

The Ethos of Evangelism:

Invite Welcome Connect and Spreading the Gospel through Hospitality

By Carly Nations



At first glance, Invite Welcome Connect seems like a simple framework. Yet, its adaptability—born of this simplicity—can accommodate a complex array of ministry contexts. In essence, this simplicity works because it calls us back to the fundamentals of the Church’s engagement with the world—evangelism, hospitality, and involvement.

We have all heard the troubling numbers regarding church decline. With each new Pew Research Poll also comes a hoard of articles analyzing the numbers in detail. While most lament the decline of organized religion in America, many attempt to argue that the decline is not the fault of their faith tradition, but rather as something which is unavoidable, ascribing it to particular qualities of a new generation, advancement in technology, or perhaps, most importantly, the problems that arise from fostering an individualistic culture that downplays the need for community.

Yet out of these fears of decline are also born the stirrings of hope. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, representing The Episcopal Church during his Royal Wedding homily to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, proclaimed the message of what he has termed, “the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. Someone once said that Jesus began the most revolutionary movement in all of human history. A

movement grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world. And a movement mandating people to live that love and in so doing to change not only their lives, but the very life of the world itself.” Curry emphasizes that although our culture may demand individualism, the Gospel shows us the need for community. This need to spread the Gospel and change the world is the responsibility of all Christians, regardless of denominational affiliation. Curry’s contextual setting of The Episcopal Church as a part of the Jesus Movement lends importance and urgency to the issue of decline. Fighting decline is not just about the survival of churches or of church buildings, but also the importance of the “power in love to show us the way to live.”

The Episcopal Church is steeped in tradition. Its long history and complex liturgical practices can seem imposing to the casual visitor, especially when a church relies on tried and true bulletins and books that in and of themselves beg explanation. In many ways, because Episcopalians are so well-versed in their own liturgy, it can be difficult to understand the ways in which the motions, prayers, creeds, and Eucharist can be introduced or explained

to a visitor other than through an immersion that takes time and dedication—a dedication that many young people are perceived not to have. Because many in The Episcopal Church assume that dedication to

tradition necessitates a steep entry curve, they also assume that their dwindling numbers are an inevitable loss to the more approachable, “seeker-friendly” models posited by Evangelical megachurches across the country. Alternatively, some Episcopal churches have added more contemporary liturgies to try and attract groups of young people who supposedly need these more accessible services, but adding services demands resources. And with much of the Church occupying rural areas of the country, led by largely non-stipendiary clergy, ditching the tradition in favor of a more Evangelical style of worship is untenable for many congregations and, ultimately, will not save The Episcopal Church.

Although there is no silver bullet for the problem of church decline, Invite Welcome Connect seeks to provide a way for finding answers and solutions as to how we can spread the Gospel and strengthen our Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement.

Founded by Mary Parmer, Invite Welcome Connect was born out of her 10-year experience in newcomer ministry at St. Stephen’s in Beaumont, Texas. The



Mary Parmer and two Invite Welcome Connect advisory board members, the Rev. Dr. Hillary Raining and the Rev. Chris Harris, deliver the first keynote address at the 2018 Evangelism Matters Conference. Hosted by Forward Movement and The Episcopal Church at St Paul’s, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, the event was attended by 400 Episcopalians from around the world.

methodology was piloted in 2010 in four Diocese of Texas congregations, and within seven years Invite Welcome Connect grew to reach hundreds of parishes in more than 45 dioceses, including the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe. Parmer attributes the initial rapid growth to the network she developed as director of the Gathering of Leaders, a peer-led leadership group of some 500 Episcopal clergy, including bishops, diocesan staff, seminary deans, and school chaplains. Recently, the ministry moved to its new home as part of the School of Theology's Beecken Center, where it held its most recent summit this past summer on the campus of the University of the South. In speaking of her work, Mary Parmer writes, "We need to be agents of imagination in our communities and empower people to take risks, try new things for the sake of the Gospel. In order to expand this important work, a home for Invite Welcome Connect that honors this approach was needed. I am confident the Beecken Center is just the right place for this ministry to thrive, to develop, and to grow."

