

Observations

Overall Summary

All English weekend Masses were observed. The Church was easy to find and generally made a good first impression. Parking by the church entrances was a problem, but there was adequate parking in the school lot on the next street. There was, however, nothing directing newcomers to the school lot. There were two signs identifying the church, however, Mass times were not listed on these signs.

The bulletin was easy to read, but did not welcome newcomers nor provide a means by which the newcomer could make themselves known and obtain further information about church membership.

The acid test for any worshipping community which desires to welcome the newcomer is, "would the newcomer attend this church again after the first experience?" Those factors which determine whether a newcomer would return to a parish are admittedly subjective and may be unique to each individual. Beyond the welcoming the newcomer receives, other factors may include: the quality of the music, the quality of the entire liturgical experience, the quality of the preaching, the perceived vibrancy of the community, the extent to which people actively participate in the Mass, and the perceived long term viability of the community. Based upon all the worship experiences, a newcomer would not feel truly welcomed and would probably not attend this church again.

Assume for the moment that there are three possible experiences a newcomer can have when visiting a new church; made to feel welcome, made to feel invisible, or made to feel unwelcome. The observer would characterize his experience as generally made to feel invisible and on one occasion made to feel unwelcomed.

Purpose

The purpose of these observations was to place a stranger in the community and observe three key areas of welcoming: the facility, the bulletin, and specific worship experiences.

View to the World

Newcomers to this community can easily find out about the church through a listing in the Yellow Pages. After hours, a person answered the phone and gave the Mass times. The church does not advertise in the local newspaper, nor does it have brochures in the local motels.

There is a rudimentary one page web site for the church, however it needs updating. It still lists Msgr. Dunn as the pastor. The Sunday Mass schedule has a Mass listing for 10:00 AM which in fact starts at 9:45 AM. The parish's page on the Diocese of Elmira web site also list the Sunday 10:00 AM Mass.

The building is easy to find. The grounds are well maintained and it makes a good first impression. There are two prominent signs listing the church's name but

Mass times are not listed. There is no mention of visitors being welcomed on these signs. There is no parking lot on the street adjoining the church's entrances (32nd St.), so churchgoers must compete with the neighborhood for on street parking. There is adequate parking in the school lot on the next street (31st St). Signage directing visitors to the school lot would prove helpful. The building has a handicap ramp for the physically handicapped. Bulletin boards or other displays inside the church are attractive and up to date. There is nothing posted in the narthex that welcomes newcomers and/or visitors, however there is a listing of Mass times there.

Bulletin Review

The bulletin is easy to read. It lists the church's name, address, and phone number. There is no mention of newcomers/visitors in the bulletin. Having metaphorical "side doors" to the church (non-liturgical entry points to the church community for newcomers) is important. There were none of these "side doors" mentioned in the bulletin. There was also no mention in the bulletin about special study groups or introductory classes (such as RCIA) for newer people.

Specific Worship Experiences

These observations were made using certain predetermined criteria meant to gauge and assess the welcoming nature of a parish community and its particular worship service(s). The observation worksheet is appended at the end of this report.

Saturday, 5:00 PM

Childcare was not available at this Mass. Children were not welcomed through special music or children's sermons, nor provided with a children's service. There were no greeters welcoming people at the door. The church was sparsely filled and with people spread out. Many pews had people only sitting on the ends with large gaps in between. This type of seating arrangement presents an immediate barrier and is therefore unwelcoming to newcomers. The lector welcomed newcomers during the introductory comments, but beyond that newcomers were not recognized and/or identified during the course of the Mass. Newcomers were not personally greeted by parishioners during the course of the Mass.

The words to hymns were easy to read. The exchange at the Sign of Peace felt very perfunctory with little warmth or recognition of the observer as a newcomer. At this Mass, people from the rear of the church received Communion first. While it was easy to pick up on what was happening, it would have been nice for newcomers if someone had explained this unusual practice.

Newcomers were not explicitly invited to come back during the Mass. After the Mass the celebrant warmly greeted people as they left. After the Mass, there was no opportunity to meet other people during a social time.

Overall, a newcomer would not feel truly welcomed and would probably not attend this church again based upon the experience at this worship service.

