

# **Creating Hospitable Environments of Welcome for Newcomers in Congregations**



*This resource manual is intended as a springboard to help congregations think about how to be more intentional in being welcoming, by Creating Hospitable, Inviting Environments for First Timers attending worship or other events held by them. Congregations may not necessarily need all the material contained within, or even need other resources. All material contained within, however, will necessarily have to be adapted for each congregation's particular context.*

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## Creating Hospitable, Inviting Environments for First Timers\*



### **Background and Introduction**

Hospitality is an ancient, integral practice of Christian faith communities. In Ancient Near Eastern culture, where there were no hotels or motels or even restaurants, hospitality and welcoming in travelers was an important and esteemed practice. In the early church, with people coming from many backgrounds, hospitality was an essential practice for growth in sharing the Good News. The church became known for offering hospitality to the poor and the sick; thus the word hospital is closely linked to hospitality.

Hospitality, inviting and welcoming all to join in fellowship, is a hallmark and spiritual practice of the Christian faith community, the Church. Just as the Spirit of Christ invites and welcomes all, the followers of Jesus are to extend that hospitality to all.

If you ask nearly any congregation if they are hospitable and inviting to those who come and participate in worship or any activity for the first time, they will say that of course they are. If you ask those first timers if the congregation was hospitable and inviting, the answer could be very different.

Congregations very rarely set out to be intentionally inhospitable and unwelcoming, but often come across that way to newcomers. Usually, this is the result of simply not thinking through approaches, language, and physical environment. With intention, forethought, and open hearts and spirits, congregations that desire to create a hospitable, inviting environment for first timers can do so and alleviate some of the difficulty and anxiety of being a first timer.

Following is some information and some ideas to assist in the process of becoming more intentionally welcoming to new participants in the community of faith and the life of the congregation, just as all have been welcomed by the inclusive love of Christ.

*\*A quick word about use of term "first timer":*

*"Visitor" implies they are simply passing through.*

*"First timer" simply means it is their first time participating with a congregation.*

*"Newcomer" simply means they are new to participating, maybe for the first time, or just a few times.*

## **Website**

In the 21st century, a congregation's website is its front door. It is where those who are looking for a congregation to attend or participate with will turn first to seek out information.

There are a few things, some very simple, that can be done to make a website more informative and inviting, but there are two things that are an *absolute necessity* for churches:



- 1) **Have a website.** A professionally designed website is almost always better and worth the money, but there are several simple platforms that will allow even novices to create a website, usually for low cost or free. Two of the most popular website builders are [godaddy.com](http://godaddy.com) and [weebly.com](http://weebly.com). More expensive, but specializing in church website building is [cloversites.com](http://cloversites.com). There are many others. It is understandable that cost is a factor, but if there is no website, or it is very poorly designed, it is simply not inviting.
  
- 2) **Keep the website updated.** If the website is outdated and has broken links, people may be frustrated and much less likely to participate in any activities. It is imperative that those in charge of the website keep it current and correct. There should always be more than one person with access to the website, which should be owned by the church, not an individual. This will ensure that the congregational leaders will always have access to the website.

In addition to these, other things that help a website to be inviting are:

- Contact information, location, and times for activities and events
- Who does what and how to reach them
- Pictures of the Pastor, Staff, and other Leaders
- History/Mission/Vision/Values of Congregation and of MCC
- Specific offer of welcome to diverse people
- What a worship service is like
  - How long? Dress code? Overall order?
  - Short video clips of a service
  - Sermons
- Highlights of ministries and activities with actual pictures
- Links to current newsletters and bulletins
- Using clear, plain language that is easy to read
  - Break it up with bullet points
  - Use headings
- Clean and concise and not cluttered
- Consider a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page for newcomers

This list of questions may be helpful: [Church Website Evaluation Questions](#)

***The most important question to keep in mind in designing and maintaining the website is: “What would this look like to someone who has never been to church before?”***

## **Social Media**



A church’s website is only a part of its online presence. In our contemporary society, in order to meet people where they are like Jesus did, churches need to be on social media. Which social media? Part of that can only be answered in context, as different communities tend to use different media. However, at the very least, each congregation should have a Facebook page.

