



Healthy
CHURCHES 

**The Hospitable
Church**

Introduction

I've chosen to title this paper *'The Hospitable Church'* rather than *'The Welcoming Church'* because as will be discussed hospitality is a deeper and more creative act than welcoming. This paper comes out of the experience many have of going to a new church.

The welcoming church

Someone new to a church may initially be welcomed warmly, however after a month or two there may be little progress beyond the initial welcoming response. They and the members of the new body of Christ remain largely unknown to one another. 'Welcoming' conjures up images of a handshake, knowing where the toilets are and being invited to morning tea or supper – it provides a reasonably 'thin' experience of church.

The hospitable church

'Hospitality' invokes images of meeting together, eating together and getting to know each other beyond finding out our name and what we do in the rest of the week. Hospitality brings newcomers into a place of safety and relationship where they can know and be known where lives are shared and commitments made. It is only in that place of safety and relationship that true discipleship can happen.

Our God – our model of hospitality

Our hospitality is derived from, and modelled by our hospitable God revealed in the Lord Jesus.

In the gospel of John, Jesus comforts his disciples prior to his death by telling them that his 'going away' is so that he can prepare a room for them in his Father's house, so they can be with him.

The Gospel describes a movement from hostility to reconciliation and adoption into the household of God in Christ - where through his death and resurrection we call the holy God our Abba Father; where Christ is the true son and by his Spirit we have the Spirit of sonship.

The church is the expression of God's family, and together we are brothers and sisters learning to live lives of loyalty and love together to King Jesus.

Who Comes to Church on a Sunday?

Those who:

1. do not express a present loyalty to the Lord Jesus but are interested in what Christians believe and do (unchurched)
2. have a background in church but left and did not return either because of life situations or being wounded (de-churched)
3. are fleeing a previous church where there is conflict or they are dissatisfied with aspects of the previous church
4. have moved geographically and are looking for a new church to attend and make their spiritual home
5. are visiting family who come to church (Baptism, Christmas and Easter)

New people who turn up to church on a Sunday can come with very different hopes or agendas, and part of our task in being hospitable, is to be able to identify why they have come. Some hopes and agendas can be identified quickly and others require multiple conversations. Being a hospitable church is being committed to multiple conversations in a variety of contexts. The overall aim is, where appropriate, to help those who visit our churches to eventually become where appropriate 'part of the family'.

One way we can become a more hospitable church is to ask ourselves the questions that those who visit our church are intuitively asking as they walk in and sit down.

The Questions We Intuitively Ask

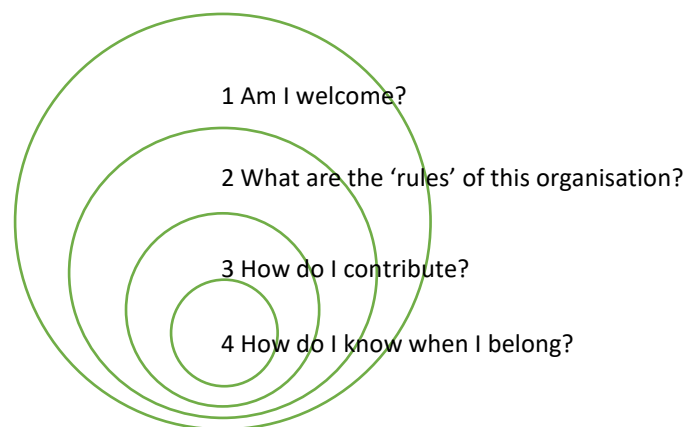
When anyone comes to a new group, or organisation there are four basic questions they are asking.

1. Am I welcome?
2. What are the 'rules' of this organisation?
3. How do I contribute?
4. How do I know when I belong?

Depending on whether you're joining a sports team or a bridge club the answers to these questions will be very different, but the questions will remain the same and this will especially be the case with a Church, or a Growth Group¹.

