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## Study guide:

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# All are welcome

*Pastors and members break down the not-so-simple concept of welcoming*

By Robert C. Blezard

Most every congregation desires to grow with new members who will bring new energy, ideas, enthusiasm and resources. And although most every congregation wants to be a welcoming place for everybody, some unintentionally and unconsciously send mixed signals that keep some folks away. But this is something a congregation can work on.

### Exercise 1: A visitor's view

Just as a homeowner can get accustomed to living with kitchen clutter or threadbare carpets that visitors notice right away and find off-putting, churchgoers can get used to aspects of their building that reflect poorly on their congregation.

Metaphorically speaking, put on “visitor’s goggles” and walk through the outside and inside of your church. Make a spreadsheet listing rooms and spaces, and grade each one on such factors as brightness, cleanliness, clutter, flooring, walls, ceiling, lighting, plumbing, furnishings and age. Note what repairs, renovations or updating would put the space aright. Remember to evaluate your parking area, sidewalks and exterior and interior signs.

When done, discuss what message your physical spaces convey to visitors and how to fix it.

### Exercise 2: Send a spy

Most churches think of themselves as friendly, although some are friendly only to existing members and not visitors. Is yours one of them? Send in a spy. Invite a friend who is unknown to your congregation to attend your church some Sunday. While you purposely ignore your friend, see what kind of reception he or she receives.

Ask your friend to come to your study group to provide feedback about how he or she was treated and about the physical plant (see above). What can you do better?

### Exercise 3: Be a visitor

To learn more about congregational hospitality, as a study group plan a Sunday when pairs of you will visit different churches where you are not known. Prepare in advance a list of things to look for in people, such as how you are greeted at the door or narthex and whether they talk to you during the sharing of the peace, coffee hour or after the service. Prepare what to look for in



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the church building, including signage, cleanliness, etc. Share your experiences and discuss what your congregation may do to improve its hospitality.

## Exercise 4: Who's welcome?

- How diverse is your neighborhood, county or region in such areas as race, nationality, economic level, education, family composition, and sexual orientation and identity? How do you know?
- Is that diversity reflected in the regular worshipers of your congregation? If not, why not?
- In what ways might the congregation be unconsciously sending out the message "you're not welcome here" to certain types of visitors? How can it do better?

## Exercise 5: Special effort

In addition to becoming more welcoming generally, does your congregation need to make a special effort to open the door to some groups of people, especially those who haven't been part of traditional Lutheran culture? Why is this so? How or why might some people feel "left out" or unwelcome in the middle-class, white culture with which most congregations identify?

Brainstorm steps your congregation can take to invite members of the following groups and make them feel at home in your church: African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, non-European immigrants, neighbors who don't speak English, the very poor, others? What would their presence mean to your congregation?

## Exercise 6: Risk and change

- Why is it hard for a congregation to change and become more welcoming? Why is it sometimes risky? Who might get upset? What might happen?
- Why is it risky not to change and not to be more welcoming?
- Which risk is worse: changing to be more welcoming or not changing?

## Exercise 7: Sexual orientation

Although churches have always had members who don't identify as heterosexual, it has been only in recent decades that gay, lesbian, transgender and other sexual minorities have lived freely and openly in North American culture. Some churches are behind the curve when it comes to making sure that non-heterosexual people are welcomed and integrated into their communities. Is yours such a congregation? How do you know? What steps could your congregation take to make certain that people from the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and others are welcome and comfortable in your church?



### About the study guide author:



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## Exercise 8: Digital welcome

These days potential visitors are more likely to check out your church online before darkening its door on a Sunday morning. If your congregation doesn't have a website and Facebook page, establishing an online presence is task No. 1. If it does have a website and Facebook page, are they not only informative and up-to-date but also warm and friendly? Does the congregation post photos of people and stories of lives transformed by their ministries?

Compare your website to those of other congregations, make a list of suggestions to improve your congregation's digital welcome, then give the list to your communications team.