[Facebook Pages](#) are for businesses and organizations to be able to connect with people by sharing their information, events, activities, and stories. They are public and for communicating broadly (Facebook Groups, on the other hand, are only for those within the group) Only official representatives can create and maintain Facebook Pages. It is very likely many more people than active members will follow the church’s page, making it an excellent form of outreach and even more important that it is welcoming.

- It is imperative to ensure that all information is accurate and up to date.
- Posts to the Page should be positive, regular and relevant, but not overwhelming
- Some examples of inviting posts:
  - Upcoming Events with details about how to get involved
  - Links to newsletters and sermons
  - Related community events
  - MCC newsletters and activities
  - Pictures of events and activities
- The Facebook Page should provide a link to the website
- There should always be more than one Administrator for the Facebook Page to ensure that congregational leaders will always have access

If needed, this is a link to the page with the [MCC Social Media Policy](#)

## **Responsiveness to Inquiries**

Before participating in a church event or activity or worship, some people will attempt to contact the church via email or phone with questions or concerns. These inquiries be handled with care and respect.

The responses need to be:

- Delivered by the appropriate person
- Within 2 business days
- Clear, courteous, and professional
- Accurate information; Saying, “I don’t know, let me find out,” and then finding out and relaying correct information is much better than giving wrong information
- Positive and encouraging

## **Signage**

The website may be the metaphorical front door, but it will be of little use if people cannot find the literal front door. Church signs are extremely important in providing a good experience for newcomers to the church campus. They are the first impressions and can help put people at ease.

There are *three kinds of signs* that are needed:



- 1) **Primary outside signs.** These are the signs that help newcomers find the church campus from the road. They need to be:
  - large enough to be seen from the road
  - placed in the most visible location(s)
  - durable for outdoor conditions
  - neat and clear, with easy to read fonts - consider lighting it for night
  - quick and to the point for drivers who have little time to really pay attention
  - informative of service times and include phone and website if possible
  - positive and bright
- 2) **Secondary outside signs.** These are the signs that help clearly direct people to the appropriate places on campus, for:
  - where to park
  - how to get in the building(s)
  - the names of each building
  - where events are taking place

These signs need to be:

- large enough to be seen well, but not too large
- easy to read and follow

3) **Inside signs.** These are signs that help clearly direct people to the appropriate places within the building(s), such as:

- Worship Area
- Exits
- Restrooms and diaper changing stations
- Water fountains or coolers
- Offices
- Meeting Rooms
- Children's Area

These signs need to be:

- easy to read - both the text itself and the words used - and to follow
  - text should be neat, attractive, readable from distance and close
  - keep in mind that not everyone is familiar with 'church' words nor do newcomers know the names of buildings or rooms
- located where people need to make decisions about with way to go
- tested for effectiveness with those unfamiliar with the building

*Even in rented spaces, good, sturdy signs can and should be posted to orient people.*

***All signs should be accurate, and correct in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.***

## **Grounds and Buildings**



Before a newcomer even gets to speak to a person, they will see and be affected by the state of the grounds and the buildings.

At all times, the **grounds** should be:

- **Safe**
  - Adequate outside lighting for night
  - Free of dangerous objects
  - Level walking
  - In good repair
- **Neat**
  - Landscaped nicely
  - Building exteriors kept up
  - Free of clutter
- **Clean**
  - Free from dirt and stains

At all times, the **facilities inside** should be:

- **Clean**
  - Free from dirt, stain, and odors everywhere
    - Hallways
    - Bathrooms
    - Sanctuary
    - Seating
    - Carpets
    - Floors
    - Kitchen
    - Meeting Rooms
    - Offices
  - Free of clutter in common areas
  - All posters, flyers, etc., are current
- **Stocked with needed supplies**
  - Bathrooms should be stocked at all times with
    - Toilet Paper
    - Soap
    - Paper Towels
  - Garbage cans available and in sight throughout facilities
- **Adequate lighting**

*To be truly welcoming to all, the grounds, buildings, and facilities need to be accessible to those with physical disabilities, including designated parking, ramps, and restrooms.*

## **Welcome Center**

At entrances where newcomers are likely to come in, there should be **Welcome Centers** that are clearly identified as such that provide information about: the congregation, worship, upcoming events, activities, specific contact information for who and how to contact for more information, and how to get more involved if they choose.



