

TAKING THE RISK: PUTTING INVITE WELCOME CONNECT INTO PRACTICE

By Carly Nations

After holding its summer conference in Sewanee in 2018 for the first time, Invite Welcome Connect is celebrating its one-year anniversary at the Beecken Center and

its ninth year as a ministry of The Episcopal Church. Its fifth summit was held for the second time in Sewanee this year. Having experienced rapid growth, Invite Welcome Connect (IWC) is enjoying for itself what it wishes for its parishes. Yet, the success of this ministry lies not in its foolproof, step-by-step directions for endless growth, but rather in its dedication to helping the Church spread the Gospel in all contexts of ministry by encouraging cultural change. This is evident in all the parishes and dioceses that have subscribed to the ethos of Invite Welcome Connect and who have dedicated themselves to bringing about this change. These parishes do not merely seek to solve the issue of declining numbers, but desire to fully live into the calling of Jesus to “go out” and share the Gospel.

Ruth Cobb, assistant to the chaplain for the development of student ministries at All Saints’ Chapel in Sewanee, is one of the newer participants in Invite Welcome Connect, but has already seen significant change in the life of All Saints’ Chapel during her tenure. Aware that students at the University are eager to become involved in the community, Cobb has directed her attention toward highlighting existing student service projects, providing additional opportunities, and strengthening the relationship between students and the surrounding community. One of their first projects, an Angel Tree for the University, was placed in McClurg, Sewanee’s dining hall, and collected more than 400 gifts during the Advent season. Students then participated in wrapping the gifts, taking a break from studying for finals in order to



engage in their college community, getting to know one another, and showing love for those in need.

The desire to develop deeper community is the common thread that connects all those wanting to put Invite Welcome Connect into practice. In many parishes, the idea of going beyond the church walls can sometimes be intimidating and often, the community even within a parish itself may need to be strengthened and reinforced.

Though members may recognize the need for this cultural shift, making changes to systems in parishes that are so fundamentally rooted in historical, liturgical practice require parish-wide dedication. Parishioners can find that though they desire a change, they do not know how to put those changes into place or overcome the accompanying discomfort that often comes with change.

For the Rev. Gar Demo, rector of

St. Thomas the Apostle in Kansas City, Missouri, the process of fully committing to implementing Invite Welcome Connect took nine months. Although the parish strongly affirmed their desire for increased evangelism in a parish survey, the process of figuring out how to approach that cultural change took longer. In order to help St. Thomas reach the point where parishioners were ready to take action, Demo invited Mary Parmer, executive director

The Rev. Brent Owens stands with new church members during the 2019 confirmation service at Christ Church Cathedral in Lexington, Kentucky. Owens state that all are a direct result of their Invite Welcome Connect Ministry.

of IWC, to equip 30 people to go forward and “make it happen,” eventually receiving the backing of the vestry, and developing an official Invite Welcome Connect team of lay leaders within the parish. This team began work on St. Thomas’s social media



Members of Holy Comforter Episcopal Church in Spring, Texas, wrap gifts and promote community involvement at their “The Church Has Left the Building” gathering.

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presence, creating a series of videos talking about their faith, which will be released in the fall.

The work of Invite Welcome Connect takes practice in learning how to be aware of those around us and move through the discomfort of reaching out to them. Yet, once parishes begin practicing Invite Welcome Connect, the changes become addictive. As the Rev. Abi Moon, associate rector of St. John’s in Tallahassee, Florida, noted of her parishioners, “... they are taking joy in seeing people settle into the church and I love seeing the next step—people inviting others to experience the joy they have found.” The Rev. Jimmy Abbott, rector of Holy Comforter in Houston, seconded this experience remarking: “being intentional about Invite Welcome

Connect has helped us change the culture of our church to be more welcoming, more aware of people who are new, more inclusive. “Because the culture changed, we became more willing to do Invite Welcome Connect.” For Abbott, part of this cultural change meant implementing a newcomer’s cafe that both allowed new members to see one another and also allowed long-time parishioners to see newcomers. Seeing this growth has encouraged parishioners to be more heavily invested in other Invite Welcome Connect events such as a “drive-thru ashes” station on Ash Wednesday which both makes use of the church’s location and the rapid population growth in the Houston area.