Moving to the Centre

Integrating people is a matter of moving them appropriately to the centre.² To the place where their four questions have been answered appropriately and they are happy to call this church their spiritual home.



An appropriate sense of belonging is fundamental to a person knowing how they are part of a church.

¹ In this document I will use the term Growth Group as a general term for Bible Study Group etc.

² What I mean by appropriately moving people to the centre will be explained below.

Some Prior Questions?

1. What is your idea of church?

Circle what word/s best describe recent newcomer's experience of your church:

Organisation

Community

Family

Institution

2. Is there a process of identifying why people have come to the church and their hopes and expectations ie are they Christians looking for a Christian community or non-Christians who have a sense of needing God in their life?

3. Can you explain how your church works and why it works that way?

Answering the Four Questions

Answering these four questions does not always happen in a linear process. Rarely do we move from 1-4 in a rigid order. Rather, people answer these questions through conversations and events and different people move in and through this process at different speeds.

Below is a table giving examples of how we can help the newcomer 'answer' these questions.

1.	<i>Am I Welcome?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People on the door warmly welcome 'visitors' to church. • All regulars have a printed peel off name tag and visitors are invited to write their name on a blank name tag when they come in. • At the door, visitors given a welcome brochure about church (1 A5 page – introduction, where the toilets are; morning tea/supper; child minding, kids' church etc). • Welcomed by the service leader. • Church has a team of people in each service who make themselves known and ask the newcomer appropriate questions about who they are and what has brought them to church today. This information can be relayed to the minister or Hospitality team. • If the visitor keeps on attending they are invited to have coffee with the minister or other member who hears more of their story. • If the person is becoming a regular attender they are asked if they would like to have a printed name tag like everyone else.
2	<i>What Are the 'Rules' of this Organisation?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After a few weeks of attending – the newcomer is invited to lunch with a few 'hospitable' members³ of the church. This includes members and visitors of all services where possible or in a large church the invitation to a meal may need to be service specific.

³ Should be people from each service represented by newcomers.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone is actively invited to share things of their background over lunch. • Newcomers lunch at the hall. Pastor explains the history of the church, ministries, function of Growth Groups, membership requirements and privileges. IN this space it is important to welcome questions. • If they want to join a Growth Group they are invited to be part of the Community phone book or social media page.
3	<i>How Do I Contribute?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joining a Growth Group – Invitation to a Growth Group by the facilitators with an explanation of what is expected. If there is a group covenant⁴ the covenant is read and explained. • How to Give – Having a brochure⁵ that explains why and how we give to the work of the church and is available for anyone who comes but especially to those who are wanting to know: How Do I Contribute? or How Do I Know I Belong? • How to serve – an outline of different avenues for serving the church and its ministries • Another area of importance is to explain the way decisions are made by this particular church. All denominations have different ways of doing this and many misunderstandings are avoided when the processes of a denomination are explained clearly and their distinctiveness from other denominations⁶.
4	How Do I Know When I Belong?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People require a way of being acknowledged that they are part of the family of the local church. This should be ‘formal’ and include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the making of promises - the giving of their testimony and - prayer for them

⁴ Increasingly Growth Groups write a covenant that includes expectations around attendance, preparation and expectations re starting finishing and other aspects of group culture, for instance my Growth Groups would go away for a weekend together once a year. When new people join this becomes an orienting document that facilitates engagement and commitment.

⁵ Two Ways to Give

⁶ This may well raise issues of membership – How do I know I belong?

Obviously until someone is a follower of Jesus they should not be a member but having become a follower of Jesus they should be urged to be part of the household of God in that church community.

Danger Danger

The biggest danger you face after reading this paper is to go through the above table as if it were a check-list – most people who visit your church are not dumb - you can *do* these things, but unless you have a culture of hospitality by week four it will be obvious you are only a *welcoming church* and not a *hospitable church*. In the New Testament the expectation is that hospitality is modelled by the broad 'leadership' of the church so that the body of Christ, the household of God experiences and then imitates this hospitality pattern and so the church has a hospitality culture.