

Quintessentials

Top 5 insights for ministry from our team in the field



Catholic Leadership
INSTITUTE

5 Steps to Transform Parish Hospitality

Hospitality is a hallmark of a thriving parish, fulfilling St. Paul's call for believers to welcome the stranger. However, too often, newcomers or visitors to a church are treated indifferently, or, if they are noticed, simply greeted at the door with a smile and a "good morning." Even longtime parishioners can feel largely invisible, especially in large parishes or newly merged parishes, which are becoming the norm in many dioceses.

In an increasingly secular world, parishes are striving to both maintain and grow their flocks through evangelization and efforts to increase engagement. Hospitality can be a key strategy.

Research by Catholic Leadership Institute (CLI) demonstrates the importance of a welcoming, supportive, and inclusive culture in building parish engagement. This is reflected in results from CLI's Disciple Maker Index (DMI), a 75-question survey that invites parishioners to reflect on where they are on their journey of discipleship and enables parish leadership to make data-driven decisions to help parishioners grow in their faith. Specifically, DMI data show a correlation between people who actively invite others to parish activities are those who are more likely to feel their parish provides them and their family support in times of need.

However, many Catholic parishes have only scratched the surface in becoming a truly welcoming community. Greeting Mass-goers on Sunday mornings is certainly a worthwhile gesture, but the Holy Spirit calls parish leaders and members to strive for deeper, more personal connections.

The following are five steps to help a parish transform from offering a simple welcome/hospitality program to building a deeper culture of connection, community, and relationship.

"Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

- Hebrews 13:1-2



1. The pastor needs to set the tone

Hospitality is one of the top priorities in the pastoral plans of many parishes because it goes beyond the Sunday experience by inviting people into discipleship and to become involved in the life of the community. An essential element to creating a truly welcoming parish is visible leadership by the pastor and other clergy.

- Make a commitment (as priests & deacons) to hospitality and to live up to that commitment at every Mass.**
 - Be available both before and after Mass to greet parishioners and visitors.
 - Offer a heartfelt welcome from the altar at the start of every Mass.
 - Invite Mass attendees to greet and introduce themselves to those around them before the processional.
 - Call those at Mass to root themselves in the parish and grow in community with their brothers and sisters.

- Continue living up to this commitment in every parish event and ministry.**
 - Make an effort to learn people's names and acknowledge new faces.
 - Set an example as one who serves as a connecting agent between people of similar interests and experiences.
 - Have necessary, sometimes difficult, conversations with ministry leaders and staff to break up natural cliques, territorialism, and a sense of "ownership" to open up ministries to new members and ideas.

2. Consider Disbanding the Hospitality Committee and Greeters

Hospitality and welcoming committees are populated by great people who want their parish to grow and thrive. While well-intentioned, a committee approach isn't necessarily the best way to build community.

- Understand why committees are ineffective.**
 - The formal structure of committees can make it feel forced and unnatural.
 - Regular meetings and minutes can give the impression of a club or group rather than a mission.
 - Assignments and reports can lead to superficial relationships based on numbers rather than deep individualized connections.

- Sunset the hospitality committee.**
 - Genuinely thank members for their work and commitment. Invite them to be a part of this new mission: hospitality as a *culture*.
 - Emphasize a focus of being out among the people rather than participating in another club or group.
 - Eliminate the overwhelming (and often off-putting) wall of greeters at Sunday Mass. All should be welcomed by the parish through the forming of meaningful, individualized connections and relationships with members of the community.



3. Identify and Build a Network of “Connectors”

Some people have God-given gifts of connectedness, positivity, empathy, and important communication skills such as active listening. They’re outgoing without being pushy; friendly but not intimidating. They know how to hear about someone’s life or interest and make a connection to their own experience or even better, another member of the community, helping people feel a greater sense of belonging. Instead of greeters, these people can serve as “connectors” within the community.

Identify community members with the gift of connection.

- Encourage parish community members to take a skill or charism assessments such as StrengthsFinder (now called CliftonStrengths, part of the Gallup organization) or Many Parts Ministries.
 - Keep an inventory of these results and evaluate them for the natural gifts of a “connector.”
 - If you are familiar with the community, you may be able to identify individuals with these gifts who would be well suited for the roll even without them taking the assessment.
- Focus on those who have these necessary skills and abilities, not simply those who would be willing to participate.

Invite the identified community members to join the network.

- Rather than sending a general invitation for parish connectors, be intentional in calling identified individuals by name, one on one, to become part of this vital network.
- Don’t exclude introverts while finding connectors. People who are uncomfortable in large groups often are great in this role, because they are actually much more naturally gifted in making one-on-one or small conversation. They’re less overwhelming to others, and can be better listeners.

Share the primary responsibilities of connectors.

