a parish setting? In the second section, we explore what growing churches and thriving parishes do regarding this ministry, followed with a theological reflection regarding the vital link between welcoming and integration of new-comers. In the third and fourth section, we discuss the often overlooked but essential aspects of welcoming and integration and what this means for a hospitality team.

1. Hospitality in the Bible and in the Church

The principle of hospitality, which can be found in the Old and New Testaments, has been practiced throughout Church history. Traditionally, it is seen as welcoming strangers and visitors and is particularly prescribed toward the homeless, the poor, and the needy.

In the book of Genesis, the patriarch Abraham is portrayed as a model of hospitality at Mamre (Genesis 18:1-8). Commenting on this incident,

1 Among these programs are Alpha, Invite, and Returning Home.

2 Francis, Encyclical letter *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.11.2013, 9, 25, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (26.01.2023).

Clement of Rome teaches us that it was thanks to Abraham's faith and hospitality that he was blessed with a son in his old age.³

The book of Leviticus instructs the Israelites to extend to strangers the same kindness and consideration as they would to their own people:

You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the Lord, am your God (Leviticus 19:34).⁴

The book of Isaiah emphasizes the importance of being hospitable towards the less fortunate, exhorting that showing kindness to the poor and homeless is more valuable than fasting:

Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:6–7).

Jesus places a great emphasis on treating strangers and the poor with compassion and kindness. He goes so far as to identify himself with the destitute. When we welcome a stranger, we welcome Jesus himself, for he says: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35).

The early Church instructed believers to show hospitality (Hebrews 13:2) without grumbling (1 Peter 4:9): "Let charity be genuine [...] Love one another with brotherly affection [...] Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality" (Romans 12:12–13). The Letter of James teaches not to be partial in exercising this moral imperative:

For if a man with gold rings on his fingers and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in, and you pay attention

3 First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, X, 7, <https://carm.org/first-epistle-clement-corinthians> (26.01.2023).

4 All Scripture quotations are from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (2010).

to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here, please,” while you say to the poor one, “Stand there,” or “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs? (James 2:2–4).

Hospitality was also part of the qualifications to become an *episkopos*. In the First Letter of Saint Paul to Timothy, we find the following passage: “Therefore, a bishop must be irreproachable, married only once, temperate, self-controlled, decent, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not aggressive, but gentle, not contentious, not a lover of money” (1 Timothy 3:2–3) This same requirement can be found in the oldest sections of the Latin rite of ordination, which outlines the responsibilities of a bishop: “assiduous study of Sacred Scripture, prayer, fasting, hospitality, almsgiving, listening, edification of the people by word and through the liturgy.”⁵ Even today, a candidate must answer questions that pertain to the fundamental aspects of their role and responsibilities: “He promises expressly to be, in the Lord’s name, welcoming and merciful to the poor and to all those in need of consolation and assistance.”⁶

The history of the Church highlights the importance of hospitality within the monastic movement, where there was insistence on providing refuge and care for the vulnerable in the vicinity of monasteries.⁷ Still today, priests are asked to exercise this virtue, including the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, as well as honesty, humility, compassion, initiative, courage, vision, energy, and Christian joy:⁸

In a fraternal spirit, priests should extend hospitality, cultivate kindness and share their goods in common. They should be particularly solicitous for the sick,

5 R. P. McBrien, *Catholicism: Completely Revised and Updated*, HarperCollins, New York 1994, p. 746.

6 Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25.12.2005, 32, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html (26.01.2023).

7 Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 40.

8 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, 37, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Publishing, Washington 2005.

the afflicted, those overburdened with work, the lonely, those exiled from their homeland, and those who suffer persecution.⁹

During the 20th century, and even more today, popes and bishops have asked the Church to pay special attention to the plight of refugees. There are many millions of refugees in the world, and their number is increasing: “They have fled from conditions of political oppression and inhuman misery, from famine and drought of catastrophic proportions.”¹⁰ This situation “merits special mention and challenges the capacity for hospitality of society and the churches.”¹¹

In the words of Pope Francis,

Here I would stress that dedication and concern shown to migrants and to persons with special needs alike is a sign of the Spirit. Both situations are paradigmatic: they serve as a test of our commitment to show mercy in welcoming others and to help the vulnerable to be fully a part of our communities.¹²

Families are also called to practice hospitality. The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity explains that families will fulfill their mission if they appear to be domestic sanctuaries of the Church by the mutual affection of their members and the prayer they offer to God in common, as well as if they provide active hospitality and promote justice and other good works for the service of all people in need.¹³

Pope Francis explains that this virtue should also be extended to the elderly:

⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* Decree on the ministry and life of priests, 07.12.1965, 8, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html (26.01.2023).

