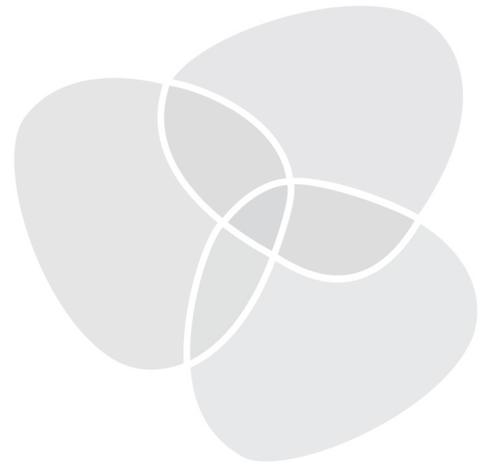


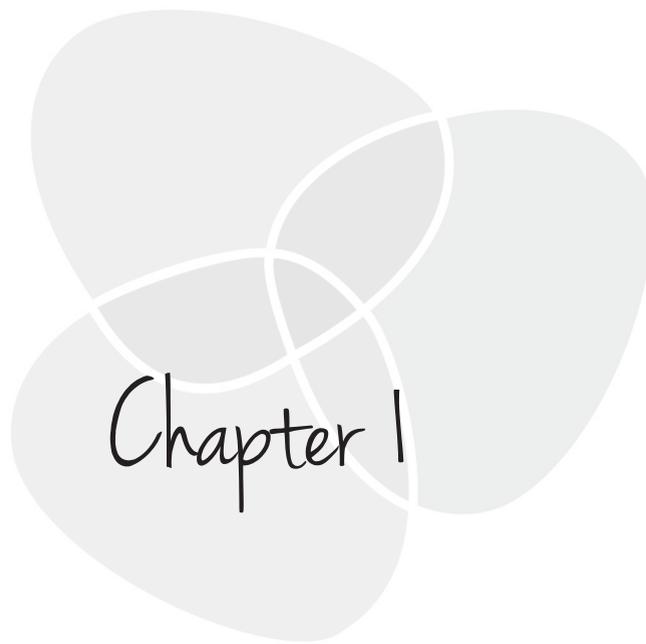


Invite • Welcome • Connect
stories & tools to transform your church

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THE STORY

The power of story is at the heart of this work, and I will start with mine.

Born in Brookhaven and raised in Natchez, Mississippi, I am the middle of five children of Southern Baptist parents. I was blessed with a family who understood the importance of the deeply Southern gift of hospitality. Visiting pastors and missionaries to Riverside Baptist Church often stayed in our home, and there seemed to be a continuous flow of friends, family, and even strangers. This relational gift, ingrained in me at a young age, was the seed of the ministry God would call me to many years later.

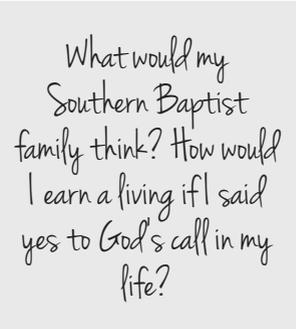
I went to Mississippi State for two years, got married, had two children, divorced after twenty years, and then opened a physician-recruiting firm in Beaumont, Texas. Sitting in my office in downtown Beaumont in the fall of 1995, I received a

call from Sally Dooley, with whom I sat on various community boards. Sally invited me to her church, St. Mark's Episcopal in Beaumont, and I accepted her invitation not only out of respect for her but also out of curiosity about this faith tradition she so obviously loved.

Attending St. Mark's Episcopal Church was my first experience of worship in a liturgical church, and I was completely overwhelmed. In retrospect, I realize I had no idea what "liturgy" meant, but at the time it was clear I was in the midst of the most Holy, and my soul was touched in a way that to this day is hard to describe. I was drawn to the reverence, the spoken word, the music, the prayers, and especially the simple act of kneeling with others in the congregation.

Throughout the following year, I struggled with what I now know was a call from God. I spent hours reading, journaling, taking long hikes, meditating, praying, and soul searching, and I envisioned a life of purpose, happiness, and healing for myself. Weir Smith, a licensed family therapist who happened to be Episcopalian, was instrumental in bringing me along to a place of emotional and spiritual healing.

I had been seeing Weir prior to my first visit to St. Mark's, and she encouraged me to read books that opened me up to an unfamiliar world of thought: Henri Nouwen's *Reaching Out*, Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth*, and Hannah Hurnard's *Hinds Feet on High Places*. I had a deep, intuitive sense that God was calling me to ministry, but fear prevented me from taking action. What would my Southern Baptist family think? How would I earn a living if I said yes to God's call in my life?