The importance of Invite Welcome Connect is, of course, not that it simply gives

the church tools to increase its numbers, but rather that it gives the church tools to help others share in the joy in Christ. The Rev. Brent Owens, associate dean at Christ Church Cathedral in Lexington, Kentucky, argues that “every single person who walks through our doors has come by holy invitation and if we are going to honor that holy invitation, we have to be able to see them and welcome them.” Thus, Invite Welcome Connect goes far beyond changing church culture in order to permit growth, but changes church culture in order to make disciples.

For Owens, this discipleship must permeate all areas of the life of Christ Church Cathedral. “We believe that prayer is really important in this. We write our own prayers of the people every Sunday and there’s always some aspect of Invite Welcome Connect in our prayers. We also

always specifically pray for visitors and the clergy preach on some aspect of Invite Welcome Connect about once per quarter.” Owens is also heavily invested in “culture in place” events that introduce the church without necessarily pushing a certain church service. The cathedral frequently hosts art gallery walks and concerts that provide a less intimidating way for members to invite others into the life of the Church. Owens notes that, “Within a pretty short time frame, folks that are new to the church really aren’t that new anymore.” Explicit within these prayers, sermons, and events is the obvious inclusion of the ideals of Invite Welcome Connect that communicates to visitors that The Episcopal Church is open and affirming of their presence. Yet, more importantly, implicit within these prayers and sermons is the assertion that the Church is a home for visitors. It is not just a place to attend on Sunday morning, but a community of individuals, a family in Christ.

Owens’ mentality is echoed by Abbott. “So much of Invite Welcome Connect is just courage. Yes, people may not like trying to change the culture of the Church, but I think that the Lord’s call to preach the Gospel is more important than whatever system you have inherited.”

The Rt. Rev. Kevin S. Brown, bishop of the Diocese of Delaware, addressed this issue of inheritance in a video announcement to the diocese regarding its recent diocesan-wide dedication to the implementation of Invite Welcome Connect. “We want to know that the Church will be here—not just in my generation and the next generation, but for generations to come. The fact of the matter is, for any organization, you’ve got to grow. You have to grow just to replenish the folks who are currently members. You have to grow just to survive. But come on, who wants to just survive? We’re talking about the very body of Christ, the Church. We don’t want to just survive—we want to thrive. So questions of growth aren’t just about survival—they’re about thriving.”

Parmer, reflecting upon the rapid expansion of Invite Welcome Connect, remarked, “I wanted to change the culture; it was never about numbers.” Yet, by sharing her passion for cultural change within the

Church, Invite Welcome Connect has continued to expand and will soon be bringing on two full-time assistants to help Parmer with the writing, publishing, curriculum sharing, and facilitator training.

Much like the parishes who implement Invite Welcome Connect, Parmer found that “In order to expand this ministry, I have to sort of pull back.” Rather than trying to control the system, Parmer has had to closely follow her own ethos—to be dedicated to the Good News of Jesus Christ and to trust that sharing that good news will lead her, the ministry of Invite Welcome Connect, and all those participating in Invite Welcome Connect in the right direction.

This year, the Rt. Rev. Carlye Hughes, bishop of the Diocese of Newark, delivered the homily at the opening Eucharist of the 2019 Invite Welcome Connect Summit at All Saints’ Chapel in Sewanee. Though she briefly acknowledged the Church’s desire to grow, her sermon questioned congregants about their dedication to God’s people. “The question is for us, not just will we invite someone to church, but will we invite them to live? Will we invite them to embrace life? Will we let them know that they have a place not just in this world, not just in our church, but they have a place in our hearts and a place in God’s heart?” For Hughes, as for Parmer, the stakes of Invite Welcome Connect are much higher than the numbers in a parish; the stakes are the lives of individuals in the world who are suffering and in need of God’s love.

Members of God’s church have come to know and cherish God’s love. Yet, outside the walls of our churches, Hughes reminded “the world could use some healing right now. The world could use some courageous Christians right now. The world could use people who are so committed to their compassion and to God’s sense of justice right now, that they’re willing to take [risks].”

“We got things to do!” Hughes encouraged. And so, the 2019 Invite Welcome Connect Summit began much in the way it will end, in the same way the ministry itself began—taking the necessary risks to go out and share the Gospel and making disciples dedicated to the message of God’s love. ■