¹⁰ John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, 07.12.1990, 37b, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html (26.01.2023).

¹¹ John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, 07.12.1990, 37b.

¹² Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family *Amoris Laetitia*, 19.03.2016, 47, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html (26.01.2023).

¹³ Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 18.11.1965, 11, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_lt.html (26.01.2023).

the Church cannot and does not want to conform to a mentality of impatience, and much less of indifference and contempt, towards old age. We must reawaken the collective sense of gratitude, of appreciation, of hospitality, which makes the elderly feel like a living part of the community. Our elderly are men and women, fathers and mothers, who came before us on our own road, in our own house, in our daily battle for a worthy life.¹⁴

As most individuals experience the Catholic Church through their local parish,¹⁵ it is important for parishes to prioritize hospitality towards those who only occasionally attend liturgies or receive sacraments, as well as towards individuals who are not Christian and may be visiting a church for the first time.

Unfortunately there is a regrettable lack of hospitality in many parishes. This is due, explains Pope Francis, “to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people.”¹⁶

While basic forms of welcoming, such as greeters handing out weekly bulletins before or after mass, are often present, the missionary transformation of parishes calls for a service of hospitality and welcoming, particularly aimed at those who visit a church only at significant moments of their lives.

This sense of hospitality extends beyond those who participate in formal “welcome back” programs. It includes Catholics who approach the Church at key “teachable moments,” such as couples seeking the Sacrament of Matrimony, parents who have children in Catholic schools or parish-based religious education programs and are bringing their children for sacramental preparation, and Catholics who seek assistance from parish social ministry programs. Additionally, Catholics

¹⁴ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 212.

¹⁵ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Missionary Dynamic of the Parish Today*, 2014, 1, https://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CCCB_Parish_web.pdf (26.01.2023).

¹⁶ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 63.

who choose to participate in a “welcome back” program ought to feel supported in their journey by the entire community.¹⁷

Still other North American Roman Catholic Church documents¹⁸ offer parishes ways to practice hospitality:

- “Encouraging words of welcome by pastors at all liturgies, especially key liturgical moments when Catholics attend liturgies, such as weddings, funerals”... and Christmas and Easter Masses.¹⁹
- Creating and training a welcome committee to help greet and support new parish members.²⁰
- Training ushers, receptionists, and other personnel.²¹
- Studying the access and availability “to people (e.g., considering event times, lighting, and signs and posters), particularly with regard to ways to welcome those with disabilities (e.g., having ramps into churches, adequate sound systems, and signing for the hearing impaired).”²²
- Creating a parish committee focused on helping newcomers or those who have not been practicing regularly to know about the parish.²³
- Offering information and assistance at the doors of the church before liturgies and parish events.²⁴

17 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization*, 2013, 17, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/new-evangelization/disciples-called-to-witness> (26.01.2023).

18 The documents are United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Disciples Called to Witness*; Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Missionary Dynamic of the Parish Today*; and United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*, 1990.

19 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Disciples Called to Witness*, 17.

20 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Disciples Called to Witness*, 17.

21 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*, 1990, 20, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/evangelization/go-and-make-disciples/go-and-make-disciples-a-national-plan-and-strategy-for-catholic-evangelization-in-the-united-states.cfm> (26.01.2023).

22 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Go and Make Disciples*, 106.

23 Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Missionary Dynamic of the Parish Today*, 16.

24 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Go and Make Disciples*, 16.

