

VESTRY PAPERS

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empowering congregations

To inspire, affirm and inform Episcopal leaders in their work

From icy roads to full membership

by Peggy Barnes

It is not a good day to visit Christ Episcopal Church in downtown Dayton, Ohio. Frigid wind whipsaws around my suburban home. Forecast: more snow, slippery roads. I am sixty-nine years old, the sort of parishioner you'd expect to stay home or simply drive down the street to my familiar pew. Instead, I scrape ice off my windshield and head for the highway. Some journeys won't wait.

Outside the grand, steepled church a few of us huddle together, passing a sign that reads: *We welcome questioning hearts.* That's what I'd heard. That's why I came. I had amassed a library of soulful theology books that never quite satisfied my gnawing, grumbling mind.

An instant welcome comes from the warm vestibule and the smell of pine branches. To the greeter I babble on about how many

local churches, Episcopal and other denominations, I've attended in thirty years. She attaches a name tag. Unlike some, I don't object to this claim ticket. At least for an hour or so, I want to be noticed. Underneath the bulky layers of clothes is a heart stretching out.

In the nave, I recognize no one. Who is included here? Deaf men and women sing hymns along with the signer. A mother patiently strokes the hair of her handicapped adult child. Over the bittersweet sound of a bugle, the lector prays for those who recently died in Iraq and Afghanistan. An usher riding an electric wheelchair passes the collection plate.

We are a varied group, we who have chosen to be in this place. Most importantly, the

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This Issue:
Welcoming Newcomers

Sharing the Good News. Opening our church doors wider. Inviting others to be part of what gives us joy and life. Such hospitality is not a burden, but the essential nature of who we are called to be as Christians. Here, writers examine the dynamics of walking in the "red doors" for the first time and how to best incorporate newcomers into the faith.

Inside:
Things best left unsaid



Cathy Carpenter



Thank you to the Diocese of Southern Ohio and to its talented writers and congregations, two of which are featured in this month's issue. Thanks also to Richelle Thompson, director of communications, who answered a call for help when casting the net for parishes with a story to tell.

On the cover:
All Saints',
Millington, New Jersey

Amp up your hospitality

by Kathy Copas

Think about it. When you visit a parish, how long does it take for you to begin to get a feeling for what the place is really like? Likely, it will be mere moments. So when a guest (note the terminology — “guest” and not “visitor”) comes to your church, one of your first challenges is to help manage first impressions. Here are a few basic ideas to amp up your parish hospitality.

Ask some acquaintances from other churches to pay a visit and give you some objective feedback. What IS the first impression your congregation is conveying to your guests right now? Listen carefully.



Susan Richardson

Consider your theology of welcome and hospitality. Besides “love one another,” the clearest imperative of the Gospel is to offer hospitality and meet people where they are. At the Eucharistic table, we set out our finest linens and silver to honor the living Christ in our midst. Shouldn't we extend just a bit of that same sense of aesthetics and care to our cluttered narthex or dirty parish hall?

What simple low or no-cost changes can you make to reflect your theology of hospitality?

Evaluate your first contacts. Listen to your church answering machine and evaluate how it may become a better tool for capturing the real spirit and personality of your parish. Remember — there is no “rule” that recorded messages must be done by clergy or the church secretary. Who has the best voice in your congregation to extend a warm and friendly voice message greeting? Enlist some acquaintances to make a phone call to the church office, to get a sense of how your church secretary, office volunteers, and clergy are doing with inquiry calls. Get some objective feedback on your website, too. How easy do you make it for someone to find your church and make a visit?

Devote a portion of an upcoming vestry meeting to an actual walking or driving tour of the immediate four-block area surrounding your church. View your neighborhood and your exterior building and grounds from the perspective of someone who has never seen it all before. How easy is it — REALLY — for guests to find your church? What could you do with some simple directional signage or Sunday morning volunteers to make it easier? Is it abundantly clear where to park, which door to use?