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For many of us, talking about our faith and our church is one of the most difficult things we can do. But what if there was a way to learn and practice in a supportive, non-threatening environment? This is what Invite Welcome Connect does. Mary Parmer has created this extraordinary combination of ideas and life experience. I first met Mary years ago in Austin, Texas, when I was in seminary. I was drawn to Mary's passion for helping congregations understand the importance of personal invitation, welcoming folks, hearing their story, recognizing their gifts, and then connecting them to ministry. This is the essence of living into our Baptismal Covenant!

Invite Welcome Connect is not a program, but a ministry based in scripture, theology, and experience. It is an *ethos*, a way of being. It is comprehensive and incredibly well thought out, but perhaps most importantly, it's exciting! This ministry encourages intentional listening by both the congregation and its individual members. It invites us to hear the story that each person carries, and in listening, acknowledge a deeper bond in Christ and each other.

I firmly believe that every visitor who crosses the threshold of our churches does so by the invitation of the Holy Spirit. In talking with our visitors, I have been told many stories about how that person "just felt like she should come to our church" or "I drove by your church every day on my way to work for five years and never noticed it, but then I just saw it and felt I should visit." We have a responsibility to honor these holy invitations by welcoming, inviting, and connecting each person to the body of Christ, the church.

But this doesn't happen by accident. It happens by cultivating an ethos of Invite Welcome Connect through teaching, prayer, and preaching. It

requires training and having parishioners poised and ready with systems in place. And it requires accountability and measuring our metrics to see how we're doing. Since we began implementing the principles of Invite Welcome Connect seven years ago, we have experienced a 22 percent increase in communicants in good standing (1,168 from 957); a 48 percent increase in average Sunday attendance (509 from 337); and a 359 percent increase in "others who are active" (445 from 97) (all numbers from 2017 and 2010 parochial reports). For me the category of "others who are active" is the most significant because these people are in the process of taking the next steps in their spiritual journey at Christ Church Cathedral. The end result is changed lives and vibrant churches.

Brent A. Owens
Associate Dean, Christ Church Cathedral
Lexington, Kentucky

Another way to consider Invite Welcome Connect is through the lens of the three-legged stool of Anglican authority: scripture, tradition, and reason. Based on the theology of Richard Hooker (c. 1554-1600), each source of authority must be perceived in light of the other two. This concept is helpful when exploring the ministry of Invite Welcome Connect: Each of the three components is connected, and transformation will only happen when we intentionally address all three of these essentials. As we live into these practices that will move us from maintenance to mission, we are transformed. Just as the sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and invisible grace, the action steps of Invite Welcome Connect are outward and visible signs. The inward and spiritual grace is the deeper, inner truth of people's connection with Christ and with the world. This is where real transformation occurs.



A three-legged stool is totally dependent on all three legs. Take one away, you fall. Our success with the Invite Welcome Connect ministry is based on the belief that each of these three aspects is equally important in building a strong, vibrant relationship with each other and the faith community.

To build a stool that is lasting and substantial, there must be a plan. Each of the legs of our stool needed a carpenter—a chairperson—who had a clear understanding of the ministry essentials. In January 2016, we first reached out to and recruited active members of the congregation to work as a unified team committed to opening doors and hearts to anyone seeking to find a place at God’s table. All chairs and co-chairs of each team studied the Invite Welcome Connect philosophy and suggestions on how to start. Next each chair (carpenter) built a team with six to ten individuals.

To give ourselves a clear understanding of our goals and objectives, we, with direction from clergy, developed a fluid flowchart, a visual schematic identifying outcomes and illustrating the path from a newcomer’s initial contact with the church until that person establishes a meaningful, comfortable place in the St. John’s family. Being a fluid instrument, our flowchart has changed over time but always provides sign posts to keep us focused on the journey.

The next step was to have our church family buy into the program. We first introduced the ministry to members in a newsletter article and from the pulpit. People were curious and started asking questions. In July 2016, on three consecutive Sundays, each committee hosted a forum, sharing the philosophy of the essentials along with goals. An underlying message from every team was the importance of each member of the church to the

success of the ministry. We included a question-and-answer session. We were learning and growing together.

We held an Invitation Sunday in September 2016, an occasion where each member was encouraged to invite someone to worship, a reception, and tour of the facilities. Because many Episcopalians shy away from the word evangelism, the Invite Committee, with the support of Welcome and Connect, presented an informative, humorous forum on “how to invite” another person to church. What a huge success! Among other initiatives, Invite was tasked with developing a list of “invite friendly” events held each year by the church and encouraged invitations be extended as a way to open the door to others.

Welcome’s “Holy Hospitality” is a three-fold ministry. It encompasses the greeters, the ushers, and the distribution of welcome bags from the staffed Welcome Table.

The ushers and the greeters work in conjunction with those at the Welcome Table to identify and welcome new people. Greeters, who wear a greeter tag as well as a name tag, greet individuals, introduce them to other parishioners and clergy, give them a Welcome Bag, and make sure they are escorted to the parish hall for coffee and conversation. They introduce them to at least one other person so that when the visitors come back, they will be able to call at least a few people by their names. We want no stranger in our midst.

