

# At the End of the Day...

by Mary Parmer

*Cultivating new practices of invitation, welcome and connection that are rooted and grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ will transform our congregations ...*

Imagine what would happen if the clergy and laity of the Episcopal Church lived into the idea that we are a part of salvation history and God's mission in the world. Imagine if we overcame our fear of invitation, if we obeyed Jesus' gospel mandate to see and welcome the stranger into our midst, and if we cultivated the sacred act of listening. Compelling stories emerge from congregations around our diocese that take these imaginings seriously, and one by one they experience transformation.

St. Francis, Houston, a pilot congregation in the newly developed Newcomer Ministry Project, began using the assessment tools to evaluate their invitation, welcome and connection processes. They began to see the school on their campus and the families and students as their biggest mission field. Only 10 percent of the students' families were members of the church; and, within six months of refocused effort, an additional 10 percent had joined the church or were attending regularly.

The Newcomer Ministry Project's primary objective was the creation of tangible materials for congregations to use in the development of effective newcomer ministry. These are now available on the diocesan website ([www.epicenter.org](http://www.epicenter.org)), and congregational coaches have been trained to assist locally with implementation of the ministry.

Complacency around newcomer ministry is the greatest challenge for Episcopal congregations today, and it might be our prevailing sin. We think of ourselves as a "friendly community" when in reality we are a "community of friends." Observe, if you will, any average Sunday morning coffee hour and you will see people visiting primarily with friends, not the stranger in the

room.

Action is another serious challenge. At the end of the day, our actions speak louder than our words. It is not what we say, teach or preach—it is what we do! At the end of the day, did we see Christ in the newcomers who walked in our doors? More importantly, did they see Christ in us?

Although there are no magic pills for turning around flat or declining church membership, failure to address the essentials of newcomer ministry will keep the revolving back door spinning in our congregations. These broad essentials make up the Newcomer Ministry Project and include: Invitation, Welcome, and Connection.

**Invitation, a.k.a. Evangelism** This is not only about inviting people into a relationship with you and your congregation, it is also about inviting them into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Bishop Claude Payne emphasizes the need for congregations to embrace evangelism as fundamental to their ministry in his book, *Reclaiming the Great Commission*. "Evangelism is not a program. It is an ethos," he says.

David Gortner expands this thought in his recent book, *Transforming Evangelism*, "Evangelism is not a programmatic effort ... It is a willful, joyful, spiritual discipline of seeing and naming the Holy Spirit at work in ourselves and those we encounter—giving voice to our own grace-filled experiences, and helping others find their voice."

**Welcome, a.k.a. Ministry of Hospitality** The gospel tells us that welcoming the stranger is welcoming Jesus. Jesus modeled for us a new way of seeing people—the way of love, compassion and forgiveness. Christine Pohl quotes Jean Vanier in her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*,



process for connecting the newcomer, giving them an opportunity to share their story, discerning their giftedness and encouraging them in their journey of faith. The sacred act of listening is critical, and Henri Nouwen speaks of this in *Bread for the Journey*.

“Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their true selves.”

At the end of the day, our choices make us who we are. When we choose to live into our sacred calling to be fully engaged in living out God’s transformative mission of hospitality to the world, we will be transformed. May God give us all the desire to make that choice.

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“Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive ... A community which refuses to welcome—whether through fear, weariness, insecurity, a desire to cling to

comfort or just because it is fed up with visitors—is dying spiritually.”

**Connection, a.k.a. Assimilation**  
Connection is having an intentional

## IT’S NOT ROCKET SCIENCE (SOME RESOURCES)

- ★ Believe that your life will be enriched when new people join our worship.
- ★ Shed your belief that people “want to be left alone” and embrace the spirit of the Seeking Shepherd (Luke 15) and Persistent Widow (Luke 18).
- ★ Model personal invitation.
- ★ Organize strategic ways to invite new people to visit our church, welcome and connect them with others so their lives and ours may be transformed.
- ★ Respond to every guest with an intentional, prayerful and strategic follow-up plan, understanding that the Body will be healthier as others are welcomed into the family of God.
- ★ “Scoot to the middle” on Sunday morning. Don’t sit at the end of the pew, blocking the way for others to sit. Move to the middle of the pew and leave the rest open as an invitation for guests to join you in worship.
- ★ Find someone new to speak to during coffee hour. If you are worried they may be longtime members of the church and not guests, begin with: “I don’t believe we’ve met ...”