

IDEAS FOR STARTING: HOSPITALITY AND WELCOME

PASTOR: AS SHEPHERD OF THE FLOCK, ALLOWING TIME FOR THE PASTOR TO MEET AND COME TO KNOW HIS PARISHIONERS IS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF HOSPITALITY. CREATING OPPORTUNITIES BEFORE AND AFTER MASS FOR THE PASTOR TO GREET PARISHIONERS AS WELL AS SPECIAL EVENTS LIKE QUARTERLY WELCOMING GATHERINGS OF NEW PARISHIONERS WILL HELP A PASTOR AND PARISHIONERS BECOME ACQUAINTED WITH ONE ANOTHER.

Pastoral Planning: When establishing goals and objectives for the parish, the involvement of both new parishioners and veteran members should be considered in the effective implementation of these objectives. Seeking new ways to improve hospitality and welcome to all members of the parish family is itself a sign of vibrant parish hospitality.

Invitation: Whether a new or long-standing member of a parish, parishioners need to be invited to serve in the most personal way possible. It often takes more than one invitation before a parishioner decides to become involved, so perseverance is important when we invite people. Parishioners who are quiet can be misinterpreted as disinterested. Understanding that people often receive information in different ways, varied forms of invitation are necessary. Bulletin and pulpit announcements, personal invitations, personal phone calls, and visits by members of the welcoming committee are effective tools. Noticing a particular talent or gift of an individual parishioner and personally inviting that person to share that gift with the parish family is most effective. Above all, we must persevere in our efforts to invite all parishioners to recognize the gifts given them individually by God and to ask them to share those gifts for the good of the parish family and the wider Church.

Called by Name: Because we are a parish family, it is important to know our fellow parishioners by name—even in the largest parishes. No doubt that this is a challenge for all of us. But we know from our own personal experience, that when we are called by our name by other parishioners, we no longer exist anonymously in the parish. At Baptism, when we become children of God, we are called by name! Updated parish pictorial directories are very valuable tools to allow us to know one another. Taking the time to study these pictures and then to leave our “comfort zones” to initiate conversation with these parishioners when we see them at a parish function is one of the most dynamic ways of establishing hospitality and welcome. The welcoming committee of the parish has a special responsibility to model this for other parishioners.

Communication: Consistent, continual, updated, friendly and clear communication of parish events in the bulletin, pulpit announcements, newsletters, parish websites, phone calls, etc. is vitally important to foster hospitality. Where people believe that they are informed, they experience that sense of belonging. Where communication is lacking within the parish, people feel disconnected. Often, this results in inaccurate and destructive conclusions drawn by certain members of the parish family, which when shared among parishioners, leads to confusion, hurt and anger.

Ministry Fairs: Ministry or Stewardship Fairs are great ways to invite parishioners to become involved. By having each parish organization set up an information booth for parishioners to see and learn about the various parish ministries, we open them to a world of possibilities in the parish where they can give of their time and talent. These fairs also provide members of each organization an opportunity personally to invite parishioners to become involved. Sign-up sheets at the booth allow contacts to be made efficiently.

Social Activities: The parish is a place of many social activities. Participating in these activities nurture our sense of community and belonging. At these events, greeting and talking with parishioners, especially new parishioners, is an important function of all members. If the leaders of the parish committee, which organizes the activity, make the welcoming of parishioners a priority as part of the event itself, this models hospitality for all those who attend.

Empowerment: Parishioners have a great sense of empowerment to want to serve the parish when hospitality is present. The pastor's personal invitation and empowerment of committee members to carry out the mission statement help foster a sense of hospitality. Identifying the gifts and talents of parishioners aids their sense of empowerment.

Direct and Rapid Follow-Up: Once we have effectively invited parishioners and they have accepted or are open to our invitation, it is imperative that parish leaders follow-up with the invitations. If a parishioner has been inspired to sign up on the time and talent form for a particular parish ministry and we fail to follow-up personally with them in a reasonable period of time, the result will be disastrous.

Next to a lack of invitation, a lack of follow-up is one of the surest sources of poor parishioner involvement. It is better not to invite parishioner involvement, than to invite and then do nothing when the parishioner offers his/her gift to the parish.

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA): Individuals desiring entrance into the Catholic Church through the Sacraments of Initiation often experience a close bond with each other and their sponsors during their catechumenate period. Sadly however, too often once these persons are initiated fully at the Easter Vigil into the Catholic Faith, they become lost in

the large parish community. These new parishioners are the fertile soil, awaiting an invitation to become active stewards in the parish family. Special care should be given these persons both by their individual sponsors in the RCIA journey, as well as members of the welcoming committee of the parish.

We are all prodigal children longing to be welcomed home. In a hospitable parish, parishioners and guests feel they belong and are appreciated. This is especially true if they were ever absent from the church. Hospitality leads to a sense of ownership among parishioners. This ownership and personal involvement fosters a sense of "belonging." When parishioners experience a warm and sincere welcome, they in turn become open to give themselves to others. God is love. God gives His love to each one of us. As God loves us, He calls us to love one another.