

EOORC Being a Welcoming Church Event - Saturday, March 2, 2024
Being SO welcoming that we realize we're not always the right church for everyone!

So, this is going to sound weird, maybe even a bit challenging, but part of being a welcoming congregation is knowing who wouldn't feel welcome in your congregation. Not everyone will.

Being welcoming, and expressing care and love for someone, can mean knowing that another church may meet their spiritual/community needs better.

Congregations can't be all things to all people and it's important for congregations to live their call and ministry authentically (people can tell when congregations aren't). It's also important for people to be able to live their authentic spirituality.

Sometimes that means our church might not be a good fit for someone. Maybe someone's theology is very different than ours or they're looking for a community that worships a certain way or that has a certain focus re: social justice that is really important to them.

Often, if that happens a person may attend a few times and then they just don't come back and we never know why. But, if we realize that not everyone's going to be a good fit, we can be SO welcoming that we turn that into both a connection with our church – even if doesn't end up being their home church – AND a way for them to explore their authentic spirituality and find a true sense of belonging.

It means intentionally getting to know the people who walk through the door.

- Maybe arrange a follow-up visit, invite them for coffee after church, engage in a few weeks of ongoing conversation.
- It can start small (taking the question on Éric's list - "What brought you to church today?" – and going a step further).
- Follow-up conversations (example questions):
 - What do you hope to find in a church community? What's important to you about church? Ask them about their church background? Just don't ask all these questions at once. It doesn't need to feel like an interrogation!
 - Help them get to know the church – This is who we are...what our ministry is/our focus...rather than just leaving them to read it on the website or figure it out for themselves.
 - It will become clear if it's working for them. For the sake of clarity, we can even ask: How are you finding things? Any questions? How are you experiencing the community here?
 - If it doesn't seem to be working, is there another United Church that might be a better fit? If not a United Church, is there another church in the neighbourhood from another denomination?
 - "It sounds like this and this are really important to you. That's not something that's a major part of our ministry, right now, but I think Insert Name Church would be a really good fit. They're doing this and this and this. If you're interested, I can introduce you to the minister or go with you on a Sunday morning if you'd like."

- Same with theology – “It sounds like Insert Name United Church would be a really good fit for what I’ve heard you share about your beliefs.”

It may feel like we may be working against our own community by “giving away” someone to another congregation. A couple of things about that:

- It will rarely ever happen. If it’s someone who hasn’t been brought into the church by someone they know – a friend or family member, for instance – usually people will go to the website first to check the community out. So, it’s important for the website to reflect your congregation accurately. This way, the congregation they met online will generally be the one they meet in person.
- You’re still building a connection and relationship with this person. Even if your church doesn’t end up being their regular church home, if it were you, wouldn’t you appreciate the gift of honesty and having someone enable you to find a good spiritual/church fit? Invite them to come back for church and community events. Even ask them if they’d like to be kept up-to-date on church activities through the newsletter, etc.
- We need to trust that other faith communities (esp. in the United Church) will do the same thing for us. This means that churches need to talk with each other to make sure we know what’s generally going on in other United Church faith communities (just generally – we obviously can’t know the ins and outs of the life and work of every UCC congregation – but the more conversation and relationship-building between UCC faith communities, the better!).

NOTE: This isn’t saying that the fit between a new person and a congregation has to be perfect. I think we all know it often isn’t. No congregation is made up of people with all the same beliefs and priorities and ways of worship, etc. As well, people can grow into congregations, and new people can impact congregations over time and help them grow, as well. Sometimes, though, the differences are too wide to create a good fit. And, that’s okay. It isn’t “right” or “wrong”, and it isn’t a failure. It just is. If we’re not honest about it, though, it can cause unhealthy conflict and, of course, it doesn’t allow the congregation or the individual to live their spiritual lives authentically.

So, how do you know if you’re a good fit? KNOW THY SELF!!

- What’s your church’s call/ministry/vision?
- Theology is probably the largest area where fit is important. The United Church is a “big tent” church. Really, it’s a HUGE tent church! Even an individual congregation is a tent within the big UCC tent, with people in the congregation having beliefs on a spectrum of theology. Generally, though, every church tends to have a theological core – a spectrum of beliefs that if people are outside of that in their own theology, they’re probably not going to feel at home. What’s your congregation’s theological core? What beliefs or theological practices (like language) might someone hold that are probably not going to make them feel at home in your church? And, can we have those conversations with people without judging that person’s beliefs? That’s really important – entering into those conversations without judgement. Nothing crushes a feeling of being welcomed faster than feeling judged!

NOTE: Sometimes, long-time members might have very different beliefs than the rest of the church. Normally, that wouldn’t be a good fit, but it works for that congregation. One of the reasons for

this (there could be others) is because long-term relationships often over-ride other differences that would normally have us seek out another community. The church's theologies/practices might have changed around this person over the years, but the relationships have kept them anchored to the community. Newcomers don't have the benefit of those long-term relationships to mitigate the differences in theology or practices.

- What's your church's social justice ministry, if you have one? Your focus in serving the outer community?
- What are your demographics? Would Josée (the single mother whose hope is to find other parents and young families in her church community to share her journey with) find what she really needs?
- What are your church's spiritual gifts and areas of excellence? The areas that the congregation naturally puts time and effort and resources into and is a priority for the church? Those unique areas of ministry that your congregation does really well? These are usually connected to a congregation's call/ministry, but could also be ongoing ways of living into that call (the "how").
 - Music? Not just music – but traditional? Contemporary? Blended? All Classical?
 - Youth/young adult ministry?
 - Unique ministry of pastoral care?
 - Spiritual education and growth?
 - Non-traditional worship?
 - Christian meditation practice?
 - Work with seniors?
 - Whatever...
- And, it's helpful to know enough about other United Churches – what their theological core is and their unique ministries and areas of excellence.

Two questions to consider and reflect on after you leave this gathering this morning:

1. Who would likely **not** feel welcome or a good fit in your church and why? If accommodating their beliefs or needs means not living your church's call authentically, can you help them find a church home that would be a more authentic fit for them?
2. What are your church's unique spiritual gifts and areas of focus and excellence? Are they clear to the congregation and to the community and the public?

If you're having trouble now identifying in your head what your church's spiritual gifts are, no worries. It's hoped that the next Regional educational event is going to look at this very thing – what are your church's spiritual gifts and areas of excellence? How to identify them? How to build on them? So, we'd invite you back to explore that further!