

an authentic welcome

by Wanda Kidd, CBFNC Collegiate Engagement Coordinator

Welcoming the stranger is a theme throughout the Old and New Testaments. Yet too often, people who visit our churches feel as if they are intruding on a private party. That sentiment is surprising to those of us within the church because we see ourselves as very friendly. And we are to those we know and see on a regular basis, but that is not the hospitality that is imperative to offering refuge to others who need community.

There are many people who yearn for a place to belong and to invest their God-given gifts. Every congregation I know is seeking a way to attract young people to their church, yet we are reluctant to offer an authentic welcome to those who risk coming our way. So, after years of talking to students about church and observing what provides space for newcomers, here are some tips and insights that could be helpful.

Historically, the culture that pulled us toward church is the culture that keeps us there. It was the norm to have a home church, and the term “home church” spoke to a relationship not only with Christ but family and friends. Assuredly, we went through the doors believing that someone inside would know us and would be glad we came.

The courageous young person who comes to our churches today does not have that assurance. In fact, many of their friends find church attendance a mystery, so they often come alone with a good chance that they will not know anyone when they come through the door and try to find a seat.

As the old adage says, “We only have one chance to make a first impression.” If we fail to make an effort to reach out to those who come our way, we will rarely have another opportunity to connect with them.

So, the rules of engagement go something like this:

It could take several times of this type of interaction before they sense that you sincerely want to know them better. Eventually find out things like where they are from, what they are studying in school, or what their plans are for the summer.

Relationships take time, as does building community. Be patient. It will get easier with practice. People want to know that we are not just trying to fill our pews or fulfill some obligation. They want to be where people know their name and are sincerely glad they came. They want a place at Christ’s table, but they need an authentic invitation to break bread with us. Hospitality must be modeled from the pulpit, but it is lived out in the pews.

the first meeting

Make eye contact with the people you meet.

Have a pleasant expression on your face.

Smile often and sincerely.

Introduce yourself as you look them in the eye, with a pleasant expression and a smile on your face.

Then, ask their name.

Write down their name so that you can remember it and pray for them that week.

Tell them that you are so glad that they came to worship with us today.

Do not assume it is their first visit unless they tell you because they could have been there before.

the next time you meet

Do everything you did before, only remember their name this time and be sure to reintroduce yourself.