

Getting the basics right: Closing your church's back door

In the previous article we considered how welcoming newcomers and visitors to our churches is more than just having a friendly face at the door. To 'open wide the front door' is to ensure that everyone finds all that we do in our churches easily accessible. Liturgy, for example, is an important part of an Anglican service, yet it is neither friendly nor welcoming to conduct our services expecting newcomers or visitors to follow what is going on without some help and direction, such as mentioning page numbers in the BAS or order of service.

However, becoming a growing church is not just about the welcome and helping new people feel at home. Once we've 'opened wide the front door,' we also need to 'shut the back door.' By this we mean that we do all we can to ensure people feel not just welcomed but also known and valued and nurtured, so that they don't leave. The problem of people leaving church is huge! Across North America and Europe, the number of Christians who no longer worship in traditional denominations is estimated in the tens of millions. (If you want to know more, Michael Frost's book *Exiles* is a good place to start).

So what does 'shutting the back door' entail?

Some people leave because their life circumstances change and they have to move. We can't do anything about that, except to thank them for their contribution to the life of our church family and wish them well in the next stage of their journey with God.

Some leave because they don't get to know anyone. Relationships are the 'glue' that helps people 'stick.' How do people who are new to your church form the relationships they need to become part of the family? As you can see, the task of starting those relationships is not the sole responsibility of the greeters or clergy. It is the job of us all. Beyond that initial welcome, we need to seek out and create opportunities to share in each other's lives. It is essential to forming true Christian community.

Some leave because they don't feel valued or nurtured. Once newcomers have settled, is there a role for them to play? This is not about putting them on the coffee roster (unless they want to help with that, of course). It is about

discovering the gifts and skills God has given them and putting them to use so that they, and we, might flourish and grow. This might involve sharing our ministry, which can be a challenge, because the newcomer might want to do it differently than we do! Yet we all know that it is often the same few who end up doing the majority of the work in the life of a congregation. That, too, can result in the feelings of being undervalued. If you are feeling overwhelmed, inviting a newcomer to help you, while being open to the changes they will bring, can assist with your burden and deepen relationships, too.

Some leave because they don't feel cared for. Do we spot when people are not present at our services or events? What mechanisms are in place to follow up with people who have not been present for a while? This is particularly relevant when that person has been ill or is dealing with a crisis and no one has been in contact with them.

The next article looks at how we might start re-connecting with people who have left the church. May God bless you richly in your missional discipleship.