

Finding Welcome

The 2012 Lent Course

for the Diocese of Canterbury

The five sessions of the course are about sharing the welcome of God that we have experienced through Jesus Christ. How do we experience and share this welcome, most particularly among those with whom we share life locally?

Learning from the Bible and from each other, people will have the opportunity to:

- understand how our faith has been influenced by God's welcome
- consider how we communicate God's welcome through our local networks, our buildings, our worship and how we welcome new disciples
- make changes within our Christian community to reflect God's welcome more fully.

Each session will follow roughly the same outline:

Welcome

(gathering, getting to know one another better)

Word

(reflecting on the Bible)

Worship

(responding in prayer and worship)

What next?

(What do we do with what we have discovered together?)

It will help you to bring a Bible and a pen each week. Your leader will provide a sheet for each session. As a courtesy, please let your leader know if you can't be there one week.



Finding Welcome

Introducing the Course

Finding Welcome is designed to help your church grow in its capacity to offer welcome in the name of the one who calls us 'no longer servants but friends'. During the last year we have explored as a diocese what it means to be disciples of Jesus - as followers, learners and friends of Christ. You may have taken part in the *Confident Discipleship* Lent course in 2011. This year's course builds on that and explores a crucial aspect of our individual and corporate discipleship.

The New Testament is full of teaching about hospitality and welcome. 'I was a stranger and you invited me in', from Jesus' story of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25. 'Go to the street corners and invite anyone you can find', from the wedding banquet Matthew 22.

The whole of Luke 15 is comprised of parables about lost things and lost people, ending with the father's words to his elder son, 'We had to celebrate and be glad'. John's gospel presents Jesus as one who offers divine hospitality, through the feeding of the 5,000, and in its portrayal of Jesus as bread for life, a good shepherd and an open gate.

Paul sees that the result of Jesus' cross and resurrection is that we are no longer 'foreigners and strangers but fellow-citizens with God's people and also members of his household' (Eph 2:19). The writer of Hebrews exhorts us to welcome strangers 'for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it' (13:2).

Our liturgy reminds us that worship is an experience of God's welcome for us through Christ. This is especially focused in the Eucharist: 'your face is turned towards your world', 'He opened his arms of love upon the cross', 'You embraced us as your children and welcomed us to sit and eat with you'.

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann put it like this: 'We are accepted in Christ in order that we might accept others, and the more determined we are in accepting the more certain we are of our own acceptance.'¹ The more we welcome others, the more deeply grateful we shall be for God's gracious welcome to us. In this way the stranger, the 'new person', becomes a profound gift to us and our churches.

In Rublev's icon of the hospitality of Abraham, the three Persons of the Trinity embody gracious welcome. Theirs is an open circle of love which draws us in. This is what our church communities can be like.

A way of seeing the welcoming life of the Trinity is as a dance in which newcomers are caught up and find to their surprise - and maybe ours too - that they are equal partners (even, especially valued ones) in the community's celebration of life. There is special joy waiting for any Christian community which discovers how to be an open fellowship, welcoming those who are different, and offering the friendship of Jesus.

We cannot go far enough in welcoming others. This will mean offering real friendship. As someone said, 'I don't want a friendly church - I want a church where I can make friends'.²

In this way, as communities graced by the extraordinary welcome of God, we are invited to become an open circle of welcome, sharing the friendship we have found in Christ.

Welcome to *Finding Welcome*.

Steve Coney

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Open Church. Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle* (London: SCM, 1978)

² Bob Jackson and George Fisher, *Everybody Welcome* (London: Church House, 2009)

Finding Welcome

Session 1

Open Hearts: discovering God's heart of welcome

Welcome

Take some time to welcome each other and introduce one another. Share with each other a time when you had a good welcome somewhere, or when you enjoyed welcoming someone else. It doesn't have to have been at church!

Word

There is a special joy waiting for any Christian community which discovers how to be an open fellowship, welcoming differences, and offering the friendship of Jesus. Today we consider what it means to share in God's open-hearted welcome.

