

We Will No Longer be a Welcoming Church

Posted on March 12, 2013 by Rob Moss



We've decided to quit being a welcoming church. No kidding.

We're giving it up. It won't be easy, but we're committed to it. We'll have to do it in stages, easing our folks into it step by step. We'll have to deal with the fear of something new, the challenge of venturing into the unknown. But we'll do it. It will take motivation, leadership, and constant reminders. But most importantly, it will take total commitment in embracing a new focus.

Like so many churches, we've sunk an amazing amount of time and energy into becoming a welcoming church. We changed worship styles, we trained greeters and ushers, we wore name tags, we percolated coffee, we went to workshops on hospitality, we put our friendliest people in the most prominent places on Sunday mornings. But we've realized we've been misplacing our emphasis. So we're no longer going to do it.

Here's what we're doing instead. We are becoming an Inviting Church. That's different. You see, "welcoming" from a missional perspective is passive. It denotes waiting for visitors and guests to drop by. When they do, we attempt to treat them very well and do everything possible to make them comfortable. We'll be willing to change who we are. We'll follow particular formats that have proven to be more welcoming to new people. We'll do whatever it takes to have them come back the next Sunday, even if they shouldn't. Welcoming is about us, not about them.

"Inviting," however, is different. That means we leave the comfort of our congregational home-court advantage. The main activity doesn't happen in our worship space when people drop in, but in the neighborhood when we go out. It isn't so much welcoming them into our place, but going out into their place and meeting them there.

Even that warrants a significant caveat. This is not just another gimmick to get people into the church. The foundation of this isn't an attempt to bolster declining membership rolls and make a better parochial report to the bishop. No, it goes much deeper than that. It starts with who God has called us to be as church. It involves discovering our gifts and purpose. And it mandates joining God at work in the world. This isn't about getting the world into God's church; it's about getting the church into God's world.

If you've read any postings on this blog before, you know that God's mission is what we are to be about. Everything comes from that—including the identity of the church. We exist as church only because God has a mission. Our purpose, our very identity, is called forth out of God's loving care and redemptive activity in creation. We are steeped in God's mission. We are drenched through baptism into this essential character of God. God is at work in the world, and creates, calls, and equips the church specifically for that work.

Each congregation has a purpose within God’s mission. Each congregation has particular gifts. Each congregation reveals the life-giving reign of God in unique ways. No congregation is everything to everyone. But every congregation is something to someone. Who can know God through your worship style? Who can experience forgiveness and grace through your congregational community? Who needs the gifts you have to offer? Who can offer gifts you need? Knowing those things, when in conversation over the backyard fence about their pain in losing a loved one, it would be natural then to invite that neighbor to your congregation’s grief support group that has made such a difference for many others. When in the employee lunch room chatting about the pressures of our jobs, it would fit to invite that coworker to your congregation’s spiritual direction group for professionals. When sharing the struggles of parenthood with a friend while waiting for your kids to come out of school, it would make sense to invite their whole family to your cross-generational faith development where you have gained so much guidance from other parents. While paying for a car repair, your long-time mechanic lets slip that she has lost her faith, it would easily flow for you to invite her to join you (and all the other doubters who will gather this Sunday) in worship.

Welcoming involves hoping whoever happens to find you will join. Inviting involves sharing God’s specific gifts—made real in your congregation—in the world.

Based on a council study of the book, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* by Chip and Dan Heath (Broadway Books, a division of Random House, Inc., N.Y. Copyright © 2010 by Chip Heath and Dan Heath) <http://www.amazon.com/Switch-Change-Things-When-Hard>, my congregation is going about this transition from being welcoming to becoming inviting in three specific ways. One leadership team is taking the lead for each portion. Each of these three approaches will be the topic of an upcoming post on this blog. As a preview, however, they are: motivating people to invite, taking on invitation in bite-size pieces, and changing the inviting environment. We aren’t sure what the final results will be, but we’re excited to find out. Join us on this journey as we jump off the cliff and (hopefully) learn to fly.

We Will No Longer Be A Welcoming Church, Pt. 2: The Motivation!

Posted on March 18, 2013 by Rob Moss

Last week, I posted on this site that my congregation is no longer going to emphasize “welcoming.” Instead, we are going to emphasize “inviting.” I encourage you to get the vision, theology, and definitions that are foundational in that Part 1 post at:

[We-WillNo-Longer-be-a-Welcoming-Church](#). There, I wrote that we are making this change with three emphases—this post is the first of those three: Motivation for Inviting.

