



The non-newcomer

They deserve gracious hospitality and care, too.

By Bishop Greg

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In or out? With me or not? Belong or not?

We often use this terminology when referring to church membership. However, I am concerned with this way of thinking. It creates an “us” versus “them” mentality.

Sure, there is a need for some kind of governance piece about membership and fulfilling the obligations of the Societies Act. I get that. But I am talking about how we practice hospitality to all people — not just newcomers. How can church be a welcoming community for all people?

For instance, how do you welcome the “non-newcomer”? (Yes, I made up that word.) But I think “non-newcomer” describes those people who have been part of a congregation but have then spent some time away from it. The reasons for someone leaving a congregation are numerous. Sometimes work gets in the way; there might be weekend sporting events, especially for children. Sometimes a person just isn’t interested in attending church anymore; sometimes there is frustration with the way things are being done. The list could go on.

While it is important to try and make a pastoral connection with someone who has stepped aside, we also need to recognize that there may come a point in time when that person wishes to disconnect for a while. But we also hope and pray that the time will come when they will want to re-connect. What then? How will you handle that when it happens?

I have heard some horror stories over the years of “non-newcomers” going back to church after significant absences. “Where have you been?” someone snidely asks. Or, “I haven’t seen you for a while.” How does that make the person feel? Guilty? Ashamed? It is not exactly a very hospitable greeting of welcome. Far better to say: “Hey, it’s great to see you again. How are you keeping?”

For those who go through a period in their lives where they have stepped back from involvement — for whatever reason — it can be extremely hard to start attending church once again. While we might always state that we would love it if people started attending again, we often send signals, either overtly or inadvertently, that they really are not fully welcomed back until they prove themselves.

In your congregation, how easily can people move from one circle to another circle? Perhaps think of people’s engagement in terms of concentric circles rippling outwards. There are those actively involved, helping out with a myriad of things. Next are those who are fairly regular attenders, participating in some activities. The next ring out might be those who attend periodically, participating in the occasional event. The ring beyond that might be those who attend at Christmas, ask about getting their child baptized, and maybe helping out with the garage sale. The ring furthest out may be those you see once in a long while, but whom you might run into at the grocery store or some community event. They, too, are deserving of gracious hospitality and care.

People actively involved in church often lament, “20% of us do 80% of the work around here!” There are feelings of exasperation and frustration, wondering why nobody steps up to help. How do we move

beyond this 20-80 dynamic? How do we allow people the freedom to attend and participate on THEIR schedule and desire, and not on OUR expectations of how they should behave or participate? How do we create a church atmosphere that is welcoming to all, regardless of their degree of participation?

Work at keeping fluidity between the different circles. Depending on life's challenges and things that happen, people will move from greater to lesser involvement, and from lesser to greater involvement. Our grace-filled task is to make sure people can participate at whatever level they would like.

Those of us who are actively involved in church can easily "over-function." Instead, how do we graciously provide space and encouragement for others to share in the work? Always lift up people's gifts. Provide opportunity. "Hey, I was wondering if you would consider . . ." This is offering hospitality as much as anything else. Develop a culture of participation with an acceptance that not everything may get done.