

Best Practices in Church Welcoming Programs

1. Top down training of Diocesan personnel, parish staffs, and parishioners designed to build awareness and to challenge communities to become more welcoming.
2. Hiring a "Welcoming the Stranger" coordinator.
3. Developing and distributing a resources book on "Welcoming the Stranger."
4. Conduct a self study and develop a three year plan for creating welcoming parishes.
5. Produced a cookbook with recipes that came from new people.
6. Produced and show a video on the importance of welcoming the stranger.
7. Parishes provide transportation to and from liturgical services for the newcomers.
8. Ask someone from outside your church community to come to all the weekend liturgies and to reflect back on the extent to which they felt (or did not feel) welcomed.
9. Newcomers are acknowledged and welcomed by someone on the altar during the Mass.
10. Everyone is involved in the welcoming of newcomers - Sometimes the most gratifying welcome a visitor can receive is from someone s/he wouldn't expect to welcome him/her, in a place s/he didn't expect it to happen.
11. Have a "welcome to the church" gathering with both newcomers and established parishioners attending.
12. After an appropriate length of time to become acquainted, invite the newcomer to commit to some parish service/ministry. Challenge the newcomer to envision what they would like to experience spiritually over the next 12 months, and then to imagine how the church can help them to realize that dream.
13. Provide visitor information cards and ask new people to either drop them in the collection basket or another designated receptacle in the church.
14. Create a Rapid Response Team. Have a group of parishioners who are willing to visit the newcomers with some fresh baked bread or cookies in the week following the newcomer's first visit to the church. Two weeks later is already too late in many cases.
15. Pray (publicly and privately) for the newcomers and for the next stranger to walk through the doors of the church. If the parish has organized prayer groups or small Christian communities, make sure they are praying for the newcomers.

16. Establish a "three-minute rule," that is, regular attendees and members spend the first three minutes after Mass visiting with someone they don't know.

17. Create a "Welcome New Members" board in the church vestibule. For each new person, there is a picture and a brief bio: where they are from, how long they've attended the church, their family, hobbies, and so on.

18. Establish programs and/or activities for the newcomer that follows up on the initial welcome. These could include: divorce recovery workshops, bereavement groups, marriage and parenting enrichment programs, out of work support and networking groups.

19. Make "Welcoming the Stranger in Our Midst" an ongoing part of every parish meeting agenda.

20. Recruit people to become umbrella escorts who would arrive half hour early on rainy days and escort people from their cars to the church on rainy days.

21. Designate well marked "Visitor Parking" spaces close to the church building and ask "regulars" to please refrain from parking there.

22. Have monthly (or quarterly depending on numbers of new people) hor'dourves gatherings of newcomers with the pastor and other parish staff.

23. No matter how efficient and cost effective an answering machine may be, newcomers are most impressed when the phone is answered by a knowledgeable, friendly, helpful person.

24. One church in Anchorage, Alaska assigns a deacon to a person or family who attends Mass for several Sundays.

25. Enfoldment Coordinators. They link visitors with a "first friend," who visits the new persons at their home. The "first friend" learns the visitors' interests and refers their names to the appropriate ministry area.

26. Integration Czar. When a person expresses interest in a program or ministry, the czar assigns a specific leader to extend an invitation to the newcomer. The czar then follows up with the leader, asking about the newcomer's response. This ensures all invitations get made.

27. Family Mentor. Assign a mentor family to each new person or family. The church attempts to match the backgrounds and interests of its mentor family with those of the newcomers. To gauge the effectiveness of the mentor program and to identify needs, a committee tracks people's attendance in Mass, involvement in service, and giving habits.

28. Tracking Changes. One church puts its people on notice: "If we don't see you, we'll call you." In tracking attendance, and focuses on changes in a person's attendance pattern. A call or visit is made when someone's pattern changes.

29. Hold a parish mission designed to instruct and inspire your parishioners to become a more welcoming community. Ideal missions will: help parishioners to get in touch with God's blessings upon their lives, explain that the way to demonstrate our gratitude for these gifts is to welcome the stranger in our midst, and to instruct in the ways of being hospitable to newcomers. *The Center for Parish Hospitality* can provide inspirational presenters to lead your parish mission. Refer to www.catholichospitality.com/resources.htm for further information.