

FAITH WORKS

LIFE & LOVE IN LIGHT OF JESUS



EIGHT STUDIES FROM THE BOOK OF JAMES



INVITE

Inviting others
to follow Jesus
with us



GROW

Growing more
like Jesus



LOVE

Loving with a
servant heart



SEND

Sending and
supporting
ambassadors for
Jesus

FAITH WORKS

LIFE & LOVE IN LIGHT OF JESUS

The letter of James is often thought “too hard”. To a modern reader, James seems to jump around from topic to topic in ways that don’t seem particularly connected. And when it does seem clear what James is saying, he seems to be saying impossible things! The great reformer Martin Luther said James teaches justification by works instead of justification by faith, and went so far as to call it an “epistle of straw”! As a result, many see James as a letter that’s best avoided. But that would be a mistake.

Craig Keener, an expert in bible background, explains how the letter of James actually makes perfect sense in light of the severe famine which afflicted the Roman empire when James wrote (see Acts 11:27-30):

The Roman general Pompey had cut Judean territory and made many Jewish peasants landless; the exorbitant taxes of Herod the Great must have driven more small farmers out of business. In the first century, many peasants worked as tenants on larger, feudal estates (as elsewhere in the empire); others became landless day laborers in the marketplaces, finding work only sporadically (more was available in harvest season). Resentment against aristocratic landlords ran high in many parts of the empire, but nonpayment of promised goods to them was hardly an option; a few landowners even had their own hit squads of hired assassins to deal with uncooperative tenants... When the aristocratic priests began to withhold tithe income from the poorer priests, their only means of support, economic tensions began to climax.

In Rome, grain shortages often led to rioting. Social and economic tensions in Palestine were contained longer but eventually yielded to violence. Pursuing peace with Rome through practical politics, the Jerusalem aristocracy became an object of hatred to Zealots and other elements of resistance... Various outbreaks of violence eventually culminated in a revolt in A.D. 66, followed by a massacre of priests and the Roman garrison on the Temple Mount. Aristocratic and proletarian patriots clashed inside the city as Roman armies surrounded it, and in A.D. 70 Jerusalem fell and its temple was destroyed...

Although the situation most explicitly fits James’s own in Palestine, it also addresses the kinds of social tensions that were spreading throughout the Roman world (1:1). During the Judean war of 66–70, Rome violently discarded three emperors in a single year (A.D. 69), and immediately after the Judean war resistance fighters continued to spread their views to Jews in North Africa and Cyprus....

James addresses the pride of the rich (1:9-11; 2:1-9; 4:13-17), persecution by the rich (2:6-7; 5:6) and pay withheld by the rich (5:4-6). He also addresses those tempted to retaliate with violent acts (2:11; 4:2) or words (1:19-20, 26; 3:1-12; 4:11-12; 5:9). He responds with a call to wisdom (1:5; 3:14-18), faith (1:6-8; 2:14-26) and patient endurance (1:9-11; 5:7-11). Once understood in the context of the situation, his supposedly “disjointed” exhortations all fit together as essential to his argument.

The situation of famine and the resulting social conflict explains why James strings together many of the topics he does. We should be grateful that we’re not experiencing the same kind of famine. But we are living in a time of huge cultural change, a time in which many Christians are tempted to react with anger, much like those James addressed. So what James says to them is incredibly relevant to us.

James says our reaction to hard times must be shaped by our faith in Jesus. Far from being a rejection of gospel faith, as Luther thought, James uses many different phrases to refer to the good news about Jesus - *the one who died for sin is king*. James calls it “the word of truth” (1:18), “the word planted in you” (1:21), “the perfect law that gives freedom” (1:25; 2:12), “the wisdom that comes from heaven” (3:17). And his point over and over again is that if we have faith in Jesus - if we really do have faith, not just claim that we do - then the way we react to hard times will be radically different to the way the world would react. In the gospel, God is not angry at us anymore, but merciful. So those who have faith in Jesus will not be angry with others but merciful. In the gospel, God is not hateful but loving. So those who have faith in Jesus will not be hateful toward others but loving. In the gospel, God is not selfish but generous. So those who have faith in Jesus will not be selfish but generous towards others. In short: **faith works**. And it’s in the hard times that you particularly see the difference that makes.

In the end, what’s “hard” about James may not so much be understanding what he says but doing what he says! Let’s pray that through this series we can help each other actually do what James says together.

