

A Deeper Hospitality: From Mere Friendliness to Making Friends
“Vital Congregations” Column by Doug Ruffle
The Relay

My mother had to move over ten times during her first twelve years of marriage. My father worked as a salesman and the companies he worked for were constantly assigning him to new places. We asked my Mom how she had managed to pick up everything and move with a family of five to a new town or city where she didn't know a soul. “I would find a Methodist Church,” she replied, “because there I knew I could make a friend.”

I thought it interesting how she worded her response. She didn't look for a “friendly church,” but rather a church where she could make a friend. There is a big difference. The difference was underscored for me recently upon hearing of a colleague who moved to a new town and sought out the closest United Methodist Church.

In the case of my colleague, he found a “friendly church.” People were kind. They smiled at him. Some greeted him during the after-worship fellowship hour. But, he wasn't making any friends. He even went so far as to invite some of the church members he met to his home—to try to build a relationship—but they couldn't find the time to come over. My colleague had found a friendly church, but not one where he could make a friend. He has given up trying and now is attending a church of another denomination where within two weeks of his first visit he was invited over to a member's house for dinner.

People long to be connected to community. They need to make friends where fellowship can be taken to a deeper level. Many churches have systems in place to meet these needs. They are intentional about inviting newcomers to join small groups. The key issue is how we help move newcomers from **interest to involvement**. How can our churches do a better job of hospitality that goes deeper than mere friendliness. The first thing we need to do is acknowledge that the responsibility for making newcomers feel welcomed and loved resides with us—the church—and not with the newcomer. My colleague should not have had to invite members to his house. Members of the church he was visiting should have gone out of their way to invite him to theirs. That he moved on to another church speaks to the failing of the church he left and not anything he did or did not do.

Here are five simple steps to help your church move a newcomer from interest to involvement:

1. Help the newcomer **form relationships with other members**. Don't let her get away from fellowship hour without introducing her to one or two members of the church.
2. Help the newcomer **find a place in a small group**, be it the choir, a Sunday School class, a UMW circle, men's fellowship.
3. Help **foster friendships** for the newcomer. Make time to invite him or her to dinner, or to join an existing friendship group of the church on an outing.
4. Help provide opportunities for newcomers to **Grow in their faith** by getting involved in some form of Christian service. Does your church have a ministry of outreach or does it take a volunteer mission trip somewhere? Invite the newcomer along! While they engage in meaningful Christian service they will also deepen their relationships with fellow members of the church.

5. Help provide opportunities for newcomers to **Grow as disciples of Jesus Christ**. Once the newcomer is involved in the life of the church, create a system whereby he or she is the point person for newer newcomers. In this way they multiply the blessing they received and learn to disciple others.

My mother taught me a valuable lesson about the difference between a friendly church and a church where you can make a friend. It's a lesson of which our churches need to be reminded. If you seek assistance for the hospitality ministry of your church, the Office of Congregational Development can help. Contact us at 732-359-1046 or send us an e-mail at Druffle@gnjumc.org.