Appoint someone or some group to a “ministry of first impressions.” You can have the most exciting and creative ministry in the world going on inside of your buildings and a vibrant personality as a parish family. Yet if the exterior of your property doesn't reflect all of that, you are delivering a mixed message to potential guests! One good first goal — particularly if you are in an older church building in an aging neighborhood and are feeling increasingly invisible — is to work to make the exterior of your building look different enough each week that passersby will turn their head and look. Example: If you want to non-verbally communicate that you are a child-friendly church, put children's artwork on a clothesline stretched across the church lawn. Use balloons, kites, banners, and streamers regularly. These are very low-cost ways to highlight your buildings and grounds

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From icy roads to full membership

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priest says Christ is here. Not just on Sunday. This is Dayton's only inner-city church that remains open during the week. Through these doors, Christ, bearing a hundred different names, comes to attend AA and Alanon meetings, and to be fed and comforted by the staff and volunteers of City Heart, the church's social outreach program.

During the passing of the peace, I hear, "Isn't our priest amazing? You can get a copy of the sermon in the foyer." There is excitement about an upcoming class, "Who is My Neighbor?" taught by a well-known New Testament scholar. I learn that many

the journey? Archbishop Rowan Williams says a hospitable church should use each person's "experience, mistakes and false starts — in order to let Christ's transfiguring love show through."

After only one visit to this inner-city church, I realized that purpose, genuine and Christ-worthy, is what I had urgently hoped the new year would bring.

Soon, I would again be a newcomer — my first day volunteering at City Heart. Once again, the weather will be freezing, but the journey will seem not so long. A homeless

For a first-timer, coffee hour can be a lonely business. But there, waving me over, is the woman who promised to save me a seat.



parishioners have traveled even farther than I. In one way or another, they all say, "It's worth the drive."

For a first-timer, coffee hour can be a lonely business. But there, waving me over, is the woman who promised to save me a seat. When she learns I'm a retired social worker, she introduces me to the director of City Heart and makes sure my contact information gets to the Hospitality desk. A visit from the priest will soon follow.

Hospitality, it seems to me, starts with an open door, a smile. It is grounded in someone taking the time to discover the gritty, more complicated thing — who exactly is this stranger and why did she make

man will guide me through the red doors. "Come on in!" he will say, "This is a great place. They take care of you here!"

Yes, my friend, they do indeed.

A new vestry member at Christ Church, Dayton, Ohio, Peggy Barnes is also a member of the church's Growth Commission and leads both the Sermon Discussion Group and the Brown Bagger's Book Club. She earned her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (Bennington College) at age 63 and is a recipient of The Catholic Press Award for Best Fiction of the Year. Peggy is currently working on a memoir: Pauline and Me: A Daughter's Story of Desertion and Redemption.



Some of the submissions we receive are printed on our website. To find out more about the ministry of hospitality through the eyes of Elizabeth Grover, membership coordinator for the Church of the Redeemer in Cincinnati, Ohio, go to: www.episcopal.foundation.org and click on the Vestry Papers link.



Resources abound for the ministry of evangelism and hospitality. For an awe-inspiring list of such tools, go to www.churchtoolbox.org

Amp up your hospitality

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and can even be used to frame and define space when you have multiple buildings and parking lots.

Take the McDonald's or Wal-Mart challenge. Have each vestry member casually ask one person at a local fast food place, gas station, or Wal-Mart a couple of questions prior to the next vestry meeting: "Do you know where xyz church is?" and "So, do you know happen to know anything about that church?" The answers you get will give you a quick, insightful portrait of who in the community knows where you are located and what/how they know about you.

Identify and covenant as a congregation to modify habits that are less-than-helpful to welcoming your guests. Some of these behaviors may include non-verbally discouraging guests from sitting in "my" pew, speaking to friends while ignoring guests, and complaining about insignificant things within earshot of those visiting. Developing a strategy of covenant and holding each other accountable for our Sunday morning behaviors is important.