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YOU'RE WELCOME

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GROW&GO

YOU'RE WELCOME

INVITING OTHERS TO FOLLOW
JESUS WITH US AT MPC

Mitchelton Presbyterian Church is on mission. We're growing as followers of Jesus so that we can go and grow new followers of Jesus. Our new 'GROW&GO' studies, planned for once a term, are designed to be video and discussion based studies. We want these hands-on 'team training' studies to be grounded in God's Word, as well as geared for everyday living in God's world.

Throughout this training guide there are videos that can be accessed at: mpc.org.au/growandgo or by following the QR code below:



WELCOME EXPERIENCE

1. Think back to the last time you visited another church (or even the first time you came to MPC). What made you feel welcomed? What was unwelcoming?

VIDEO - Part 1

Watch the video, take notes and then discuss the question.

2. How should God's welcome of us shape our welcome of others?

WELCOME MISSION

Church is on a 'welcome' mission – reaching out to those 'outside' (of Christ and His church). We should be an 'open door' to outsiders.

3. Read the following passages. What do they teach us about what God's family should be like, particularly with reference to outsiders?

Hebrews 13:1-2

Acts 28:30-31

1 Peter 4:8-10

1 Corinthians 14:23-25

1 Thessalonians 2:8

James 2:2-4

4. Read the following passages. What reasons does Paul give for serving and befriending others?

Ephesians 5:1-2

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

WELCOME TEAM: WHOSE JOB IS IT?

VIDEO - Part 2

Watch the video, take notes and then discuss the question.

5. How might you (and us) need a mind shift in our attitude and responsibility with respect to welcoming?

INTEGRATING NEWCOMERS INTO THE LIFE OF YOUR CONGREGATION

AUTHOR || GLYN KEARNEY

How do you connect with people when they come to your church? Glyn Kearney from EV Church unpacks problems and solutions for turning new faces into familiar, thriving church members.

Most people would agree that if you don't identify, connect and care for newcomers they are likely to either never return, or to stay on the fringe and eventually drift away feeling disconnected, unwelcomed and perhaps disillusioned. Everyone would agree that this is not the outcome the community of Christ wants for those that Jesus brings to our doors.

If you are not seeing newcomers welcomed and incorporated into your community you need to rethink your approach to newcomers, and reshape your vision for connecting and integrating them into your church life. Here are some of the common problems you may face.

Failing to understand that connection takes time

Welcoming and connection is a journey, not a destination. As newcomers step into your world they will need to be encouraged, nurtured, directed and sometimes pursued so that they are purposefully moved into the life of your church. It is not enough to tick a box that says your newcomer was greeted at the door. The newcomer needs to keep moving forward into the life of your church, and you need to show them the way.

Failing to determine your church type and mission

What type of church are you? Are you a big church or a little church? Do you have a certain demographic feeding your church, or are you multicultural with many layers? Knowing who you are and whom you reach dramatically affects the success of your newcomer strategies.

Failing to adapt to changes in society and culture

As Bob Dylan once said, "the times they are a-changin'". Have you reviewed your strategies against current social trends? Have you thought about how the average person in your community thinks and feels when they walk through your doors? A lack of understanding of the society and culture around you may encourage the newcomer to go elsewhere to find their connection. What changes can you make to become a healthy, welcoming & integrating church? Here are some helpful tips.

Know why you do what you do

This may sound simple, but you'd be surprised how many people do not have a clear mission statement. Before you create strategies and systems you need to make sure everyone understands your mission. Knowing why you do what you do will keep you on the right track.

This is the EV Church mission statement for welcoming, caring and connecting new people. Our aim is:

1. To see newcomers personally and meaningfully welcomed into our church family.
2. To make sure that newcomers are established in Christ and strengthened in their faith.
3. To help newcomers connect into life at EV Church.

Everything we do flows out of a desire to achieve these goals.

We welcome with purpose because we're on a mission to build Christ's kingdom. Our strategies are only a means to achieving our goals and never an end in themselves. We welcome, connect and incorporate people because we love Jesus.

Know your front door, close your back doors, and beware of revolving doors

The front door is a metaphor for your key entry points into church. What do your front doors look like? When newcomers come to church, what will they see, and how will they be received?

You need to be aware of how a person will feel as they come to church for the first time. The reception a newcomer receives will greatly affect their decision to come back. Will they enjoy a warm personal reception, or will they be left feeling confused and indifferent? If their experience entering your church is positive then this will assist you in following them up. To be good at integration you need to think clearly about how it feels for a new person stepping in through your front door.