- Offering flexible hours for parish services.²⁵
- Forming small faith communities that provide fellowship, sharing of the word of God, and allow for a dialogue between faith and life to occur.²⁶
- Fostering a spirituality of communion and stewardship that inspires parishioners to offer a greater welcome to newcomers.²⁷

All of these ideas are helpful and require preparation and planning, much of it invisible to the eyes of a visitor²⁸: “Parish hospitality is more than simply a spontaneous welcome. It is an intentional and strategic plan that begins long before the sun rises on a given Sunday morning.”²⁹

2. Hospitality in missional and growing churches

In missional churches, hospitality is a key component of evangelization. They have an intentional welcoming process³⁰ whose goal is not just to be friendly or to help people register for the parish, but “to help them take their first steps towards becoming a missionary disciple.”³¹ Nelson Searcy and Jennifer D. Henson tell pastors and churches that by

putting a well-planned, well-executed Assimilation System into place, you will be doing your part to ensure that the first-time guests who cross your path are transformed into fully developing followers of Jesus.³²

Where does hospitality truly begin? A church’s website is the starting point. Missional churches have websites that clearly and easily inform

25 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Go and Make Disciples*, 16.

26 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Go and Make Disciples*, 19.

27 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Go and Make Disciples*, 21.

28 W. E. Simon, *Great Catholic Parishes: A Living Mosaic*, Ave Maria Press, Indiana, Notre Dame 2016, p. 101.

29 W. E. Simon, *Great Catholic Parishes*, p. 98.

30 J. Mallon, *Divine Renovation Guidebook: A Step-by-Step Manual for Transforming Your Parish*, Novalis, Toronto 2016, p. 74.

31 J. Mallon, *Divine Renovation Guidebook*, p. 140.

32 N. Searcy, J. D. Henson, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully Engaged Members of Your Church*, Baker Books, Michigan, Ada 2017, p. 38.

potential visitors about their worship times and ministries and offer maps to find the church:

Welcoming begins long before parishioners settle into the pews. It begins even before they make it to the parking lot. Hospitality means opening wide the doors, and the first portal of today's parish is its website.³³

These websites provide information on what to expect during a church service. They may not be the most sophisticated or technologically advanced, but they present current information and accurately reflect the church's identity, mission, and objectives. Some of these websites also provide links to surveys for first-time guests and registration options for small group meetings.³⁴

An intentional welcoming process involves actively considering the perspective of a first-time visitor:

We need to look from the street all the way through to the seat to ensure that every aspect of that experience is as welcoming as possible: fix signage, paint, weed, and vacuum, as well as setting out some fresh flowers.³⁵

And when the time for liturgy arrives, *guests are expected and accepted*, "regardless of who they are, what they're wearing, or what isn't in their pockets."³⁶ Christian communities should cultivate a culture of hospitality where the responsibility of welcoming others is shared by all members, not just delegated to a select few who are particularly gifted or appointed for the task.³⁷ Those in the pews are prepared and encouraged "to step outside their comfort zones and be a welcoming presence to others."³⁸ They show visitors that they are excited to see them and enthusiastic about their church and about being a Christian. Newcomers and

33 W. E. Simon, *Great Catholic Parishes*, p. 108.

34 N. Searcy, J. D. Henson, *Fusion*, p. 87, 114.

35 R. Birch, *Church Growth Flywheel: 5 Practical Systems to Drive Growth at Your Church*, Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, Kalifornia, Scotts Valley 2018, p. 30.

36 R. Birch, *Church Growth Flywheel*, 69f.

37 C. D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Eerdmans, Michigan, Grand Rapids 1999, p. 31.

38 W. E. Simon, *Great Catholic Parishes*, p. 89.

visitors are treated like *gifts from God* “with the grace, understanding and hospitality that are reflective of His own.”³⁹

The church leadership may also appoint a guest services coordinator.

