



The Practices of a Radically Welcoming Community

What might change or develop in your community's life if together you opened the door to the dream of God? Here is a summary of the practices others have taken on as they made their way toward radical welcome; they're also the attitudes and behaviors you'll need to cultivate for this renewed way of life.

Engage in Formation for Radical Welcome

- Focus your preaching and Christian formation programs on the Gospel message of embrace, transformation and liberation
- Prepare people for the reality of change, day in and day out
- Emphasize formation as disciples and apostles; mission and embrace isn't just the clergy's responsibility
- Take advantage of anti-oppression trainings and resources in order to develop critical consciousness regarding systems, identity and your participation in oppression (past and present, individual and communal)
- Connect to your own history of participating in liberation and welcoming The Other
- Tap into your personal and shared experiences of pain and marginalization
- Look at the community through the eyes of The Other—what is exclusive and what is radically welcoming?
- Tell the story of the costs and loss your community suffers because of oppression and exclusion

Model New Attitudes

- Nurture an identity that can “flex” to include fresh ideas, perspectives, practices *and* The Other
- Allow yourself and others to try new things, fail and try again
- Assume conflict is not the end of a relationship or a program
- Cultivate patience and persistence and keep returning to the long view
- Be playful and irreverent about yourself, your traditions and new possibilities

Create and Nurture Supportive Structures

- Revamp or plant ministries that are collaborative, with room for different groups to share leadership and teach each other
- Cultivate deep pastoral resources and nurture your community’s holding environment
- Practice open, effective communication, especially across various group lines in the congregation
- Offer a wide variety of forums and opportunities for truth-telling, storytelling and healing throughout the community
- Identify bridge people from the center *and* the margins who can help to lead change and nurture mutual relationships
- Nurture vibrant ministries of inviting and evangelism and of inclusion and hospitality
- Open up participation in ministries, especially the ones perennially closed to new blood
- Offer regular opportunities to ask questions and offer feedback with key leaders—and then be willing to follow-up, address concerns and incorporate good ideas

Welcome The Other

- Meet people where they are rather than require that they find their way to you
- Advertise and evangelize in ways that connect with The Other’s culture and location, and be sure your stated welcome matches your reality

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- Cultivate relationships in the surrounding community—think civic, political and cultural groups and broad-based community organizations—in order to increase your cultural competence, visibility and skill at welcoming and partnering with The Other
 - Create space back home to welcome these new gifts and leaders, even if they don't fit your standard requirements or expectations
 - Establish multiple points of entry to and relationship with your congregation: sponsor relevant community programs and events, offer exceptionally hospitable space for community groups
 - Ask your marginalized members and your neighbors what issues most concern them and what programs and offerings the community needs from your church
 - Recruit and make room not only for the “safe” people on the margins, but eventually those whose presence, voice and power present a real change and challenge
 - Undertake “diversity” moves (efforts that increase representation and visibility of under-represented groups), but be sure to back them up with extra encouragement and support for these newer leaders, as well as communication and training for the rest of the community about the values guiding such decisions

Prepare for the Journey

If you would like to take on these practices, consider these preparatory questions for yourself and your community. You may not have all the answers yet—that's what the journey is all about!—but these questions will help to kick-start or deepen radical welcome in your community:

- Who are The Others for you? Whom do you hope to radically welcome?
- Why do you want to radically welcome these groups? Are there other groups who are on your doorstep who are just as marginalized? (For instance, are you beating yourself up for having no African-Americans when the majority of people of color in a one-mile radius are actually Brazilian or Cambodian? Are you focusing on welcoming people of color first when there's already a disenfranchised, unchurched community of young people wandering around outside?)
- What do members of this group or these groups say about your church now? What have your interactions been like to this point? If there has been little or no interaction, what would they likely assume about your community?

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- What would your institution need to change in order to convince The Other that the terms are now different? If they dare to venture inside, what activities, images, messages and events would make it crystal clear that you are making room for their voices, their presence, their power, at the heart of your life together? (Don't be afraid to pose these questions directly to your marginalized members and neighbors.)
 - Is there an existing group in the congregation already committed to something like a radical welcome vision? Could you engage them in this work?
 - Do you have even a small, critical mass of people from the marginalized group, with bridge people in place (that is, members of the marginalized group who are already members and leaders; these leaders have likely helped the congregation to develop some competence in the marginalized group's culture, and they can provide a touchstone and ease entry for others)? Or are you starting from zero?
 - If you are starting from zero, are you willing to develop some cultural competence (that is, how can you become conversant in The Other's culture, story, arts, style of leadership and of engagement) before people arrive?
 - Are you willing to embrace The Other: *not* demanding that The Other be like you or minimizing differences, but stretching and re-imagining your way of life so that you might be transformed by those who have never been truly, radically welcomed in your community?
 - What is the current center of this group's common life: coffee houses, ethnic groceries, daycare centers, the dog park, the soup kitchen, the refugee center, music stores, schools and colleges? How could you step out to meet them there? How could you incorporate wisdom from their culture into your community's life? Are we willing to find out ways to build and celebrate God's reign together?
 - Are you ready to talk about power: individual power, interpersonal power, institutional power, systemic power? Do you know where to get the resources to have those conversations?
 - Are you willing to deal honestly and compassionately with your community's fear of change and fear of The Other? Do you know where to get the resources to nurture a holding environment?