



THE SEARCH FOR A CHURCH

By Kathryn Houston

I recently started my search for a new church. It was daunting. I posted about my experience to an ELCA Facebook group and got over 300 responses. It appears the search for a church is an issue for many folks.

As an ELCA pastor, for much of my life I've done the welcoming. I've visited congregations of all sizes, ages and settings. All had this in common: they believed they were friendly. Some were, some not so much.

After I retired, I moved to a new state. I'd forgotten how unsettling it can be to walk into an unfamiliar church for the first time as a visitor. Jesus was big on welcoming the stranger. Sometimes that stranger is the person in the narthex who is looking bewildered. When I moved, I became that person. Perhaps my experiences will help your

congregation live up to its perception of itself as a friendly community.

I started my search for a church during Advent. I learned from a website that one close to me was offering a service that sounded especially appealing. I arrived for the dinner before the service just as the servers were closing down the line. Though the information was available, I had misunderstood the schedule, thinking the order would be dinner, service, home. That's how all the other churches I attended did things. I was the last person served and sat with two couples just finishing their meals. There I learned that dinner is served until 6 because the pastor teaches a class between dinner and the service. Ah.

One couple apologized, saying they needed to get to the class but assuring me I'd be welcome to join them when I finished my

dinner. The other couple kept me company while I ate, then grabbed their coats and left me alone in a large fellowship space. Not wanting to sit alone for a half hour but really wanting to attend the service, I went to find the class. The couple had told me, "Can't miss it. Just down those stairs. Come on down. We'd be happy to have you join us." OK, that sounded good.

I followed their instructions and walked into what I presume was a 12-step meeting. Oops. When I did find the class, sitting in a circle, there were no chairs available and no way to sneak in unobserved. A woman got up, announced that she had to leave for choir rehearsal and told me to take her seat. "Conspicuous" comes close to describing that moment.

My first Sunday I went to the early service and followed the crowd to the coffeepots. I sat at a table with several couples who, to their credit, included this stranger in their conversation. They seemed genuinely curious about how I came to be there that morning.

The next week I attended the late service and sat next to a woman who looked about my age. She scooted over and indicated I should join her. She chatted with me before and after the service and the following Sunday told me she was hoping I'd come back. When she spots me now, she makes it a point to introduce me to one or two other people. She gets hospitality to strangers.

Hospitality is about spotters and scooters. Spotters are those wonderful people who look out for people they don't know and make a point of introducing themselves. Scooters are the equally helpful souls who see a stranger approaching them and move over to invite the new person to join them.

On my first visit to another church, a woman greeted me with a bear hug. Perhaps she mistook me for someone she knows, or maybe she greets everyone that way. Even I, an extrovert, found that a bit much. If I were an introvert, I probably would have retreated to my car.

Church folks believe they're friendly, and they often are toward those they already know. I've come up with a checklist to help congregations extend appropriate hospitality toward the people they don't know.

1. **Good signage throughout the building is important.** Visit a church building you've never been in and see how easy or difficult it is to find your way around.
2. **Make worship times, location and church contact information the first thing web visitors see.** Include links to

staff and programs. Ditto for Facebook information. Make it easy to find the names, include a brief bio for each staff member and provide a way to get more information. Visit other church websites for good and not-so-good examples.

3. **Train spotters to take turns looking for folks they don't recognize.** Should the unrecognized person be new, the spotter can accompany them to the fellowship time. Nothing says "I don't belong here" like standing alone with a cup of coffee in a room full of people chatting with each other.
4. **Presch and teach once in a while about our collective calling to welcome the stranger.** We're taught as toddlers to be leery of strangers, so it takes intentional effort to counter that message with tips for how to relate to new people appropriately. Sometimes strangers are angels traveling incognito. These days churches need good security measures, but we also must encourage people to socialize. That's the only way to turn a stranger into a new friend.
5. **Don't point out visitors by making them stand.** A generic "We're glad you're here" is good, but too much unsolicited attention can be threatening. A visitor gift is a nice touch, but people actually talking with guests makes a bigger impression.
6. **Ask open-ended questions but don't pry.** We have no way of knowing how this new person mustered the courage to enter the building. Saying things such as "Hi, my name is . . ." "I don't think I've had a chance to meet you" or "Can I answer any questions for you?" invites conversation without pressuring someone to disclose more than they would like.

The current decline in church attendance and membership is real. Equally real is our universal need to belong to communities that accept us as we are, pray for us, embrace us when we grieve and rejoice with us when we celebrate. Such communities welcome that new person who stands at the door, debating whether to enter.

"I was a stranger and you invited me in," Jesus tells his disciples (Matthew 25:35, NIV). Who among us doesn't know what it's like to be the stranger? Let us also be part of the inviting. †