This coordinator organizes greeters, ushers, and other volunteers who make church a warm and friendly experience for guests. Greeters help attendees feel welcome and wanted. Volunteers must be able to tell arriving guests where to go and what to do. These volunteers should understand how the gospel is mirrored by their kindness. They should be friendly, helpful people who smile, exuding the joy of their salvation. They should be trained to meet virtually every conceivable need. They should know the location of a first-aid kit, the site of the nearest water fountain, and the location of all departments, meeting rooms, and restrooms in the church. Other tasks for them may include:

- Greeting guests in the parking lot
- Clearly marking entrances
- Providing name tags for all attendees
- Assigning individuals to sit in a specific area each week to connect guests with nearby members to make them feel welcome
- Promoting the “three-minute rule” – members must talk to someone they don’t know for three minutes following the end of worship
- Helping the church intentionally develop its volunteer-staffed greeter and usher system.⁴⁰

Hospitality is also provided by displaying the prayers of the liturgy on a screen or directing the guests’ attention to booklets in the pews with the responses.⁴¹ Children are led to a separate space for their own Liturgy of the Word:

The children return to their families in the main church after the homily. Whether parishes and churches call them Kids’ Zones, Wee Ones’ Words, or All

³⁹ N. Searcy, J. D. Henson, *Fusion*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ E. Stetzer, D. Im, *Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting Churches that Multiply*, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville 2016, p. 232.

⁴¹ J. Mallon, *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to a Missional Parish*, Novalis, Toronto 2014, p.107.

Stars, these children's ministries offer great ways for both children and parents to get the most out of their Sunday experiences.⁴²

We're convinced, explains Michael White,

that weekend programs for children that stand alongside of, or in addition to Mass, aren't just a good thing; they're critically important to creating an irresistible environment for parents (or grandparents) with young kids.⁴³

Another important aspect of hospitality involves following up on first-time and second-time guests. Guests receive a visitor's packet that includes an invitation card for them to attend a visitor's reception following the morning service they attend. At the reception they meet staff members and elders of the church. The reception includes good-quality food that makes it worth the visitor's time.⁴⁴ Follow-up is usually done by mail, phone, and e-mail. These three approaches are low-cost activities. David Frey explains that "Not following up [...] is the same as filling up your bathtub without first putting the stopper in the drain."⁴⁵

Each month, Rick Warren, founder of Saddleback church in California, and his wife Kay host an informal coffee gathering in their home. This provided an opportunity for new members and visitors from the previous month to meet them in person and ask any questions they had:

We'd place a sign-up sheet out on the patio before Sunday services and the first thirty to sign up would get to come. The chats would last from 7 to 10 P. M. This

42 W. E. Simon, *Great Catholic Parishes*, p. 104.

43 M. White, T. Corcoran, *Rebuilt: Awakening the Faithful, Reaching the Lost, and Making Church Matter*, Ave Maria Press, Indiana, Notre Dame 2012, p. 116. Interestingly, the Canadian Large Church Report 2015 states that churches do their most effective outreach through children, youth, and/or family, followed by the Alpha course and events with an evangelical component (see p. 5).

44 J. N. Vaughan, *Hard Time Tough Churches Awesome God! 13 Churches That Faced Losing Almost... Everything!*, Xlibris Corporation, Indiana, Bloomington 2010, p. 73.

45 N. Searcy, J. D. Henson, *Fusion*, p. 84.

simple act of hospitality brought in hundreds of new members and established many relationships that Kay and I cherish today.⁴⁶

Hospitality is also about inviting newcomers to *new members'* classes or to join a small group. These classes or small groups give the opportunity to build meaningful friendships: “That is not possible in larger groups—too many relational lines exist for everyone to feel like they are a significant part of things.”⁴⁷

Small groups can be an environment where people:

1. Learn more about God and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.
2. Love others and experience God’s love.
3. Minister to people in need, within the group as well as in the community.
4. Decide to grow deeper in faith.
5. Share the joys and stresses of life together.⁴⁸

Missional churches also offer second-time guests the chance to get involved with service teams: “Of the first-time visitors who live in the church’s ministry area, three of every ten should be actively involved within a year,”⁴⁹ explains Win Arn. Many areas of service are available for new members in which to get involved, such as assisting with the refreshments table or guiding attendees to their seats:

If guests have been impressed with their initial experiences within your church, many of them will be interested in offering that service back to others. Giving them the opportunity to engage in service moves them farther along the continuum of the assimilation process.⁵⁰

46 R. Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission*, Zondervan, Michigan, Grand Rapids 2007, p. 323.

47 E. Stetzer, M. Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too*, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville 2007, p. 154.

