

The Episcopal Church is an Inviting Church

The Rev. Linda L. Grenz

For most of my 30+ years in ministry the church has used the motto: “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.” It is posted on our street signs, in ads and at our church entrances. This motto was fine for the 1950’s when many people were entering those doors, and all we needed to do is welcome them. But today we no longer have very many people coming in the doors for us to welcome. So a focus on just welcoming isn’t adequate. And our latest motto: “The Episcopal Church – We’re Here for You” is even worse. Now we don’t even have to welcome people; we just have to be there if they show up!

I propose a different motto to guide us in these days: “The Episcopal Church is an Inviting Church.” It is not enough to “be there” for people or even to welcome them. We need to *invite* them in – in many ways. Perhaps we should put a sign on the inside of the door that says we are an inviting church so when we depart we are reminded to be an inviting people and place.

An Inviting People

We need to become people who invite others to church. I know this isn’t the Episcopal custom or culture, but we need to learn how to invite others in ways that fit our culture. That doesn’t mean going door-to-door in teams of two – although there’s nothing wrong with that. It does mean finding our own Episcopal ways of inviting people to church.

Begin by thinking about when, where and how you issue invitations in personal, community or work situations. Do you plan ahead and send out formal invitations? Think of something at the last minute and send out an email or grab the phone? Do you invite close friends and family or co-workers or are you the kind of person who invites everyone in sight? Are you more inclined to invite people to cultural events or educational events, to public parties or small dinners at home? Looking at your personal patterns of invitation will tell you something about how you are comfortable inviting others. You may not even think of it as “inviting” but rather as “informing.” “I saw a great movie last night,” you might tell a friend, “I bet you’d love it.” Start there. Figure out what you normally do and then think about how you can use those patterns to invite people to church.

One idea I’ve used and offered over the years is to develop a business card for each member of the church. Print business cards with the church name, address, etc. and the person’s name with the word “Member” below it. On the back side print the following: “We invite you to worship, learning and friendship....and list your service and education program times. Those words are selected deliberately – “worship” (not liturgy, which non-Episcopalians don’t understand), “learning” (not study, which reminds people of school) and “friendship” (not fellowship – a very “churchy” word that doesn’t have much appeal).

Give everyone (including children and youth) one laser printed page of ten cards with their name on it and ask them to give them to people as a way to invite them to church. This is something that fits our culture.



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Some people will post them on bulletin boards but most people will just carry them around and when some topic comes up in conversation, they can pull out a card and say, “You might be interested in a study series on that which we’re doing next week; here, let me give you my card. It’s during the adult education hour at 10:30am on Sunday mornings.”

Another idea I’ve encouraged churches to use is to have a “Visitor Sunday” at least twice a year – maybe once in mid to late October and one in the spring. Ask every man, woman and child to invite at least one person to visit your church. Roll out the red carpet. Have special music. Give tours of the Sunday School rooms with teachers present to talk about what they do. Highlight your best features. Put on a nice lunch and make sure parishioners get to know your visitor. Do NOT pressure people but be honest. Tell people you are inviting people to join your church and you would welcome them if they wanted to come back – but you also want them to know about you so if this isn’t a good fit for them or they are already involved elsewhere, you hope they will remember this church and recommend it to others. It is easier for people to invite someone to a special event like this than an ordinary Sunday (“My church has this Visitor Sunday and I’m supposed to bring someone – would you be willing to be my visitor? We promise to make it fun and we don’t pressure people to join!”). What a Visitor Sunday does is give your parishioners practice in inviting people – and you’re all in it together.

Remember that the Mormons don’t send those missionary teams out to go door-to-door for two years because they get lots of new members that way. They don’t. What they are doing is training those young people to share the gospel and invite people to church, over and over again even in the face of repeated rejection. They are most successful when those former missionaries get married and settle down in a neighborhood. Then they see results. Within five years the majority of the former missionary’s neighbors will be Mormons....because the missionaries learned how to invite people to church. Visitor Sundays (or whatever you call them) are practice sessions – they provide a clear, concrete goal that everyone can work towards. Each one bring one. Practice hospitality. Listen to the feedback and then make appropriate adjustments. Oh, and by the way, practice inviting others to church.

