

There are many ways to welcome . In India they place their palms together and raise their hands above their face. In some countries in Africa, you would cause deep offence if you greeted with your left hand. In Chile it's very common for women to give each other the "air kiss". In Kuwait, men kiss each other on the cheek. In other places, the good ol' hand shake will do fine. You just better be careful to use the right welcome in the right place!



Welcoming - it's important in culture. And you can also hear lots about the importance of welcoming in church. In fact mpc, has a core commitment on the topic of 'welcoming' (we'll get to that soon). But why is it important and if it is, how as a church can we go about it. This week's growth group study is a look at this very practical part of our church life together.

### **Welcoming & the Big Picture**

What does Luke 15:1-7 tells us about God's character and how we should act?

What attitudes are behind the commands in Colossians 4:5-6; 1 Corinthians 14:23-25; and 1 Thessalonians 2:8? How will these passages affect how we go about welcoming?

### **Welcoming & Our Church**

From the above, we can see that church should be a welcoming "open door" to others. We should expect and desire newcomers to come into our midst, both believers and unbelievers. This is something we want to keep valuing at mpc. In fact, we have a core commitment along these lines. You can read all the core commitments on the inside back cover of your church directory, but this particular one says:

We are committed to church activity which is welcoming and understandable to newcomers (1 Cor 14:23).

This core commitment is what's behind an overall strategy at mpc. We believe newcomers, seekers, and long term Christians can all grow in the same 'soil'. If what we do in church is made understandable and clear, and if we do our best to be sensitive and open to newcomers each week so that they understand what we're doing and feel genuinely welcome, their experience of church may well be revolutionary. At the same time, long term Christians benefit by learning to be outward looking, and by hearing the bible taught in a straightforward way.

## **Our Experience of Welcoming**

The fast food chains, like McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken, ask certain people from the public to be their 'consumer watchdogs'. These people regularly attend outlets as customers (a bit like undercover police) and report back to the company on the service, the quality of the food and the cleanliness of the outlet. Whenever we go to visit other churches, we sort of take on this role. We are aware of what is done well and what is not done so well in the area of welcoming. It is worth reflecting on this.

What was good about their welcoming?

What was not so good about their welcoming?

## **Welcoming and Growth**

Churches that are growing are doing so because of God's generosity. But that should not stop us thinking hard and long about what we do in church, how it affects our fellowship and how it appears to outsiders.

The growing church is one that identifies everyone who comes through its doors in two ways:

1. As people who matter to God;
2. As potential brothers and sisters in Christ.

When we believe this, our church can become, and be seen by outsiders as, a loving community, which cares for the needs of others. Newcomers will then hear the message of Jesus in an atmosphere of loving concern.

If this is true, why don't we welcome as well as we should? What stops us?



Here are some tips. Read each one and then discuss as appropriate.

### 1. Think Rightly About Yourself

Perhaps the biggest 'stopper' for us in terms of welcoming is fear of what people might think of us. We wonder, are we going to have anything to say to a new person and will I just embarrass myself. To combat this way of thinking, Christians need to keep seeing themselves as God see them. We are God's precious possession. We are his dearly loved children. He has lavished his love on us and made us to be a new creation. We need to hold on to this reality, to give us perspective when we might worry what others think of us.

But on a more 'practical' level:

### 2. Assume Nothing

Don't assume that a person wouldn't be interested in talking to you. Don't assume that someone else who has more social skills will see the newcomer and approach him. Don't assume that just because the person is a regular whom you recognise, he/she already has good friends at church.

### 3. Take Initiative

Newcomers need to be welcomed immediately. And the first impression which you give them can make all the difference. Be on the lookout for people you don't recognise and try to go out of your way to make sure a newcomer receives a friendly welcome to church.

Where are the opportunities at mpc on a Sunday to take initiative?