48 E. Stetzer, M. Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, p. 154.

49 C. P. Wagner, W. Arn, E. L. Towns, *Church Growth: State of the Art*, Tyndale House, Indiana, Carol Stream 1986, p. 101.

50 N. Searcy, J. D. Henson, *Fusion*, p. 128.

And finally, newcomers can also be invited to serve on community service projects:

Effective follow-up must open opportunities for people to become involved. This is a bit tricky, because some people are eager to get involved quickly while others have a wait-and-see attitude. So the idea is to open the door, but not force anyone to walk through it.⁵¹

3. Authentic integration

When people drop out of church, the reason most often given is not personal conflict in theology—it is that “I did not feel a sense of belonging. I did not feel needed, wanted, or loved.” And when inactive members consider the possibility of a new church home, 75 percent tell researchers the most important thing they will look for is “the friendliness of the people.”⁵²

Even when a church has a well-organized welcome and hospitality program, visitors and newcomers may still feel excluded from community life and eventually leave. Churches that consider themselves welcoming can sometimes suffer from an exclusionary trait where there is an unconscious dividing line or a wall that protects the insiders from the outsiders.⁵³ Gary McIntosh explains it this way:

every congregation can be described in terms of two concentric circles. The larger outer circle is the membership circle. Every member is within that outer circle. The smaller inner circle includes the members who feel a sense of belonging and who feel fully accepted into the fellowship of that called-out community.⁵⁴

There is considerable evidence which suggests that at least one-third, and perhaps as many as one-half, of all Protestant church members do

51 D. E. Galloway, *Making Church Relevant*, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas 1999, p. 90.

52 C. P. Wagner, W. Arn, E. L. Towns, *Church Growth: State of the Art*, p. 64–65.

53 R. Zuck, *Vital Ministry Issues: Examining Concerns and Conflicts in Ministry*, Wipf and Stock, Oregon, Eugene 2004, p. 180.

54 G. McIntosh, G. Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church*, B & H Books, Nashville 1991, p. 76.

not feel a sense of belonging to the congregation of which they are members. They have been received into membership but have never felt they have been accepted into the fellowship circle.⁵⁵

So, welcoming and hospitality without integration is a possibility: “People can be reached, baptized, and brought into membership and not be incorporated into the friendship structure of a church.”⁵⁶

One of the reasons is that churches’ assimilation programs often consider visitors as *guests*. This can lead ministers and lay leaders to relying more on plans, programs, and structures, rather than on building genuine relationships of friendship and care with newcomers. Established church members may maintain an “us and them” mentality, which can prevent newcomers from feeling truly welcomed. This can be a barrier to the newcomers becoming active members of the church.

McIntosh notes that “assimilation begins right at the heart of our need for relationships. Many churches are inclusive in outreach, yet exclusive in fellowship.”⁵⁷ This is why integration will truly happen only when church leaders develop and define a plan for existing parishioners to intentionally create new friendships with visitors and newcomers.

While some relationships will spontaneously develop, the friendship factor in assimilation is too crucial to leave to chance. You can’t just hope [people] will make friends in the church. You must encourage it, plan for it, structure for it, and facilitate it.⁵⁸

With a “friendship plan” in place, newcomers will not be introduced into an *impersonal discipleship system*, but into a warm community, open enough to integrate them in its networks of friendship. Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas explain that “Pastoral ministry is founded mainly on personal connections, while major public services are founded mainly on administrative and bureaucratic practices.”⁵⁹

55 L. E. Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1978, p. 16.

56 G. McIntosh, G. Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them*, p. 75.

57 G. McIntosh, G. Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them*, p. 75.

58 R. Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, p. 324–25.

59 N. Searcy, K. Thomas, J. D. Henson, *Launch: Starting a New Church from Scratch*, Baker Books, Michigan, Ada 2017, p. 139.

