

1 Corinthians 12:407, 12-14, 26-27
Welcome a Stranger, Welcome Christ
WRCoB 7.23.23

There's nothing wrong with a small church like ours.

In fact, her most effective tool
Which larger churches struggle to emulate
Is her sense of community!

But it can also be her most destructive tool!

A small church can be its best or worse
Depending on how functional or dysfunctional
She may be.

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One of the taglines I have appreciated from the Brethren is

1

Continuing the Work of Jesus
Peacefully Simply Together!

Together is the part I want to talk about.

Small churches do things together.

We worship together
We study the Bible together
We serve our community together

Most everything we do, we do together.

There are no generational divisions here.

Being a part of a community that is generational
Is priceless in a world
Where very little of that goes on.

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The negative side of course
Is a community plagued by dysfunction.

Things like

2

- Gossip
- Power struggles
- Family owned and operated
- Attitude of exclusivity
- Self-centeredness

The small church will make us, or it will break us.

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In our Scripture Lesson

We read over the Apostle Paul's shoulder
As he writes to the church in Corinth.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that what binds them together
Is unity in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

There is one baptism and one Spirit.

And within that community of faith
There is a variety of gifts

But it is the same God who works in all people
To the benefit of the greater good.

The Spirit is the glue that keeps them bound together.

It is not family ties, not ethnicity, not culture
Not race, or language, or tribe or gender, or age

But the Spirit!

And each person within the community
Is absolutely essential to the whole.

Each having skills and gifts needed
To enable and empower the community.

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Paul compares the community of faith with that of a body.

Jesus is the head.

And we are the various parts
Each with a vital role to play.

Some bring gifts to preach and teach.
Some bring gifts of music, voice, and song.

Some are gifted with administration
Or accounting
Or showing hospitality.

Some are gifted for the physical aspects of church.

Mowing lawns, trimming bushes
Fixing the toilet, raking leaves
And changing the furnace filters!!

And all are gifted to be in mission.

But like a body

Every part is as essential as the other.

No part plays a bigger role than any other.

And everyone has a part to play

In the life of the community.

Sometimes roles change with age and experience.

But in a healthy, functioning church

Everyone will find a niche in the body of Christ

And with Jesus as the head of the church

The church will be **THE** healthy functioning

That Christ meant it to be.

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So what does this have to do with hospitality?

A church community can be a friendly church

But not necessarily a welcoming church!

You may hear a bunch of chatter

Brothers and sisters greeting each other.

But how about the newcomer

The first-time visitor

Or the one who has come several times

Are they involved with the chit-chat?

Quite often there is what I'd call *Pew Dynamics*.
Here's an example.

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"Welcome to our church—even though
you're sitting in our family pew . . ."

Or this.

When a visitor comes in
Where do they sit in the sanctuary?

Often towards the back.

Now, where do the church's introverts usually sit?

Quite often towards the back
Or along the outside edges.

See the dynamics?

The church may be a friendly church
But pew dynamics may prevent someone
From feeling the friendliness.

And even if a church is initially a friendly church
She may not be a welcoming church.

It's an important distinction
Relating to Paul's comments
From our passage today.

Once a visitor moves from an occasional visitor
To an active participant

How well is the church at incorporating them
Into the life of the congregation?

Welcoming a new participant involves
Helping them find their niche in the body of Christ.

What are their gifts?
Where are their interests?
What is their passion?

They can't do that on their own.

And that's where many churches fail.

Visitors might say the church is friendly
But they have a hard time fitting in

Either because they don't know how or where to engage

Or because the church
Doesn't give them opportunities to engage

Truly helping someone belong
We need to help them find a place
To use their God-given gifts.

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I remember years ago
A man in his forties and his family
Started attending a church I served.

Over the months they became more and more involved

People were friendly towards them.

He and his wife accepted Jesus there
In that little country church, I pastored

They were baptized and became members

They loved the little church.

The man would often come to me
And ask to be more engaged in church life.

The church didn't have a lot going on.

And he really didn't know where his interests were

Since he was a business man
I suggested he serve on the church board.

Boy, was that a mistake!

It was a dysfunctional board
With a couple of really negative people.

In a matter of months
He left the church never to return

The problem, as I see it, was two-fold.

The church was a friendly church
But not a welcoming church.

They made him feel good
But they didn't make room for him.

The church couldn't help him find his niche in the body.

And the church board was a dysfunctional mess.

Maybe I assumed administrative work was his niche.

Maybe he needed to serve in a homeless shelter
Or he needed to visit nursing homes.

The church has to know how to move a person
From being a visitor to being a part of the body.

So, here's my list of things we could do
To help people to become a part of the body of Christ
Here at West Richmond.

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1. **Make room for people to get involved.** All of our areas of mission and ministry must have room for new people to engage, whether it is helping out at the veteran's shelter or taking a turn as worship leader.
2. **Focus work around your mission.** What is our mission? What is the collective work we are doing as the body of Christ? If we don't know, then we should start praying about it.
3. **Create a culture where engagement is expected.** Most people are not just looking for a one-hour Sunday morning experience. They want to get involved. People have something to offer. We need to come together to find their gifts and make a way for them to be used.
4. **Stop catering to members who treat the church as a private club.** This was from Carrey Nieuwhof. There are churches like that. There seems to be no room for the new member to be a part of the community. The club has reached its membership limits.

- 5. Seek to not only be a welcoming church but an inviting church.** Welcoming is a passive act. It is waiting at the door for a first-time visitor to arrive. Inviting is active. It is missional. You show hospitality wherever you are. Because hospitality is of the heart and not the hearth.

It will take an effort to find places
For everyone in the body of Christ.

The good news is there is a place at the table for everyone.

And everyone has a role to play in the body of Christ.

There is always room.

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Paul says in our passage today
That there is a diversity of gifts in the body.

So too, he says there is diversity in the gift-givers as well.

The beauty of it all is that
As the body is composed of different parts
They are all unique and vital to the whole.

The body cannot do without each part represented.

We need diversity in our gifts
And in our gift-givers.

Eugene Peterson says in his Message
Paraphrasing Paul's passage

The old labels we once used to identify ourselves—labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive.

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I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less.

7

You are Christ's body—that's who you are. You must never forget this.

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The bottom line in the sacred art of hospitality
Is to welcome the stranger, guest, and new member.

Everyone has a role to play in the body of Christ

We all have the same access to the same Spirit

We are no longer strangers
But fellow citizens in God's kingdom
And part of the family of God.

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Ephesians 2:17-19 CEB

¹⁷ When [Jesus] came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were far away from God and to those who were near. ¹⁸ We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit.

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¹⁹ So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household.

It's missional, its evangelism, its hospitality at its best.
Welcome a stranger, welcome Christ.