



# How to ...

## Welcome new families to church

**It's a normal Sunday morning Eucharist and you're standing just inside the porch with your 'welcoming team' badge on, copies of the order of service and 'Pew News' neatly stacked on the table in front of you and out of the corner of your eye you notice a young family walking towards the entrance. As the family gets closer and closer you begin to wonder if they are familiar and as quizzical thoughts circle around in your head, you realize that they are now all standing in front of you!**

This 'how to' guide provides churches with advice on welcoming new families and suggests three simple and effective ways to make them feel valued and included during the worship and contribute as part of the congregation.

### **1. First and foremost – the importance of welcoming.**

This may sound obvious but first impressions last! Stepping over the church threshold can be a huge step for some. Often the buildings, the rituals, the regalia (and the people!) can be quite daunting, so meeting a friendly person at the door will help new families feel at ease very quickly. Whether a new family has previous or no experience of church, remember to be personable and polite. So don't be over enthusiastic or apologetic. Be nice and normal – be yourself!

It is important to greet all the family, including children. Ask if they are visiting and assure them that they are very welcome. Asking where the family would like to sit is often a gesture that is easily neglected. Perhaps suggest a few places that would be the best place for them and walk with the family to their seats – it shows you care and they will appreciate you being with them as they walk past others in the congregation. However, please don't sit them right at the front. Why?

Think about it. Everyone else can see them but they won't be able to see anybody else. If the family are unaccustomed to the pattern of an Anglican service, they will not know when to stand up or sit down. Escort the family to seating where they will feel comfortable, perhaps near to another family or friendly faces that will also make them feel welcomed.

Once the family are comfortable make a point of reminding them of your name and where you will be sitting during the service just in case they might need to locate you about something later on. If Sunday School/Junior Church is running that morning, if possible try and introduce the group leaders to the family before the service starts. Parents are more likely to take their children to groups if they have met the leaders beforehand or at least let the leader(s) know, so that if the children do go to the group it does not come as a surprise to the leaders.

### **2. Communicating is key.**

Again this may sound obvious but an area that many churches forget to consider. Producing a 'welcome' leaflet can be a simple way of informing newcomers about the protocols of the service and some basic information that can ensure a new family's first experience of your church is a positive one. For example, below is a brief list of the type of questions to which families visiting for the first time are likely to want to know the answers as early as possible:

- Is the church family friendly?
- What if my children get a little fidgety/noisy – is there somewhere I can take them?
- Where are the toilets/baby changing facilities? (a young child will probably need the loo at some point during a service)
- Is there Sunday School/Junior church today? If yes, can I sit with them in the session?
- Is it a communion service? What is communion/Eucharist?
- If it is a communion service do we have to participate or can we just observe?
- If my child receives communion at our home church, how can I let the minister know?

Providing a welcome leaflet that communicates this information will ease any apprehension or confusion and show families that you have identified some of their needs and an extra effort has been made to make them feel valued and included within the life of the church.

Other resources that are worth investing in to enhance your welcome to families are:

- **Pew cards** – this can be in addition to the welcome leaflet and simply emphasises to the whole church that everyone plays a part in welcoming children/families – an example of the wording for a pew card is provided at the end of this guide.
- **Pew bags** – this is a great way to show young families that they are welcome, especially if the church has limited or no provision for children during services. Pew bags are drawstring bags, just like school P.E. bags or decorated boxes/shoeboxes with Bible activities, colouring sheets, books and pens to entertain children during the service. Again, think about first impressions. If you decide to produce pew bags, a well-maintained and thought-through pew bag says the church cares. A dated, neglected pew bag does not. Some members of your congregation may be knitters or sewers. Invite them to help or invite your local schools if they would like to use pew bag making/designing as a project. Also, there might be someone who would like to be responsible for putting together the pew bags and monitoring the contents so that each pew bag is relevant, clean and all the pens work! Here are some ideas to put in your pew bags:

**Under 3s:** Include soft toys, wooden or plastic toys, board books, plastic bath-type books or fabric books, glove puppet – readily available in supermarkets. Try theme bags such as a 'sheep bag' with cuddly toy, book and picture boards, play cubes – washable cloth toys and check for hidden noises like bells!

**Additional ideas for 3+** Include jigsaws – simple jigsaws can be placed in an envelope in each bag; books – Biblical, 'feely', or 'find' books are ideal, children love lifting flaps and hunting for hidden animals etc; cardboard, fabric or plastic (bath) books are ideal; picture dominoes; easy dot to dot books; chubby crayons or felt tip pens with colouring book (make sure the ink washes off easily!). Create themed bags for festivals, for example Christmas/Easter/Harvest.

- **Children's corner.** Creating a space in your church that is child-friendly is a noticeable and public feature that says to newcomers 'children are welcome'. Again, too many churches leave these corners alone and they can look dated and unloved. Think about what is attractive to children – a bright, colourful, inviting space says that you care, and you don't need huge amounts of money to make these spaces safe and welcoming. Ikea is a great place to pick up bookcases, storage cushions, beanbags and nice colourful rugs for children's corners.

### 3. Remember to say 'Good-bye'

Yes, it is important to welcome families well but it is just as important to say good-bye. This may be harder as at the end of the service so many things are going on, but do make an effort to look out for your visiting family, and if you do refreshments, go up to the family at the end of the service and explain what happens.

**If you have found this 'How to' guide useful and would like to follow-up on anything, Dan Jones (Youth & Children's Adviser) can provide further advice as well as extra support to help your church explore ministry with children, young people and families.**

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An example of a Pew Card:

## **To everyone in this church**

**The presence of children is a gift to the Church and they remind us that our church is growing.**

**Please welcome the children and give a smile of encouragement to the adults they are with.**

**Remember all are welcome in God's house!**

*Then Jesus said to them, "Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me also welcomes my Father who sent me. Whoever is the least among you is the greatest"*

**- Luke 9:48 -**

### **Parents, grandparents & carers**

Quietly explain the parts of the service to your children; sing the hymns, pray, and voice the responses. Children learn by watching and copying you.

If you have to leave the service with your child, feel free to do so, but please come back. As Jesus said, *"Let the little children come to me."*

Remember that how we welcome children in church directly affects the way they respond to the Church, to God, and to one another. Let them know that they are at home in this house of worship.

Please let your child use the reverse side of this card to draw and doodle.