Develop distinct roles/job descriptions for your greeters and ushers. One possible model — greeters begin in the parking lot or

on the sidewalk, seeing to the immediate comfort and needs of your guests. This may mean offering an umbrella if it is raining, helping them get a wheelchair or stroller out of their car, pointing them to the drinking fountains and restrooms, and introducing them to an usher, who then takes on the role of helping them navigate the worship service, introducing them to clergy and others, and seeing they get escorted to coffee hour or church school.

Put together a congregation plan for tracking and assimilating guests into the life of your congregation. Good assimilation begins sixty seconds after worship ends and intentionally extends at least six months out. Congregations that do assimilation well have a shared value that this is everyone's job and ministry — not just the clergy's.

Kathy Copas is Coordinator and Communication and Evangelism for the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis. A former vestry member at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in New Albany, Indiana, she "joined the church with such zeal" at age twenty-four that she was baptized and confirmed on Sunday and appointed to fill out a vestry term the very next day.

*Inviting guests to join the sacred circle of parish life is an effort that is worth practicing, as is learning what kind of things might turn visitors away. We admit to having a little fun at **Vestry Papers** in this regard; you might also enjoy developing your own list of things not to say.*

Things best left unsaid...

- Welcome to our church! Here's a pledge card!
- Have you ever served on a vestry? We've got LOTS of openings.
- You'd like to use the restroom? Hey, Joe, show these people to the john, would you? We meant to put up signs but never got around to it.
- Oh, the nursery? Go through the back door, down the stairs, and around the corner.. it's a little dark but don't worry. If little Tessie cries too much, she'll do better next time...

Living Hospitality

by Judith Doran

Dr. Alan Watton was ninety years old when he started coming to church, via a ride from our hospitality chairs (a husband and wife team). After the first service, he stopped on his way out and asked if I made home visits. Of course I did, and that was the beginning of a wonderful relationship in which I was honored to introduce him to Christ and the Episcopal church. At the same time our congregation was wrestling with moving the communion table and kneelers — a sensitive issue — Alan's health began to fail. In order to get to the communion rail at our church, you have to travel up a few stairs and then across the chancel to get to the altar rail. Alan had to use a walker and was on oxygen, yet every Sunday he insisted on being helped up to the rail. Sometimes it was such a struggle for him that he had to be assisted by a person under each arm. Sometimes he would get to the rail and declare, "I made it!" Alan never spoke a word about the issue, but his weekly efforts spoke more eloquently and convincingly than any sermon. Alan's gift to us was a living example of why we needed to become more hospitable and inclusive. We did complete the sanctuary renovations. Sadly, by the time they were done, Alan was too ill to come to church. Within a few weeks of returning to the sanctuary, he died.



I am sure he no longer struggles to receive communion. And sometimes when someone who is in a walker or wheelchair comes forward with the rest of us, I still glimpse Alan's earnest face and outstretched hands.

The Rev. Judith Doran is assistant to the rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Dayton, Ohio.



Churches grow when follow up with newcomers is deliberate and consistent. Growing congregations use these tools (listed in order of popularity): mail, phone, sending materials to visitors, personal visits, and email.¹

- Service times on a sign? You don't KNOW the times?
- It's been a long time since we've had a young family like you. You look strong.
- Website. **Really.** That's pretty complicated.
- If you'd take that pew over there, we'd appreciate it. The one you're sitting in now belongs to the Smiths.
- You're new? Oh — well, here's a service leaflet, and an insert for the readings...and a prayer book and a hymnal and the new supplemental music book — and, oh, don't forget your name tag!
- Oh, thank God, fresh blood.
- Unlock the front doors? Why would we do that? Everyone knows to come in the back.



