

MAKING A MEAL OF WELCOMING NEWCOMERS

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Next Sunday we shall have a newcomers reception after the morning service. While the rest of the congregation are having just tea, coffee or squash and nothing more, those of us at the newcomers reception will also be eating sausage rolls and cheese straws, together with all manner of wonderful cakes.

As a church we are blessed with a good number of visitors. Indeed, there is hardly a service when we have not at least one visitor. Some of these visitors do not return (it would make for a very interesting and no doubt informative research project to find out why people do not find our services attractive), but many others do. I believe that one of the appealing factors of our church is that we are a warm and friendly fellowship. Although I can't pretend that everybody is outward-looking, nonetheless many of my people do a splendid job in welcoming newcomers. Indeed, thanks to the fact that along with myself the leader of our pastoral team is always stationed at the one and only entrance into our church, nobody can get either in or out of the church without receiving a welcome

At the same time as extending a welcome, we encourage our visitors to fill in a card, giving details of not only their assessment of us ('This is what I first noticed' and 'This is what I liked best'), but also their name, address, telephone number and e-mail address. This enables us to send flowers after the service, saying how pleased we were that they chose to worship with us that day. It also enables me to visit them - although generally speaking I won't visit them until they have attended church at least twice.

The cards also enable us to invite the visitors concerned to a newcomers reception, which we host once or twice a term. These receptions are attended not just by the newcomers themselves, but also by deacons and by members of the pastoral team. After ten or fifteen minutes of general socialising, I call the meeting to order, introducing not simply myself, but also everybody else present (it does mean that I have to remember everybody's name - including the names of the children!). I talk a little bit about the church in general, and then ask different people to speak about various activities in the church - for example, the leader of our nurture team will speak about our small groups, one of our youth leaders will speak about activities for young people. Then its back to general chat again.

These newcomers receptions make for a long morning. I know that other churches do something on a Saturday morning or a Sunday afternoon. However, in our experience, these attract fewer people: perhaps it is because we are a commuter town, but many people are just too busy to come out on a separate occasion.

For us, 'Newcomers' Receptions' are a vital tool to integrating new people into the church.