

FROM STRANGER TO FRIEND

A WORKBOOK TO
HELP SMALL GROUPS,
PCCS, CONGREGATIONS
AND INDIVIDUALS
THINK ABOUT
WELCOME

Hello...

Over the past few years, a wide range of research with those who are new to church and church activities has shown the importance of friendliness and welcome. But it's not always easy to know what that means: 100% of churches think they are friendly, and yet 100% of churchgoers have had an experience of going to an 'unfriendly' church. So 'Stranger to Friend' helps us to think about what we really mean by welcome, and how it helps people on their journey of faith.

This workbook can be used in a small group or by individuals. Or, why not use it for a discussion at your PCC? We hope it helps all of us discover more of God's great love which calls us all into friendship with Him through Jesus.

Evangelism and Discipleship Team

INTRODUCTION

Activity

"What is a friend?"

Take a few moments to think about all the words that you might use to describe a friend. You may want to write them down.

Reflection

John 15:9-17 *'I have called you friends'*

The whole biblical story is underpinned by a God who calls people from being a stranger to Him into being in a relationship with Him that is characterised in different ways. Sometimes we are called 'family', sometimes God's people are called 'children', and some of the most passionate and committed followers are referred to as 'friends'. And 'friend' is the word Jesus uses to talk about a whole new level of relationship.

Take time to think about your own journey from being a stranger to God and God's people, to finding that you have become

a friend. How do the words you thought about apply?

Our task as followers of Jesus Christ is to reflect God's desire and invitation to 'strangers' to become His friends.

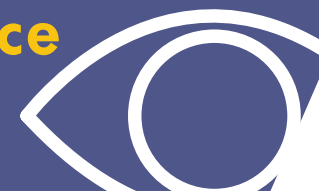
How does this change your thinking about welcome?

In the next few pages, there will be four simple steps which form the bedrock of a culture of welcome. It doesn't matter whether you meet people at Sunday worship, a toddler group or at the church fete - everywhere we meet people – it is how we welcome them that matters. These reflections are not actions, but rather lenses through which we can think about our own approach.

You might like to begin by looking at Luke 19: 1- 10 – the story of Zacchaeus.

STEP 1

See – take notice



Activity

Make a map of all the different ways in which people encounter your church: don't forget about those coming for weddings, funerals, baptisms, toddler groups, the school, in the workplace, the food bank.

When we come across those who are unfamiliar to us or with us, we might give them a glance, but Jesus actually sees Zacchaeus. 'Seeing' Zacchaeus meant that Jesus noticed.

- Zacchaeus was making an effort to discover something about Jesus.
- He had been willing to get a new perspective – even risk ridicule.
- He had put himself in an unfamiliar place.

What other things might Jesus have seen about Zacchaeus that day?

What might Zacchaeus have seen about Jesus?

How do we *really* see people when we meet them for the first time, using our eyes and our ears to discover more about their story, their motives and their journey towards us?

STEP 2

Smile – reflect the kindness of God



Activity

Think about how it makes you feel when you go somewhere unfamiliar and a person smiles. What are all the things that a smile can convey? Reflect on 'The Message' translation of Proverbs 15:13, to remind you of the practical effect that smiling can have: *"A cheerful heart brings a smile to your face."*

Reflection

Although there are no words to describe Jesus smiling, we know that he fully shared all our human experiences, and so it is difficult to imagine that he didn't smile at the sight of Zacchaeus in the tree!