Sunday, 8:30 AM

Childcare was not available at this Mass. Children were not welcomed through special music or children's sermons, nor provided with a children's service. There were no greeters welcoming people at the door. Many pews had people only sitting on the ends with large gaps in between. This type of seating arrangement presents an immediate barrier and is therefore unwelcoming to newcomers. The lector welcomed newcomers during the introductory comments, but beyond that newcomers were not recognized and/or identified during the course of the Mass. Newcomers were not personally greeted by parishioners during the course of the Mass.

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Sunday, 9:45 AM

Childcare was not available at this Mass. Children were not welcomed through special music or children's sermons, nor provided with a children's service. There were no greeters welcoming people at the door. Many pews had people only sitting on the ends with large gaps in between. This type of seating arrangement presents an immediate barrier and is therefore unwelcoming to newcomers. The observer approached one pew where a man was sitting at the end with a large gap next to him. When the observer asked to get by, the man was visibly indignant and put out that the observer would ask to get by him and sit next to him in the pew. The lector welcomed newcomers during the introductory comments, but beyond that newcomers were not recognized and/or identified during the course of the Mass. Newcomers were not personally greeted by parishioners during the course of the Mass.

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Sunday, 12:15 PM

Childcare was not available at this Mass. Children were not welcomed through special music or children's sermons, nor provided with a children's service. There were no greeters welcoming people at the door. Many pews had people only sitting on the ends with large gaps in between. This type of seating arrangement presents an immediate barrier and is therefore unwelcoming to newcomers. The lector welcomed newcomers during the introductory comments, but beyond that newcomers were not recognized and/or identified during the course of the Mass. Newcomers were not personally greeted by parishioners during the course of the Mass.

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Observation worksheet

View to the world outside the church's neighborhood

1. Newcomers to this community can easily find out about the church through:
 - a. a listing in the Yellow Pages
 - b. a weekly ad in the local newspaper
 - c. brochures in motels
 - d. a web site
 - e. a message on the church's answering machine that lists the times of Masses.
2. The building is easy to find.
3. Anything posted outside of the church that welcomes newcomers and/or visitors?
4. Anything posted in the narthex that welcomes newcomers and/or visitors?
5. There is a prominent sign listing the church's name and times of services; the information is up to date.

First Impressions

6. The grounds are well maintained.
7. There is adequate parking, and the lot does not have major problems.
8. The building is accessible to the physically handicapped.
9. Bulletin boards or other displays inside the church are attractive and up to date.
10. The bulletin is easy to read. It lists the church's name, address, and phone number.
11. The bulletin mention newcomers or visitors
12. Are there "side doors" (non-liturgical entry points to the church community for newcomers) to the church mentioned in the bulletin or during the Mass or posted on bulletin boards?
13. The bathroom is easy to find and well maintained.

Reinforcement

14. Each visitor is sent a letter (personally signed), called and/or visited as soon as possible after his/her first visit.
15. The church offers special study groups or discipleship classes for newer people.
16. The church offers several short-term groups or activities.

Worship Experience

17. Friendly members greet people at each major entrance.
18. I was welcomed through word or eye contact by the person next to me as I entered the pew
19. The priest or lector welcomed newcomers during their introductory comments
20. Newcomers were recognized and identified during the course of the Mass
21. Newcomers were personally greeted by other parishioners during the course of the Mass
22. At the Sign of Peace, I felt sincerely welcomed or greeted by the people near me
23. After Mass, there was an opportunity for me to meet other people - coffee and donuts, etc.
 - a. During this social time, I was welcomed and greeted by at least one parishioner
 - b. During this social time, I was included in at least one interesting conversation
 - c. During this social time, I was introduced to at least one other parishioner
24. I was invited to come back
25. I was invited to come to parish activities other than Mass
26. I was introduced to the pastor, an associate pastor, or another staff person
27. Childcare is available. Room numbers and directions are clearly visible.
28. The words to hymns, whether printed or displayed, are easy to read.
Directions are given for all portions of the service in which people participate, such as prayers and responsive readings.
29. During the service, traditions or approaches that might be unfamiliar to people, such as the way Communion is handled, are explained.
30. Children are welcomed through special music or children's sermons, or are provided with a children's service.
31. I felt truly welcomed and would look forward to attending this church again