

## The Difference It Makes

Being new in town has afforded me a myriad of “new” experiences. I’ve attended several meetings with other pastors and church leaders, went to orientation meetings at the middle school, looked for a Girl Scout troop for Bekah to join, and entered a number of restaurants for the first time.

From this newcomer’s perspective, it makes a world of difference. Hospitality, that is. It is painfully obvious that some people and groups have a heart for the newcomer, expecting that a visitor will arrive, and many others do not. I’ve been faced with several questions as I drive to a new location: Where shall I park? When I arrive, which door shall I enter? What is the “normal” procedure here? Will I be considered only a number or will I be a person with a name and need? While clear answers to these questions will not guarantee I return, they certainly make my return more likely.

My thoughts about hospitality and welcome go well beyond the local dry cleaner or restaurant, and take me to the church. A church that expects visitors, in addition to its regular worshipers has signs posted outside and inside to direct the newcomer. Volunteers are also provided to greet and welcome others both outside and inside the church building. There are obvious places to locate these signs and volunteers that safely and warmly direct the newcomer within to their destination. A friendly face at the door and a gracious “good morning” values the one who is entering.

Yet, the ministry of hospitality and welcoming is not a task for just a few, but a task that the community of the church shares. When someone sits near you, extend a greeting to them, even if you have to get up out of your seat to greet them. Better yet, invite them to sit with you, so that you could assist, as needed, while we worship, pointing out the Bible or hymnal in the pew. Did you know that the first few moments following the worship service are the time that many visitors decide if they will return? While it’s comfortable to head to a familiar friend to catch up on the latest family news, the biblical call is one that moves us beyond what is comfortable to what parallels the heart of God, which generously extends relationship to all.

Harper’s Bible Dictionary defines hospitality as the act of friendship shown to a visitor. In the ancient Near East, hospitality was the process of “receiving” outsiders and changing them from strangers to guests. So, hospitality differs from entertaining family and friends. When a stranger leaves the host, if the encounter has been positive, the stranger has changed into a guest and sings the praises of the host. Genesis 18 tells the story of Abraham and Sarah as they encounter three men who were traveling near their tent. Abraham looked up, saw the men standing near him, ran from his home to meet them, and bowed down to the ground in greeting. He invited them to linger there, offering water to wash their feet, rest for them under the shade of a tree, and food to eat before they continued on their journey. These gestures of hospitality were received and Abraham and Sarah were blessed with the promise of a child, even though they were advanced in years.

Generous hospitality does make all the difference – not just to the one who receives, but also to the one who extends. Abraham and Sarah extended themselves to the three strangers, and in so doing encountered God and were blessed beyond imagination!

Keep your eyes open as you look for a visitor in our midst!

Yours in Christ,

*Judi*