Personal invitations from established members to newcomers are also essential to overcome feelings of isolation and lack of integration. These invitations can be extended to participate in a newcomer's class, an Alpha course, a volunteer ministry, or a small group. The act of personally inviting someone is just as important in fostering a sense of community and belonging as it is in outreach and evangelization efforts when church members invite friends or family to visit the church for the first time.⁶⁰

Personal invitations are a key complement to befriending visitors and newcomers. A "personal invitations strategy" can help guide newcomers through different stages of their journey with the church, from being welcomed and experiencing fellowship, to learning about salvation and spiritual growth, and eventually to becoming involved in ministry and leadership.

Another reason some churches can suffer from an exclusionary trait can be found in the mindset of long-time church members. These can consider newcomers as threats to the status quo. Nobel Prize-winning author John Steinbeck said, "It is the nature of man as he grows older to protest against change, particularly change for the better."⁶¹ Without realizing it, older members of a church can sometimes be resistant to change and may hold a sense of control over the church's activities and direction. This attitude can make it difficult for newcomers and visitors to feel truly welcomed and integrated into the community. "There is a welcoming culture in the congregation, but when newbies come they want them to fit in. It's as if they're saying 'this is how we do church, you are very welcome but this is how it is'."⁶²

60 Research show that when people are asked what caused them to attend their church, more than 50 percent of them point to the invitation from a family member or friend (see G. L. McIntosh, *Growing God's Church: How People Are Actually Coming to Faith Today*, Michigan, Ada 2016): "a personal invitation, delivered by one person to another, is the most effective way of encouraging someone to attend your church... I have found that sixty to eighty percent of first-time guests come to church because of a personal invitation." E. Stetzer, M. Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, p. 169.

61 J. C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville 1998, p. 147.

62 D. Voas, *Intentionality, Numerical Growth and the Rural Church*, "Rural Theology" 15 (2017) no. 1, p. 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14704994.2017.1298265>.

Older parishioners may accept newcomers only if the newcomers see things the way they see them. They may consider themselves the guardians of a certain way of doing church: “The incorporation of newcomers threatens the status quo, so they are unconsciously rejected or severely limited in their influence.”⁶³

Institutions, including religious ones, have a natural tendency to resist change. While resistance can be beneficial, as it helps maintain stability, it can also hinder progress to accomplish its core mission. When a new vision arrives, change should occur. This process may cause discomfort for some members, but it is necessary for growth and survival: “The church or para-church organization that needs to change will invariably suffer pain. But without pain there will be no change, and that may mean death.”⁶⁴

This brings back the importance of infusing a culture that promotes openness to newcomers but also to the change newcomers might bring. True assimilation will happen when pastoral ideas coming from new members are seen not as threats but as positive and necessary.

4. The spiritual level of welcome and integration

Authentic integration in the church also has an important spiritual dimension. It is about helping visitors experience God’s presence and love. It means helping them encounter God and allowing them to be transformed by His love and grace.

The ultimate end of the whole divine economy is the entry of God’s creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity (Jn 17:21–23). But even now we are called to be a dwelling for the Most Holy Trinity: “If a man loves me,” says the Lord, “he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our home with him” (Jn 14:23).⁶⁵

63 L. Anderson, *Dying for Change*, Bethany House Publishers, Minnesota, Bloomington 1998, p. 112.

64 L. Anderson, *Dying for Change*, p. 118.

65 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 206, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015_IN-DEX.HTM (26.01.2023).

God's plan is to "sum up all things in Christ" (Ephesians 2:10). We are called to integrate our being in God. Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity composed this beautiful prayer:

O my God, Trinity whom I adore, help me to become utterly forgetful of myself so that I may establish myself in you, as changeless and calm as though my soul were already in eternity. Let nothing disturb my peace nor draw me forth from you, O my unchanging God, but at every moment may I penetrate more deeply into the depths of your mystery. Give peace to my soul; make it your heaven, your cherished dwelling-place and the place of your repose. Let me never leave you there alone, but keep me there, wholly attentive, wholly alert in my faith, wholly adoring and fully given up to your creative action.⁶⁶

In his Letter to the Ephesians (2:19–22), the apostle Paul writes:

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

We are invited to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge and to be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19).

