Welcoming New Parishioners

The Importance of Welcoming

How a parish welcomes new parishioners can have a tremendous impact on the success of stewardship educational efforts in your parish. If parishioners feel warmly welcomed into the parish family from the very beginning, they are much more likely to be receptive to your annual stewardship appeal. Additionally, parishioners are usually much more willing to get involved and offer their gifts of time and talent in a parish where they are made to feel comfortable and welcomed.

New parishioners can bring gifts to the parish that had never been present before – new talents, new experiences, new ideas and new commitments. By welcoming new parishioners appropriately, you have the opportunity to grow into a new and better parish. By ignoring new parishioners, you ignore the new gifts God is sending your way.

When a parish embraces the concepts of stewardship, it is important that new parishioners, too, be invited to share in the joy that stewardship can bring. Remember that first impressions can be lasting impressions. Treat newcomers to your parish as cherished guests, not as imposters.

It is important to note, however, that the initial welcoming time is not a time to push for a stewardship pledge of time, talent or treasure. Most new parishioners are overwhelmed by their move. The process of moving places demands on an individual’s time and financial resources. This is not the best time for the parish to also be pushing for a pledge. The first contact with new parishioners is simply a time to let them know that they have joined a vibrant and active faith community that welcomes their involvement in the future.

However, within a few months after a new parishioner has been registered, be sure to reach out to these people again. Most new parishioners are very open to the message of stewardship and they are willing to get involved in their new parish. If you ignore them and allow them to get settled into an inactive complacency it will be much harder to motivate them to become involved in your parish sometime in the future. Snag new parishioners quickly! Let them know that yours is a stewardship parish and you welcome the gifts they bring. Inform them of the benefits they will receive by being a part of your community but also let them know that their membership involves an obligation to be good stewards. If this type of message alienates them, you must ask yourself if you really want to encourage that kind of parishioner anyway.
The Welcoming Process

Several ingredients go into creating a warm welcome for your new parishioners. Stewardship committees may want to look at the current welcoming process in the parish and determine if there are areas where some of these ingredients can be added or spiced up to make for a warmer reception for new parishioners. Remember that nothing will turn off a new parishioner faster than being pressured to give time, talent or treasure before they have first been greeted with a genuine spirit of hospitality and acceptance. The key ingredients that can be used in the welcoming process are:

- Registration
- Welcoming packet
- Welcoming letter
- Welcoming visit
- Welcoming event

Registration

All parishes register new parishioners. How well you do it can make a big difference in how truly welcomed the newcomer may feel. Consider these points.

1. Encourage all new parishioners to register. This can be done with periodic announcements in the bulletin or an occasional announcement from the pulpit. Having new parishioners accurately registered will be important when you do your next stewardship mailing.

2. Make every effort to have a priest, deacon or pastoral assistant register and welcome every new family. If possible the new parishioner should be introduced to the pastor during the registration process.

3. The registration process should be a friendly time. Conversation about the family, interests, previous home, occupation, etc. will make a lasting positive impression.

4. If the situation in the parish office does not allow for parishioners to be warmly welcomed and registered during the normal business day, consider offering a special registration time. This could be after Mass on one Sunday a month. The registration time should be announced from the pulpit and in the bulletin. A parish priest and necessary staff or volunteers should be on hand to register and welcome new parishioners. Doughnuts and coffee could be served and new parishioners would have a chance to meet one another.

5. You also may want to consider providing an opportunity for new parishioner registration at your annual Festival of Ministries.
The Welcoming Packet or Brochure

At some point in the welcoming process all new parishioners should receive a welcome packet or brochure. It is most common to give this out at the time of registration however some items from the following list might be held back to be given during a home visit or sent with a follow-up letter from the pastor. Items from the welcome packets can also be made available during a welcoming event.

The components of the welcoming packet or brochure will vary from parish to parish. Here are some things for you to consider for your packet.