Events to attract community members seem to build numbers, and most Episcopal congregations offer them. Those that do not do so are more likely to experience a decline in worship attendance.²

^{1,2} *Episcopal Congregations Overview: Findings from the 2008 Faith Communities Today Survey, Kirk Hadaway*

¡Hola! A warm welcome in Spanish

by Daniel Vélez Rivera

Hispanics are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States, yet Episcopal churches in America, regardless of their geographic location, are not typically equipped to provide worship services and pastoral care to Latino immigrants in their midst. Why do Latinos arrive to our doorsteps? What do they find? Why do they stay? What makes Latinos feel welcome in the Episcopal Church?

When a Latina/o person walks by the church and sees a sign that reads, “Misa en español” (Mass in Spanish) they might be curious and

Bilingual, bicultural clergy are key

Your church might already provide social ministries in the community so the newcomer might be familiar with the Episcopal Church, but not as a house of worship. In order to provide worship services and pastoral care to Latinos it is crucial to have a bilingual, bicultural priest or deacon with evangelistic and entrepreneurial skills who is willing to be the Latino face of the Episcopal Church in your community. If there is a bilingual/bicultural clergy person who is part of the social outreach ministries to Latino



Daniel Vélez Rivera with the “Ruth and Naomi” women’s ministry group at a workshop held at VOCES, a service center for immigrants in Salem, Massachusetts.

walk inside. When greeted in Spanish and hearing familiar hymnody with beats and rhythms that call them as well as receiving the Word of God spoken through Latino lips, they might return and bring friends and relatives.

Coffee hour? What’s that? An opportunity to meet that neighbor you have seen in the bodega (corner market), at the waiting room of “la clínica” (neighborhood health center), or at the barber shop and discovering more about each other while sipping on coffee and sharing some food. You may wonder what happens if you do not speak Spanish — how can you welcome Latinos into your congregation?

neighbors, you have already taken the first steps to reach out and welcome those who can form part of the first Spanish-language worship community in your church.

Who is likely to respond to your welcome? A disenfranchised Roman-Catholic, a divorced person or couple, single moms, young parents, children and teens, middle aged abuelas/os, tías and tíos (grandparents, aunts and uncles) — an extended family hungry for God. What does the newcomer look for? The Latino church-seeker wants to pass on their spiritual and moral values which they received back home. Faith is the rock of survival for many immigrants and the

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Episcopal Church can be the fountain that sustains and nourishes that faith.

I invite you to envision welcoming the Latino newcomer beyond a greeting at the food pantry or watching the after-school children working and playing in the parish hall. With prayer and honest discernment

Faith is the rock of survival for many immigrants and the Episcopal Church can be the fountain that sustains and nourishes that faith.

the Spirit will guide you through the never-ending reciprocal and transformative process of recognizing, understanding, and appreciating differences that lead to a multicultural, multilingual congregation. Be prepared for change because sustainable ethnic ministries take root in Episcopal Churches where power and privilege is shared by all.

Changing structures and worship

In addition to the signs that invite people to the church in English or Spanish you can explore having bilingual vestry meetings, hiring bilingual and bicultural administrative staff and clergy, and offering three or four weekly worship services in English, Spanish, and occasionally in both languages. A true welcome means that you will be vulnerable and a bit uncomfortable by changing the ways that you understand what it means to practice your faith and respond through your actions as an Episcopalian.

Do you still want “them” to be part of your Episcopal Church? Open the doors of your hearts beyond the red doors of the church. The gifts of the spirit will be revealed as you become true friends, true brothers and sisters in Christ, and as everyone loses the fear that oftentimes prevents us from taking the risk of becoming one in Christ.

The Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera is an Episcopal Church Foundation Fellow and a priest at St. Peter's/San Pedro Episcopal Church in Salem, Massachusetts, where he launched a Hispanic ministry. His call to the ordained ministry began at the age of six or seven and he “finally said YES to God at the age of forty” after working in the fields of mechanical engineering and telecommunications technology.