Once you figure out how your front door works, you need to evaluate if you have any back doors or exit points for newcomers. Back doors are reasons or things that encourage the newcomer not to return. Do they leave because they feel unwelcomed or hurt by the lack of care from Christians who should care greatly? Are people not coming back because no-one noticed they were ever there? Do they not return because they have no idea what to do next, or they felt confused by a lack of information and direction? Have an honest look around and assess why people are not staying. Better still, contact those who didn't return, find out why, and set about closing those 'back doors'. It is really worthwhile following up people who leave as they are more likely to tell you where you went wrong.

A 'revolving door' is the outcome you get when you fail to connect people into the life of your church. Lots of people come to have a look, but they don't settle and they don't stay. Be careful you are not congratulating yourself on how well your church is welcoming people while those same people are slipping out, never to return again.

Know your customers

In the business world the best companies spend large amounts of money and time evaluating their market place. They want to know all about their customers so they can best sell their products.

Do you know who you are welcoming? Do you understand your 'customers' and do your welcoming and incorporating methods serve them? Connecting people of diverse generations and cultures requires different strategies because one size does not fit all. Your target might be Gen Y, Gen X, baby boomers or grey nomads. You might be welcoming a group that is working class, white-collar professionals, self-employed, or unemployed. People in your area might be predominantly one culture or a mixture of many cultures so, before you determine what newcomer strategy you might implement, you'll need to determine what age group and culture you are targeting. You need to know your 'customers' and understand what they need to help them connect into your church.

At EV Church we have five congregations but four of them differ in culture, demographic and age group, so we have developed four similar but different welcoming, follow-up and integration strategies. The question you need to consider is who are you trying to reach, and what do those people need from you? You may have to define your target group using broader terms, and you may require a degree of flexibility in your welcoming systems,

but you need to know your 'customers' and their needs. Your church's health and growth depend on it.

If you want to move people, find a travelator

I love the travelators at the airport. You just step on the moving walkway and, before you know it, you have arrived at another destination. Wouldn't it be great if every newcomer steps on to a travelator at your church &, before they know it, they have moved into the life of your church?

There is an assumption that people don't want to be told what to do, but part of the welcoming process is to give them some idea of what's ahead. There is definitely a difference between ordering someone and informing them.

At our church we use the term 'pathway' to help newcomers see what the next steps are ahead for them. If they need to hear & understand the gospel we guide them in that direction, and if they are ready to move into the life of this church we move them that way. Either way we encourage them to step on the 'pathway' and get moving. All new people receive a copy of the pathway in a welcome pack along with information and goodies to make them feel special on their first visit. At each event a newcomer attends, we like to put the pathway up and show them where they were, where they are, and where they could go next in church life. People like to know they are going somewhere; you just need to give them the right pathway.

Get your newcomers connected

The minute a newcomer arrives at church you need to get the connection process happening. There are a variety of ways to do this, and you will need to determine what works best for your church and your newcomers, but here are some suggestions:

- As soon as you can, invite them to an event that will connect them with regulars and other newcomers. Remember that food and connection go hand in hand.
- If possible, try and connect newcomers with each other. This may seem counter-intuitive, however newcomers can often feel more comfortable with people who are on the same journey as them.
- Make sure that newcomers are able to find out what your church stands for, with things like newcomer information events, well-presented documentation, or easily accessed websites. Have all 3 if possible because newcomers expect to be able to learn about the church, and they find and absorb information in

different ways.

- Communicate with your newcomer in a way that makes them feel like they have been noticed. Whether it's phone calls, letters, emails or SMS, make sure they hear from you within the week after they arrived.
- Assign someone to care for and mentor them. Use a buddy system to help the newcomer make connections and encourage them to go to the upcoming events. Personalized welcoming and connection trumps strategies and systems every time.
- Get them into a small group as soon as possible. This will take time, but make sure it is clear that you want them to be part of your small group network. This is where connection is most likely to occur.
- Teach the welcoming and connection strategies to the whole church. Nothing convinces a newcomer to return more than a genuine welcome from someone who naturally loves newcomers because it is part of their church's DNA.

There are many ways to help connection happen, so think through who you are, who your target is, and get going. Find a way to help newcomers move into the heart of your church and remember that welcoming, connection and integration is a journey, not a destination.

Identify, track and monitor newcomers

It's no good having processes to help a newcomer connect into your church if you can't know when they arrived, where they are now on their journey, and where they are heading. How can you assess if systems are working if you don't keep details on where the newcomer is at? If they leave you need to know why. Were they welcomed, given information, invited to gatherings, cared for and followed-up? You need to keep information but it is important to remember that data alone can be impersonal and detached. It is only a device to assist your goals. We are in the business of people, not statistics.

