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A resource for evangelism and church growth from the Wycliffe College Institute of Evangelism

Online Edition

Volume 6, Number 1

Spring 1999

A Place of Welcome

An Interview with Ed Dallow, Rector of Christ Church, Cataraqui.

Numbers are not everything, but when they change dramatically, it is worth asking what is going on. In the past three and a half years, Christ Church, Cataraqui, has grown from 100 family units on the parish list and an average age in the 70s, to 260 and an average age in the 40s and 50s. good idea! spoke recently with the rector, Ed Dallow.

Ed, how did all this begin?

Before I began at Christ Church in 1995, I asked my bishop for three months leave, and took that time to research congregational development. I read widely, and attended Harold Percy's "Beyond Survival" conference at Wycliffe. The most helpful book I read was Andrew Weeks' *Welcome!* published by the Alban Institute.

And when you began in the parish?

In the first couple of months at Christ Church, we developed a simple Mission Statement for the parish: 'The Anglican Parish of Christ Church, Cataraqui is a welcoming, nurturing community seeking to celebrate and share God's love for all creation.' I also encouraged parishioners to perform an audit of parish resources, covering everything from the state and size of the parking lot to the condition of the church photocopier, and asking such questions as "Is there a suitable place for socializing after the service?" and "Would a non-Anglican newcomer be able to find their way through the service?"

So what happened?

One of the first things that happened was that a new couple came to our church, and I wrote them a letter of welcome. They responded straight away, saying they had never received a letter of welcome like that before. They came back to the church, and have been involved ever since.

I had made a habit of taking a bunch of carnations whenever I visited a new family. One day, I had less flowers than I had visits to make, so I called in at the bakery in Odessa and bought a loaf of fresh bread. The elderly lady I was visiting was overwhelmed by the gift. When I told the story later, one of the congregation, Jacqui, said, 'Oh, I was just given a breadmaker for Christmas. I would love to make loaves for you to take on your visits.'

Soon a system had developed. Whenever a visitor showed up on a Sunday, I would write a letter of welcome on the Monday, and then, on the Thursday or Friday of that week, two parishioners would make a 'doorstep visit' to the newcomer--taking a homemade loaf of bread.

We have become very systematic in tracking visitors. One of the first things I did was to design a new database to meet our congregation's needs. With that, I can keep track of old members, new members, visitors, pastoral visits needed, and so on.

You must be doing more than following up visitors to the church?

Well, we have a Ways and Means Committee whose job is to "enhance the social life of the parish." They plan one social event each month. Incidentally, 15 of the 21 members on that committee are themselves new members of the congregation. (Please mention that we appreciated the last issue of good idea! with its theme of parties. That was very relevant to our situation.)

It's a matter of attitude as much as anything. We work on the next-door neighbour principle. If a neighbour came over to your house for a meal, how would you treat them? One new person said she was very struck by the fact that the greeter offered to take her husband's coat and hang it up. Well, that's the sort of thing you would do if a neighbour came to your home.

What else are you doing?

Rites of passage are very important in our outreach. For instance, I offer three preparation classes for parents who want their babies baptised. To the third of those sessions I invite a couple from the parish, similar to the newcomers in age and interests, and introduce them as the parish sponsors. Together we walk through the BAS baptism service. Then, at the baptismal service, the parish sponsors meet the family, sit with them, and host them through the service, helping them whenever necessary. During the vows, the parish sponsors are asked and answer the question, 'Will you who witness these vows do everything in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?' before I turn and ask it of the congregation as a whole. These parish sponsors host the family during coffee time, and are then responsible to keep in touch with the family over the next few months.

We also make a video of the baptism, which we offer as a gift to the family. We have a potter in the congregation who makes candle holders for the baptismal candle, and a lady who embroiders crosses which we give to each member of the baptismal party. A group in the church also makes a banner with the child's name embroidered on it.

As a result, the majority of families whose children have been baptised in the past three years are still attending Christ Church.

Ed, I hope this doesn't sound critical, but in a sense you're not doing anything new.

You're right. We're not doing anything new. It's all motherhood stuff. If there's anything we're doing that is distinctive, it's that we are being very intentional in what we are doing. We have worked out the cost of what we want to do, we have a plan, and we're following the plan. All I know is that people are coming, and, on the whole, they're staying. And it's certainly not to hear the rector's preaching!

Ed, thank you for your time.

A team from Christ Church is available to lead a Saturday morning workshop on welcoming . . . in Ontario at least! The Rev. Ed Dallow may be contacted by email at eldallow@limestone.kosone.com, or by phone at 613 542 8229.

A Response to the Interview with Ed Dallow

By Harold Percy

I am very impressed by what I read of the development of the congregation at Christ Church, Cataraqui. As I read the interview with Ed Dallow, I believe there are several lessons to be learned from their experience:

1. Ed spent some time thinking out congregational development. Of course, not everybody can get a

leave of absence from his or her bishop to do that, but anyone can decide that, over the course of their year's reading, they will make a point of reading three key books in the area of congregational development. Personally, I would choose Rick Warren's 'The Purpose-Drive Church', Tom Bandy's 'Kicking Habits', and Don Posterski's 'Future Faith Churches' for a perspective on the Canadian scene.