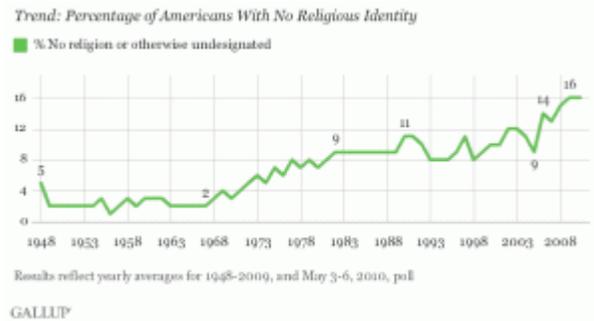
If the average return rate on direct mail of 1-2% applies to inviting people to church (which is really low as personal invitation rates are generally higher) you can see that it takes A LOT of invitations to get someone to come. You’d have to personally invite 50-100 people to church before anyone responded. That’s far too many for most people to sustain. BUT, give each member of your church a page of 10 business cards and, if you have 100 people that’s 1000 invitations that will probably get 10-20 responses. Or get a church of 50 people to invite 50 people to a Visitor Sunday and at least a few of them will come back on subsequent Sundays. A church, working together, can do much more than one person. Don’t forget your children and youth – they are often more comfortable and their invitees usually bring families with them. So, you might end up with new families brought to you by your younger members!

There are plenty of people we can invite. The number of people who chose “no religious affiliation” doubled from 8% in 1998 to over 16% today. If you look at those under 35, that number jumps to almost 40%. In addition, 40% of those who *did* list a religious affiliation said that no one in their household belonged to any religious institution. In other words, 40% of the people who *say* they are Episcopalians don’t come to



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church. That means that about half of the people in your town most likely don't belong to any faith group. And, ironically, most of them (86% in one study) say they would come to church IF someone invited them – especially someone they know. So building relationships with people and inviting them is key.



Prepare people before you send them out. Brainstorm lists of potential invitees – the clerk at your grocery store, the neighbor down the street, the family of your child's friend, etc. You might want to do some role plays to give people ideas of how to invite people and how to handle possible responses. Get your teenagers and children involved. Have fun. Play out some of your worst fears. Talk about what works and what might not work. Share ideas. This can be a great community-building experience as well as helping lower people's anxiety about inviting others to church.

Of course, inviting someone is just the first step. You need to follow up: research shows that you can increase a person's chances of returning by over 80% if someone stops by their home within 48 hours and delivers a small gift and personal welcome. Churches have used homemade cookies or bread, small Prayer Books, an Episco-Bear or other Episcopal logo item as gifts. This is a doorstep visit of less than five minutes – just enough to communicate that the visitor was noticed and valued. This should be standard procedure in every church for any local visitor.

Finally, you need to integrate newcomers into the congregation. Once someone has shown up a few times, we assume they are "in." We might recruit them for a task or announce an occasional newcomers group, but we don't have a systematic way to integrate newcomers or to assist them on their spiritual journey. If you expect newcomers to arrive regularly, you need to have multiple opportunities for them to attend a newcomers or inquirers event...and you need to invite them personally rather than just making an announcement and hoping they will show up.

I'd also like to see churches establish ways for every adult to take time each fall to sit down with a trained "guide" or in a small group to develop a personal faith formation plan. We have a systematic way for our children and youth to move through a Christian formation process, but we offer our adults a smorgasbord of courses and services with no way to help adults figure out where they are in their own spiritual formation or what might meet their needs or how to organize or find something they need if it isn't being offered. Inviting people to church means inviting them into a deeper relationship with God and each other in Christ. We need to develop ways for adults and especially our newcomers to walk that path. Many of them will come to us with little or no background in the faith. We can't assume that our newcomers will be able to simply step into congregational life without help. We have to provide multiple ways for people to grow in faith and walk with them, no matter where they are starting the journey.