Mark DeYmaz explains that knowing God, in this sense, is a matter of faith. The term rendered "know" is a translation of the common Greek word, *ginosko*, meaning simply, "to know." To know, in the full sense of this term, however, means to learn or acquire knowledge through experience. In other words, Christ does not so much pray that these will come to know God intellectually (the term *oida* in Greek) but rather that they will come to know God more fully in and through their own personal experience.⁶⁷

66 *The Trinitarian Prayer of Elizabeth of the Trinity*, <https://www.carmelholylanndco.org/the-trinitarian-prayer-of-elizabeth-of-the-trinity/> (26.01.2023).

67 M. DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation*, John Wiley & Sons, California, San Francisco 2007, p. 6.

Among a church's many ministries, the welcome and hospitality ministry is then primary in leading visitors into a relationship with God, helping newcomers and visitors experience God's love and integrate in God. Visitors will be led towards authentic integration if they feel welcomed, accepted, noticed, known, loved, and appreciated. This is how God values and treats each of us, and it is important for parishioners to strive to make newcomers feel the same way.

Conclusion

Hospitality in the Church has traditionally been understood as welcoming and hosting the less fortunate. In a parish setting and in the context of the New Evangelization, it is also welcoming and integrating visitors and newcomers. It is structured by an intentional process that is conceived by thinking like first-time visitors.⁶⁸ When visitors arrive at a church, the hospitality team ensures that they have an outstanding welcoming experience.⁶⁹

There are many elements to consider in a welcoming process: creating a website where visitors can find the information they need, providing special parking for visitors, greeting them in the parking lot, practicing the three-minute rule for chatting with visitors, setting up a visitors' table with contact sheets, projecting the prayers and hymns of the liturgy on a screen, providing name tags and visitor's packets, planning for excellent and life-impacting preaching and worship with the assumption that first-time visitors will be present, inviting visitors for coffee or lunch after the liturgy, following up, inviting them to a newcomers' class, inviting children to the children's liturgy, and so on.

A special coordinator is usually in charge of this ministry, but the whole parish should live and breathe a culture of hospitality: welcoming is understood by all as the responsibility of the faithful and for all

⁶⁸ Rick Warren writes: "Think through everything you do from a visitor's viewpoint" (R. Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, p. 260).

⁶⁹ According to Lyle Schaller, a small but rapidly growing number of Evangelical churches are driven by a desire to reach and attract new generations of youth and adults. The Sunday morning worship experience is entirely designed for seekers, and the worship service designed for committed Christians is scheduled for another time during the week.

to practice. Visitors are *expected* at liturgical celebrations, and parishioners are to be on the lookout to connect with them and make them feel specially welcomed.

But hospitality is more than a well-executed process. Focusing solely on its operational aspect could diminishes its true purpose. This ministry—indeed the parish as a whole—is not a mechanism for “producing disciples.” Leaders need to remember that the Church is a family in which all are called to encounter the Holy Spirit, to embrace salvation, and to develop a loving relationship with God and with one another.

The spiritual and relational aspects of hospitality are crucial. True Church hospitality aims to foster both a connection with the Holy Spirit and a sense of belonging within the community of the church for visitors. In addition to welcoming newcomers, it is important to value their perspectives and ideas. This spiritual, friendly, and accepting atmosphere will contribute to instilling a deep sense of belonging and close the back door of the church.⁷⁰

Apart from helping parishes rethink and restructure their welcoming process, the content of this article has implications for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). The Rite speaks of friendship and of insertion in the Christian community only during the time of mystagogy,⁷¹ but more should be done to integrate seekers early in the parish’s social network.

Ultimately, the success of integrating newcomers into the Christian community relies on the strength of the parish’s evangelization efforts. The more individuals who are invited and welcomed as first-time visitors, the greater the potential for them to become fully-fledged members and disciples of Christ.

70 Elmer Towns explains that “bonding is essential to the task of closing the back door of the church. Nothing is more frustrating than spending time and effort to win people to Christ and then watching them become unfaithful, join another local church, or drop out of church completely. But that is exactly what happens when the task of bonding is not taken seriously” (E. L. Towns, *154 Steps to Revitalize Your Sunday School and Keep Your Church Growing*, p. 7, 47, https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/view-content.cgi?article=1006&context=towns_books (26.01.2023)).

71 Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Chicago 1988, p. 238, 308.

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