

## 10 Best Practices for Cultivating Belonging

### Engaging Newcomers

Good news! Your congregation has experienced a wave of repeat visitors. How will you invite them to consider membership and make intentional use of practices that cultivate a sense of belonging? Context matters. One size fits all processes can paralyze those who are waiting on a critical mass for new member/inquirer classes. Multi-week sessions may be impractical, developing a curriculum may seem intimidating, and the culture of a particular congregation may be shaped by a variety of styles, ministry emphases, sizes and staffing patterns, etc. The potential new members may come with vast prior church experience, or they may be brand new Christians. They may be at any stage of adult life. They may have lovely memories of church life past or carry deep wounds from teaching that wounded their souls.

An additional reason for rethinking this process is the strong paradigm shift in our understanding of faith development. Traditionally we have practiced a model that begins with teaching doctrinal content, individuals then expressing acceptance of 'right behaviors', and that finally culminates in an identity of belonging. This process has been dubbed believe, behave, belong. For more than a decade, students of church culture have been documenting a shift to a belong, behave, believe progression. Finding a place of experienced belonging has become increasingly important, building a trustworthy environment for experiencing a life of faith, which then leads to a strongly professed and owned faith.

What follows are ten best practices to guide intentional planning for welcoming new members into your community. Spread them out over time, create a special event, or use your imagination to help people experience what is uniquely wonderful about this potential new church home.

- 1. Current members should be involved in the leadership of your process.** Do not miss this opportunity to connect inquirers with members of the congregation. This is a time rich in opportunities to develop relationships that grow out of shared experiences and longings. The ability to form meaningful ties with other church members is critical in long term bonding. This grouping of folks in the room when these conversations are shared becomes deeply meaningful in the lives of both current and new members and leads existing church members to more fully invest themselves in practices of welcome and hospitality.
- 2. Share stories.** Our stories shape us. The late Phyllis Tickle observed that we do not truly know each other when we only know the facts of our lives, it is in story sharing that we truly become known. Who are these gathered people? What are their lives beyond Sunday morning? What influences have shaped them? What brings them joy? What first brought them to the church and what keeps them coming back? The answers to these questions, shared by all people in the room, will provide a springboard for future richer, deeper conversations. Caution: as much as we may be tempted by long expansive story sharing, everyone should have the opportunity to share. It can be helpful for one of the leaders to go first, modeling an appropriate level of detail based on the number of people and the time allotted for this gathering.
- 3. Translate the language.** There are few things that work against our sense of belonging as quickly as not understanding the language, especially when one feels everyone else has been clued in. The church is filled with language that may feel like codes and passwords. Once upon a time our vocabulary lessons might have been limited to theological language (e.g. justification, predestination, and vocation) or unpacking and clarifying an archaic turn of phrase (e.g. the great ends of the church or total depravity). Today our newcomers may well

need help with words like pew, or narthex, or session, or stewardship. Note: this is NOT a call to avoid specialized language, only to demystify it. As author Leonard Sweet observed Starbucks taught us to use their unique language by patiently affirming and persistently using the word *vente for large!*

**4. Find out 'why us?'** Why do these prospective members keep coming back? What drew them in and what will make it a church home in which they will take an active part? Knowing the answers to these questions will help leaders connect newcomers with people and programs which will nurture them.

**5. Share the culture.** Part of your church culture is shaped by denominational theology and practice. This is not the place for a graduate course in Reformed Theology and Presbyterian Polity. That said, the centrality of scripture, our expansive understanding of grace, the role of elected members of the congregation in leadership, and the connectional nature of the church should be included. (You may wish to further customize this list based on your particular context.) The part of this conversation dealing with your particular congregation is equally important: how does your congregation live out the Great Ends of the Church ([Book of Order, F-1.0304, pg 5](#))?. What is it that members most value and how is the church known in the community? How can new members become involved in these ministries?

**6. Talk honestly about expectations of members.** While becoming a member involves simply answering yes to four simple questions, the expectations of members set out in the [Book of Order \(G1.0304, pg 16\)](#) is far more inclusive and describes a pattern of activity we each grow into with God's help. Emphasis is on the journey, not perfection or merely ticking off a check list.

**7. Make Introductions.** Folks stick when they feel a part of a network. Be sure to introduce new people widely, not just by name but with a few words about life story which help all parties to find common ground and start conversations. Don't hesitate to introduce across the age spectrum, remembering that churches are one of the few places left where intergenerational friendships can be lived out.

**8. Matching gifts and interests with opportunities for involvement is a key factor in developing a true sense of belonging.** Each person brings unique gifts into the community. Shared service opportunities build relationships and can contribute to faith maturity. By helping identify touch points that correspond with their interests, reluctant volunteers are more likely to step up.

**9. Welcome to the family (faith community) means time to celebrate.** Mark the welcome of new members in worship. Have a special bulletin insert including names and short bio of new members as well a photo. Make the time to welcome them by name and have them share with the congregation some aspect of the church they particularly appreciate. Plan to also include the information in newsletters, online, and/or welcome displays. Consider giving a small symbolic gift such as a loaf of artisanal bread to represent the mutual promises to provide 'Bread for the Journey' as we grow together in the body of Christ.

**10. Plan next steps to close the revolving doors.** How will you track the new members involvement moving forward? All too often the reality of finding one's way into the heart of congregational life seems daunting. Notice attendance and other contact points and pay attention if the individual(s) seem to be falling away. Assigning a buddy to shepherd each individual or family for the first year can be helpful, especially if there are interests or stage of life in common. The better you address points 7 & 8 above, the easier this will be.

### **Finally, a few random suggestions that will benefit the whole congregation**

- Develop an up to date 'catalog' of ongoing volunteer opportunities which include a brief work description, an estimate of time commitment, and any special skills needed. Have both a paper commitment card and a digital means of connecting volunteer with the person coordinating volunteers. In cases of volunteering with children and youth mention any special clearance policies in your Child Protection Policy. Include opportunities for all ages.

- Some churches encourage members of a newcomers class to take on a one time joint service project as a means of developing community.
- Consider scheduling whatever training is offered during the faith formation hour. It is a way to feed into existing childcare and to accustom adults in committing to a time for education.
- Identify a spiritual gifts inventory and not only encourage all members to complete the assessment, but train volunteers to help interpret the results with the individual, highlighting how they can see these gifts working in the person's everyday life and where those gifts can be used in the church.
- Encourage new members to volunteer as worship greeters. This is an easy, low time commitment task that can be done by both individuals and families which can provide a highly visible way for newcomers and long-timers to connect.
- Encourage wearing of name tags by all.
- Make sure that the way to ask questions about membership and the scheduling of gatherings is publicized regularly in visible locations such as worship bulletins and church website.

## Resource Links

Here are some resources to engage newcomers and new members in group settings.

- [New Members: Call to Discipleship Workbook](#) - from PCUSA Store Being Reformed Series. Additional studies are available.
- [Being Presbyterian: Foundations of Presbyterian Discipleship](#) - Find additional topics [here](#).
- [Why Presbyterians are Like That](#) – 10 Session Bible Study
- [Animate: Faith](#) – Imaginatively explore central topics of Christianity.
- [Coming Alive in Christ](#) Equip Course – Includes discussion questions on major themes. Although written for training Elders and Deacons content can be helpful for education classes for those learning about being Presbyterian.

For those who are looking for Confirmation Materials consider:

- [Big God Big Questions](#)
- [Changing the World: Confirmation for the Missional Church](#)
- [Confirmation in the Spirit, Bread for the Journey Retreat](#)

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