

Sixth Mark: Makes room for all
being inclusive rather than exclusive

- **Welcome: works to include newcomers into the life of the church**
- **Children and young people: are helped to belong, contribute and be nurtured in their faith**
- **Enquirers are encouraged to explore and experience faith in Christ**
- **Diversities: different social and ethnic backgrounds, mental and physical abilities, and ages, are seen as a strength**

Welcome: works to include newcomers into the life of the church.

There are a range of levels of response to the work of welcome, as noted below:

- Some churches consider themselves welcoming because everyone who is currently 'in' the church feels at home there. But, how do things look from 'outside' the existing membership?
- Other churches welcome newcomers within a narrow band. They want 'people like us' and give out subtle signals that freeze out anyone who is different.
- There are churches who talk about welcome – 'Newcomers are warmly invited to stay for coffee after the service, etc.' But in practice, regular members huddle in groups while visitors are left to fend for themselves.
- There are churches that give a verbal welcome. You might be greeted at the door, shown to a seat, even introduced to a couple of church members. But, what happens after we have said the initial 'hello'?

- Some churches welcome newcomers to services and church activities, but the welcome is to be part of the audience. They want more people at the Carol Concert or the Christmas Tree Festival, but hold back on welcome into deeper personal relationships/ entry into church life in a more profound way.
- There are churches that *incorporate* newcomers. This is costly because it means making others part of our life, allowing the warmth of the friendships we enjoy to be taken, broken open, blessed and given to others with whom the only thing we may have in common is our faith in Christ. It may take time to realise that our common humanity is something we share and is enriched by our differences. A good analogy might be the image of a couple welcoming their first child into their shared life; major changes are required for the well-being of the whole family. As Raymond Fung has put it: '*... love of God and others is not just the church's foreign policy it's its domestic policy too.*'

Some research has been done into why people who start coming to church sometimes stop coming after a few weeks, while others becomes full and long-term members. The importance of forming significant relationships with people who were already members was highlighted as a significant factor. In the research for one particular church revealed the following statistics:

Of newcomers who formed a relationship with 6 members of the church in their first 6 months of attending, 98 per cent stayed.

For those who made no significant relationship, only 2 per cent stayed.

The percentage of those who stayed went up steadily for every one significant relationship that a newcomer made. That is the heart of welcome, opening our hearts, ourselves and our lives to others.

Children and young people: are helped to belong, contribute and be nurtured in their faith

Contemporary society is much less connected between generations. People tend to relate within fairly narrow age bands. The Gospel calls us to reach out across those divides. Churches that do so are more likely to be churches to which people are attracted.

Churches that have no one under 60 years old sometimes express a desire 'to have young people in church.' This can be translated as wanting children and young people to stay quiet and attentive in services and activities designed for adults. Changing things for the sake of the young people is not really wanted. This is not encouraging children and young people to *belong*, but to *attend*.

A lot of adaptation will have been made on the journey towards a younger church. The existence of people in the younger age bands will enable the children and young adults to be more easily incorporated into the life of the church. Healthy churches make sure they are aiming at honest, realistic and achievable goals.

Enquirers are encouraged to explore and experience faith in Christ

The first mark of a healthy church, that it is being energized by faith, finds expression in the nurturing of the faith of its members, rather than assuming faith. These churches see the faith as providing 'resources for living'. Such churches also do the same for those enquiring about the faith. That enquiry may take the form of asking direct questions about what Christians believe, but is more likely to be in the form of a desire to 'make sense of life.'

Some churches have spotted that the typical Sunday service is not necessarily the best or right place for an enquirer to start, simply because they want to ask questions, and that rarely fits with most public acts of worship. So wise churches develop ways into membership appropriate for the people with whom they have contact. This is why Fresh Expressions or Cell Church has a very significant role to play in the future of inherited church.

Diversities: different social and ethnic backgrounds, mental and physical abilities, and ages, are seen as a strength

At its best, the church should be a rich and diverse community, held together by the love of God and one another rather than by any limited socially shared background we might have in common.

In the research on which *Hope for the Church* (Bob Jackson) is based, it was discovered that churches that had some engagement with young people, churches that had an ethnic mix, and churches that were using the Alpha course were all more likely to be growing than the average church.

Bob Jackson viewed these three factors as symptomatic of a deeper truth about these churches. These churches had clearly developed the ability to incorporate people who were of different ages, different ethnic groups and people who were not currently churchgoers. Churches that are able to embrace such diversity are more likely to grow simply because there are more doors through which people can enter the life of the church.

Let's pray

Lord God,
Bringer of good news,
through your Son, amaze us!
Help us to think what we he might like
if he were among us today.
May we be able to make church relevant,
to make it a place of welcome and refuge,
to draw people in to worship
and to reach out to those who have never called on you.
Give us the inspiration and confidence
to follow your disciples' footsteps
and engage with people where they are-
and where you are.

Amen.

Study Passages

Isaiah 65: 17-25

- What is God's agenda?
- Who else is working on God's agenda?
- How can we join in with what *they* are doing?

Matthew 8: 1-17: What on earth did he see in them?

Meditation

The church is called upon to embody the life of Jesus Christ, who told his disciples that:

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many, (Matthew 20: 28).