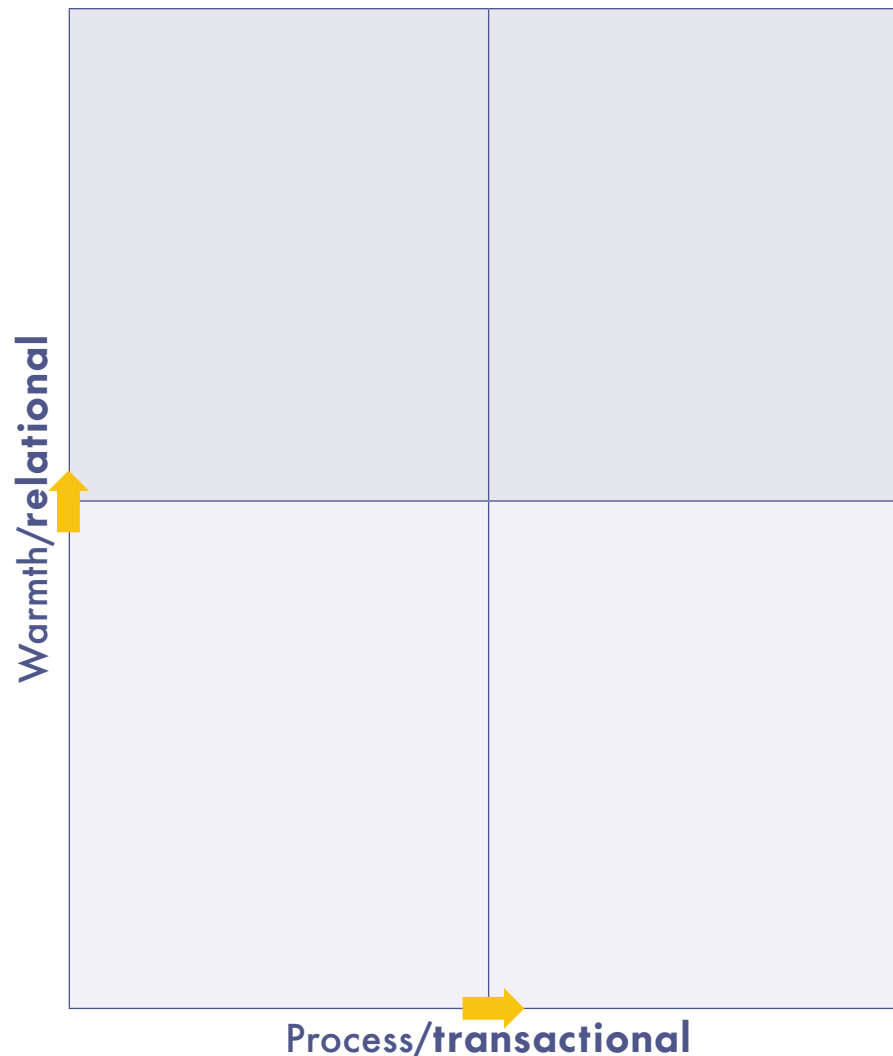
Warmth vs Process

'Process' ways of engaging with people mean that we focus first on the systems we have in place – making sure they have a hymn book or a notice sheet, for example.

'Warmth' means that we focus first on who they are and the fact that they matter to us and to God. We then support that with good information and communication.

When we get involved in something new or visit a place we have never been before, it is the 'warmth' that helps us have the kind of good experience that makes us want to go back. But if it's not backed up by practical things, then we are disappointed.

Think about how your church balances warmth and process.



STEP 3

Say hello – build bridges



Activity

Take a moment to think about a recent friendship in your life – how did it develop? What were some of the things that happened that took the person from just an acquaintance to being a friend?

For friendship to develop – whether with God or with God’s people – there has to be a next step after the seeing and the smiling...and usually, it involves communication. And that means conversation – saying ‘hello’ is a good place to start. As we begin to hear about people, we begin to share something of ourselves, and we find common ground to build on. Remember that it is not just those we meet who are strangers to us – we are strangers to them too. So, getting to know each other is really important – it builds trust, it builds care and it builds friendship.

Jesus spoke to Zacchaeus and in that moment, the possibility of relationship began.

Think about how we start conversations that build bridges from our lives to the lives of those we meet, and where we might have opportunity to start talking and listening.

Going deeper

Take time to think about how this reflects the way that God draws us into relationship with himself and with one another.

How can we start conversations with those we meet?

STEP 4

**Don't just invite back,
invite on**



Activity

Look at the story of Zacchaeus again, and think about what happened after Jesus spoke to him. Jesus didn't ask Zacchaeus to come and listen to him next week, but went to Zacchaeus' home, where presumably, there was some food and hospitality on offer.

It's easy to ask people to come back to our place, come next week to church. It might be a lot more difficult to go beyond the church and start to share our lives and make real friendships.

How and where might that happen?

But also how will people know what the next step might be?

Think about communication, information and opportunity.

You might like to review noticeboards, magazines, social media and websites to see how they play a part in helping people move from stranger to friend.

A final thought

Check out Genesis 18: 1-15

When Abraham and Sarah reached out with welcome and hospitality to three strangers, they were blessed, changed and challenged themselves. Thinking about welcome will mean not only the lives of those we meet are open to being transformed by Jesus, but that we too will be changed by those we meet.

For more information go to

churchsupporthub.org/welcome



PILOT VERSION



Copyright © 2019 Church of England
Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3AZ