It can be as simple as a bulletin board, or a designated table, or a special kiosk.

This information should be presented in a colorful, concise, but clear (and not cluttered) way and may use posters, flyers, leaflets, brochures, CDs/DVDS (of sermons and/or services). There should be general information brochures or leaflets, but also brochures or leaflets for specific ministries, activities, and events. In addition, information about other local resources may be helpful. *It is important that all information is up to date.*

## **Greeters/Hosts**



For worship, and for large events or activities, the Welcome Station should have *people at them to greet people as they come in and act as a host to help newcomers begin to feel at ease*. It is very important that these be *out-going, joyful people with a warm personality and positive attitude*. They will be the first human contact made and can make a lasting first impression - a positive or a negative one. Anyone involved in the greeting or hosting ministry should be trained so as to increase the likelihood that the first impression is positive.

***Greeters serve an essential role in providing a welcome like Jesus welcomed.***

Those who are greeting at the Welcome Center by the entrance should:

- Spend time in prayer for their ministry, the church, and the people
- Be neatly groomed with good hygiene, including fresh breath
- Smile in a friendly manner and make eye contact when greeting
- Say “Hello” warmly to everyone who comes in
- Focus attention most on any first timers
- Offer a handshake of introduction to newcomers
- Say something like, “Hi, I don’t believe I’ve met you yet, my name is ...”
- Express gratitude and pleasure for the people coming
- Respect personal space at all times; set aside personal preferences
- Answer questions; if information is unknown, find it out
- Approach those who seem “lost” and offer help
- Ask if they have any questions; listen more than talk
- Take a genuine interest in who the newcomers are as people
- Introduce newcomers to other members
- Give a tour of building(s) or at least point to important locations (restrooms, etc.)
- Ensure newcomers receive an information packet

## **Information Packet**

An information packet will help to communicate to those participating for the first time who the congregation is, what activities and events there are to participate in, and gratitude for their attendance and participation.

This packet may be *information brochures and leaflets* placed neatly in a *nice folder, or in a nice bag*. Folders should be sturdy and it is preferable to have them printed with the church’s name or have neatly printed stickers applied with the church’s name. Plenty of information packets should be assembled before worship or major event.

A few ideas about what to include in the information packet:

- A letter of greeting from the Pastor
- Announcement flyers about upcoming events
- Descriptions of programs, activities, and ministries
- Information on the current sermon series
- Information on what to expect during worship
- A church business card with contact information
- A pen with the church logo
- A magnet with the church logo and website
- (If using a bag) a small gift from the church
  - some ideas: a mug; a snack; an appropriate book; a gift card; a t-shirt

***The two absolutely essential items to include are:***

1. **An information brochure** with a brief overview of the church
2. **A connection card** for them to share information about themselves



### **Information brochure**

The information brochure should provide a *brief overview*, giving the most pertinent facts to know what the church is about. It is preferable to have it designed and printed professionally. It should be printed in color on good quality paper.

A trifold on 8 ½ X 11 paper is best. It should be colorful, but not cluttered, and with a font style and size that is easily readable. Content should be neatly organized.

At minimum, the brochure should include:

- An attractive cover
- Church name, address, phone number, website
- Worship days and times
- Church mission, vision, and values; “Who We Are” summary
- Ongoing opportunities for connection and growth
- Church staff, functions, and contact information
- Positive, inclusive images and messages

Other items to consider including:

- Pictures of real people (with permission) engaged in real activities
- Very brief history of the church
- Information about MCC
- Brief explanation of worship practices and styles
- Ongoing ministries and missions

***Proofread all content very carefully!***

## Connection Card



Connection Cards are an effective way to obtain contact information from first-timers so there can be a warm and inviting follow-up.

They can also serve as a record of attendance for regular attendees and members and provide for updated contact information.

They also allow all people to communicate their prayer or other needs, as well as indicate interest in activities or ministries.

Using the Connection Cards for all in attendance means that newcomers are included from the beginning and it is a more confidential process of sharing for everyone.