- To keep eyes open for people who they don’t know, or know well. This can include newcomers as well as established or longtime parishioners.
- To introduce themselves to these people before and/or after Mass with the intent of establishing rapport and beginning a relationship.
 - This is *not* the time to invite people to participate in a specific parish ministry or event.
- It helps to identify a captain to lead these efforts. This could be a parish staffer, parish council member, or anyone with the skills, abilities, and time to recruit and coordinate a large network of connectors.



APPENDIX I

Connector Role
Description

4. Set Clear Expectations and Offer Training and Formation

Clearly define the reason for this effort and the role of a connector, establishing guidelines and resources to help them live into this effort.

Understand the role of “Connector.”

- Help them understand that while they represent the parish, they’re not asked to provide a rundown of parish activities, groups, ministries, and staff.
- Their goal is to provide a friendly, welcoming, non-threatening presence for those facing a new and unknown situation.
- Begin by getting to know the person’s family situation and what’s going on in their life.

Take the next step.

- Identify steps and a pathway, beyond the initial introduction, to help build the relationship between the newcomer and the parish.
- Recognize that patience is key; the connector needs to listen to understand each newcomer’s readiness for deeper engagement.
- Taking cues from these brief conversations, the connector should be able to understand when it’s appropriate to take next steps.

These could include:

- introducing them to a fellow parishioner with similar interests or experiences.
- inviting the person to a parish event or ministry.
- getting together for coffee or lunch.



Training and Formation

The pastor should meet with the connector team at least once, if not twice, a year, to set the tone and expectations.

Connectors benefit from training and formation in the concepts of welcoming and active listening. Such a program could include real-life examples from the captain and others based on their personal experiences, both as parish newcomers and as established parishioners. Captains also should send regular emails of support to members of the group, sharing success stories of people coming to the parish for the first time.

Training could include talking points to help connectors formulate their welcoming introductions. Plus, role-playing activities can help everyone hone their skills so they are best prepared for this role. However, this role should emphasize authenticity and avoid being formulaic.



APPENDIX II

Training Resource for
Parish Connectors

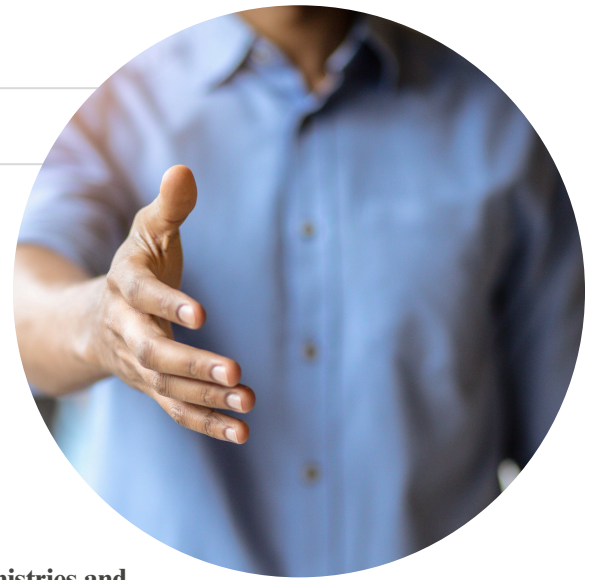
5. Reinforce Parish Touchpoints

Consider how to support a welcoming culture through already established parish groups and tools.

Highlight personal stories.

- Using Flocknotes and social media channels, share brief snippets - identified by the newcomer's connector - about them and what interests them.
- Be sure to focus more on who they are than on what they do.

Infuse the concepts of welcoming and relationship building into ministries and groups across the parish, as well as during the opening and closing of the Mass.



HOW ONE PARISH IS CREATING A WELCOMING COMMUNITY

Nativity of Our Lord Parish in Warminster, Pennsylvania, has instituted Hospitality Sunday – also referred to as Donut Sunday. What started as a traditional Sunday donut event is now dedicated to developing community after Mass; a time to socialize, make friends, and develop ongoing relationships with others in the parish.

Parish parents coordinate food, with special themes for each week's get-together. A section of the church hall is dedicated to activities and crafts for children. It's an environment where families are fed, hearts are nourished, and guests are transformed into family.

Donut Sunday springs from one of the parish's priorities in its Next Generation Parish planning focused on "welcome, music, and hospitality."

"It all goes back to that first impression, that initial welcome: if anyone has something to say about Nativity of Our Lord Parish, I want them to say it's a welcoming parish and community," said Fr. Joe Watson, pastor. "I know that can be trite at times

and that a lot of parish bulletins will say 'St. So and So is a welcoming community.' But I want that to be a reality. I want people to feel at home in the church."

