



THE POWER OF WELCOME

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KATHRYN TAYLOR SHARES HER EXPERIENCE OF FINDING A NEW CHURCH AND DESCRIBES THE INVISIBLE HURDLES SOMETIMES FACED BY NEWCOMERS. SHE OFFERS PRACTICAL TIPS TO HELP US MAKE PEOPLE FEEL ACCEPTED THE FIRST TIME THEY VISIT OUR CHURCH.

'Phew. That's the car parked. Now where's the front door? Hmm. Looks like it could be either way... I'll try right first. Nope this doesn't look right, I'll go back round. Ah there's someone coming, maybe they can help...

I'm in and I've got my notice sheet and service book from the lady on the door who smiled at me. Now where shall I sit? That looks a bit too far forward, I'll go somewhere in the middle, this little row is empty, I'll go here. Let's have a look at the service book. Seems fairly straightforward to follow. Oh, wait a minute, we've skipped ahead to another section... Time for a hymn. Oh, good I know this one...

Uh oh, time to share the peace. Okay just be brave and smile. Oh good, the lady in front has turned around briefly, I better turn around to the one behind. 'Peace be with you.' It looks like the minister is coming down. I think I'll just stay in my seat. Ah she's coming to say hello to me, that's nice...

Time for communion I think. Do I stay in my seat? Will I be told when to go forward? Will they allow me to take the bread and wine if I'm not a member here? I'll just do what everyone else does and hope I get it right...

I think that's the end of the service, they said something about tea and coffee in a hall? I wonder where that is. Maybe I should go through by myself, but what if no one comes to talk to me? I'll just sit here and read the notice sheet for a minute and have a look round, maybe someone will come and say hello and invite me to have a coffee with them... Looks like no one is coming, they just keep walking past me. The odd person smiles. I'll walk very slowly back to the door and hand back my service book and maybe the people on the welcome desk will say hello. Oh, they're busy talking to someone else, they do all seem to know each other. Maybe I'll just go home, this is hard work! Back to the car.'

It's difficult to go to church alone. There are so many things to think about! Often, it's easy to get so caught up in the 'where will I sit?' that you forget you are in God's house. One of the most difficult challenges I have faced was being left to join a table alone at a café style service, when all I could see were groups of people huddled around tables talking. Luckily, someone noticed me and found me someone to sit with, but had it been another ten seconds, I would have turned around and walked straight back out close to tears.

We all have a deep desire to belong. For me, it isn't about how many guitars are in the worship band or whether there are biscuits with the tea and coffee. I am looking to make a connection, for people to walk alongside as I journey with Christ.

All too often we are too caught up with our 'jobs list' ('I must just speak to so and so...') that we don't see the new person sitting on the row behind. If we want our churches to grow, then welcoming new members the first time they enter the church is vital. I was never any good at this, but I've come up with a few tips based on my experiences whilst visiting five churches to find a 'home church'. It's a fine balance between being sincerely friendly and being overpowering, but I believe a bit of practice and genuine desire to be welcoming will help us all to grow God's kingdom.

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TEN TIPS ON BEING A WELCOMING CHURCH

1. You'll be surprised how much of a hurdle it is even to get to a new church in the first place. If you're already apprehensive, not knowing where to park can make the morning very stressful! Does your church website give details on suggested car parking? (Does your website have the correct postcode?)
2. Is your front door obvious? Is it open? A door that you can't find, and then when you do find it, is closed, is perhaps the most unwelcoming start to a church service you could experience.
3. Do you have someone designated to welcome people? Are they on the lookout specifically for visitors? A smile goes a long way, but a verbal greeting and introduction goes even further. At the very least tell me your name and ask me mine. You don't have to remember it!
4. Ask me if I'm happy to find a seat by myself, or, if you're having a café style event, maybe say, 'Sarah would love to have you on her table, I'll introduce you.'
5. If there's an opportunity during the service to speak to the new person next to you, start with a brief 'we haven't met before, I'm Bob' - it opens up some dialogue!
6. Is your communion process obvious? Is it clear when to go forward and clear when to leave the rail? It is awful when receiving the body and blood of Jesus is overshadowed by worries of logistics!
7. At the end of the service, don't just say 'there's tea and coffee in the hall' to a visitor and leave it at that. Try saying 'I'm going to get a cup of tea, would you like to come too?' That eases the worry of standing alone with a full cup of tea to get through.
8. Introduce me to at least two other people. Not so many that I'm overwhelmed with names, but enough that if you're not there next week, I might recognise another face and they might notice me. We might even find something in common, such as working in the same place or living on the same street!
9. Invite me to something on during the week, whether it's a coffee morning or Bible study. Offer to meet me there if you're already going or tell a friend who is going to look out for me.
10. If you see me the following week, introduce me to a few more people and soon enough I will be confident enough to get a cup of tea by myself and start getting to know the church family.



I think we are often too nervous to approach someone new, thinking 'they look quite young, I won't have anything to say to them', or 'they look much older than me, they won't want to talk to me' or even just 'what will I say?' The key thing here is that we should remember that if we're both in church, then we have something amazing in common. We're both there because we want to get to know Jesus better. What more could you possibly want to have in common?

'Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God'

Romans 15:7

Kathryn Taylor is a twenty-something on a mission to find a church to call home having moved to a new area after university. She is passionate about welcoming new people in church after she realised that if she found it daunting, having grown up in a Methodist Church, how much more difficult it must be for those with no church background.