An Inviting Place

Before you can inspire members to invite others you need to have an inviting church. By that I mean it needs to be a place that attracts people, much the way a warm fire attracts people on a cold day. This is not as easy to accomplish as you might suspect as it requires a total re-orientation for most congregations. Most people come to church to get something out of it. Some of them come to “help out” because fulfilling a role helps them get something out of it. Becoming an “inviting place” means helping our members come to church in order to serve – to come to give rather than to just get something.

When a church is an inviting church, it is obvious almost immediately when one enters the door...or even before. The church grounds are well tended and the door is open or, if the weather requires it to be closed, it is comfortable to walk up to and open the door (try it – you’d be surprised how many church doors are more formidable than inviting!). When you enter, someone is standing next to the door (preferably opening it for you), welcomes you and engages you in enough conversation to make sure your needs are met. If there are children, someone is there to escort the family to the nursery and Sunday School....and that can easily be a role best fulfilled by children and youth of comparable age. Having a cadre of them in the area, ready to step forward and engage a child whose family just walked in the door is a great way to be an inviting church.

The visitor might be seated – perhaps next to a member who is prepared to assist the newcomer, if that’s what the visitor indicated was preferred. The bulletin and other materials will be intelligible to someone who has never been to a church before. If the visitor has any special needs, those will be tended to immediately and naturally – there will already be a space for wheelchairs in the midst of the congregation, hearing aids and large print materials will be offered and readily available, etc.

The visitor will see the members interacting in ways that are attracting. Someone drops a bulletin and another member picks it up. A child cries and someone in the pew behind her starts making faces to distract her. A mother leaves to tend a child and someone either takes over supervising another child left behind or offers to join the mother to assist her. An older member is assisted down the stairs after communion. Members smile at each other, some of them hug one another – there is clear affection and concern for one another. People are fully engaged in the service, when the time comes to pray, they actually pray (rather than listen to prayer read at them), when it is time to sing, they sing (rather than just listen to a fine choir singing) and there is a spirit of joy in the celebration.

There is a clear lack of conflict. The members may not agree on everything and may even disagree significantly with each other. They may not be pleased with the actions of the national church or bishop or diocese....or even the Rector, the Vestry or some other parish group. But this does not lead to unhealthy conflict, gossip, complaint sessions in the parking lot, dagger-eyeball exchanges, studied avoidance of certain people, etc. People express their disagreements openly and appropriately, without blaming others or expecting that they are “right” and the other side is “wrong” or that things will be resolved in the way they prefer. Differences are discussed and negotiated but then people move on. They hold God’s mission and the shared ministry of the congregation above any disagreements. So their disagreements don’t result in



unhealthy conflict – they are merely a normal part of congregational life and they help the congregation make better decisions by raising all sides of an issue. If things do get more “heated” than normal, the congregation tends to it promptly and returns to caring for one another. That environment is both safe and inviting to others who are drawn by this rather unusual way of being in relationship with each other (“see how they love one another”).

If you work at becoming an inviting church, a process that takes a good amount of time, you’ll end up looking at almost everything you do. Every congregation’s work will be different but it will be work – becoming an inviting church is a spiritual practice that takes practice! It doesn’t just happen. It is the result of long-term, sustained practice of serving one another in Jesus name.

The focus of being an inviting church is not really on newcomers – it is on ourselves and how we interact with each other. It is moving us from being consumers of religion: coming to church primarily to be uplifted, renewed and enlightened. All of those are good and worthy, but as an exclusive diet they can make us self-centered. A focus on coming to church to worship God and serve one another in Jesus name shifts us from looking for what we can *get* to looking for what we can also *give and celebrate*. When a congregation’s members have internalized that shift through months (years) of diligent practice, a visitor will sense a different environment and will automatically be treated differently. That’s what is inviting....what attracts those who are not members of a church to want to be part of the Christian community.

Changing Times

We no longer live in a time when it is assumed that most citizens will be Christians or, perhaps more importantly, even a time when Christians assume that they need to be practicing Christians or active members of the Christian community. In the midst of our anxieties about budgets and buildings, our fussing over committees and personnel and our debates over issues, we often forget that we are really about being the people of God. Being the people of God in today’s world means being intentional about being a Christian community that is inviting. Being the people of God in today’s world means intentionally inviting people to join us. It is about truly being the people of God in today’s world!

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