The fact is that you can encourage, threaten, explain, and even manipulate all you want. But if people aren’t motivated to invite others, it pretty much isn’t going to happen. Especially when it comes to church, because—let’s face it—we’ve done a poor job of making the church a desirable (much less helpful) community of which to be a part. My congregational folks know it and so do yours. That’s why they rarely invite. Isn’t there a statistic somewhere that says the average mainline person invites someone to worship once every fourteen years? There are reasons for that! Yes, our folks are happy to welcome new people if they happen to show up at church, but the vast majority of people in our congregations just aren’t motivated to invite others.



We can work really hard to try to get people to invite anyway—attempting to explain that a lot of people actually are open to coming to a church if invited (there are statistics on that too; again, not the point). But they aren't going to go for it. Probably just like you, we've worked that angle too. Folks aren't willing to take that risk. To me, that approach has, by and large, been a waste of time.

So rather than continue to push water uphill, we are going to try a different approach. We will simply raise the motivation to invite above the reluctance to invite. Sounds simple, right? Here are some ways we are attempting this:

Discover Your Ministries: My congregation is not a large one. In my denomination we are pretty much a medium sized church. And yet, even in a place where people think they know everyone and everything that goes on, we find that no one knows all the ministry that actually is happening through our congregation. It's surprising, actually. It turns out that lots of people in our church are doing some pretty exciting things—and hardly anyone knows about it. Sure, there's all the normal (and wonderful!) things that are in the monthly newsletter: the food pantry drive, the youth mission trip to Tijuana (BTW, watch for a future blog post on why calling these trips “mission trips” does a huge disservice to our theology and purpose as church!), and the dedicated crew that works with Habitat for Humanity. But when you take the time to listen, people in our churches are living their faith in the broader community in amazing ways! Find those hidden gems; the reign of God is being revealed in ways that haven't had much press. So, we are discovering these ministries and finding ways to highlight them. Awareness of what we, collectively, are actually doing is a must in order to be motivated to invite. Who knows, in a conversation with a friend, you may discover that an already existing ministry in your church actually would benefit them.

Articulate the Passion: We are asking people in our congregation what they love about it. We are videoing any number of people asking that question and will be using our social media sites, as well as other ways, to share the answers. There are people who are committed to your congregation, right? Find out why! Give them an opportunity to say it out loud—let them articulate their passion. Helping people vocalize their love for their church not only concretizes those reasons in their own minds, but gives them good practice in saying it out loud. Young, old, male, female, straight-laced, free-spirited, etc.—the more diverse you can make the answers, the bigger a picture of the giftedness of your congregation will be revealed. Again, use whatever means you can think of to highlight these things that make your congregation special. Write them up, make posters, presentations, put them on your web page, and more. It is important that all these reasons for being part of your congregation be known to as many as possible. Enthusiasm is contagious. Let it work for you!

Go Public: One of the big surprises as this process unfolds is that it is becoming apparent that our church is actually more than any of us thought. Instead of being a small, typical, 50-year-old mainline church, we are closer to being a well-kept secret gold mine. So we are making our giftedness public. Sure, we have a web site and a Facebook page. But they are pretty underutilized. We are making social media our best friend. You'd be surprised how many 80 year olds have a Facebook account! So we are asking all our ministry leaders to take photos and/or videos of their ministry in action (or inaction), and post them on our congregation's Facebook page. Most people have a cell phone with a camera on it, encourage them to use it! We have someone monitoring these posts just to make sure that everything up there is more or less appropriate (we are getting written parental permission for kids' pictures to be on our social media sites), but pretty much anything goes. We are also asking members to encourage their Facebook friends to “like” our congregation's page. We're considering having a “1,000 new likes in the next month” or something like that.

The reason for all this social media stuff is partly about getting helpful information about our church into a public arena. But just as importantly, it's about getting our own members to be more aware of all that is

happening in their own church! The Holy Spirit is at work among us in ways we may not see. Social media is accessible, instant, and already utilized by many people in our congregations. And even if you discover there aren't that many on Facebook (though you'll be surprised how many are), teach them how to use it. I needed someone to show me how to post pictures to the church social media sites (and need periodic re-training), but any twelve year old in your church can teach that. And what a wonderful way to help younger members understand that they have something valuable to offer. The technology they take for granted is important to the rest of the church! While you're at it, have that twelve year old link your church's web page, Facebook page (start one today!), and Twitter account (start that one too!).

Social media is great for instant communication, connection, and information. But don't stop there. Collect all the pictures and videos that people are taking and put together PowerPoint presentations to show after worship on several Sundays. Emphasize different aspects, e.g., "why I love my church" one week, "little known ministries we do in our world" another week, and "one thing I've learned about my church in the last month" on another week. The more people know about their church, the more amazed they are and excited they become. And the more excited they become, the more motivated they are, perhaps, to invite someone to experience the faith community they love.