### 4. Listen

God gave us two ears and one mouth. On the basis of that fact, perhaps we should do twice as much listening as talking. People love the chance to talk about themselves and it is one thing that they can speak about with unquestionable authority! A newcomer will appreciate the opportunity to talk about him/herself—it's safe, easy territory.

### 5. Beginning

Beginning a conversation is an art form. You're trying to make the newcomer feel welcome and comfortable. I assume we would all agree the best approach is not "Who are you and what do you want?" But how do we get the conversation going? What do you think of these convo starters?

"Hi, Welcome to church. What has brought you along this morning?"

"Hello, are you new to this area or are you just visiting?"

"Hi, I don't think we have met before? My name's Jenny.

### 6. Endings

Finishing a conversation can be harder than starting one! You must continue to care for newcomers at this point. Be sure that they will not be left on their own, feeling awkward. They should sense that you have been pleased to speak with them and will welcome the chance to chat again. How can we end the conversation well? Discuss your ideas.

## **Not all newcomers are the same**

On any given Sunday morning, we could find an assortment of people who have come along for the first time or who are in the process of checking out our church?

1. Uncle Joe and Aunt Gladys are from out of town who are visiting their nephew, Ron. Ron is a part of mpc.
2. Carla is a uni student who expects to be living in your area for this year.
3. Kellie and John are a young married couple with a one year old. They just moved in the area and are checking out churches.
4. Ben is a rather unusual and unkempt person, who lives at a local hostel.

Ask the following questions about each of these people:

- What information about church would you communicate?
- How will you put this person at ease in the church environment?
- To whom in the congregation would you introduce him or her?

## **Developing a 'Nose' for Newcomers (& the Rest!)**

Wine connoisseurs have a 'nose' for fine wine. After much practice they have trained themselves to pick what is good. Others just go for the colorful label! But the point is, we have to develop a 'nose' for the newcomer. It's a talent that doesn't come naturally for most of us and every now and then we all need to be refocused to do it better. Below are some simple things we can look out for in ourselves. Give any comment as you read down the list.

1. Am I arriving late to church or even just on time? Newcomers always arrive early - they don't know about normal church culture!
2. Am I tending to sit in the same part of the building every week? Having an attitude of 'my spot' can work against looking out for new people.
3. "Choose" to sit next to someone. When you come in on a Sunday, look for who is sitting by themselves or who you don't really know. There is no real reason to leave a space. Most people like the opportunity to have a chat.
4. Am I projecting an 'affable' character? If you smile, keep eye contact and listen, then it will go a long way for our church to be received as friendly.

Really, all of the above tips could be equally applied to our approach to regulars at church as well. In a big church like ours, it's easy to only speak to those few who we know really well. The unfortunate thing though is that people who are part of our church family begin to feel left out and then the saying becomes true—"It's easy to feel lonely in a crowd". What contributes to our uneasiness in approaching 'regulars' is that is we feel a sense of embarrassment that we probably should know certain people by now but we don't. But strive to not let this stop you growing relationships in our church family. Again—look to take the initiative and be friendly and open to those around you.

## **Taking up the challenge**

Visitors are our honoured guests at mpc, so give them excellent treatment. It's an opportunity to express Christ's love. Jesus said, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away".

Let's work to express the very character of God and don't let this study on welcoming be just talk. Let it be a time when you think seriously about ways you could do better at being welcoming. Let it be a moment when you commit yourself to having a welcoming mindset! The thing is new habits take time to form and it's easier if you have a group to help.

In the group, share 1 or 2 very practical things you could try to do this coming Sunday. In your group commit to have a quick chat when you next meet to ask how each of you are going at it.

## **Prayer**

Praise God for the initiative taking step he took in sending his Son Jesus into the world to die for us. Give thanks to God that he welcomed us into relationship even though we did not deserve it. Pray that individually, we would take real steps to be better at looking out for people, particularly newcomers. Pray for our church, that for the sake of 'growing followers of Jesus', we would really demonstrate a warm welcome to others.