## Exercise 9: Give me a sign

Signs outside your church are the most immediate way your congregation conveys a welcome to potential visitors. Do exterior signs clearly, easily and boldly identify your congregation to all passers-by? Is the sign old and in need of replacing? Is it lighted and highly visible? If it is a sign that allows for a changing message in removable letters, does it convey fresh information? Are worship times readily conveyed? Do people know where to park? Many churches have multiple doors—do signs identify which are the main ones? Once inside the church, do signs help a visitor find the sanctuary, office, nursery and restrooms? Make a list of suggestions for better signage and give it to your congregation council for consideration.

## Exercise 10: Hoops and barriers

If an unchurched person visited your congregation, would he or she be readily and easily able to decipher the worship bulletin and participate in worship? What hoops and barriers does your congregation set (obviously unintentionally) for new people to be a part of the community? How do you know?

Invite some of your newer members to talk about their experiences. In what ways does your congregation have to change in order to remove the hoops and lower the barriers?



# All are welcome

Pastors and members break down the not-so-simple concept of welcoming

By Wendy Healy

The church's catchphrase "all are welcome" is so common it seems like a meme. But what do these three simple words actually mean? Are they sincere or do dwindling congregations just hope to get people in the pews? Is it just what we think we should say?

Welcoming isn't simple. How churches welcome newcomers can often mean the difference between vibrant congregations and those that struggle.

"'All are welcome' used to mean those who look like us, act like us, have the same lifestyles and same values," said Brenda Smith, ELCA program director for faith practices and missional development.

Smith, who served as a pastor in New York City before joining ELCA churchwide staff in Chicago, said the good news is that it's 2016 and hospitality ministry is a faith practice.

"The new reality is that people are beginning to understand that 'all are welcome' means that *all* are welcome—regardless of race, color, creed, age, ethnicity, knowledge of Christ and sexual orientation."

It also means that congregations need to be inclusive and understand that not everyone has grown up in the church, knows Jesus or can follow a worship service, she added.

"I've been in many churches where I visit incognito and would never go back because there was no hospitality," she said. "Or the church was dirty and not maintained or had no place to change a

**Our Saviour Lutheran Church**, Jamaica, N.Y. (photo at left), hosts an annual carnival as a community outreach event. Food and activities are all free. The event helps people in the neighborhood learn about the church and meet members. Katelyn Reed (left) enters Messiah Lutheran Church, Yorba Linda, Calif., for worship after being welcomed by Rick Eckart, a greeter and usher.



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baby diaper." Worse yet, Smith said, sometimes congregational tension and drama were palpable.

"I often ask churches to think carefully about what environment they're bringing people into," she said.

While the words "all are welcome" seem innocent enough, they evoked a wide range of responses when *The Lutheran* asked its friends and followers if their congregations welcomed folks and to share examples of how they felt welcomed or not. That request produced more than 50 Facebook posts and emails, and 270 likes and almost 90 shares on Facebook.

Several respondents praised their church's welcoming program, like Sarah Accettura of Holy Cross Lutheran, Libertyville, Ill., who said friendly Art Schmieding, 90, a greeter for more than 20 years, was one of the reasons she joined the congregation 10 years ago. "He was an incredibly warm person, and his intention was to make sure everyone felt welcomed and included," she said. "He would engage in conversation about your life, what you had done this week, how you heard of us and how old your kids were."

Responses also included criticisms from those who had been hurt by the church, or people who visited a congregation and felt ignored.

Diane Pederson, a member of St. Timothy Lutheran, Naperville, Ill., still remembers how badly she felt after visiting a small Lutheran church with her family while vacationing in Florida 10 years ago: "The service was warm and lovely. But afterward, during the fellowship time in the small narthex, the 50 or so congregants happily greeted each other as we stood among them, ignored. We felt invisible.

