

# TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

## Connecting Resources with Ministry

### Church Development Discussion Papers

**TITLE:** Welcoming Strangers

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In his excellent and thought-provoking book, *Welcoming the Stranger, A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*, Patrick Keifert uses the term "stranger" in three senses:

- The most obvious group of strangers, the outside strangers, may dress and speak differently, and may well be of a different class, race, age, or life situation than the insiders. Entering the church for the first time may also mark one as obviously different.
- The second group of strangers, the inside strangers, are members who are not a part of the inner circle where members function as an extended family for one another. Some of the inside strangers may have at one time been members of the inner circle but for one reason or another left the core. Now when they come to worship they have an acute awareness of what they are missing. Others have never been in the inner group. Even though they are members, they feel like outsiders.
- The third sense of stranger is the irreducible difference between two persons that exists in any encounter. This irreducible difference is most obvious with outside strangers and less obvious with inside strangers. This irreducible difference is least obvious with those with whom we have regular contact and with ourselves in our efforts to know ourselves. In this third sense we remain, even to ourselves, strangers.

Keifert makes the point that for us to show hospitality to the stranger is less a matter of making the stranger feel at home and more a matter of opening our private world to the stranger. Learning to enjoy life among strangers opens us to a fuller experience of God and ourselves.

As President of the Episcopal Church Building Fund I realized early on that "Professional Visitor and Stranger for the Episcopal Church" is an accurate description of my job. I now experience the church I love from a very different perspective than I had for twenty years as a parish priest. In Keifert's terms I am an inside stranger. It is from that point of view that I want to make some observations and offer some positive examples of welcoming.

Visiting in a congregation at Sunday worship is often like walking into someone's home uninvited and sitting down at the dining room table at meal time. At the time of sharing the *Peace*, most members turn to family members and friends first, and the visitor waits for second string. Greeting the stranger last, further estranges the stranger.

The heart of the routine welcome at the announcements is a request to sign the guest register and to remain for coffee. If visitors sign their names, they want a personal greeting. If they leave their addresses, they want mail. If they leave their phone numbers, they want phone calls. If they follow our instructions, we need to follow-up appropriately. Visitors go to the coffee time to meet someone in a setting that is not awkward or embarrassing. If we invite them to coffee, the members need to be prepared to greet them. If they actually go for coffee, we should consider serving better coffee.

Some visitors want to be invited deeper into the congregation, others want to be given permission to remain on the edges of the congregation. It is up to us to know the difference. Why visitors come on a given Sunday is too varied for a single response:

- first time in a church
- returned to church after years of absence
- church shopping
- visiting from out of town
- came with friends
- in personal crisis
- unchurched seekers.

The greeter is less likely to trigger unwanted responses from the visitor when he/she acknowledges that the visitor may be there for any number of reasons. It always works to ask why the visitor is there. What I want to hear from the greeter is that for whatever reason I came, being a stranger is a basic experience we all have on some level all the time. Let me know who you are, especially that you trust and expect the mystery and challenge that comes with the stranger. Let me choose how anonymous or known I want to be at the time.

As a visitor I have experienced several congregations and leaders who are very effective at welcoming strangers.

While visiting St. Mark's, Raleigh, N.C., I observed a parish welcoming visitors by having members speak publicly about when they arrived at St. Mark's and how long they have been there. At the end of the service the rector remained behind on the altar platform. She stepped to the pulpit/lectern and said, *"I'm Jane Gurry, and I've been the rector here at St. Mark's for four years. I want to welcome our visitors and invite you to join us for a reception in the courtyard after announcement time. I ask those with announcements to come forward."* Each person who made an announcement identified him/herself with first and last name, how long he/she had been at St. Mark's, and what his/her primary ministry was. I was made aware that we were all new at some point, and that you didn't have to be an "old timer" to have a leadership position in this parish.

One person told of arriving a few years ago, feeling lost after a divorce, thanked the congregation for its support, introduced a fiancée, invited all to the wedding, and pointed out the sign up sheet on the parish bulletin board. What was displayed for the stranger was an open, caring community where being new was something that was honoured. Jane asked if there were any more announcements. A woman hesitantly stood from the middle of the congregation, stated her name, first and last as modeled, said that this was her first time at St. Mark's and her first time in any church in a while. She said that she had never stood up and made an announcement before, but she wanted us to know that she would be back next Sunday.

Another place that does an extraordinary job welcoming the stranger is St. Bartholomew's, New York City. They advertise twelve free hours of parking on Sunday if you attend worship there. They suggest that you worship, go to brunch, and take in a museum. They understand the culture of the New York City church visitor, many of whom live in the suburbs and are not driving into the city only for church. The advertisement got me into the city for church. They know what life is like for me and use that knowledge to reach out to me. They really want me to come.

Bill Tully, the rector of St. Bartholomew's, began the announcements by saying, "To those of you who are here for the first time, or the first time in a long time, I'm glad you are here!" Tully is aware that part of the recent swell of membership is from people who once were members and have come back. Tully speaks directly to visitors, not about visitors. It works. He also gives permission to "church shop", to look St. Bart's over as long as you like and however you like. He makes it clear he hopes you find your place there and that you can determine how near the core or on the edges you want to be. He actually says, "St. Bart's is loose around the edges and hard at the core." in giving permission for the visitor to be as uninvolved or involved as the visitor chooses to be. In other words, it's okay to hang back if you want to, but there is substance at the core when you are ready. All Saints', Pasadena, CA, is another place that affirms the visitor without qualification. Their invitation is *"Whoever you are and wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome...."*

St. Bart's uses disposable tin buttons like the ones at museums to identify visitors. Visitors are told that if they wear one, they are guaranteed a greeting. Members of the congregation are trained to look for the buttons. However, Tully warns with humour that if you don't want a personal greeting, and some visitors don't, absence of a button does not guarantee that you will not be greeted. Tully explains that the congregation has become very welcoming.

Every Sunday the service handout includes a written welcome to visitors. To avoid stale, hollow, and formula greetings, a different staff member writes the greeting each week. Recently this text greeted visitors:

*"A real community has a listening heart. Our community takes its inspiration from one of humankind's greatest listeners, Jesus of Nazareth. He was that most paradoxical human being, a person of deep and clear conviction who nevertheless had room for others. The late Henri Nouwen, a great spiritual teacher, once said,*

*'someone filled with ideas, concepts and opinions cannot be a good host. There is no inner space to listen, no openness to discover the gift of the other. When our heart is filled with prejudices, worries, jealousies, there is little room for a 'stranger.' In this place, we are not perfect. But we work and pray always that we will have room for one another, and for any seeker and stranger who comes here. Welcome to a house with inner space.'*

Being sensitive to and effective with visitors and strangers is difficult and complicated work. We are better at welcoming the stranger when:

- We recognize that we all are visitors and strangers on some level.
- We devote ourselves to the ongoing task of understanding the life situations of both visitors and members.
- We continue to test with visitors and strangers any assumptions we have about them.
- We speak directly to and with visitors in public announcements.
- We meet visitors where they are, taking our queues from them instead of bringing them our assumptions.

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