Connection Cards need to be readily accessible. In addition to being placed in the information packet, they should also be *placed in the bulletin and/or in the seats*.

Their purpose of communicating to provide connection and how to fill them out will need to be explained during worship at some point as well.

At whatever point Connection Cards are introduced, make sure to:

- 1) Provide *sufficient time* to fill them out
- 2) Provide *writing implements* to fill them out
- 3) Provide *a writing surface* - clipboards are often helpful

The information requested should be basic, making it easy to fill out the card. Too many questions or details can cause people to lose interest and choose not to fill them out.

Information to request should include:

- Name - Adult(s) and Child(ren)
- If this is their first time
- Address, Phone, Email (if a member, only need update)
- If and how they wish to be contacted
- Specific prayer requests
- Any other specific needs
- Interest in an event, activity, or ministry

The most efficient way to collect the cards is generally to have them placed in the collection plate. When the offering is collected, the cards should be gathered to be distributed to whomever records attendance. Any pastoral needs should be forwarded to the appropriate staff member. Any interest in event, activity, or ministry should be forwarded to the appropriate contact. This needs to be completed and any needed responses be done promptly to ensure that connection and communication occurs.

Many templates for connection cards are online. [This](#) is just one example from an MCC.

## **Worship Bulletin**

The worship bulletin provides another avenue of communication and can set the tone for beginning to worship together. Even in congregations that rely primarily on the screen for worship songs, prayers, etc., it is helpful to many to also have bulletins. ***Especially for newcomers, a bulletin will give them some idea of what to expect in the flow of worship.*** [Here](#) is just one example of an MCC Worship Bulletin

*The primary purpose of the bulletin is provide information about the worship service.*

It should identify the church, the date, the worship time(s), physical address, phone and email contact information, and website and social media links.

Other items to consider placing in the bulletin might be the mission statement, the pastor and staff information, and news about major upcoming events.

To be most effective, the bulletin should:

- Use a simple font for clarity
- Have a logical, easily followed layout
- Be uncluttered and readable
- Utilize plain, up-to-date language
  - ensuring that all are included
  - making it more inviting
- Provide explanations for worship practices
  - Be intentionally welcoming



***The question to ask about bulletin is, “If I had not ever attended any worship service, here or anywhere, would this help me to understand what is happening and what is expected?”***

## **Worship Service**

*The worship experience actually starts before the worship service itself starts, which is yet another reason for being intentionally inviting and hospitable as people enter. That hospitality and welcome should continue into the worship service itself. Depending on the congregational culture, either a greeter or an usher will distribute the bulletin and then assist in being seated in the worship space prior to the service beginning.*

There should be *plenty of seating* for people, especially newcomers, to choose from. If the worship space is consistently 80% or more full, a second service or adding more space for seating should be considered. People simply do not like to feel crowded.

People also need to feel welcome to sit wherever they would like. Many newcomers will choose somewhere near back or near the aisle. It is hospitable for church members to be flexible enough to cheerfully allow newcomers to sit wherever is comfortable.

*All open seats, unless needed for very specific reasons, need to be available to anyone.*

If a newcomer desires, it is often helpful to seat them next to a congregant who will be especially hospitable, introducing them to others if the newcomer wishes, explaining worship, possibly inviting them to a meal or coffee after worship. As with greeters, these *congregants need to be warm and inviting, but respect personal boundaries.*

It is important to honor everyone's time and start the worship service on time. During the *welcoming time*, it is appropriate to extend a *special welcome to those participating for the first time*. This should be the only public form of welcome to newcomers, as the majority of people have a fear of public speaking and a fear of rejection.

During the *worship greeting* may be the time to *explain the Connection Cards*: what they are, what their purpose is, where to find them, how to fill them out, and what to do with them when they are filled out. For many congregations, this will be the collection plate.



Throughout the service, worship leaders should provide invitational transitions, such as an invitation to pray, sit, stand, sing, including where songs or written prayers are found. However, it needs to clearly be invitation to participate as they are able and if they choose.

If the congregation has a time of *passing the peace*, it is important to remind congregants to respect personal boundaries without judgment.

