

Expanding Our Welcome

September 2024 Edition

What is happening at my church to build community beyond surface-level niceties?

Building relationships of any kind takes time. After two years in a church I treasure, I have only scratched the surface of possible ways to deepen my connections there. Our church is probably no different than many. Things take time, do not fear or fret! Such deepening requires multiple and various moments of connection and open heartedness to bear good fruit. Go gently forward. Reach out.

Paying attention to individuals and their journeys or being interested in learning more about a pew mate's current situation, noticing how things may have changed for fellow members. . . all of these allow **curiosity** to guide us in seeking to know one another better.

Having a variety of options for people to get to know one another is practical and inclusive. Activities that attract people with similar interests helps individuals discover shared commonalities. Walking, hiking, and nature outings, which are open to anyone, are delights that can be further debriefed as a group by **going to coffee afterward**. Groups meeting over a beer in a study group to talk theology, Bible study, knitting prayer shawls, book groups, age- or life-stage-related activities, all can provide more opportunities to talk at deeper levels. Reaching out to fellow members through the mail to acknowledge losses, celebrations, milestones of all kinds, can signal care and concern to newcomers as well as longtime members.

Doing crafts or constructing things for fun or profit, selling handmade items to support specific ministries, creates an atmosphere of shared intention and goals among people. Doing projects and working together both advance our understanding of one another's gifts and interests, while also building a sense of belonging to something larger.

Sharing meals in small groups in members' homes reveals much about the hosts and gives rich opportunities to learn one another's stories. Hospitality is a spiritual gift as much as others listed in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians. Bringing people together in various ways, inviting widely, inclusively, and making sure everyone knows names before launching, are all elements of hospitality.

Conflict resolution builds trust. So, if some disagreement arises among members, or if factions seem to be developing along certain lines, try to address them as quickly and sensitively as possible. **Listening** to one another can yield increased insights about one another. Listening can bring understanding of what may have contributed to the problem. And, ideally, an avenue for resolution and reconciliation may emerge.

I like to think of a congregation as a spiritual gymnasium, in which we all have opportunities to stretch, grow, and strengthen our connections and our capacity to forgive and love each other. All these efforts I have witnessed and practiced in my congregation. I am grateful for them.

The RIC Work Team serves as a resource for congregations and ministries throughout the synod as we all seek to expand our welcome in creative and life-giving ways. In this new publication we hope to provide practical ideas for your congregation to consider. Each month will have a different focus and some resources you may find valuable.

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Consider This

RIC Work Team



Southwestern Washington Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.