The basis of our identity as people of God is our new life given to us in Jesus Christ. When we quit pushing that on others and simply "be" that through caring relationships with others, we reveal the love of God. And who knows? Those that are invited might reveal something about God that we didn't know before. Oh, but wait. Remember? This isn't about how the church can benefit, but how our neighbors can. Jesus Christ is alive and creating new life in the world—including in our congregations. How life-giving it is when we notice that, articulate that, and thereby are motivated to share that.

Inviting (Not Welcoming) in Bite-Sized Chunks. Pt. 3 Posted on April 3, 2013 by Rob Moss

A few weeks ago, I posted on this site that my congregation is no longer going to emphasize "welcoming." Instead, we are going to emphasize "inviting." This is a move from passivity to activity, and must be done in keeping with God's missional activity in our neighborhoods. I encourage you to get



the vision, theology, and definitions that are foundational in the initial, Part 1 post at: [We-Will-NoLonger-be-a-Welcoming-Church](#). There, I wrote that we are making this change with three emphases. The first of those, "Motivation for Inviting," is available here. This, now, is the second emphasis, "Inviting (Not Welcoming) in Bite-Size Chunks."

Let's face it, change is hard. Most of us resist it, grudgingly accepting its reality only when it is forced upon us. Partly this is true because change is scary, and partly because it forces us to acknowledge we can't always control it (well, actually, that's scary too). So I guess when you come down to it, change is frightening. Is it any wonder, then, that we generally resist stepping way outside our comfort zone and established pattern of behavior to invite a friend to come to worship? This is terrifying! We are all afraid a) that our friend will laugh us out of the room. b) that they will tell all their friends that we're narrowminded, judgmental, hypocritical Bible-thumpers, or c) that they might actually come. Then what?

Because the change we are asking congregational members to make is too much, too big, too audacious, to frightening, we simply don't ask, and they simply wouldn't do it anyway. Let's accept that reality and quit fighting it. Then, perhaps, we can make some progress.

You know the old joke, "Q: How do you eat an elephant? A: One bite at a time." OK, it's not funny, but it is true. The same strategy holds true for inviting. It's just too much for most people to risk or try. So how about breaking it down into bite-size chunks that people actually can do? Here's the way we're doing it in my congregation. See if something along these lines might work for you.

Month 1: We ask people to use the phrase "my church" in a conversation with one person each week. Really simple: "Just go two blocks past my church and you'll see the grocery store." "No, I can't go camping this weekend; I've already made plans to be at my church." "Yes, I saw the sunset last night. The view from my church was amazing!" Just one person, one time each week during the month. Have them make up scenarios and practice with each other before worship on Sundays.

We purchased some promotional items with our church logo on them to aid in these conversations. Cloth grocery totes, string packs, water bottles, etc. things that people will have with them in public. They aren't all that expensive and you can pretty easily recoup the expense by selling them to your members at a reasonable price. So when you go to the bank, the bank teller may well ask, "What a handy back pack. Where'd you get that?" And we would answer, "I got this at (all together, now) my church."

Month 2: We ask people to consider one word or phrase that describes our church well. Then use that word to finish the phrase, "my church is ____." Again, do this in conversation with one person per week during the month. "My church is struggling with that very issue." "School violence? My church is hosting a forum about that next month." "That's a hard situation. I've found my church is very supportive in difficult times."

When people are watching for opportunities to do these quick, relatively small steps toward invitation, it's amazing how many opportunities there suddenly are to take them. Ask them to share their stories with each other of their experiences. You can even award prizes for the funniest, the most awkward, the most creative, etc. Make this fun, but keep it in front of them.

Month 3: We ask people to think about one thing our congregation does very well. Perhaps it's children's ministry, education, music, social activism, or making the parking lot available for ride-sharing. Then use that to finish the phrase, "My church is really good at ____." Again, one time per week to one person in a conversation. By now, some of them are getting the hang of this. A few might even be eager! Let them roll with it. That enthusiasm can become contagious. Encourage them to practice on each other and share their impressions of what their church is good at. This can feed into the motivational part covered in the previous post.

Month 4: We ask people to invite one person to check out something in which our church is involved. "Check out our volunteer day at the food pantry." "Check out my church's Alcoholics Anonymous Group." "Check out the hiking trip my church is sponsoring." This is all done in appropriate conversations when an opening presents itself. People, understand the organic nature of these statements, and that they shouldn't be forced or manipulated. By this time, people are actually seeing appropriate openings and are better able to bring up their church in a way that is natural and not off-putting.

Month 5: We ask people to invite someone to come to worship with them. This seems to be the most frightening invitation for many to make. But when broken into bite-size pieces, it can be attained.

Worship attendance isn't necessarily the most important invitation, but it seems to be the hardest—leaving people feeling the most vulnerable. So we include it. If folks can invite to worship, they can make appropriate invitations to pretty much anything.

