

12 Tips for Becoming a More Welcoming Parish

All of us, at some point in our lives, have had to move and try to become part of a new church community or other group. As this transition is already difficult, it is made even more so if the people in that new church community are not very friendly or just indifferent or just don't know how to welcome newcomers. The following is a list of ways congregations, and more specifically you as a member of a congregation, can love any and all who walk through your church doors. This list is adapted from the book *Now Go Forward* by J. David Eschelmann, who says, "Loving unbelievers the way Jesus did is the most overlooked key to growing a church...The command to love is the most repeated command in the NT, appearing at least 55 times."

1. Change your perspective on who should be welcoming members into your church community. Every church member is a **host** and not a **guest**. Making visitors and other members feel welcome is primarily the responsibility of members of the church community, not the nebulous "church," or the church staff. The most important person for a visitor to talk to in order to feel at home in a new church is **you**. It is not the pastor, or the greeter, but a regular attender. J. David Eschelmann says "One of the most impressive gestures we can extend to first time visitors is for people with no official position to take the initiative and welcome them."
2. Treat first time visitors as **guests of God**, not **strangers**. How often do you see people who come to your church for the first time get ignored? Regular church members avert their eyes so they don't have to converse with a "stranger." So, treat these visitors as your brothers and sisters in the one Christian family.
3. Being attentive to the present. So, your body language is very important. Smile at **everyone** and offer your **hand**. Look people **in the eye**. Use [only] appropriate and allowed **Touch** such as a hand shake or a gentle pat on the back. Don't let a mother struggle with an infant in a carrier and a diaper bag on her shoulder. Offer to hold the door open for an elderly person using a walker.
4. Since you are the host, you need to take the **initiative**, don't wait for visitors or other church members to initiate conversation or ask you for help.
5. Be a good listener. **Listening** is a very effective way to show love. Ask **questions** and learn about **your guests** and even regular church members. Do you know the head usher's name as you walk through the door? Learn people's **names** and remember them because that's how God knows each of us – by our names. It is better to express interest in them than it is to try to "sell" your church.
6. Greet children at **their level**. Let children be **children**. So what if they are crying or whiny or running around in the back of the church! Heck, if the priest can make a joke about a toddler sitting in his chair, then we can smile even at the crankiest of kids. They are here soaking up all the ritual and the joy of our parish community. Don't roll your eyes, instead offer the parent some help. Or, just enjoy the vitality and youth in your church and be grateful that their parents want to be a good example to their children.
7. Be inviting. Invite visitors or even regular church members to join you at **something, anything!** Coffee and donuts is always nice, but any one of the dinners coming up would be great as well. Invite people to fill out your church's **registration form** at the mini-office or on-line if they are interested in becoming a member of your church.

8. Never let new people or even regulars ***sit alone***. Eschelman says, “New people should never have to sit alone. Take initiative and go to them without delay.” People don’t come to church to be alone. Go sit next to them and introduce yourself.
9. Be helpful and create a welcoming space. Help visitors find ***seating*** that suits their ***family’s needs***. Or, better yet, sit in the center of an empty pew rather than on the end allowing a welcoming space for people who will arrive after you. Experiment, sit on the end of the pew and see how many people sit next to you. Then, sit in the middle of the pew and watch the pew fill up on both sides of you! Then, smile and greet them or introduce yourself if you don’t know them. Shake their hand at the sign of peace and hold their hand during the Lord’s Prayer (even if they don’t offer it). Help first time visitors by being their ***tour guide*** and helping them find worship ***resources*** so they can respond and sing along with the congregation at Mass. Visiting a new church is like a cross-cultural experience, even for those of us who have visited dozens of other churches.
10. Tell people you’re ***glad*** they are ***here***. If you notice someone is missing that usually attends Mass, give them a call and show your concern. Tell them that you missed them today.
11. ***Pray*** for the new people you meet throughout your week. Ask for God’s help in inviting them to fuller participation in your church community.
12. ***Be yourself!*** You are loving! You have a good thing going! You have the capacity to love more people, and to love more deeply. Eschelman says, “Practice making people feel special, and what you give to others will be returned to you.”

Hospitality is not a given among Christians, it’s a calling which requires a specific skill set.

Consider yourself called to be an Ambassador of Welcome at your church!