

Friendly Churches – A Practical Matter

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I read a whole lot over the years on all kinds of subjects related to churches and church life. Some of what I have read I have found helpful, and other material I have found to be of little value. What delights me most is when I find an article along “practical” lines—in other words, it contains insights that translate easily into the life of the church and make a difference.

In our Small Church Clarity sessions and in meeting with Church Councils I will often touch on what I call the “friendliness” factor. We all like to think of our churches as “friendly” churches and we want our church to be perceived as a “friendly” church. Much has been written on this subject. I often mention a study I read years ago which sought to answer, based on polling of church visitors, as to what factors caused them to think of a church as “friendly” as opposed to being an “unfriendly” church. Since friendliness seems to be a big factor as to whether or not an individual or a family will return to a church they are visiting, I consider this a pretty important thing, and the study caught my attention. The study resulted in one particular insight which I have found helpful—and it can be stated in terms of an equation:

FRIENDLINESS = the NUMBER of people who acknowledge me and greet me warmly.

In other words, it’s not a matter of one or two people “charged the task” of greeting me, or one or two people magnificently trained to do a bang-up job of greeting me if I’m visiting a church. It’s the sheer NUMBER of people who say hello to me. I found this fascinating since so many training manuals stressed the quality of the greeting versus the quantity of the greetings. According to the survey and accompanying article, it’s better if 25 people come up to me and say “hello, got to go, but hope you return!” than an official greeter spending an hour with me. This suggests an approach wherein friendliness is part of the culture of the place and everyone, not just a specific “team” or set group of greeters, take on the task of making the place a friendly place. In other words, it’s great to have greeters—but it is incumbent upon EVERYONE to take responsibility of making their church a friendly place, staying on the lookout for visitors, and then taking just a moment to say hello. This sounds easy-- but it’s not. We want our churches to be friendly places, and we ARE, in many cases, friendly—with each other! We are so glad to see one another and catch up with one another and find out what’s going on in the life of each other, that it’s all too easy to overlook the new person entering the room or coming up the stairs or off the elevator. Such a mindset, and making this a distinguishing mark of a church’s culture, takes constant reminding and constant cultivation.

Years ago I ran a support group for grieving people. It grew large, and people came week after week. I trained facilitators for small groups. We’d have up to fifteen small groups in a given evening. We had a table set up near the door to officially greet new comers—and our team was exceptionally well trained. We’d always start out the evening as a large group and did a brief Gospel centered bible discussion, prepared in such a way

that people with even no religious background would be comfortable. As people came week after week, they got to know each other and were glad to see each other. The pre-session and opening session got rather loud and the room filled with laughter each week as we gathered. But I noticed that fewer newcomers would return the week after their initial visit.

I came to the realization that people with breaking hearts, at the end of their rope, would come through the door and find a bunch of people laughing and thoroughly invested in each other. The focus on the newcomer which had characterized the group when first formed had become a thing of the past. In a way, were the victims of our own success. Through our efforts we had become a group, a very friendly group! We loved and supported each other. What I told our regular attendees at a special meeting called was that “the day we failed to see the tears in the eyes of the person coming through the door for the first time is the day we should call it quits.” The room fell silent and things got better after that because they understood what I was saying. Christian author Thomas Rainer has assembled data on what makes for “Genuinely Friendly Churches.”

A GENUINELY FRIENDLY CHURCH (GFC) exhibits the following characteristics:

-THEY ARE INTENTIONAL about being friendly...recognizing that all organizations drift toward an inward focus unless they are INTENTIONAL about being friendly toward outsiders.

-THE LEADERS in that church model warmth, humility, and concern for the newcomer.

--A SECRET GUEST is employed once a year to come to the church and give feedback on their experience (an interesting concept, don't you think?)

--A GFC has a “guest friendly” web site, since this is the first place an inquirer will go in our day and age

--GFCs still have a well-organized “Greeter's Ministry,” strategically placed (Parking lot, all points of entry)...but this is not relied upon, since “friendliness” is the responsibility of all

--GFCs have clean and neat buildings, since this reflects on the care and concern of members

--They have a FEEDBACK process...in other words, they follow up on guests and encourage them to be open and frank in their feedback

--Areas dedicated to children are clean, sanitary, and well equipped

--The majority of church members in GFCs are **involved in the community**. *“They thus exude genuine friendliness in and around worship services because they are regularly connecting with non-churched people at other times during the week.”*

Author Thomas Rainer makes the claim in his article that “a genuinely friendly church” has a guest return rate of six times greater than other churches. I can’t verify this, but I’m not surprised.

I once had a successful businessman tell me “Success is a matter of not one big thing but in doing a lot of little things right.” I’ve never forgotten that comment, and personally, I believe it to be true.