In pairs consider: What are the characteristics of a welcoming church community? As a whole group, record these.

Choose some of these characteristics and think how they might be expressed concretely in our actions and attitudes. (In other words, how would you actually *know* that a church was welcoming if you visited it as a Mystery Worshipper?)

Read: Luke 15:11 - 24

What does the parable tell us about the boy's father? What words would you use to describe the father? What might Jesus intend us to understand about God the Father's heart? What kind of a person is the father welcoming in this story?

Read: Luke 15: 25 - 32

How do you feel about the elder son? Do you have some sympathy for him?

What might this part of the parable be saying to us about welcoming people to church?

In what ways have you experienced less than helpful welcome in a church, or none at all? (We can learn much from such stories.)

In the parable, why did there *have* to be celebration?

How do we celebrate in our church community? Where do we experience delight or joy?

These celebrations are a good starting point for thinking about how we can share God's welcome with more and more people. If you have any ideas about inviting and including people, record them here.

Worship

Get out the loyalty, discount and membership cards that you've got between you in your wallets and purses. Place them where they can be seen. Reflect in silence on the difference between these clubs and schemes and the Christian friendship and welcome which we have found through Jesus Christ.

Leave the cards out and share a time of prayer, praising God for his friendship and welcome, and praying for one another. If you are comfortable with the idea, pass one of the cards round so that each person, as they hold it, has a turn to pray out loud or silently. Or you may like to use the *Finding Welcome* prayer:

Loving Father,
you have turned your face towards the world
and welcomed us home in Jesus Christ.
Work in us by your Spirit
that we may share with others the welcome we have found in him,
that strangers may become friends,
and your love be made known in all the world. Amen.

What next?

Looking at what has been written down during this session, identify:

Some key attitudes or values which you feel are important for your church as it grows in its capacity to offer good welcome

Two or three actions which your church could take to express God's welcome more fully. This could be something as simple as putting up a poster which says 'You are welcome'. Over to you for ideas!

Record these as feedback to your PCC or leadership team:

Feedback

You may like to visit the Mystery Worshipper section of the witty and self-critical Ship of Fools website:
www.ship-of-fools.com

Finding Welcome

Session 2

Open Invitation: finding a way into the Christian Community

Welcome

You have already succeeded in finding a way into your own church! Share what (or who) first drew you to come to this particular church.

Word

In this section we think about contacts. We all have a network of friends and neighbours and so does our church. Part of our discipleship call is to extend God's welcome to them. We can't just expect them to stumble across it by chance. But what can we do, and to what can we invite people? This is what this session is about.

Inviting people

Read: John 1:40 - 46

Who invites whom in this passage? What is the invitation? What is the reaction?
How do I feel about inviting someone I know well to a church event or service?
What might make it easier for me to ask, or for them to say 'Yes'?

As we serve others, friendship often follows. In what ways might I be able to serve a friend or contact as an expression of my faith?

Our wider contacts

Make a list (not exhaustive) of the people and groups with which your church is in regular contact in the community.

How can we be more welcoming to such people (for example, to other users of the church buildings)?

Joining in with God

Read: 1 Corinthians 3:5 - 7

Who is 'doing the work' in this passage?

What activities or services in this church have brought new people into the worshipping community in the last few years? Put another way, where are we already seeing God at work? Please record your ideas together as part of this week's PCC or Leadership team feedback.

Feedback

Where is our church seeing God at work as it reaches out beyond the church and its buildings? This could be outreach into the local community or among the friendship networks of church members. Make a note of these stories.

Feedback

What ways does your church have of communicating with the local community and contacts of church members?

Worship

Ask anyone who has a mobile phone or address book with them to hold it as we share in a time of prayer. In silence or aloud pray for our contacts, family and friends and for ways to help them to find God's gracious welcome through us. Conclude with the *Finding Welcome* prayer:

Loving Father,
you have turned your face towards the world
and welcomed us home in Jesus Christ.
Work in us by your Spirit
that we may share with others the welcome we have found in him,
that strangers may become friends,
and your love be made known in all the world. Amen.