Plan for the future before it arrives

What will your church look like in a year, two years, ten years? Will you still be using the same systems you always had, or will you update and change with all that is changing around you? It is critical to look ahead and plan for the future, and, where possible, start implementing future strategies earlier rather than later.

We are presently reviewing our whole welcoming and incorporating systems because we have nearly reached the limit of our abilities to personally identify and welcome each and every newcomer that comes through

our doors. We use the term 'water bottle' as a way of describing how we currently welcome people; i.e. we find them and take the 'water bottle' to them. The water bottle system is very dependant on our ability to find the new people so we are planning to implement a 'waterhole' model which is more of an opt-in welcoming system where people choose to be welcomed (i.e. they take themselves to the waterhole).

This is a big change for us but we have looked ahead and realised that our current system won't cope, so we are planning for the future before it arrives.

Are we there yet?

When my children were younger and I was travelling with them on holidays, they would always be chanting from the back seat, "Are we there yet, are we there yet?" At the time it was pretty annoying, but this is exactly the same question you should be asking yourselves, & the answer should always be the same as I told my kids: not yet, not yet.

Are your follow-up and integration systems there yet? Is your church community fully built up in Christ yet? The answer will always be 'no, not yet', and we need to be developing and updating our welcoming and incorporating systems until we are welcomed into heaven ourselves.

I just wonder whether you get a welcome pack in heaven?

**Article from The Briefing, September 2010, Issue #384*

7 WAYS TO BECOME A WELCOMING CHURCH

NICK BALZIG

In his important book, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, Jack Miller recounted an experience he had at a church in which he had been invited to speak. As he and his wife walked around and met people in the church, they continually heard the members saying things like, "We're one of the friendliest churches in the community," and "we are a very friendly church." Sensing that something was not right (since he had been told that the attendance of this church had shrunk considerably over the past several years), Miller began asking individuals and officers in the church what was really going on. What he discovered was that the congregants were friendly - to one another in a cliquish way - but that the congregation had started relying on the pastor to do all of the welcoming of visitors. No one was inviting visitors into their homes for meals or seeking to help integrate them into the life of the church. By God's grace, both pastor and congregation repented of having lost sight of the Great Commission and the role of the local church in the world. Sadly, this story is all too familiar with many churches in North America in our day. In fact, many churches that grow do so through leveraging an appearance of health through staffing, structures and programs. So what can be done to foster a spiritual friendliness and a welcoming culture in our churches? Here are 6 things that we should labour to implement into our churches:

1. Regularly pray for a set number of new families and individuals.

During the first five years of church planting we repeatedly prayed for 10 new families every year. When the Lord answered this prayer, we would start praying for 10 more. As we have grown, this practice has declined. This should be an ongoing practice. It should be done from the pulpit, in small groups and bible studies. This will help to stir the congregation up to be thinking about being intentional about reaching out and welcoming visitors. Additionally, it will be a great encouragement to a congregation to see how the Lord answers prayers in bringing these families and individuals to the church. This shows commitment to the Great Commission, to our sincere desire to see God's Kingdom come and it shows dependence on the Lord for growth. In addition to doing this at all gathered meetings, congregants should be encouraged to do the same thing in their homes during times of family worship and prayer.

2. Intentionally sit by someone that you don't know.

This is probably the least utilized and yet most strategic step that can be taken to become a welcoming church. It is easy to sit by someone you don't know when you attend a church of 40 to 50 people. This dynamic changes quickly at the 100 + person mark. Also, we are creatures of habit and naturally do not like change. We habitually like to eat the same kinds of food that we enjoy and we like to sit in the same seat in classrooms and in the worship service. If congregants would intentionally look for someone that they do not know well, and sit by them in order to talk with them after the service, the church would automatically take the right steps toward becoming a welcoming church. As Colin Marshall has helpfully suggested, when you meet a visiting family before the service "sit with them and help them feel comfortable in this strange place by introducing ourselves and explaining what is going on." Assist them if they look unfamiliar with the order of service and what song/hymn book to use. Marshall further unpacks this when he says, "Keep attending to newcomers' needs. If they can't find their way around the Bible or the service outline, or they don't have a Bible ...help them yourself. It is your meeting, not the minister's. It's all about being observant and outward-looking."