“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” writes the author to the Hebrews, “for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing.” (Hebrews 13:2)

Resources

Visit the Hispanic Ministries website:
www.episcopalchurch.org/hispanic.htm

Consider reading the The Episcopal Church's Strategic Vision for Reaching Latinos/Hispanics:
www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/Strategic_Vision_English.pdf

And feel free to contact
The Rev. Canon Anthony Guillén,
Program Officer for Latino Hispanic
Ministries of the Episcopal Church:
aguillen@episcopalchurch.org



Next issue:
Capital campaigns



ECF's Mission

To strengthen the leadership and financial capabilities of Episcopal congregations, dioceses and related organizations to pursue their mission and ministry.



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Subscriptions

\$40 annually. Mailed in packages of 15 copies per issue. \$30 annually for electronic version. Published in January, March, May, July, September and November.

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815 Second Avenue

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www.EpiscopalFoundation.org

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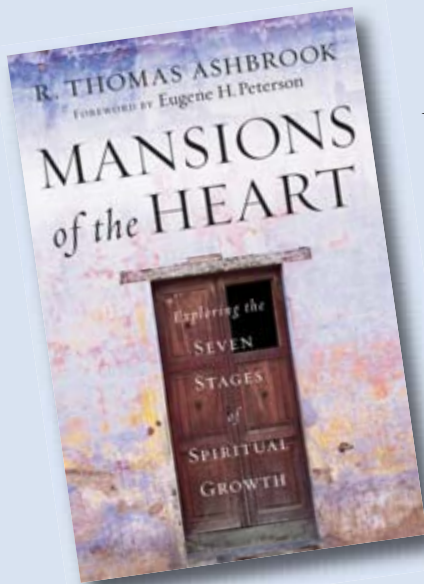
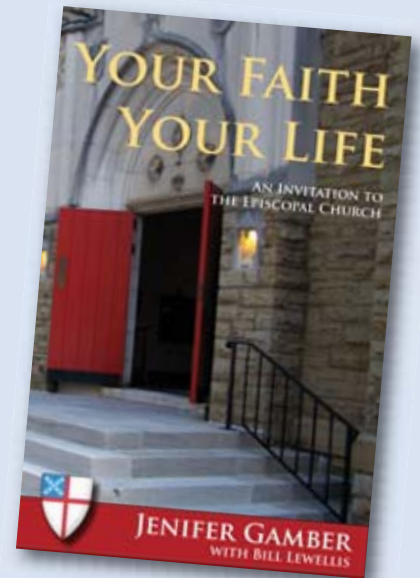
Your Faith, Your Life

An Invitation to the Episcopal Church

by Jenifer Gamber with Bill Lewellis

Handy for newcomers, adult formation groups and lifelong Episcopalians, this book provides a strong framework to better explore, experience, and share the meaning and practice of faith, Episcopalian-style. An easy-to-navigate layout encourages readers, and the section on the Bible and church history is particularly helpful.

Morehouse Publishing
www.churchpublishing.org



Mansions of the Heart

Exploring the Seven Stages of Spiritual Growth

by R. Thomas Ashbrook

The first chapter of this book entices the reader as the author recounts meeting a monk in a chicken coop while searching for God. Later chapters, based on Teresa of Avila's Seven Mansions, continue to intrigue the reader with a combination of practical and academic work. This book isn't for beginners. But it is for anyone who wishes to draw closer to God, using emotion and intellect, theology and faith.

Wiley
www.wiley.com

Tips for Vestry Members

by Lindsay Hardin Freeman

A new addition to Forward Movement's TIPS Series. This brief overview of vestry responsibilities offers practical advice tempered with accumulated wisdom, and is useful for those currently on a vestry and those considering this important ministry. Explore the whole TIPS series, including tips for chalice bearers, healing ministers, acolytes, ushers and more. A good investment for 25 cents each.

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www.forwardmovement.org