- Facts and figures about the parish. (Make these as positive and interesting as possible. This is your chance to “sell” your parish. Remember that many Catholics today “shop around” for a parish that meets their needs.)
- A schedule of Masses, confessions and other regular parish devotions or activities.
- A listing of all parish activities. (Time and Talent catalog)
- A map of the parish facilities making special note of where meeting rooms and entrances are located.
- Names, titles and phone numbers of parish staff and lay leaders.
- A copy of the parish Mission Statement, especially if it has been printed on a card.
- Current stewardship brochures. (The parish can order extra stewardship brochures for this purpose.)
- Information on local Catholic education programs – pre-school, grade school, high school and PRS programs.
- A copy of the most recent parish newsletter and/or annual report.
- Any special parish information that may be available – patron saint prayer card, parish history, parish directory, parish calendar, parish stewardship prayer, web site address, etc.
- Any special personalized items the parish may have – magnet, pens, key chain, T-shirt, coffee mug, etc. These could be specially made for the welcoming committee and include a message of welcome or they could be items that the parish originally used for some other purpose. Some parishes also give new parishioners a candle to burn in their home or a small Bible.
- An invitation to the next “New Parishioner Welcome Event” if your parish hosts one.
Welcoming Letter

Some parishes like to include a welcoming letter in the welcome kit or with the brochure. This letter is often a very generic letter that is copied and included in all the kits. This is acceptable; however, parishioners should also get a personalized and signed letter from the pastor about a week or two after they have registered. The personal letter is much warmer and it gives the parish a second opportunity to connect with and welcome the new family.

SAMPLE WELCOME LETTER

Dear (personal salutation)

Welcome to PARISH! I am delighted to have you join our parish family.

At PARISH we know that we are all individual parts of the mystical Body of Christ. Working together, we find great joy in doing God’s work here on earth. I invite and encourage you to join us as we pray, work and play together.

(A paragraph can be inserted here about parish history or upcoming parish events.)

If there is anything I can do to help you in your journey to grow closer to God, please do not hesitate to contact me. Our parish is proud to offer many opportunities for parishioners to come together in faith. However, if there is a personal or family need that requires individual attention, know that our parish staff is always here to assist you.

I pray that you may find warmth and happiness in our parish and I look forward to getting to know you personally in the weeks and months ahead. God bless you and your family.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Personally signed

Pastor

When the pastor is sending out a personal letter to all new parishioners, the parish should consider whether the letter in the welcoming kit should also come from the pastor or from another leader in the parish. Instead of a letter from the pastor in the welcoming kit a parish might decide to have a letter from the parish manager, the Parish Council chairperson, the Stewardship chairperson or the Welcoming Committee chairperson. This letter could refer to the fact that the pastor looks forward to welcoming them and it should also talk about what a great community the parish is and how much everyone looks forward to the new person getting involved.
Welcome Visit

In some parishes, new families receive a welcome visit from a priest, deacon and/or member of the Welcoming or Stewardship Committee. These visits are usually very well received as long as a few basic rules are followed.

1. Keep the visit short, especially if you are arriving without an appointment. You just need a few minutes to say, “Welcome” and possibly deliver the Welcome kit, some additional information, an invitation to a welcome event or a small gift.

2. REMEMBER: The purpose of this visit is simply to welcome and let the new parishioners know that the parish invites them to become involved. This is **not** a time to push for a pledge of time, talent or treasure.

3. Make sure you spend time getting to know the parishioner and not just talking about the parish. Ask questions about the family, their previous parish, their interests and their work. This is a good way to discover their previous and potential stewardship interests.

4. Do not overwhelm the newcomer with multiple visits or with a large team of people. Only one welcoming visit is needed. The visiting team should consist of no more than two people. If the pastor did not meet the new family at registration, it would be nice if he could make a home visit. A lay volunteer could accompany him, if desired. Other members of the parish staff or welcoming committee could also pair up to make welcoming visits, but remember **only one visit** and **only two people at the most**.

If a parish priest is the one making the parish visit or if the parish does not do parish welcome visits, it is appropriate for a lay volunteer to make a follow-up welcome call to the new family within about a month after registration. The purpose of the call would be simply to ask the family if they have any questions about the parish. This would be an excellent ministry for a homebound person who feels they have no other talents to give to the parish.

