

welcome one another

A HANDBOOK FOR
HOSPITALITY MINISTERS

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Augsburg Fortress

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So [Paul and Barnabas and some of the others] were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

Acts 15:3-4

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It starts in the parking lot

That most important first welcome

What are the initial impressions of any worshiper who pulls into your parking lot at a time of worship? Or, for that matter, in a more urban setting, one who hops off the bus or walks up to the front door?

Are the grounds neatly kept, a mirror of the beauty of creation? Is ample parking available? Is it clear where one should park? Is the lot littered with specialized signs: Pastor's Parking; Musician's Parking; Visitor's Parking? Once one has arrived, is it clear where to enter the building, and are the doors of that entrance clearly marked and unlocked? Do they offer the newcomer and the seasoned worshiper alike a wide welcome to the worshiping assembly?¹

¹ Richard Reising, *What If Starbucks Marketed Like the Church: A Parable* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7_dZTrjw9I), is an instructive, entertaining look at some of these very questions and many more from the chapters yet to come.

It's often hard for us to see the forest for the trees—the familiarity of our church home makes it difficult for us to evaluate and take meaningful action on the questions offered above. The weeds in the median are so familiar to us, it's difficult to see them as a first-time worshiper might: a sign of lack of care and concern for the Creator's place of worship.

To honestly evaluate what fresh eyes see in both parking lot exterior upkeep and even the gathering space itself, consider inviting a team from a neighboring congregation to visit a hospitality team meeting and gently comment on what they experience at your place of worship as first-time visitors. What do they see that you can no longer see? How do they experience this initial stage of visiting your congregation?

In a gracious effort to build up all of the body of Christ, offer this invitation with the corresponding proposition of visiting *their* congregation to do the same. Whether this is the United Methodist congregation down the street or another ELCA congregation in the next county, to do this work together for the good of the gospel is a holy thing.

As a first step in evaluating the welcome of your outdoor surroundings and parking areas, come up with a checklist as you survey your grounds with the eyes of a newcomer. Be creative and thorough in your analysis. Such an evaluation can be both uplifting and instructive. Enter into it with the mind of Christ, and then invite some neighbors to have a look with your checklist in hand.

When Paul and Barnabas and the others traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria and on into Jerusalem for one of the church's most important early conversations, the book of Acts makes it clear that there was joyous welcome all along their route. Especially when they reached their final destination in Jerusalem, *they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders*. It doesn't say that everyone was there in the parking lot to greet them, but wouldn't that be a wonderful sight if every Sunday at our places of worship that were able to happen? Even if we can't all be there as each car or SUV pulls in, as each person gets off the bus or subway, as families of all sorts of configurations come up the sidewalk, what if the surroundings they encountered were as welcoming as the people themselves might be?

“What is all the fuss?” you might ask. “People are perfectly capable of getting from the parking lot to the front door. They don’t even notice what things look like.” That may be true. But it also may *not* be true.

Consider what it might be like to you to be a newcomer at an unfamiliar and holy place. If you were to arrive at a mosque or a synagogue, would you feel confident about your next move? By which door should you enter? Are there separate doors for men and women? Once inside, is any special dress required? Head covering? Shoes on or off? Most Christians would not know the answer to these questions and, consequently, most would feel reluctant to attend a memorial service, wedding, or special event—even if specifically invited.

We once believed that as a majority culture in North America everyone knew all there was to know about a church and its surroundings. That was probably never fully true. But it certainly is no longer true in a post-Christian North American culture. Most people in our towns and cities, in the neighborhoods and surrounding countryside of our church properties are completely mystified about who we are, what we do, and who is welcome—or not. Carefully attending to that first brush with all things Christian beginning in the parking lot is a criti-

cal consideration. To do so is to extend to all who may come to inquire about Jesus the very first bit of welcome to a life of faith.