"We never returned to that church because we never vaca-

'Whoever you are,  
wherever you're from,  
whatever the color of  
your skin, whomever you  
love or marry, or whatever  
your feelings about  
religion or spirituality,  
**you are welcome here.'**

—Welcome statement, Holy Trinity  
Lutheran Church, Chicago

tioned in that area again. But if we were snowbirds, we would've sought out a different church. As someone uncomfortable with small-talk chitchat with strangers, the feeling of invisibility was very strong for me. My more social husband felt it too.

"What their behavior said to us was they were a tight-knit church family, and they didn't want strangers there. No wonder the congregation was so small and seemed so warm when observing from the pew. It was afterward when we wanted to compliment the congregation for the nice service that we realized the warmth was not for outsiders."

### It's complicated

"Welcoming" is a complicated and emotional challenge that isn't problematic only to the ELCA, said the church's pastors who were interviewed for this story. They define a welcoming ministry as being inclusive and mindful of a congregation's identity, recognizing members' gifts and understanding what they are comfortable with, acknowledging the neighborhood, and assessing the needs of those to be welcomed. Pastors said there's



KRISTA KENNELL  
**Jennifer Pierre** (in blue) shakes hands during Sunday worship at Our Saviour, which implemented a welcoming ministry that saved it from being closed.

no one-size-fits-all approach to welcoming—one person's welcome is another person's wall.

Congregations, Smith said, would be smart to embrace the cultural norms of 2016, including the needs of young people and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgen-

der (LGBT) community, the use of technology, people's busy schedules and the fact that the church isn't the center of life anymore. People often "church shop" and make judgments based on what they initially see and feel.

"People are looking for three things in a church," Smith said. "One, a warm community that loves and follows Jesus; two, a place where they can learn something; and three, a church that is doing something to transform the world. Sometimes we're woefully inadequate in all three."

For shy or introverted people, an overly friendly greeting or coffee hour can be off-putting or cliquish. An extended sharing of the peace—where members walk around the sanctuary hugging people and chitchatting—might appear friendly to some newcomers and uncomfortable to others.

Craig Mueller, a pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran, an urban Chicago church, is sensitive to the needs of newcomers and runs what he calls a general welcoming program, inclusive of both introvert and extrovert personalities and communication styles.

"What I'm finding these days in organized religion is that the welcome is the main thing connecting people," Mueller said. "All churches say, 'You are welcome,' but part of that welcome is whoever you love or marry is welcome, too, and whatever you may think of church or organized religion, you are welcome."

Holy Trinity has a long history of welcoming the LGBT community. Mueller said that (along with other factors) has helped create a welcoming and healthy church atmosphere.

Mueller said church today is just different: "We often have a church full of people we don't know. Our demo-

**Christine Curl** (left), Irma Mulder and Faye Phillips partake in treats and coffee during "Sunday morning hospitality" at Messiah, which views food as a universal language and offers coffee and doughnuts every week. Some churches have no coffee hour because they view it as too overwhelming for visitors.



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graphic is a community of young adults that pops in and out without being known. We want to give people the feeling that they can come and go on their own terms and give people their space. They need to know that they won't be asked to be on a committee."

This can be a problem for small Protestant congregations where members act like family, Mueller said. But this is the technology era, he added, where young people are used to communicating behind a screen, texting or emailing.

"A greater issue is ambivalence to organized religion," Mueller said. "They value church but not in the way that we're used to. Given that, we need to do church in new ways since we're not the center of people's lives."

It's OK, he added, to not know everyone in the congregation and to not greet them by name.

Paula Swaim, who recently began attending Shepherd of Life Lutheran in Lake Elsinore, Calif., wrote to *The Lutheran* that her congregation has a good balance of being welcoming and allowing space. "The people were welcoming and helpful, but not in a fake 'love-bombing' fashion," she said. "One lovely lady offered to sit next to me to help me understand the liturgy during the service. Another lovely lady gave me a brief tour of the facilities. I feel comfortable there. It's perfect for me."

