

Mystery Worshippers and a Ministry of Welcome



The Ship of Fools website (ship-of-fools.com) has an interesting section entitled 'Mystery Worshipper'. The premise: a brave soul ventures into a service at a church they have never visited before and reports on what it is like. The anonymous mystery worshippers have to answer questions about if and how they were welcomed to the service as a newcomer, what the experience of attending church was like, what happened afterwards and, crucially, whether they would consider going back again! All kinds of churches are reviewed from many different denominations with a huge range of styles of worship and size of congregation.

I find these little reviews remarkably telling. One person recently reported feeling like 'the invisible man' and in answer to the question 'Did the service make you feel glad to be a Christian?' the answer was, 'Well, perhaps, but an extremely lonely one!'

Many of the reviews note the only welcome is a quick greeting from the person giving out the hymn books or service sheets. More worryingly, a recent reviewer actually felt bullied by the congregation, and said that his lasting memory would be of 'the pushy members of the congregation trying to get me to sign things and buy things from them!'

What I find most interesting about Mystery Worshipper is that it gives us an insight into something many of us have either forgotten or never experienced – what it feels like to attend church if you have never been before. I always think about that in churches I go to: what is the experience like for the family and friends of the baptised person or the happy married couple, for the friends and neighbours of the person being laid to rest, for the person who has just wandered into the Christmas Eve midnight service a bit the worse for wear?

We rarely get to find out because, unlike the Mystery Worshippers, they leave no record of their feelings or experiences, no scorecard, no reflection, and, unless they return to us, no inkling of what God may have done with their visit. Mystery Worshippers are asked 'what will you remember about all this in seven days' time?' I often wish I could ask visitors the same thing!

Initiatives like Rural Mission Sunday help us to remember the importance of a ministry of welcome. People 'like us' are often more easily greeted and assimilated, but people who don't quite fit can end up 'invisible' and 'lonely' even in the midst of a congregation that would describe itself as warm and friendly.

Jesus, of course, is always on the side of the invisible and the lonely, and has some challenging words to say to us about it:

'For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?' (Matthew 5:46-48)

With these words, Jesus puts his finger on an uncomfortable fact of human nature: we tend to invest our time and attention in the people who are like us, with whom we feel most at home. It is important to us as human beings that we place ourselves where we feel happiest, among friends perhaps, the loved-ones in our families, our chosen social groups, our familiar congregations.

But Jesus offers a challenge: 'what more are you doing than others?' To offer good news and to demonstrate God's kingdom reality, disciples of Jesus must do more, stepping out into the places we would rather not go and offering welcome and love to people we would rather not meet. This can lead to reconciliation across all kinds of social divides, the creation of a new kind of community in which healing and restoration can happen, and the demonstration of something distinctive about being a holy people which does these things even though we would rather stay in our comfortable places and little cliques. Jesus does it all the time: eating with sinners, pursuing the outcast and restoring them, snatching the hated and condemned from the brink of death. All these are invited into the arena of God's saving love.

It's easy to say that we will do as Jesus did and offer welcome to all, so that every Mystery Worshipper would feel welcomed, helped and included, without being overwhelmed or bludgeoned. And often we do a lot of work on that, making sure there are welcomers for newcomers in our churches, working on our sensitive inclusion of people of other faiths or none, learning how to be more hospitable. However, what Ship of Fools has taught me is that while we do a lot of work on developing our ministry of welcome, and sometimes congratulate ourselves on how well we are doing it, we often forget to check what impact we are actually having on those we are seeking to include.

How does a person know that they are welcome within your church, your home, your school, your community? How do you feel a 'welcome' anyway? What has to happen before you can feel that this is a place you would like to return to? What happens when that feeling disappears? I am sometimes contacted by Christians who have been part of a church for many years, who have decided to leave, because they have come to feel that they are no longer welcome. So it's not just about people outside the church or people coming to church for the first time, it can be a gradual 'unwelcoming' of people who get quietly, but inexorably, edged out.

In one church I met a very friendly welcomer who'd stood by the door throughout the service. I asked her who in the church might feel the most left out. She smiled sadly and said, 'I think that would be me.'

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