

Entertaining Angels Training Session – week 1

1. What is Christian hospitality and what does it feel like to be made truly welcome?

Of all the recommendations in Divine Renovation, improving our welcome is the single easiest and most straightforward change to make. After all, we all know what it is like to be made welcome into someone's home and we also know what it's like to be made to feel unwelcome. No-one wants this for our churches, but sometimes we can get too comfortable and forget to look out for newcomers – or perhaps we should call them guests?

If we are to do this seriously, there's a lot to think about. At one end of the spectrum, we could give out hymn books with more of a smile, but if we're to take this seriously, we really need to be strategic and think about how welcoming fits into lots of aspects of parish life, from websites to car parks, from Mass on Sundays to everything else we do.

What is the difference between friendly and welcoming churches? Thom S. Rainer, in his book "Becoming a welcoming church", carried out hundreds of surveys and interviews on this topic. The video trailer for his book makes some excellent points

https://youtu.be/suF6dQ1_Oo

What, for you, is the difference between a friendly and a welcoming church?

How would you describe your church?

2. Biblical hospitality

“Remember always to welcome strangers, for by doing this some people have entertained angels without knowing it”

Hebrews 13.2

The Book of Hebrews is a long reflection on the Old Testament, and this verse is referring to a number of encounters with angels that appear in Genesis and Judges, of which this one is the most famous:

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.”

Genesis 18:1-5

What qualities of hospitality can we see in this passage?

What can we draw on for ourselves?

- Enthusiasm and joy – Abraham rushed from the entrance of his tent to the visitors
- He revered them -bowing down to the ground – showing great respect
- Hospitality - He encourages them to stay – offering food and drink

An alternative perspective:

¹³ Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.

¹⁴ Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” ¹⁵ When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

Matthew 19:13-14

What does good welcome look like?

We can see from this that hospitality isn't an add on. It's absolutely central to our communities. But when we think about the teams that we need at Mass on Sunday, eg Eucharistic Ministers, readers, children's liturgy, coffee, where do the welcomers come? It feels like an optional extra.

Actually, it's a ministry of skill, welcome and tact, as Fr James Mallon says:

"The question of how the marginalised feel when entering our churches is one that haunts me. How welcomed does a person feel who does not look like us, sound like us, dress like us and smell like us? How does the person who is struggling with mental illness feel when entering our churches? How does the person living an alternative lifestyle or struggling with sin and brokenness feel?... It's not just a question of treating "these people" the same as everyone else; they are the guests of honour."

How does that make you feel? It's pretty challenging...

3. Mystery worshipper – how to find out what it's like to come to your church as a stranger

Thom S Rainer, surveyed and interviewed hundreds of people to find out why they did not return to a particular church. Here are the top ten responses:

1. Greeting time in church was unfriendly - church members were good at greeting each other but not so much new people.
2. Unfriendly church members – don't speak to guests because they don't know them, and prefer to withdraw into holy huddles
3. Unsafe and unclean children's areas
4. No place to get information on the church
5. Bad church website
6. Poor signage
7. Insider church language
8. Boring or bad church services
9. Members telling guests they were in the wrong pew or chair "you're sitting in my pew!"
10. Dirty facilities

On the other hand, the positives were:

- a. Someone asked the guest to sit with her
- b. People introduced themselves to the guest
- c. There was clear signage
- d. There was a clearly marked welcome centre
- e. The kids loved the children's area
- f. The children's area was secure and sanitary
- g. Guest parking was clearly visible
- h. Church did not have a stand-and-greet
- i. Members were not pushy
- j. Guest card simple to complete

What are the characteristics of your church, good or bad?

Have you ever spoken to a guest about their first time visit to your church?

How do you think a guest feels in your service?

4. Signs, signage and sites – is your church top secret?

3 Myths about signage and websites:

- #1 Everyone knows where our church is
- #2 Everyone knows where everything is in our church
- # Church websites aren't that important

What is your reaction to these myths?

If someone moved into your town, and wanted to find the Catholic church, how would they go about it?

Websites – are they up to date? If you google “Catholic church” in your town, does your church come up? When you’re on the website, is it easy to find times of Masses? Can you easily find the address? Are there parking instructions?

When you search for your parish website, can you find the answer those questions?

Think about what needs to be different to make it accessible to newcomers.

Signage

Can you find your church from the road? Is it clear what the car parking arrangements? Are your toilets signposted? Is there any signage for families, eg when children’s liturgy is on, where the baby change toilet is? Finally, if you have coffee after Mass, how easy is it to find?

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Final Thoughts

What are the main “Aha” moments from this session?

Looking forward to next time – become mystery worshippers

1. Perhaps get some other people involved
2. Mystery worship (even if online) at a parish or alternative church near you
3. Try and look at your own community with fresh eyes – even better, ask someone to mystery worship you