

Radical Welcoming and Hospitality

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: 2013 Summer Stewardship Education Meetings

What positive story(s) of hospitality and welcoming can you recall from your parish experiences?

In each of the five sessions, this question morphed into what are action items that can be done to create a positive, hospitable and welcoming environment. The suggestions fell unanimously into three categories.

1. Make a connection with visitors. Whether a welcoming committee was tasked with making the first contact or the pastor set the tone that it was each parishioner's duty to extend the hand of friendship, all responses included introduction of self and asking the visitor's name. It was suggested often that the visitor be immediately introduced to another person to foster a sense of belonging. Some suggested greeting guests as they arrived at Mass; others suggested in-pew; and, other suggested after Mass. Some suggested weekly social gathering to invite visitors to attend and others suggested less frequent gatherings to keep them special and more meaningful. While each group mentioned the pastor, the DRE, and the welcoming committee as those responsible for greeting guests, ultimately each session also had someone mention that it was all parishioners responsibility to greet visitors. One person suggested that parishioners be bold as they met visitors.
2. Regarding new parishioners, the key concept was ways to accomplish inclusion. Suggestions ranged from passive activities such as including new parishioners in the parish directory and listing their name and contact info in the weekly bulletin as well as utilizing a new member bulletin board that displayed pictures and interesting facts about new parishioners. Others recommended a buddy system that paired new members with existing, well-integrated members so that the new members could tag along to events and be integrated into those activities that fit. When appropriate, take advantage of the school functions to include new members, especially those with children. Other ideas included the various socials, "fun"-raisers, festivals, etc.
3. In addition to those things that involve direct interaction with visitors and new parishioners, there was often mention of those things that determine the atmosphere. Many mentioned the music, as it can set the tone of the Mass. Others jotted down the need for consistency in the schedule and structure of Mass. A few even mentioned expressed tolerance towards the fidgety or unruly child. Within the Batesville Deanery, one pastor gave out candy to the children after Mass so that he could interact with the parents of a particularly fussing child to thank them for coming to Mass and for bringing the child with them. A few noted that it was important to find individuals to be on the welcoming committee that were well suited

for the role, choosing those that exhibit a real joy for the job like the 4 year-old who opened the door with a big smile and hearty welcome. Another parish outfits their welcoming committee with T-shirts that read, “Ask me and I can help.”

On the flipside of this issue , St. Agnes in Brown County reports that between 25 -40% of attendees at each Mass are visitors due to their location. They expressed the concern that they are so focused on creating a warm welcome to visitors that they might miss maintaining the same warm environment for their own parishioners. Throughout all the replies, several mentioned ways to keep current parishioners engaged such as ministering to the sick and providing mercy meals, as well as use of name tags and involving members in CRHP and other parish activities.

Summing up all the many thoughts and suggestions for this question boiled down to creating a welcoming atmosphere that conveyed warmth and genuine hospitality; all parishioners intentionally making a connection with those they encounter; and , having a plan for integrating and including all new members. One participant noted that the current generation of Catholics is the first generation to embrace the concept of welcoming and hospitality.

How do you anticipate, in light of “Connected in the Spirit”, 1.) What possible roadblocks you may encounter in enhancing your parish welcoming and hospitality, or 2.) Encouraging those parishioners whose parishes are closing to bring their gifts forward as newcomers to a new parish?

“Connected in the Spirit” is a process. The Terre Haute Deanery has completed the bulk of the process and therefore had a different perspective on the question. The Batesville Deanery and some parishes in the Connersville Deanery will be undergoing major changes, some parishes are even closing. All four Indianapolis Deaneries are entering into the process. Eventually all the Deaneries will undergo the process.

While the remarks from the Batesville Deanery were oftentimes raw, they were also tempered with faith. There was great sensitivity in many comments from the other deaneries yet to go through the process.

Someone from Batesville stated that so much family history and roots are part of the brick and mortar of the parishes that are closing. Yet time and time again others stated that those parishioners whose parishes are closing need to have the space and time to grieve. Ideas to augment that process included intention Masses, a letter writing campaign from the parishioners of parishes that will be receiving those needing to be integrated, buddying up parishioners from two or more parishes in a timely manner to establish relationship prior to the closing of the parishes, and hosting parish open houses and utilizing ministry fairs to engage those that will be joining new parishes.

Often mentioned was the fact that we are a universal church. Choose language that avoids “our” and “yours”. With the help of Strength Finders, help those that will be attending Mass at a different parish identify strengths and focus on where those strengths can be used to grow the universal church. Invite people to join ministries and combine programs that overlap.

Above all, be patient. Change is difficult. It can create fear and uncertainty. The timeline for grieving varies by individual. Pray for those who struggle with the changes and respectfully communicate that they are regularly the focus of prayers.

Those from Terre Haute reported that after a year, there are still parishioners struggling. Most have assimilated into other parishes, but some are still searching. For those, encouragement and respect are key.

What actionable items from today can you walk away with?

- Listen.
- Smile.
- Personally invite.
- Introduce yourself & invite others to do same.
- Meet the visitor or newcomer “where they are”, walking alongside them and slowly help them grow.
- Provide name tags for all.
- Greet not only new people but existing members as well. Call them by name and inspire them to be great.
- Using the books cited in the meeting, provide seminars for members of parishes that are not closing to become more aware of how they can welcome others into the parish.
- Design and implement a membership covenant.
- Pray. Ask pastors to pray for parishioners and priests who are directly affected by the changes at the parish level.
- Decide not to wait for those affected by closing parishes to show up once their parishes close, but rather engage them now. One example is to host an open house before parishes close that focus on welcome and integration. Possibly host a welcoming dinner that includes complimentary babysitting. Another idea is to set up a welcome and parish information booth at festivals to help others see how they can assimilate into ministries and programs that interest them.
- Provide umbrellas for greeters to use on rainy Sundays.
- List the Welcome committee mission and members on the parish website.