Through its summits and workshops in individual congregations and dioceses, Invite Welcome Connect provides training for all orders of ministry within the church—bishops, priests, deacons, and laity—on fundamental aspects of growing parishes by empowering congregations to formulate an authentic and approachable representation of their culture. At the core of Invite Welcome Connect remains the Gospel-centered message that Curry has emphasized; yet, the principles extend beyond the specific beliefs and values of The Episcopal Church and enter the more general realm of hospitality—engaging with newcomers in a way that openly shares the best of The Episcopal Church by emphasizing relationship-building.

Parmer lists the core values of Invite Welcome Connect as prayer, intentionality, relationships, and accountability. Bound by these ideas, followers of the methodology are asked to reconsider their evangelism and hospitality efforts through these lenses. However, the challenges of complacency, hypocrisy, intolerance, and fear of change continue to hold parishes back from living into the core values of Invite Welcome Connect and ultimately, the Gospel itself. Thus, through

these summits and workshops, Parmer and other speakers show participants ways to address the "sacred cows" of their parishes and empower church members and clergy to usher in change.

Parmer vehemently refuses to call this ideology a "program," in that it does not offer a single, magical solution that quickly and easily solves the problems of every parish. Instead, Invite Welcome Connect relies on the creativity of church members who choose to actively and intentionally embody the principles of hospitality, making this method adaptable to any parish, age group, or location.

Courses for this year's summit included talks led by the Rev. Donna Gerold, Canon Mary MacGregor, the Rev. Matt Holcombe, Catherine Pryor Miller, the Rev. David Romanik, the Rev. Chris Harris,

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and the Rev. Brent Owens, Jim Goodmann, and Dr. Courtney Cowart. Classes ranged from a wide topic of discussions, some addressing church signage and websites, others addressing programming and organization, and yet others still addressing general church culture. In MacGregor's class, "Greeting is More than Hello," MacGregor not only talked about the ways in which greeters and ushers can embody the principles of Invite Welcome Connect, but she also held practice sessions in which participants of the summit could approach common scenarios and troubleshoot problems. Holcombe in his class, "Are You Ready?" talked to participants about the hard realities of inspiring change in churches. Encouraging leaders to "focus on transition, not change," Holcombe talked through the stages of grief as they might

appear in a church attempting to rebuild its culture of hospitality. Meanwhile, Miller walked her classes through the actual physical processes of those changes in a discussion on how to transform digital presence, signage, and advertising in her class "Cracking the Invite Code."

Among the participants of this year's summit were 200 Episcopalians, representative of all orders of ministry as well as all age ranges. The youngest participant was 12 years old, attending the conference with her mother who was passionate about hospitality and Episcopal ministry, and who believes it is her own responsibility to actively see the mission of hospitality realized in her home church. Members of the Diocese of Georgia, led by the Rev. Canon Frank Logue, who himself has spearheaded Invite Welcome Connect in Georgia, showed up in force.

Along with Bishop Scott Benhase, Logue has helped the Diocese of Georgia to become one of the first dioceses to implement these strategies diocesan-wide. When asked about the decision to formally subscribe to Invite Welcome Connect, Logue emphasized that participating actively in Invite Welcome Connect was a helpful way to shift a culture. Is there an intentional way of helping people connect with this church? For Logue, engaging with what he calls the "ethos" of Invite Welcome Connect demands an intentionality that moves beyond the parish and extends to diocesan accountability. Thus, Invite Welcome Connect is a practice

that not only impacts how parishes share the Gospel, but extends into the pastoral leadership of bishops who are looking for ways to support their priests in missional change. Logue noted that, although in many ways, Invite Welcome Connect challenges leaders in the Church to change their thinking, the inherent creativity within the ethos is life-giving — "Invite Welcome Connect is not a set program — 'do this and find life.' Rather, it's 'attend to these things in a way that fits your context.'" The flexibility inherent within Invite Welcome Connect means that each parish can focus on cultivating a culture of hospitality that fits their individual needs and matches their individual skills.