Now the question becomes, “what happens when our folks start inviting others to worship? How will these people be received? Will it be worth their time?” That, my friends, is the next installment of this invitational series. I invite your comments and partnership along the journey.

An Inviting Environment (No Longer Welcoming, Pt. 4)

Posted on April 10, 2013 by Rob Moss

A few weeks ago, I posted on this site that my congregation is no longer going to emphasize “welcoming.” Instead, we are going to emphasize “inviting.” This is a move from passivity to activity, and was to be done in keeping with God’s missional activity in our neighborhoods. Get the vision, theology, and definitions that are the foundation at: [We-Will-No-Longer-be-a-Welcoming-Church](#). There, I wrote that we are making this change with three emphases.

The first of those is Motivating-for-Invitation. The second emphasis is Inviting-in-Bite-Size-Chunks. This post is the third emphasis, “An Inviting Environment.”

It started with coffee. Very few worshipers were staying on Sunday to share a cup or a piece of cake or a slice of cantaloupe (we always have good treats!). Virtually no visitors in worship stuck around. Granted, our “coffee area” was less than conducive to invitation. It was pushed into an available corner back by the kitchen. Though visible from the worship area, it was small and not very accessible. If one person filled their cup and then began a conversation while still in front of the urn (because there was no other place to move), the coffee’s availability to anyone else was cut off. Because we have no narthex (lobby) area, this was really the least bad option for the placement of our sacramental coffee. Yet it obviously wasn’t working.



As our council talked through our “Invitation Initiative,” it became clear to us that our environment was far from invitation-friendly. Some changes in our worship/fellowship space would be required if all those people being invited were to feel welcomed.

Now I know this sounds like “welcoming” instead of “inviting.” And, in fact, that’s partially true. Bear in mind, we weren’t giving up on welcoming; we were just placing invitation as a significantly higher priority which would get our best energy and focus. Beyond just the “welcoming” aspect of our space, however, there was a genuine invitation issue around worship and the follow-up coffee and treats.

For us, relationships are everything. We believe that the Triune God is God-in-Relationship. We believe that as beings created in God’s image, we are relational people. We believe that authentic relationships in the broader community are the best way we can reveal the reign of God and participate in God’s missional activity. Relationships are key in our congregation’s statement of purpose. Therefore, this “coffee time” comes out of our core identity. It is here that we have a chance to share, to talk, to get to know new people, to laugh together, to strengthen relationships. It’s not the only way, but it is an important way. Our

configuration wasn't allowing this to happen. Invitation, particularly to the relational coffee urn, was being unintentionally discouraged. We needed a more invitational environment.

So we looked at our overall space and considered where the most invitational place for coffee et al would be. For us, it turned out to be in a large open area that was adjacent to our worship space. By adjacent, I actually mean included. Right up the right hand side. That would be fine, except for setting up coffee and the treat table toward the end of our first worship service each Sunday would be a bit distracting, to say the least.

Someone asked why don't we reconfigure the worship space so that new coffee area would be in the back rather than along the side. That would be fine, but now we've got a back lighting issue from large windows there. Plus the projector and screen used for portions of worship would then be in the wrong place and not easily visible. Lots of other small issues kept emerging.

It was discouraging. These obstacles could have piled up and overwhelmed us. But instead, we took this as an opportunity to enhance our worship space, making it work better, be more inspiring, and be more attractive than before. With some imagination (and some unused memorial money) we have a much more attractive worship space and a much more invitational coffee space. The difference in the environment—physically, spiritually, and invitationally—was amazing.

On the Sunday morning when this was all unveiled, we pointed out that the change in environment also serves as a tangible reminder of our emphasis on invitation. The environment wasn't changed just for you, it was also for those who aren't here. Our environment is invitational for the neighborhood's sake, so each of us could invite others more freely. Oh, and as long as you've invited them to worship, make sure you invite them to coffee, too.

About the Author: Rev. Dr. Robert Moss has been pastor at Lutheran Church of the Master (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) in Lakewood, CO since 1998 after serving congregations in Nebraska and Oklahoma. Born in Boston, Rob grew up in Ogden, Utah, and graduated from the University of Utah in Salt Lake City with a degree in Geography. He received a Master of Divinity from LutherNorthwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, and a Doctor of Ministry degree (Congregational Mission and Leadership) from Luther Seminary. Pastor Rob recently served as the ELCA's Interim Director for Evangelical Mission and Team Leader for Expanding Vision in the Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA. He is married to Lois and they have three grown children: Greg, Emily, and Phil. Pastor Rob is passionate about helping LCM and the broader church fulfill its purpose as part of God's mission of care and redemption of the world