3. Go out of your way to talk with someone you have not yet met.

This can seem awkward--especially for introverts--if you are not in the practice of doing it, but it gets easier and more comfortable with practice. There are times when people in a church have not met someone who has been coming for many months. Obviously you would not want to go up to them and say, "Is this your first time here?" Rather, introduce yourself and say something like, "Hi, I don't think I've met you all yet. My name is ____." After they introduce themselves to you, ask them how long they've been coming to the church. Then ask them about themselves--how long have they lived in the area, where they work, where they are from originally, etc. I have been told that these sorts of questions are things only Americans ask, but they help break the awkwardness of meeting someone new and they open the door for you to get to know others. Also, remember to be transparent about your own life if they ask questions in return.

4. When you meet a visitor, introduce them to others in the congregation who may have common interests.

This takes some thoughtful effort, but it is immensely important. Having done the work of breaking the ice, intentionally think about connecting visitors to others in the congregation. If you find out that a visiting family or individual is from a certain city--far from where the church is--and you know that others are from the same city, bring them together so that they have a feeling of commonality with someone. This can also be done with occupations. If you meet someone who works at a certain company and you know that someone else in the congregation works there, ask them if they have met that person. If they haven't, this is a perfect opportunity to connect them with someone in the congregation that they may see semi-regularly outside of worship. If the visitor you meet works in health care introduce them to others in the congregation who are nurses, doctors, etc. If they are musicians, introduce them to other musicians. If they homeschool, introduce them to other mothers who are involved in the homeschooling community. If they have children who attend a public school, try to introduce them to families in the congregation who have children who attend the same school. Seek to introduce visitors to others in the congregation who may be at a similar stage of life (i.e. singles, young families with children of similar age, retirees, etc.).

5. Allow the Visitor Greeting Team to do its work.

It is all too common for members to get caught up in conversation with the men and women who serve on the visitor greeting team. This is natural since they are the first people that you see when you walk in the church building. But they are there to identify and assist visitors and to get their contact information. The visitor greeting team needs to be alert to new families that are coming for the first or second time. They should be free to focus on these families and individuals. They need to be free to take a family to places in the church like the nursery or children's Sunday school classes. If the members of the church are standing by them and talking to them they may be inadvertently keeping them from being most effective in welcoming visitors.

6. Be prepared to invite a visiting family or individual to your home for lunch.

While it is impractical to have visitors over for lunch every Sunday, get in the practice of having a meal ready for guests on a somewhat regular basis. Then, seek out visitors after the service. You will find that almost anyone visiting will jump at the invitation to come to your home for lunch. If no one is visiting on that particular Sunday, and you have a meal prepared for you and another family, invite a family in the church over. This fosters a spirit of outward focused hospitality and congregational fellowship. This is a win-win.

7. Make Use of Social Media.

It takes two seconds to ask someone if they are on Facebook. Finding a visitor on Facebook and adding them is a expedient way to make them feel cared about and to help integrate them into the life of the church.

STUDY 1

FAITH WORKS IN THE HARD TIMES

JAMES 1:1-18

Have hard times ever made you doubt the goodness of God? What about the direction our culture seems to be moving? As James, the first leader of the church in Jerusalem, writes to Christians throughout the world, particularly Jewish ones, most of his audience are suffering and their culture is headed for disaster. A severe famine has hit the entire Roman empire, hitting Judea even harder than most other places (see Acts 11:27-30). Poor farmers can't pay their rent. Rich landowners are often vicious in their response. Tensions escalate between rich and poor, establishment and rebels, climaxing just a few years after James writes in a violent revolt against Roman occupation. This is the revolt that ends in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. If God is good, how could he let all this happen? Can he still be trusted in such times? Let's see what James has to say...

5. What's the ultimate display of God's character in v18? Why is this the ultimate display?

WISDOM IN TRIALS

James doesn't pretend the bad times aren't bad. They are. But he says there's a good purpose for the bad times: they give us a chance to show that our trust in God is genuine and lasting (v2-4), which is what we need to receive eternal life (v12). If we have trouble seeing this good purpose for the bad times, we can always ask God himself for wisdom (v5). We just need to be sure that's what we really want, instead of just wanting the bad times removed (v6-8). Part of this wisdom will be remembering that God is consistently good - past, present and future - a fact proven in the way he saved us through Jesus: "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth" (v18). That shows what he's like toward us, always, even in the worst times.

6. When you're doing it tough financially, how can you know God's still good to you? (v9, 18)

7. When you're going well financially, what should be most important to you? (v10-11, 18)

8. What kind of trials have made you doubt God's goodness to you?

9. If you had to go through similar trials again, how could you get through them still trusting in God?

Pray for each other, for wisdom to understand the good purpose of your trials, and that you'd persevere in trusting God. Through the rest of the series we'll see that our faith has profound implications for how we relate to other people... which means our faith needs to be solid first!