

# Welcome everyone to church

Sermon for Sunday, June 17, 2007 by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Philippians 2:3 and others

## 1) Why welcome others to church

I rarely meet people who say, "I don't go to church because I don't believe in God." The truth is many people are very open to learning about God and spiritual issues; they just don't feel welcome at church or feel that it has anything to offer them. This message today focuses on being a welcoming church.

Jesus welcomed people, all kinds of people, with no exceptions.

**Mark 2:15, Contemporary English Version:**

Later, Jesus and his disciples were having dinner at Levi's house. Many tax collectors and other sinners had become followers of Jesus, and they were also guests at the dinner.

**Luke 15:1-2, New Century Version:**

The tax collectors and sinners all came to listen to Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to complain: "Look, this man welcomes sinners and even eats with them."

Later, the church was experiencing growing pains as a result of people from all kinds of backgrounds joining together in one faith family. The apostle Paul gave them this principle to live by:

**Philippians 2:3, Living Bible**

Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself.

## 2) How to welcome others to church

### a) Put yourself in the other person's place

The key to welcoming people is to be more concerned with what the visitor thinks of us, rather than what we think of the visitor. Again, "**Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself.**" In other words, sometimes you have to go out of your way to make others feel welcome. The emphasis is on them, not us.

Imagine that you are a first time visitor to this church. (Perhaps try going to a town to a strange church where nobody knows you, just so you know how it feels.) Would you know which door to come in? What if you needed to go to the bathroom, but were too embarrassed to ask anyone? Would there be anyone to welcome your children, and introduce them to the Sunday School

teachers for their ages? Would people say more than just, "Hi, how are you?"

### b) Talk with people

Believe it or not, even in a small church like ours, there are still people who are strangers. Last fall in a conversation I happened to mention the name of someone else in the congregation. The person I was talking with interrupted me and said, "I'm embarrassed to say this, but I've been coming here for 20 years, and I don't know who you're talking about." I pointed out the person in the crowd, and she said, "Oh yes, I recognize him... but I guess I don't really know him."

If that's what it's like among *regulars*, what will it feel like for newcomers?

Some people don't know what to say to visitors. They say, "My name is \_\_\_\_\_." Then their minds go blank. Here's a suggestion. Figure out what you like best about your church; what really makes it special in your heart. Once you're talking to a visitor, say, "Would you like to know something I really like about this church?" Who's going to answer "No" to a question like that? Then, with a big smile on your face and with obvious enthusiasm in your voice, give your answer. Just be careful not to go on and on. The effect on visitors is remarkable.

In fact, we need to do this for others besides visitors. Why not go over to that person who's been here for years, but you still don't know their name or where they live? Step outside your comfortable circle of friends. Sometimes you have to go out of your way to make people feel welcome.

### c) Be prepared to welcome

**Hebrews 13:1-2, Today's English Version:**

Keep on loving one another as Christians. Remember to welcome strangers in your homes.

Expect new people to come to church. We want it; we pray for it; so act like we believe it! Be prepared.

How? By being ready to treat someone special. Here's what they did in one church. Every week a different person or family was assigned to be the "hospitality family." This household prepared extra food for Sunday dinner. During the morning service they would look for someone new — someone who needed a welcome — to spontaneously invite to dinner. Imagine being a first-time visitor at that church, and going home with someone you've just met, who treated you like a royal guest!

There are lots of ways to make people feel special. Again, sometimes we have to go out of our way to make

people feel welcome. Such as in this story. This happened in a church in Portland, Oregon, where Becky Pippert worshipped. She wrote about it in her book *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World*.

Becky was doing Christian outreach work with students at the university in Portland, Oregon (much the same as what Cameron Lawson does at PECI in Picton). She got to know one fellow named Bill. Bill was brilliant, and was always pondering the why's and how's of life. His hair was always messy, and in the entire time she knew him, she never once saw him wear a pair of shoes. Rain, sleet or snow, Bill was always barefoot. While he was attending university, he started coming to a Christian students' group Becky was leading, and Bill eventually became a Christian.

Across the street from the university was a old, large, established (i.e. wealthy) church. They had worked to maintain beauty and dignity in its worship service. The people loved the great hymns of the faith that flowed from the pipe organ. People still believed that "Sunday dress" meant "Sunday best." Parents and children polished their shoes, and wore handsome suits and dresses to church. This was a strong tradition in that church.

A few years earlier the church had decided that they wanted to "reach out" to the students who went to the university. They weren't sure how, but they just wanted them to feel welcome.

Then one Sunday after his decision to follow Jesus, Bill decided to worship there. He was wearing blue jeans, a t-shirt and of course no shoes. The usher who greeted him looked a bit uncomfortable, but no one said anything.

Bill began walking down the aisle looking for a seat. He looked like he was ready for the beach, not for worship—at least that's what most people thought when they turned and saw him. The church was quite crowded that Sunday, and he got all the way to the front without finding any place to sit. Would he go and stand at the back? By now everyone was watching him, holding their breath to see what would happen.

Bill had his own solution. He sat cross legged in the aisle between the two front pews — perfectly natural among students, but unheard of in this church. The tension in the air became so thick you could slice it.

At the rear of the church, the gray-haired head usher named Oakley was watching the whole spectacle. From the time he was young, he had been taught to dress for

church in the clothes he would wear to see Jesus. So he had on a blue three-piece suit and an elegant silk tie. A gold watch chain gleamed from his vest.

Oakley — his name was appropriate. He was old and strong like the oak tree. In previous years he had chaired the church board, and his reputation was solid. People said, "Oakley's quiet, but he's wise." If anyone could handle this distraction gracefully, he could.

Head usher Oakley began walking down the aisle, leaning on his cane. His trek to the front seemed to take forever. Entire wedding processions had finished in less time. The church became utterly silent. All eyes were focussed on him. You could not hear anyone breathe.

Some others from the Christian student group were also present in the congregation that day, and along with everyone else they watched Oakley approaching Bill. They thought, "Is he going to scold Bill? You can't blame him for what he's about to do. He would never guess that Bill is a Christian. His world is too far removed from Bill's for him to understand."

When Oakley finally stood next to where Bill was sitting, he dropped his cane on the carpet, and with some difficulty lowered himself to the floor, sitting beside Bill. He reached out his hand and whispered, "Glad to have you with us today."

Mr. Oakley understood that sometimes you have to stretch yourself a bit to make sure a person feels welcome.

**Philippians 2:3, Living Bible**

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