

A Pastor Speaks

Pastors need to be pastored and inspired. The spiritual health of a pastor really ought to be a priority for his or her congregation. We want to share inspiring and insightful sermons from pastors within our district with the aims to minister and empower one another. It is our prayer that we keep each other accountable as we are building God's kingdom together in the Connecticut District.

First Impressions Are Formed Earlier Than You Think

BY KAY KOTAN AND BLAKE BRADFORD

Kay Kotan and Blake Bradford explain that a church visitor's first impression is often formed long before they enter the sanctuary. So, hospitality needs to begin online, as people approach your location, and through casual encounters with your building.

We have all heard it said that you do not have a second chance to make a first impression. This is so true in the life of the church. But where do those first impressions occur in the church? We often are misled to believe the first impression is at the door of the sanctuary or perhaps the front door. We would challenge you that hospitality begins much sooner.

People can go almost anywhere to find friendliness, but most people are looking for something beyond friendliness. They are looking for relationships. They are looking for a place to belong.

Online

Most likely, hospitality begins online. Yes, online! What kind of first impression would a guest receive from your church's Facebook page? Your website? Are there stories of transformation and relationships, or simply pictures of an empty building? Most often social media is used for insider communication without much consideration for new persons. Have someone not affiliated with your church take a look at your online presence and give you some feedback.

Location

Next, we want to think about hospitality offered to someone approaching your church's location. Is there directional signage to find the church, where to park, and what entrance to use? Is the guest being greeted in the parking lot, at the exterior entrance door, and at the sanctuary door? Is the interior signage adequate for guests to find their way easily around the facility, paying special attention to signage for restrooms, children's ministries, and the worship area? Is there a congregation-wide culture of hospitality, or is hospitality left to the greeting team alone?

Worship

How about worship? Is worship designed to encourage new

people to be comfortable and encounter Christ, or is it designed totally for the sake of those already in the church? Is the bulletin guest-friendly, or are we using insider or churchy language and acronyms? Think about announcements: are the content and delivery guest-friendly? Could a guest feel invited and easily figure out how to step into ministry and the congregation's web of relationships?

Are pastoral prayers filled with references to Hazel's surgery outcome or Bob's grief while members nod in knowing agreement, and guests are left perplexed and mildly embarrassed by the sharing of private information? Do we forget we have guests among us and rush out the door once the benediction concludes, or do we intentionally offer an opportunity after worship for the forming of new relationships?

We often mistake friendliness for hospitality. It is rare that we, the authors, encounter a church where people are not friendly or at least polite. However, we often encounter a church that is friendly but fails to offer opportunities to form relationships. People can go almost anywhere to find friendliness, but most people are looking for something beyond friendliness. They are looking for relationships. They are looking for a place to belong.

Building

We must also think about our building as it relates to hospitality. Churches often allow outside groups to use the building. The imagined hope is that if people enter the building for another activity, they will somehow find their way to the life of the congregation, most often through worship. Yet we offer no intentional pathway for this to occur. Instead, we have the crazy idea that some Sunday morning, the person who goes to Scouts on Thursday night

will wake up and suddenly decide to go to church on Sunday. Friends, this occurs rarely, if at all.

How does your church offer hospitality to groups who use the building so that there is an opportunity to build relationships? If a church is not willing to offer hospitality and opportunities for building relationships, then we must ask, with all due respect, why are you letting groups use the church? Issuing a key is not hospitality. Churches are not in the landlord business. We are in the people business. If we are not willing to invest in the people who use the building, then we must ask ourselves why outsiders are using the building.

Kindness is the New Evangelism

BY ANDREW PONDER WILLIAMS

Andrew Ponder Williams says that simple acts of kindness can counter the dominant cultural narrative of meanness and be a powerful way for the church to connect with others. Kindness, he suggests, is the new evangelism.

So much of the narrative in our culture today can be summarized as just plain mean. From the way customers behave at the corner restaurant to the dialogue of lawmakers on Capitol Hill, there is no shortage of people being nasty.

Kindness is simple but challenging. Kindness is global. Kindness is Christian. Kindness is contagious.

As Christians at our best, we spend our energy decrying the cruelty of all those around us. At our worst, we fall victim to the same cruelty within the walls of our congregations. What if, instead, our response to society's fixation on bad behavior was to model a different way?

We have traditionally thought of evangelism as an invitation to those outside the church to experience God's love by joining us inside the church. Instead, what if simple acts of kindness to those beyond the walls of our churches became our new approach to evangelism?

The power of basic kindness

I did not realize the power of basic kindness until the students I shepherded in a campus ministry at the University of California, Irvine, came up with a distinct outreach plan. Instead of having a table lined up next to all the other church groups at the student involvement fair, we decided to offer random acts of kindness to students roaming the campus between classes.

Thanks to my spouse's occupation at a grocery store, I was able

to buy a whole bunch of chocolate chip cookies for a fair price. We wrapped each cookie in a napkin and included a small card inviting students to our weekly dinner. If you ever want to feel like a celebrity, stand in the middle of a busy college campus corridor with a whole bunch of cookies!

What we learned about kindness

We experienced three types of reactions from the students. One was instant glee that there were cookies and that they were free. The second was to politely decline the cookie initially but return within approximately 30 seconds to inquire if they really were free. The third was to completely refuse the cookie out of disbelief that we were giving away cookies without a gimmick.

These responses taught us something about kindness. Kindness is simple but challenging. Kindness is global. (So are cookies!) Kindness is Christian. Kindness is contagious. But some people will never believe that something desirable is free.

The varied reactions to our random acts of kindness created many opportunities for our student leaders to begin conversations with those who received cookies. Our kindness to everyone in our midst frequently made people ask us who we were before we could volunteer the information. We discovered that kindness not only attracted positive attention to our ministry, it also helped us stand out from the crowd within the Christian community on our campus.

How can kindness be a form of evangelism in your context?

The most effective uses of kindness are highly visible and interpersonal. Here are some starter ideas for a variety of contexts:

1. Facility-use evangelism

Your church likely hosts outside community gatherings, from Scouts to recovery support groups. Pick a couple weeks a year to leave snacks and other fun things in a visible spot in the meeting rooms of these community groups. Make sure to include bright and simple literature about your church that highlights your desire to welcome them into a deeper connection.

2. Sermon series

You can't go wrong with a sermon series on kindness. This is a great way to get your congregation thinking about how they can live out their faith by simply being kind.

3. Define kindness as central to your mission and values

You can work with your congregational leadership to define kindness as a part of your congregation's mission and core values. This will establish a distinct culture for your ministry.

4. Offer kindness to those in crisis

Watch your local news to see where kindness is urgently needed in your community. Perhaps the staff of a bank that was robbed would appreciate encouraging notes.

5. Cookies

Of course, we are ending with cookies. If all else fails, pass out free cookies to strangers of any age. From neighborhood sporting events to senior centers to college campuses, you will make someone's day meaningful and memorable. All those you reach will come to associate your church with kindness (and cookies). That's evangelism at its sweetest.