"I think ours is already a welcoming parish and that we can continue to grow by inviting everyone in the pew to feel like it's also their mission to be welcoming to others," said Ann Marie Gervino, Director of Adult Faith Formation, who is spearheading the Next Generation Parish initiative with Fr. Watson. "It's not just a role that belongs to the pastor, myself, or other leaders. Everyone has a role to play in creating a welcoming parish environment. In this way, we can all cultivate a place that this and future generations can call their spiritual home."

Scan the QR code to read more about hospitality at Nativity of Our Lord Parish.



Next Steps

As Catholic parishes continue to evolve and change in dioceses across the country, it's even more important that they establish a robust welcoming climate, rooted in a community built on relationships – relationships among parishioners, between parishioners and pastoral staff, and ultimately, with Jesus Christ. Because in order to make a parish bigger, you have to make it feel smaller.

This concept is supported by creating a culture of encounter. First and foremost, parishioners are invited to encounter Christ. But they also encounter Christ in one another, fulfilling the longing in every human heart to be seen, to be known, to be understood, to be invited.

To work into a better understanding of how to truly become a welcoming parish, begin by identifying the right individual to lead the effort. It's OK to start small. Let the effort grow and flourish in its own time, emphasizing the importance of momentum to overcome inertia.

This *Quintessentials* ministry resource is produced in collaboration with:

- Dan Cellucci, CEO, Catholic Leadership Institute
- Fr. Gary Kastl, President of Bishop Kelley High School and the Rector of Holy Family Cathedral in Tulsa, Oklahoma

APPENDIX I CONNECTOR ROLE DESCRIPTION

Who?

- Parish connectors are comfortable introducing themselves to strangers before or after Mass or at other parish functions.
- Ideally, they have a natural charisma for hospitality: God-given gifts of connectedness, positivity, empathy.
- They are adept at conversation and have the ability to listen to understand.
- They're outgoing without being pushy; friendly but not intimidating.
- They can be introverts, extroverts, or a combination of both traits.

What?

- Keep eyes open for newcomers or other people who don't seem to be making conversation or even eye contact with others.
- Watch for an opportune time to begin a brief conversation.
 - Before Mass
 - After Mass
 - At a parish event
 - Initial conversation
 - Introduce yourself; ask for the person's name if it's not offered.
 - Break the ice. Be curious, but don't pry.
 - Example: "I don't think I've seen you before. Are you new to the parish or the area?"
 - Guide the brief conversation as it unfolds. You may ask about family/children, interests, etc.
 - Look for natural connections to yourself or others you know in the parish.
 - Example: "Oh, Pete Smith is an avid golfer. Do you know him?"
 - Avoid talking about what they do for a living unless they bring it up.
 - Avoid talking about specific parish ministries or events.
 - End with a future-focused farewell. Example: "Have a great day. I look forward to seeing you next week."
- Think about natural connections to engage the newcomer, such as common interests (sports, games, hobbies, etc.) with others in the parish.
 - This could include staff and priests/deacons.
- Maintain and grow the relationship over the ensuing weeks.
- Continue to expand your network.

APPENDIX II

DRAFT TRAINING RESOURCE FOR PARISH CONNECTORS

In 1995, psychologists Elaine and Arthur Aron found that if they paired strangers, they were likely to socialize and even become friends, provided they asked each other the right questions.

It's called "The Fast Friends Procedure." They created a list of 36 questions for emotional replies that would result in personal connections. These included: "Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?" and "How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?"

The problem: While the 36 questions worked well in a lab setting, they aren't much help in real life.

Instead, Harvard University scientists found a more practical way in 2016. They suggested turning shallow questions into deep questions that invite emotions and vulnerability. Instead of "Are you married?" ask: "Tell me about your family." Instead of "Where are you from?" ask: "What is the best thing about where you grew up?"

Why it works:

1. We crave deep connection and meaningful conversations.
2. These questions allow vulnerable replies but don't mandate them.
3. We reciprocate, and the bond deepens step by step.

So to make connections quickly, replace shallow questions with questions that allow the other person to decide how deep they want to go. Listen, ask follow-up questions, and share something real about yourself.

Other ideas include: "I'm glad you're here." "How are you doing?" "What's new in your life?" "I hope I see you next week."

Think about one other person in the parish that you could connect them with who's in a similar phase of life, in a similar school or similar activity or circumstances. Again, don't worry about connecting them to a ministry. Think about connecting them to another person.

Later, think about whether there's a group that this person might enjoy. Or is there an upcoming event where this person might be interested in contributing time or leadership? Consider whether the person has an interesting, compelling or heart-warming story that could be shared through parish communications channels.

Think about if there's a sacramental moment that you could accompany this person to. For example, maybe the person shares that they don't like going to confession, and you could offer to bring them with you. Or if it seems appropriate, suggest a retreat or other faith-building opportunity.

The bottom line: Connectors help people figure out the best way to develop a deeper life in the parish and the Church.