Although a church's average Sunday attendance (ASA) may be small, Logue and Benhase are looking for success markers

in parishes that set them apart, markers of health and vitality that go beyond the numbers. For Logue, the parishes that he sees fully "buying-in" to Invite Welcome Connect are doing so by equipping laity. Although the processes of change can be difficult for many parishioners, Logue noted that "The typical negative feedback is 'we tried it and it didn't work,'" but in churches where "people get intentional about these things, there's a correlation between that and the church thriving." Thus, the success of Invite Welcome Connect is inherently dependent upon creating an investment in which all members of the church feel that their contribution is necessary.

In the closing plenary for the 2018 Summit, Logue emphasized that "everywhere you and I go we are surrounded by people who are masking deep pain," but "there is only one balm in Gilead ... life changing, world-changing love is found in Jesus and it is as far away from a program for a church as you can get." Logue points out that the Gospel of Jesus is good news to the world, but if the church continues in its self-concern, then "the church isn't dying, we're killing it by focusing on the institution as an institution."

Canon Logue emphasized that when new members approach the church, "We promise them Jesus, and then we offer them affiliation in a club. I think we need to find a way to actually promise them Jesus, and then offer them Jesus." Offering people Jesus looks like sharing the Gospel of Jesus. But in order to share the Gospel, members of the church must be not only equipped to share the Gospel but also understand the ways in which God's love is transformative and necessary to the lives of our neighbors.

In his own closing remarks, University

of the South's Vice-Chancellor John McCardell sought to seat the University within the tradition of Invite Welcome Connect's hospitality, and further emphasized the University's commitment to continuing that dedication to the Gospel through the culture of the Episcopal tradition. Citing the recent "decision made by our Board of Regents to bring the School of Theology and the Beecken Center back to where it began on the center of campus," McCardell noted that the historical trajectory of Sewanee is to embrace the ministries of The Episcopal Church and to occupy a prominent place in the tradition of the whole Church. McCardell sees this move as "an affirmation by this University of our historic, unique, and treasured connection



with The Episcopal Church" rather than running away from religious traditions as many other universities (and especially many other traditionally Episcopal universities) have done.

Those who visit Sewanee know that it is a place unlike any other. Once called "Arcadia" by William Alexander Percy, the

University of the South has always provided a place of respite for those who once called it home. Yet, perhaps the most important quality of Sewanee is not its ability to bring people back, but its insistence that sending people out is as equally important. The lessons of hospitality that one learns while in Sewanee do not only apply while one is there, but rather stretch far beyond the boundaries of the Domain and into the hearts and minds of each former undergraduate, theologian, or faculty member. Thus, the inclusion of Invite Welcome Connect as a presence on the University's campus is a natural fit. In providing a place to which people often return, Sewanee reminds us that our mission to spread the Gospel is one of community—establishing

relationships in our homes as well as maintaining the relationships that give us life.

As Invite Welcome Connect begins its tenure at the School of Theology, the hope of new ministry serves as a reminder that the love and community we seek has always been present within those people and in those places where we seek Christ. In the words of the Rt. Rev. J. Neil Alexander, dean of the School of Theology, "If life in Christ is everything we say it is, then why wouldn't we want everyone to have it? I think about that question a great deal. I believe that is precisely the question that should motivate all of our efforts at evangelism, outreach, and growth for the Church. Such efforts are never about us really, but about those

who are hungry to know what we know. Consequently, I don't think of Invite Welcome Connect as a program. I think of it as a call. It is a clarion call to the Church to make sure others come to know who we know (Jesus) and what we have (abundant life). ❧

Invite Welcome Connect is a ministry of transformation that equips and empowers congregations and individuals to cultivate intentional practices of evangelism, hospitality, and connectedness rooted in the Gospel directive to, "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19). A central part of spreading the Invite Welcome Connect message is to expand the ministry by identifying gifted teachers and leaders throughout The Episcopal Church to become certified Invite Welcome Connect facilitators and coaches. Facilitators will be trained to conduct intensive workshops around the country and

provide support to participating parishes and dioceses. Coaches will be trained to support the implementation, visioning, and application of Invite Welcome Connect in a parish or community setting. To become a certified facilitator or coach, a comprehensive 10-step process must be completed that includes an application process and hands-on training. Facilitator and coach certification guidelines, training dates, and locations can be found under the Facilitator-Coach tab on the Invite Welcome Connect website: inwitewelcomeconnect.sewanee.edu.