2. The parish developed a mission statement. Developing a mission statement does not solve all your problems, but it does force you to focus on who you are and why you exist. There are a lot of churches in this country which go from year to year without ever sitting down and seriously thinking through that simple question.

3. Using the parish audit helped create a climate and an expectation of growth. The rector gave the people ownership by nurturing in them the idea of growing and getting ready for company. I think that's brilliant. As a result, the whole congregation has developed an attitude of expectation and a climate of growth. Everything else being equal, the difference between growth and decline is this attitude on the part of the congregation.

4. The parish let newcomers know that this was a place that would welcome them and where they would be valued. Ed wrote them a letter right away. Parishioners took them a gift which said, 'We're really happy that you're here.'

Their attitude is not just, 'Oh, we're a nice friendly church and when people come they'll find us friendly.' Every church, whether it's a congregation of 25 or 500, needs a plan for what happens when a new person comes.

In fact, everybody knows how to welcome somebody. It's largely a question of common sense. We need to ask ourselves what situations we have been in where we felt strange, and what would we like to have happened to break that tension. The model really is how we treat people when they come to our home. We don't ask them if they'll help paint the roof, or ask how much money they've got in the bank, we make them comfortable.

5. The leadership are helping the congregation become a community by their one social event a month. What newcomers can sense is whether they are coming into a real community. That in turn changes the tenor of what happens in worship.

It's great to have new people on that Ways and Means committee, because those newcomers have friends who are not yet connected with the church. Serving on the committee also gives newcomers the sense that they are valued and have a contribution to make. Developing the social life of the parish is a job tailor-made for brand-new people.

6. This congregation is becoming intentional about the flow of traffic through the parish in terms of rites of passage. Ed is not simply meeting every request indiscriminately, but, on the other hand, he's not putting up huge barriers either. What is important is to let people know that we're very serious about what we do, and, on the other hand, we take them and their children very seriously too.

7. I like Ed's comment that people are not coming to hear the rector's preaching. It means the parish has a humble leader. At the same time, while he may not be Billy Graham or Martin Luther King, I can guarantee that, if people are coming back, then his preaching is helping them connect with God and get some spiritual guidance for their lives. Word is getting out to spiritually hungry people that this is a place worth checking out. Ed shouldn't underestimate what he's doing through his preaching.

Towards A Theology of Welcome

A Bible study by John Bowen

Our student son said to us recently, 'By the way, I was talking to some street kids in Toronto the other day, and I gave them our phone number in case they needed it. I hope that's OK?' So far our mettle has not been tested, but it raised an interesting question. To welcome or not to welcome? Which is kinder . . . to everyone?

It brought home to me in a fresh way that welcoming is a very vulnerable thing to do. If I welcome this person, will they take advantage of me? Will they respect me? Will they . . . well, once they're through the door, anything could happen. I am no longer as much in charge of my life as I generally like to be.

All of which sharpened my wits as I began to think what welcoming means in the Bible. There are at least three dimensions to this topic:

God welcoming us

God's posture, as Jesus shows it over and over again, is one of welcome towards humankind. Thus Jesus welcomes the crowds (Luke 9:11). In particular, he welcomes 'sinners'--to the discomfiture of the Pharisees. 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!' they say in amazed disgust (Luke 15:2). How can he open himself to such people? The story Jesus tells in response, of course, is all about a father who is also a welcomer. Would the son abuse the father's generosity a second time? Maybe. For the welcoming father, however, that made no difference.

The most frequent Greek word for welcome, or receive, is *dechomai*. Twice, when describing those banquets which are foretastes of God's eschatological banquet, Luke uses an unusual word for 'feast', '*doche*', which is related to *dechomai*. Welcoming, it seems, is most naturally followed by feasting!

Us welcoming God

God's hope is that humankind will reciprocate by welcoming God's banquet invitation. In fact, the word *dechomai* becomes almost a technical term in the New Testament--the equivalent of receiving or believing or trusting in God's salvation. So when the New Testament observes anyone engaged in 'welcoming', it is not just a sociological statement but also a theological one. The welcome means the welcomer has welcomed God's grace.

Thus when Zaccheus 'welcomes' Jesus into his house, it is almost Luke's code way of saying, 'Look! Do you get it? Zaccheus has entered the kingdom.' Zaccheus discovered, of course, that it costly to welcome Jesus, just as it is costly for God to welcome us.

It is not only receiving Jesus which has theological significance, however. When Jesus is sending out the twelve, he explains to them, 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me' (Matthew 10:40 cf. John 13:20). Paul too understands that the messenger stands in for the speaker. When he recalls how the Galatians first welcomed him, he says, 'you welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus' (Galatians 4:14). Their welcome of God's messenger was the beginning of their opening the door to God.

Us welcoming one another

The work of God's Spirit in us can be summarised as making us like Jesus, restoring the image of God in us. Part of that renewing is to turn us into welcomers in just the way that God is a welcomer.

