

God's Promise of an Extravagant Welcome

Tuesday Oct 4 and 11, 2011

Facilitated by Kath Mason and Heather Bond

Twenty-two people attended one or both welcoming sessions. Each evening began with a few people who shared their feelings of both being welcomed and some challenges we experience with welcoming all people into our midst. We discovered that an extravagant welcome may take many different forms. The group discussed the welcome we provide to newcomers who enter our doors as well as the care, support and sensitivity that we extend to our existing members. During our second evening, we brainstormed some wonderful ways to more fully live into God's Promise on Extravagant Welcome.

While not an inclusive list, the following groups were discussed as needing a more specific welcome.

Chronic Illness
Long Term unemployment
LGBT
Single (never married, divorced, Widowed)
Mentally challenged.
Multicultural

Oct 4th:

Small group questions and responses:

1. What was your welcome at South Church
2. What are we doing well?
3. Are there unconscious ways that we don't fully welcome?
4. What do you envision when you hear "extravagant" welcome?

Discussion points:

What are the positives of South Church's Welcome?

What can we do better?

- We are building the close relationships that support and sustain
- We offer a host of opportunities from which those relationships develop.
- We have great involvement in different aspects of church life
- Coffee hour a blessing and a curse
- How do we, as a congregation learn to expand beyond our close relationships and reach out to folks who are new/or in some way out of sync?
- How do we reach out to youth who may want more religious teachings?

- We should recognize that we may not know the whole story - build understanding
- Extravagant welcome comes from the voices of the congregation spreading our spirit and value.
- Envision a strong presence.
- We can misunderstand or miss clues that would help us to more fully welcome
- How do we get out of our comfort zone?
- We want to be receptive to what each person brings to South Church. How do we tap into that?
- Multi-generations done well
- Multicultural is done well sort of...not as well as multi-generations
- LGBT support: PFLAG meets here

Oct 11th:

Small group questions and discussion points:

1. Can different groups of people see themselves in our church/in our service/ in small group opportunities? Do we celebrate diversity? Are we celebrating multiculturalism, LGBT, multiple generations?
2. Do we help newcomers find their place? Do we provide for depth and intimacy?
3. What are the opportunities we offer for social action and witnessing? Do we provide outlets for people so that they can give of themselves?
4. Do we care for people in our community? Are some groups easier to care for and/or support than others?
5. Do we provide leadership training and opportunities? Do we help our members understand how to care for, support, and celebrate different groups of people?

Newcomer Concerns:

- Hard to tell from the outside that we're supportive
- We think we honor diversity; how can we do it better?
- We should think about how to present ourselves; should we be thinking more about our outreach and how our church is presented within the community even though it may not gain us more members. It's important how we present ourselves to the community at large. (Andover, Lawrence, North Andover, Merrimack Valley. Etc, etc.)
- In fellowship time we often connect with our long-term friendships, not newcomers or those unknown to us.
- Get newcomers engaged: Guess who's coming to dinner, lower the bar for entry (committees are a huge commitment and can be intimidating? More short term entry points of 6 weeks to 6 months?)

- Every committee could widen their jobs to include these shorted time commitments.
- Sponsors could be assigned at entry instead of joining if wanted by the newcomer.
- Confusing messages: rainbow flag off to side
- Small groups help newcomers ease in, extend invitations (lower the bar)
- The checklist for new members needs to be reworked and updated. Could this list be accessible for many different committees? A call me if you need ONE THING DONE list.*

Existing Member Concerns:

- Provide outlets but we don't always match people to outlets (places to join in)*
- Cull more information from nominating calls and find a way to use the information to fill needs
 - i.e. a group of people could take the nomination information and see if there are places other than committees that might match well to a person.
- Provide leadership training
- Provide welcoming training
- Sensitivity training - examine our assumptions
- How much is too much (some people can get overwhelmed)*
- Routine happenings that folks can step in to. (i.e. put fellowship hour back to new members...it's a one time commitment, what else?)
- Support groups for various people: i.e. grief, divorce, abuse
- Other small groups could help connect members to other members with similar interests
- Small group help form bonds that fulfill and sustain us.
- We need a members' only pass protected part of website for directory and talents and interests. Not just for new people.
- The diversity of our schools shows that we should be more diverse at church.
- The extravagant welcome takes several different forms.

Practical stuff:

- Toss up Sundays (everybody sits in a different place.)
- Fellowship hour mix-up (everybody picks one person they don't know and talks with them for 5 whole minutes)
- 5 minutes seems too far between editions and then it gets too long
 - We need brief more often updates
 - Everybody really loved the e-mail we got last week re: Top THREE things for the week . We should have that every week.
- Rethink how we use the e-mail list
 - Current policy is obsolete

*Pertains to both categories

Notes from these meetings will be brought to Council and Board of Deacons.