Mueller, whose doctoral thesis was on technology and the decline in mainline denominations for the future, is often asked how his congregation manages to be welcoming to all. "The main thing that I've helped churches think about is to get over the family mentality—that everyone comes to be a family," he said. "Some people like anonymity."

"The trick is in knowing how to do ministry on different paths. There's a difference between warm and welcoming, as in shaking your hand, and dragging you to coffee hour or signing you up for a committee. We don't ever want to appear desperate."

**Kathi Shaheen (left)** and Cheryl Hoffman greet one another during worship. This is formally called "passing of the peace," but Messiah asks people to greet those around them in an effort to use language that is friendly to guests.



**Jim Harter**, with Carmen Pease, holds up the sign for the new welcome center at Messiah.

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'Immanuel Lutheran Church is a Reconciling in Christ congregation. We welcome people of every age and size, color and culture, every sexual orientation and gender identity, socioeconomic status and marital status, every ability and challenge.

**We welcome believers and questioners, and questioning believers.'**

—Welcome statement, Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Ill.

In Jamaica, N.Y., the situation was fairly dire when Bob Fritch arrived at Our Saviour Lutheran Church

24 years ago. The congregation's New York City neighborhood was evolving into a Caribbean-rim community, and Fritch said he was faced with changing how to do church or closing. The pastor began practicing a welcoming ministry that revitalized Our Saviour.

"We were a church slated to be closed, so a welcoming program does work," he said.

Today Our Saviour is home to 250 worshipers at three Sunday services and is a congregation that is constantly changing in a transient neighborhood.

"We're a melting pot of more than 20 nations of origin," Fritch said. "For someone who isn't of the majority to walk in [and] feel at home, that's the winning combination."

Fritch said his approach focused on going back to basics: "First, fix your signage, clean the bathrooms, and



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make sure that people can follow your worship service and it isn't confusing.

"We've forgotten what we're called to do—we're not here to keep the clubhouse open. We're called to bring God's word, and we must do it in new and different ways.

"We live in a channel-changing society. If people don't like what they see, they change the channel. It's the same in the church today. You've got five minutes to get them before you'll lose them, especially if you don't let them know that they're welcome."

A church's first welcome, Fritch said, is its website. He suggested making it clear and inviting since people will often Google search a church before visiting. "The website gets people into the front door even before they ever walk in," he said, "so show photos of happy people and not just shots of the building.

"If you want to welcome the community, then welcome it. On our church exterior sign we acknowledge other religious holidays. That kind of action says who we are to the world. We put up Ramadan messages, Jewish New Year's greetings and Diwali signs for our Hindu friends. It says we're an open and welcoming church. We send blessings to our neighbors. That's a part of getting people in the door before they come in the door."

Our Saviour also avoids fellowship or coffee hours, which, "to quote Dickens, 'are the best of times, the worst of times,'" Fritch said. "One thing I've found is



that a coffee hour for an introvert is bad. An introvert doesn't want attention drawn to him. And never ever make people stand at the end of service and say who they are or why they came—or wear a name tag. It's horrible

for a newcomer. They'll never come back; we have not welcomed them."

Fritch advised congregations to be true to themselves: "If you're not yet a multicultural congregation, just be the best church you can be. Don't try to be who you are not."

Angela Denker, pastor of community life and discipleship at Messiah Lutheran Church in Yorba Linda, Calif., agreed: "Churches have to know who they are and be welcoming in a way that fits. If you're a rural congregation, your approach is different from an urban congregation. Each church has to look for its gifts. We often try to be too many things to too many people, instead of picking a niche."

When this fragmentation happens, she added, no one's interests are well served.