What next?

Each person take a moment alone to list three people with whom they are in contact regularly who do not go to church.

Think privately: Who am I going to invite to something at my church, maybe at Easter? (Or on another occasion if you are doing this course at another time of year.) If you can't imagine inviting them to a service, what kind of event could they helpfully be invited to?

You may like to visit the Back to Church Sunday website. There are great stories there of 'inviting someone we already know to something we love'. www.backtochurch.co.uk

Finding Welcome

Session 3

Open Doors: Using our Buildings

Welcome

First impressions count! What do you remember about the first time you walked into your church building? How did it feel at the time? How were you welcomed?

(If you've been a member of your church for so long that you can't remember your first time, listen to the experience of others. We all need to step back into the shoes of the first-time visitor.)

Word

In this section we think about the welcome which our church buildings offer to newcomers and visitors. We ask 'Why can it feel so daunting to cross the threshold and come into church?'

What three things do you most value about your own church building(s)?

What aspect of your church - the people or the building - would you most love to share with a newcomer?

Read: Luke 14:16 - 20

Quote: 'I never felt so alone as when I walked into church and everyone was looking happy and talking to each other'.

Why do you think people often find it really difficult to come into a church?

Imagine:

a Starbucks

a medieval castle

an Accident and Emergency Department

What 'message' does each of these buildings try to give? What aspects of the building reinforce that message?

Now think about your church building(s):

What impression do they give?

What message do you want them to be giving?

Put yourself in someone else's shoes: (think of different kinds of people.)

- What might make people anxious about walking into church?
- What might make someone want to come in?
- Is sufficient information displayed for visitors?

Read: Luke 14: 21 - 23

What does this passage tell us about God's desire to invite and welcome people?

Consider this question for a few moments in silence before discussing: how may we offer a warm welcome in God's name? Record your PCC or Leadership team feedback:

Feedback

Worship

Pass a bunch of keys around the group. The keys represent the doors of our church, which we long to open more and more. As each person holds the keys, pray silently or aloud as you feel comfortable. You might want to give thanks for the welcome you received at church, and to the God whose welcome extends to all. Finish with:

Loving Father,
you have turned your face towards the world
and welcomed us home in Jesus Christ.
Work in us by your Spirit
that we may share with others the welcome we have found in him,
that strangers may become friends,
and your love be made known in all the world. Amen.

What next?

Decide together on two or three actions which your church could take to make your buildings more welcoming, or to make it easier for someone to come into for the first time. Record your actions:

Feedback

Finding Welcome

Session 4

Open Services: offering a welcome in worship

Welcome

Think of a recent worship experience in your own church which you felt brought you close to God or to others. Share some stories. What was helpful about it?

Word

In this section we look at the experience of newcomers at our church services. How can we help people to feel at home and encounter God?

Read: Colossians 3:12 - 17

What attractive qualities and characteristics of a worshipping community do you see in this passage?

Imagine ...

You are a first-time visitor to a typical service at your church. Together, talk through the whole experience, from finding out the service times to arriving in the car park (if there is one) to leaving after coffee at the end. (For example, finding a seat / leaflets and hymnbooks / following the service itself / sharing the Peace / after-service refreshments.)

Consider:

How a visitor might feel
What questions they might have?
What might make them anxious or uncomfortable?
What they might find helpful or inspiring?

Make a list together of anything that seems important.

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:4 - 6

What is the spiritual service of a sidesperson or a welcomer? (Why is it more than 'just a job'?)

What could your church do to make the welcome offered at the door even better?

Children in church

Jesus placed them in the centre of what was happening and blessed them.

When and where do you think a child would be most likely to meet God in one of your church services?
When do you think they would be most bored?

(A next step might be to ask the children how they feel.)

Coffee!

It's a tricky time for newcomers, especially if they have come on their own.