Connect’s goals are to help identify newcomers’ talents and passions by getting to know them as individuals and letting them know that they are needed and vital to St. John’s family and the community. Connect’s flowchart identifies goals from the first month of contact through the sixth month—from the time newcomers fill out a visitor’s card to the time when they (hopefully) feel like they truly belong.

In March 2017, another Invite Welcome Connect forum was held, and two of the new church members spoke about why they had chosen to become a part of the St. John's family. Each had immediately been greeted and felt welcomed and valued at St. John's. Their spiritual and community needs were being met. Their testimonies were proof that Invite Welcome Connect is effective.

This three-legged stool that we have built together has helped guarantee a safe, nurturing place at God's table. The congregation and clergy are the glue that ensures each person has a place among our St. John's family.

Mary Lee Robertson
Lay Leader, St. John's Episcopal Church
Tallahassee, Florida

VISION

The vision of Invite Welcome Connect is to change the culture of the Episcopal Church to move from maintenance to mission. In his seminal book *Culture Making*, author Andy Crouch describes culture as what we make of the world, and he encourages Christians to be creative culture makers. He writes, "If God is at work in every sphere and scale of human culture, then such supernaturally abundant results are potentially present whenever we take the risk of creating a new cultural good... Culture – making something of the world, moving the horizons

of possibility and impossibility—is what human beings do and are meant to do. Transformed culture is at the heart of God’s mission in the world, and it is the call of God’s redeemed people.”

Attempting to change the cultures and contexts of individual congregations is not the intent of the Invite Welcome Connect ministry; rather, the vision for this work is to assist communities in becoming creative culture change-makers, moving communities of faith from maintenance to mission. Bishop Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley articulated the difference between the two in their classic book, *Reclaiming the Great Commission*: “The missionary church is forever in deep water, always at risk, continually taking chances as it tries to carry the gospel to the unchurched, in words and ways they can understand. It is the maintenance church that keeps its feet on the shore—unwilling to risk, unwilling to change, unwilling to encounter God in the deep water of the unchurched. Just washing its nets.”

Transformed culture is at the heart of God’s mission in the world, and it is the call of God’s redeemed people.

- Andy Crouch



Jesus calls us to be fishers of people. Invite Welcome Connect has helped St. John’s move from line-catching to building a net for newcomer incorporation. Through the Invite Welcome Connect model, we now think holistically.

Let’s begin with the terminology: the genius of this model is that it takes words that are scary to most Episcopalians, words like evangelism and

radical hospitality, and replaces them with words that people grasp immediately in or outside of the church: Invite Welcome Connect.

I frame it like this: Every Sunday, Jesus throws a party at church. He is the host, we're all guests, but in our case, we are guests who have already experienced Jesus' welcome. Now, we are to share it with others.

First, we are encouraged to invite people to the party. When we are excited about our faith in God, it's not hard to want others to have the same experience. It's pure joy. In recent years, we've held an Invitation Sunday in the fall. We send out a letter in the summer and ask members to invite someone to church with them. The letter includes practical pointers and is written with a light touch—evangelism doesn't have to be ponderous! We also include Invitation Cards (the size of business cards) with basic information about worship service times, website, social media, parking, and directions that members can give to people they invite.

Second, once folks knock on our door, we open it wide. Our goal is to make visitors feel like they are the most important people in the world to God (which they are!). This is the vital ministry of our greeters, ushers, and Welcome Table volunteers. Invite Welcome Connect has inspired us to revitalize these crucial ministries.

Third, once folks have been welcomed, we introduce them to their fellow guests and make them feel at home. Connect is a particular area on which we needed to concentrate. I personally witnessed many of our newcomers leaving the party through the back door. They would be active for six months and then disappear. Through Invite Welcome Connect, we are now much more intentional about connecting new people to other members and ministries. At the same time, we realize

people connect at their own paces. I've witnessed newcomers joining the choir on their very first day with us, and others who need to sit in the back of the church for a year before they get involved with anything. Members of our Connect team are good listeners and appreciate the need for discerning the best approach for each individual.

Last year alone, we welcomed more than 100 new members, all of whom have become meaningfully connected to the St. John's community. I am very excited to see how Invite Welcome Connect will continue to help St. John's grow in numbers and spiritual depth in the future!

David C. Killeen
Rector, St. John's Episcopal Church
Tallahassee, Florida

CORE VALUES

Critical core values undergird Invite Welcome Connect, and participating congregations and those carrying out this work are reminded to keep these values at the forefront of ministry.

PRAYERFUL: We pray God will give us courage to implement the essentials of Invite Welcome Connect in our congregations. We also pray for our hearts to reflect God's gracious invitation and welcome. It is not our table to which we welcome people—it is God's table! One would assume our faith communities are naturally open to welcoming the strangers in their midst; however, this is not always the case. Early on in my travels around the country with this ministry, one vestry member at a small parish told the assembled group she liked the church the