**Many new parishioners especially appreciate welcome visits if they include an offer by the parish priest to bless the new home.**

Welcome Event

Periodically – monthly, quarterly, semi-annually or annually – the parish should plan a “Newcomer’s Welcome Event.”

- This can be a “coffee and doughnuts” after church, an evening “wine and appetizers” party, or a Sunday afternoon “cookies and punch.” It is a good idea to vary the time and type of event – pizza with the pastor on a Friday or other weeknight one time, Sunday breakfast another time,
Saturday evening wine and cheese another month. This allows you to reach out to all parishioners regardless of their work schedule or personal commitments.

- All new parishioners should receive a personal invitation – by mail or phone or both.
- All parish priests, staff, Parish Council members and parish leaders should be present to meet with new parishioners.
- Other members of the parish community can also be invited to meet the newcomers.
- Make sure you have nametags!
- The pastor may want to say a few words of welcome.
- Parish Council president could also talk a little about the parish.
- Be sure to provide a time for questions and answers and easy discussion.
- During their remarks, the Pastor or Parish Council president should mention the importance stewardship plays in the parish, but only in a very gentle way. They should also encourage parishioners to get involved – it is a great way to meet people.
- It might be fun to have someone take pictures at this event and post them on a parish bulletin board with a heading such as: “Welcome to Our New Parishioners. They bring us wonderful new gifts of time and talent.”

Other Ideas for Welcoming

1. Names of all new parishioners should be periodically listed in the bulletin under a banner such as “We Welcome the Following New Parishioners to Our Parish Family.” Under this listing is a good time to also include a reminder that the parish encourages all new parishioners to take a few minutes to register.

2. Remember your new parishioners at the Festival of Ministries. It is nice to send them a special invitation to the event, especially if you did not do another Welcome Event.

3. Make the Blessed Mother the patron of your welcoming activities. Just as she totally welcomed Jesus into her life, we are welcoming Jesus when we welcome each new parishioner.

4. Depending on the number of new parishioners your parish is receiving, you might want to monthly, quarterly or annually ask all new parishioners at a weekend Mass to stand for a special blessing. Doing this on a Hospitality Sunday would be a great idea.

5. If many new parishioners visit your parish on a weekly or monthly basis, consider having a welcoming table in the back of church weekly or once a month. Staff this with a volunteer who can answer questions, hand out information and generally make the newcomer feel welcomed.

6. Some parishes like to leave a welcome card for visitors or newcomers in the back of church or in a pamphlet area. The card could include the following:
   - A warm welcome to the parish with a little bit of history about the church
   - An invitation for the individual to share their thoughts about their experience at the parish
An opportunity for the individual to express interest in a few key parish activities such as RCIA, Small Faith Communities, or Parish Outreach

A chance for the individual to request a call from the parish priest or Welcoming Committee

NOTE: This card should not take the place of registration. Registration should always be done in person.

7. If the parish is experiencing an increase in the number of new parishioners you might want to consider a brief (5-10 minute) welcome video. This could easily be produced with a home video camera – possibly by the Confirmation class – and briefly welcome the new family and inform them of the mission, ministries and activities of the parish.

8. List all new parishioners for the year in your Annual Report, using this as another opportunity to welcome them.

9. Determine some simple parish activities that might easily get the new parishioner involved and promote these events to them. New parishioners might be used to decorate the church for various holidays or seasons, to serve at a particular fish fry every year, to man a special booth at the parish picnic or to join a “Newcomers” bible study or discussion group. Make sure everyone involved in the activity knows these are new parishioners and goes out of their way to involve and welcome them.

10. Invite at least one new parishioner a year to serve on your stewardship and/or welcoming committee. They may bring valuable new insight into involving others in your parish.

11. Make sure all parish leaders understand the importance of welcoming. All your efforts to welcome new parishioners can be sabotaged if leaders of organizations and ministries do not welcome newcomers into their groups and allow them to be actively involved and heard. If necessary remind established parishioners of the words of Our Lord, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Mark 25:35)

12. Be sure to include the new Catholics who have completed the RCIA process in your parish in your welcoming efforts. The sad reality is that 50% of RCIA Catholics are totally inactive within two years after their initiation. Possibly this is because we did not warmly welcome them while they were on fire with their new faith.