What kind of experience do you think new people currently have of being made welcome at coffee time?
(Promise yourself that you'll watch carefully for the next few weeks to see what actually happens!)

Worship

Light a candle in the middle of the group. The candle represents God in our midst. In silence or aloud, thank God for his presence with us and pray that his love may be made known to us and all who come into our church services.

The *Finding Welcome* prayer:

Loving Father,
you have turned your face towards the world
and welcomed us home in Jesus Christ.
Work in us by your Spirit
that we may share with others the welcome we have found in him,
that strangers may become friends,
and your love be made known in all the world. Amen.

What next?

We've just covered a lot of ground. On the basis of what you've said in this session:

1. What two or three actions could have an immediate impact on helping new people feel relaxed and able to participate in our church services?
2. Can you think of ways of ensuring that the quality of welcome is consistently high?

Record your answers as feedback for the PCC or leadership team:

Feedback

Next week everyone please bring an object which symbolises 'belonging' - a football scarf, old slippers, keys etc. Use your imaginations!

Finding Welcome

Session 5

Open to all: helping people to belong

Welcome

Think of an event or time when you have felt pleased to be a part of your own Christian community. (It could be a time of worship, a social event or some other activity - and it doesn't have to have taken place in a church building!)

Share what was good about this experience.

Word

'I want to be a part of this community...to have a place...to belong'.

Today we're looking at ways of helping people to feel involved and valued, and to stick and stay. If we don't actively welcome newcomers into Christian friendship, the chances are that they may well drift away pretty quickly. They, and we, will have missed out on the amazing possibility of growing in faith as the body of Christ together.

In our church, what do we already do well to help new people feel involved and integrated in the church community?

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:12 - 27

'I'm happy to belong here.'

What does the passage teach about the importance of each individual in a church community?

What do verses 21 - 25 suggest to you about the place of newer, less established church members?

Read the following quote.

'I experienced a great welcome when I came to our church. But even now I can feel so alone - that feeling of being in a crowd and feeling alone ... I found I made acquaintances at church - but only through a small group do you make friends ... It is still not easy to be in a large crowds. It's all about making some friends.'

Every church claims to be friendly! But there's a world of difference between a 'friendly' church and one where it's easy for a newcomer to make some friends.

Work together on this scenario:

A new person has come to church for two weeks running. We'd like to offer friendship and get to know them. But we're British and we don't want to seem pushy! How can we offer an appropriate and sincere welcome? Think about social events as well as church services and small groups. Consider ways that a newcomer can be invited and accompanied to events when they don't know many people yet.

Share and record your ideas:

Feedback

What must we do in order to help new people to be included in friendship groups?

‘I have a part to play’

Think back to the passage and its picture of the body. Why is it important to involve new people, their gifts, time and talents?

How quickly are newcomers given a chance to contribute to church community life? (In your church, how long does someone have to be there before they are allowed to ... lead prayers, help lead a service, serve coffee ...?)

What sort of things might a newish person enjoy helping with in your church community? Is there any job that’s ‘too hard’ or ‘off limits’ to new members? Or to the non-churchgoing partner of a new member? To what extent are we prepared to give up or change things to enable people to join our community?

Worship

If you remembered to bring objects symbolising belonging, place them in the middle of the group. As a group write a prayer summing up what you have learned during *Finding Welcome*, asking God to send new people to your church over the next few months, and praying for them in advance. Then say your own prayer together.

What next?

Now that you are at the end of *Finding Welcome*, what overall feedback do you wish to offer to your PCC or leadership team?

Examples of what you may like to consider are:

- whether anyone in your group would like the opportunity to address the PCC
- what questions would you like to put to your congregation
- whether you might devise a congregational questionnaire
- what proposed prayer events might be planned for the Nine Day Week/Novena of Prayer from May 18-26th 2012.

Feedback

If you are happy for the prayer you wrote in the *Worship* section to be made more widely known in the diocese, please send it to: Sarah Lucas, Local Ministries Administrator slucas@diocant.org Thank you.