

A FRIENDLY CHURCH IS HARD TO FIND

Our family returned to the U.S. last summer after nearly two decades of living abroad, where we were active in several international congregations. We settled into an attractive east-coast college town, assured by *Forbes* and other surveyors of great places to live that we were practically relocating in paradise. The many beautiful churches of the historic town were part of its appeal, and having read of the steady membership decline of most mainline denominations we were certain that we would be eagerly embraced.

Our travels had inculcated a tolerance for diversity and an acceptance of the vagaries of interdenominational churches. The factor most important to us was a friendly welcome, for we knew from past experience that we would make most of our friends at church. Also, we hoped to orient our two college students in a local church by summer's end. With a dozen university-related churches within two miles of our doorstep, we anticipated an abundance of fellowship for the whole family.

We visited ten mainline congregations—four Methodist, two Presbyterian, two Episcopal, one Baptist and one Lutheran—and one conservative Presbyterian church, because it was the only congregation recommended to us by casual contacts. We also attended mass at the Roman Catholic university parish. We returned to three congregations twice. At the outset we never intended to visit so many churches, but kept looking as we found each successive congregation unwelcoming.

We practiced the good manners of church visitors. We tried to arrive ten minutes before the service and stayed in our pews through the postlude and then greeted the minister and attended each postservice fellowship. We always signed the visitor register with our full names, phone numbers and address. The same information appeared on our checks with which we made contributions

Our expectations were modest: we did not presume to receive casseroles at the door, invitations to supper or the loan of futons, though we would have welcomed these. We hoped merely to meet a few friendly souls at the service and at coffee hours, to get a welcoming letter from the pastor or a follow-up phone call from a church member. We would have warmly welcomed a church visitor.

From the 11 Protestant congregations we visited, six ministers wrote short, nice form letters acknowledging our visit and inviting us to return if we were interested in joining. Not a single minister phoned us, though these churches' total ordained staff, as listed in the bulletins, was 24. Our answering machine recorded the sole call of a laywoman who left a greeting but no invitation to call back. We received one unannounced pastoral visit, from the new minister of the nearest Methodist church. Three of our immediate neighbors are members of churches we visited, and we volunteered to them that we had visited their churches, but neither they nor anyone else ever discussed affiliation with us.

Not a single church mailed us a newsletter, bulletin or special promotion. One campus minister promised our children that he would call them regarding a program in July, but did not. In September, when both had left for school, a brochure arrived for our son. One young rector whom we complimented for his courageous sermon said he would phone and visit us, but he did not.

Greetings at the church door were usually perfunctory; only at one church did an usher ask if we were visitors. This was also the only church where someone introduced herself to us after worship and invited us to the coffee hour where she passed us on to several other members. We were so impressed that we returned that afternoon for an ice-cream social, where our names were remembered from the morning introductions. This was a rare opportunity for us to respond to a church member's warmth. The only other was the visit by the new Methodist minister, which led us to invite him to see a movie with us, which he accepted. But in general we were struck by the absence of spontaneous interaction during our search for friendliness in the Protestant mainline.

The ten or so Sunday morning coffee hours we attended struck us as wasted opportunities for outreach. Overseas we were used to high-decibel chat after the service: people caught up with each other's lives and sometimes even critiqued the sermon. In America we found these levees invariably quiet and restrained,

and neither the majority of the morning worshipers nor the pastors bothered to attend. Regulars spoke quietly to a few friends and left. As no one seemed to want to talk, we wondered why any were there. Certainly not for the cookies.

The most egregious example of bad manners came from one pastor who discussed church business with her council president while we stood at her elbow hopeful of a pause and acknowledgment. After five minutes we departed—the only visitors at the church that morning, yet unable to catch anyone's attention.

Response to our financial contributions was also disappointing. One typical freewill check was for \$20, but in one very small church, driven by tax considerations, we dropped a \$1000 check into the basket. Though the church cashed the check, it has not in three months contacted us once. By contrast, our \$20 check to one large church elicited almost immediately a three-page computer printout—"This is a financial statement, not a bill," in which our token donation seemed naked amid columns of zeros; then an unsolicited box of 52 pledge envelopes arrived; later the letter from the pastor. At one Baptist church our check bounced; it was embarrassing for us, but after six weeks we had not heard from the church regarding the check or ourselves.

From the visitor's perspective we offer the following suggestions on how to make a congregation more welcoming. First check the signs out front. We found some unreadable from a moving car; in two cases the worship hour was listed incorrectly. And why not say something nice here—and in the bulletin as well—to obvious visitors like tourists, new residents, students, emigrants and those in need?

Examine how your registration forms are phrased. The ones we signed gave the single option, "Do you want the pastor to call?" No, we didn't as the first contact, but we would have welcomed a lay member's call. That option was never given, even though surveys indicate lay visits are much more effective than pastoral calls in prompting repeat visits.

Pastors should be more accessible to the total congregation, particularly newcomers, on Sunday morning. They should be at the door before the service and move through the congregation and greet the early comers, including visitors, in the pews. They should attend the post-service fellowships, where they should put graciousness ahead of church business.

A follow-up phone call is probably more effective than a form letter signed by the pastor. But the letter is nice, too. Don't practice false postal economies; a program announcement and even a second letter are not overkill.

Most of the churches' liturgies included the passing of the peace, which is about the only point in the liturgy where spontaneous conversation can ensue (prayer being the other). Strengthen the peace by giving the congregation several minutes to focus on greeting and meeting other worshipers. Social overreach is much better than reticence when celebrating the blessings of God. The liturgist sets the example here, and some pastors lacked initiative and warmth at this special moment of the service.

Congregations should consider why they host a coffee hour. If they wish to use it to welcome visitors, they should provide guides for newcomers and focus discussion to stimulate conversation. If that hour exists only to proffer a cup of coffee, the church might as well move the pot to the narthex.

Membership committees can make creative use of older members' social skills. In our experience, only those older than 65 had the social confidence to approach us as strangers and show us around. Longtime members know the history of the congregation and the building. And only senior citizens seem to know enough geography to understand where exotic visitors are from. We were thrilled to meet an 80-year-old retired missionary who could distinguish Karachi, where we had lived for three years, from Caracas. Ushers might be instructed to seat newcomers next to an elderly member who is likely to take them under wing right after worship and at the coffee hour.

By the end of summer we hadn't affiliated with a church. It proved easier to find a good plumber, get on the mailing lists of theater groups and antique shows and arrange for cable television than to make comparable connections with any Protestant church. We were committed to push beyond the cool exteriors

of several of these churches—but it was easier to see how and why so many might have dropped from the Protestant mainline during the years we were abroad.

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