

From: *In Your Holy Spirit*, Gallagher

There's hospitality-as-formation

The hospitality of a parish community is directed at the neighborhood or community in which it exists, those who might consider membership, the visitor—stranger, and its own members.

There is a form of hospitality to offer the community in which the parish exists. It's not simply about serving the community. It's more about being a responsible institution in the town or neighborhood. It's a form of stewardship as we care for the community in which we are set or with which we have a significant relationship. For most parishes that will be a geographical area. On occasion it will be with a community of people. For example I was once vicar in a parish with a relationship with the jazz and performing arts community.

There is also the hospitality we offer those who might in time become part of our parish community. This is the hospitality of formation, formation rather than welcome. We need to be clear about what we are up to here.

It's not the hospitality of having a guest over for dinner or the hospitality of a good hotel or restaurant. It's more like the hospitality the Marine Corps shows a new recruit (although not, of course, in the actual practices of yelling commands and shaving heads). The Marine Corps, along with other defined organizations have a rationale of engaging people new to the organization with an eye to the person's formation.

If we are to form a Marine, or a good teacher or nurse, or a carpenter, we do things at the front-end so we increase the likelihood that they will be good at being a Marine, teacher, nurse or carpenter. This understanding of "front-end" action was one of the significant learnings of the quality improvement movement.

In the parish we can offer a hospitality that will orient the new member toward their growth in Christian maturity. In doing that we'll take into account where people are in their own journey. How are we to engage someone who is tentative and immature in Christian practice versus one who is transferring into the parish, or coming from another communion, and is already proficient? The hospitality we offer depends on the person's real needs and specific place in the Body of Christ.

So, hospitality is a phase of incorporation into membership. More accurately, it is a phase into full, mature membership. And mature membership, in turn, is about human maturity. Our invitation is into maturity, into "real life." The hospitality of the parish is to be done in such a manner that a person might finally come to "real life."

At the front-end of this act of hospitality-as-formation there is a paradoxical dynamic. We are to welcome new people without imposing our views on them. We are to welcome, love and support them freely, without conditions. In this parish they are offered a space in which to be and grow. There's no rush. They may be part of this community's life as they are. Our stance is one of receptivity and openness.

Along with this stance of acceptance there is also a confrontation. As individuals and as a

community we have come to certain values and ways of doing things. We carry in us deep assumptions about the nature of things, what God is up to, how a person becomes fully alive, the nature and purpose of the church. In an open, non-aggressive manner we are to share those things with the new person. We are to share ourselves. That is a form of confrontation.

To do hospitality well we need to understand the dynamics of inclusion. Inclusion is a two-way process. The person new to the community has to decide to include herself.

“Welcome” is not the same as inclusion. Inclusion is a complex process in which the person new to the community becomes incorporated in the ways of the community. Everyone may be welcomed and the parish can unilaterally accept responsibility for welcoming.

“Inclusion,” however, involves the movement of *both the community and the person*. There are all the initial matters of inclusion described by William Schutz involving questions of cost and trust. What does it cost to be part of this community? Can I trust myself to these people? And the reverse—can we trust this new person among us? What will it cost us to have them be part of our life? The process of inclusion continues as the concerns of control and influence, openness, affection and intimacy are engaged and adequately resolved.

The life of this parish community is worthwhile as it is. The visitor is welcome to join in and taste it but the life is not twisted in an attempt to make the visitor comfortable. In any case, our attempts to make visitors “comfortable” may just as easily cause them discomfort.

We can offer people acceptance of who and how they are right now. We can love people as they are. If that love is to be anything other than sentimentality and feel-good, however, it needs to also be an invitation into a transformed and new life. Paul wrote about putting away our old self and putting on a new self “created according to the likeness of God.” (Ephesians 4: 22 – 24)