When it is time to ask for the *offering*, the focus should be on how giving helps the church achieve its mission from God. [Here](#) are some tips on asking for the offering.

A very brief reminder of the Connection Cards is appropriate. However, remember to give people time to fill it out before passing the plates.

*Communion*, especially the way most MCCs celebrate it, will be a new experience for many newcomers, so it is important to make truly inclusive invitations - without conditions for receiving communion. Specific instructions for the process should be given. For a truly inclusive communion, make sure to offer a completely gluten-free option, as well ensure those with impaired mobility have a clear way to participate in the meal.

Language used during worship should:

- be genuinely warm, inviting, and uplifting
- as plainly and positively stated as possible
- avoid acronyms, abbreviations, special names, unless explained
- include explanation for any jargon or specifically “Christian” words
- be inclusive of all genders, ages, family status
- invitations to move should be “as you are able”
- make it clear that participation in any part of worship is voluntary

[Here](#) is a resource for using language that includes all people.

***The question to ask about the worship service is, “If I had not ever attended any worship service, here or anywhere, would I understand what is happening and what is expected? Whoever I am, would I feel included?”***



If there is a *coffee hour* or *refreshments* after service, or if it is customary for people to go out for a meal together after service, make sure that is explicitly stated and the invitation to participate also include directions for where to go. A personal invitation is often most helpful to newcomers. Greeters and other congregants should make effort to talk with newcomers and engage in conversation.

*When newcomers leave, make sure they are told their presence was appreciated and are invited to return for worship or other events or activities.*

## Follow Up

Hospitality continues even after the worship service or event occurs and newcomers depart. *Following up with newcomers will extend the welcome and invite them to return and continue to explore the church community.*

Follow up should be **timely** - within 2 days of the first-time attendance.

Follow up may take the form of

- a letter written and signed by the Pastor
- an email directly from the Pastor
- a letter or email from another staff person
- a letter or email from a congregational leader
- a handwritten thank you note



The first follow up communication should:

- Thank the newcomer for attending
- Provide them specific ways to connect
  - like a program, activity, or mission project
- Give an invitation to the next Newcomers Gathering
  - Include date, time, and location
- Let them know who to contact and how if they have questions
- Express desire for them to return

After the second time attending, a *phone call* from the Pastor or another staff person or leader will provide a further opportunity to answer any questions the newcomer may have and to invite them to events or activities in line with their needs and interests.

A **Newcomers Gathering** should be held at least every other month as an opportunity for the newcomers to meet others, ask questions, and learn more about the church.

Usually right after worship is the best time for these to be held. *Food* should be served.

*The Pastor and other staff and church leaders should attend.* The Pastor takes a few moments to share about the mission and vision God has given the church and how the congregation is living into that with its programs, events, activities, and service.

The Pastor, staff, and church leaders then make themselves available for questions.

Information about the *next Membership Class* should be provided.



## **A Culture of Welcome, Hospitality and Inclusion**

Even though there are those who are specifically called to ministries of welcome and hospitality - like greeters/hosts at the Welcome Center, it is actually the job of the entire congregation and a culture to establish and cultivate.

***The whole congregation should make newcomers feel welcome and included.***

In such a culture, the congregation:

- Uses language that includes, not insider language
- Happily gives up their 'usual' seat or 'saved' seats for a newcomer
- Moves to the inside so a newcomer can have the aisle
- Makes room for families to sit together
- Is pleased to have newcomers even if they are late
- Allows everyone to worship in their own way
- Expresses gratitude for newcomers attending
- Asks non-intrusive questions
- Keeps appropriate boundaries
- Ensure the grounds and facilities are kept up
- Makes sure newcomers do not leave without being greeted by someone
- Takes pride in their church and speaks positively of it



MCCers often know more than most what it means to feel excluded from church. But, MCCers also know what it means to know that they are included in the love of God. This is what ***creating hospitable environments of welcome for newcomers*** is about. It is about extending the welcome of God to others, so, they, too, can know for themselves that they are included, that they are welcome at the table. It is about being the hands and feet and arms of Christ for whosoever comes. It is about the Spirit moving, uniting all of God's rainbow children.