Denker wrote about the phrase "all are welcome" for *Sojourners* magazine (<https://sojo.net/articles/3-ways-all-are-welcome-hurting-church>). She said barriers have developed, not through any fault of people in church but because of changes over the years. She highlighted three:

- **Too often, all aren't welcome after all.** We create hoops for newcomers to jump through and unwritten rules, and people won't explain the unwritten rules.
- **All are welcome, including bullies.** Sometimes the church doesn't do a good enough job of exercising church discipline for those who need it.
- **All are welcome and no one's needs are met.** We try to be everything to everyone. Everyone wants to be the church with lots of children's programs, or the congregation with diversity, or one that helps the homeless. Pick a niche and stick with it.

"Where are we going?" Smith asked. "If we can't see with our numbers diminishing that something needs to change, that our mindset needs to change, then I don't know what will make a difference. Just having a sign that 'all are welcome' isn't enough. You have to live that sign." □

**Angela Denker**, a pastor of Messiah, greets Sue Lindemulder after worship. Denker says welcoming is about churches looking for their gifts and picking a niche.



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**Author bio:**

Healy is a freelance writer and a member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Brewster, N.Y.



Wide welcome:

# The essential ingredient is old-timers

By Jessica Krey Duckworth

When Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest, welcomes a newcomer to Homeboy Industries, he begins with a conversation in his office and invites the former gang member to share his or her story. A 26-year-old ministry in Los Angeles, Homeboy Industries provides job training positions and free social services every month to more than 1,000 men and women who were formerly involved in gangs and previously incarcerated.

Newcomers begin life at Homeboy working in the maintenance department and then progress into vocational skill-building in one of six social enterprises. Boyle or a caseworker asks each client a question before they start their training: “Are you willing to work alongside your enemies?”

By definition, a newcomer is anyone who has recently arrived in a place or joined a group.

Newcomers are novices—they haven’t spent a great deal of time participating in the central practices of a community. By contrast, an old-timer is anyone who has spent more time in the community and thus has a better grasp of its way of life.

On the first day of training, Boyle accompanies the newcomer to the maintenance department. Old-timers line up to shake hands with the newcomer and extend welcome. Inevitably enemies are shaking hands with each other, leaning into this new venture because each has made a choice to be there. Work resumes with the new client learning skills side-by-side the old-timers.

Newcomers arrive each month. Within the month they become old-timers. Older old-timers move on to vocational skill-building and become newcomers all over again in a new setting. New old-timers remain to welcome newcomers. No longer

**Alex and Nelson** (front) work together in the Homeboy Diner at Homeboy Industries.



PHOTO COURTESY HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES



PHOTO COURTESY HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES

**Hector, James, Andre and Mario** (last names withheld) work together as merchandise team members at Homeboy Industries. Former enemies work together and learn from each other at Homeboy, which provides services to people who were formerly involved in gangs.

enemies, the co-workers learn to cherish one another. In being cherished, homies (as the clients are called) experience what it means to be beloved and ennobled. In time they learn to see themselves, through their co-workers, as Jesus sees them: made in the image of God, as God’s child, as beloved.

Trust develops because it is experienced through the good work at hand and they learn the Homeboy mantra: “We belong to one another.”

Boyle and the Homeboy staff aren’t at the center of this enterprise of welcome, but by standing at the periphery, nurturing relationships between old-timers and newcomers, they bear witness to the creation of what Martin Luther King Jr. described as the beloved community.

Congregations welcome newcomers too. Typically congregational leaders pour incredible amounts of energy into orientation sessions and the rites of baptism or affirmation of baptism. Well and good. But all too often, including old-timers as the essential ingredient of the newcomer welcome process is overlooked.

Newcomers need access to relationships with old-timers—not only leaders but established members who are co-workers in the vineyard. Congregational leaders are called to cultivate the relationship between old-timers and newcomers.

This year imagine designing a newcomer welcome process that includes old-timers, the essential ingredient, and get excited to bear witness to a community that cherishes each one as beloved and learns to belong to one another.



### Author bio:

Duckworth is an ELCA pastor and the author of *Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church* (Fortress Press, 2013).