Jesus urged us, 'When you give a feast [*doch*], invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind...' (Luke 14:12-14) Paul says much the same thing, only in different words: 'Welcome one another, as God in Christ welcomed you.' (Romans 15:7) God is the standard by which we are to measure the warmth of our welcoming.

For Paul, as for Jesus, this was not a matter of mere words. When Luke records at the climax of the Book of Acts that Paul 'welcomed all who came to him', we recognise this to be a Christ-like kind of welcoming, not least because Luke adds pointedly that Paul entertained 'at his own expense', just as God's welcoming is at God's own expense. (Acts 28:20)

When we welcome strangers into our churches, then, like Paul we are agents of God, representing the God who has welcomed us without reserve. The hand of welcome we extend is God's hand. There is thus something sacramental in the act of welcoming. It is, as the BCP says of baptism, 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace': the sign of the grace God has shown to us. Is it costly? Is it disturbing? Naturally. That's the way grace is. But it is also deeply divine, and deeply human.

Signs of Welcome

John Bowen

You are an unchurched person. You believe in God, but you have little time for organised religion. If pressed, you would say you are a spiritual person, but church? Well, thanks, but no thanks.

What will get you inside the church? Two things in particular. One: rumours that something good is going on at that place. They say it's welcoming. It's not embarrassing. It's not too religious. They talk my language. They're good with kids. They smile. And they don't seem to be after my money the whole time. Two: a family member or friend or neighbour who says, 'Hey, I'm going. Want to come with me?'

Somewhere on the list of inviting influences should be church signs. I put it in the context of the first two because the most welcoming church sign in the world is not going to help people access the church if #1 and #2 are not in place. But if they are, well, signs can help. After all, the church sign is the first thing people see as they pass the church property, if the sign is big enough to see, of course. (Harold Percy points out that a tiny sign which reads '8.15 1 & 3, MP (BCP), 10.45 2 & 4 HC (BAS)' is neither helpful nor welcoming to a newcomer.)

Here then is the first of an occasional series of articles on church signs. Look at them as if you were that unchurched person, interested in spirituality in a vague kind of way, not opposed to church if it really scratches where you itch. You are idly curious as you drive along the street as to what advertising (including church signs) is to be seen: is it interesting, intriguing, thought-provoking? Does it offer a good deal?

What do you see?

LADIES COME MEET MARY MOTHER OF JESUS

What does this mean? Church folk understand that the invitation is probably to a Bible study, or a series of studies. Perhaps there will be dramatic presentations on the life of Mary. The sign is certainly intriguing, but, for the outsider, probably a little too mysterious. Are you really going to find (and pay) a babysitter so you can give up a Wednesday evening to find out what 'meet Mary mother of Jesus' means? Not likely.

Of course, if that friendly, helpful neighbour who goes to the church tells me more of what it's about, and is enthusiastic about it, and if she's going herself, and if her teenage daughter offers to babysit my children for free...well, that's different.

BEAUTY & HAPPINESS FOLLOWS THE INNOCENT

I'm still thinking about this one. To be honest, I have not noticed that, as a general rule, 'beauty and happiness follow the innocent'. In fact, the opposite is frequently the case. The innocent suffer, the evil get

off scot-free. (Don't the psalms complain about that sort of thing too?)

As for the unchurched reader, how do they read it? How does it speak to the battered wife? The businessman who fears he has cancer? The couple on the point of splitting up? The child who doesn't know where to turn to speak of sexual abuse? 'Beauty and Happiness Follow the Innocent'? There's not a lot of good news for anyone in that message.

CHRIST WILL COME SAT AT 6PM

If this doesn't make you laugh, it should make you cry. Church readers understand: an Advent celebration, a theme for the evening. Normal stuff for the time of year.

Is the unchurched reader likely to show up? Unless they have some faint liturgical memory around the meaning of Advent, the sign won't even make a lot of sense, let alone appear as a warm invitation. Sounds like a headline from *The National Enquirer*. They've got better things to do with their Saturday nights.

WHAT JESUS SAYS TO THE SMASHING PUMPKINS

Someone here is trying.

'Smashing Pumpkins? Aren't they some kind of rock group? Wasn't my high school son saying something about them? Sounds like the aftermath of Hallowe'en to me. But what's that got to do with church? or Jesus? I'll mention it to Josh when I get home. He'll get a kick out of it.'

Will Josh go to find out what Jesus says to the Smashing Pumpkins? That depends mainly on factors #1 and #2--of course. But the sign, and the topic, might just help.

[If you see church signs--good, bad or ugly--that delight, anger, amuse or horrify you, send a note, and (ideally) a photograph, to good idea!]

A Prayer for the Church's Ministry of Evangelism

Merciful God, creator of the peoples on earth and lover of souls, have compassion on all who do not know you as you are revealed in your son Jesus Christ. Let your Gospel be preached with grace and power to those who have not heard it, turn the hearts of those who resist it, and bring home to your flock those who have gone astray; that there may be one flock under one shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Solemn Intercession: Good Friday
The Book of Alternative Services, page 312

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