

WELCOME TO YOUR CHURCH HOME: STRATEGIES FOR CONGREGATIONAL
WELCOME AND ASSIMILATION IN A POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

When welcoming a guest into a personal home, nearly every action is taken to make that person feel comfortable, at ease, and at home in a place they may or may not have ever visited. These foundational principles and the goal of establishing belonging are no different for a congregation seeking to welcome individuals into their spiritual home. Just as hosting within one's personal home changes based on the audience coming, a church adaptation is no different. American culture has experienced a profound and rapid spiritual shift in recent decades, leading many to describe America as a post-Christian society. In this environment, Christianity no longer holds a place of assumed influence or high regard. What does this mean for the church? This cultural transformation signifies that the church's mission field has changed. Therefore, churches must thoughtfully consider how their congregational welcome can make people feel at home the first time they walk through the front door. This paper will attempt to define "home" in a congregational setting while exploring subtle yet practical strategies that foster a welcoming environment and facilitate meaningful assimilation within Christian congregations seeking to engage in a post-Christian society.

INTRODUCTION

“In its full richness, *To long* suggests to yearn for a long time for something that is a long way off and something that we feel we belong to and that belongs to us. The longing for home is so universal a form of longing that there is even a special word for it, which is of course, homesickness.”¹ Perhaps I never truly understood the profound concept of the word '*home*' for most of my life. I certainly did not when pulling out of the gravel driveway of my childhood home in southeast Michigan. As daunting as the eleven-hour drive may have been, anticipation for the new adventure of college overcame the dread of the long trip. I still recall the sensation of the car tires transitioning from gravel to the paved main road as I made a right turn out of the driveway. Continuing tradition by giving two honks on the horn to say goodbye to my waving parents, as I had witnessed my older siblings before me do, my eyes officially switched to only what was out of the front view window ahead.

The newness and busyness of college life initially served as an unrealized distraction. Stepping out of my car, registering for classes, learning the layout of campus, locating my dorm room, and unpacking kept my attention fixed on everything in front of me. Yet as unpacking cleared my car's rearview window, so too my focus began to shift, bringing into view everything I left behind in Michigan. It was not until the friendly question from a soon-to-be classmate, “Where are you from?” that the home I left behind came into its clearest focus. The more the question continued to be asked, the greater the pain of nostalgia continued to increase. I began

1. Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections*. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 9.

desiring breaks from college not merely because of its rigor, but also to satisfy the buildup of nostalgia.

The days leading up to a school break seemed to last progressively longer until the final day. It was not until the tires once more crunched onto the gravel driveway that my desire for home was satisfied. Opening my car door and stepping out was always met by the familiar country noise of crickets and cicadas. Passing the tire swing and seeing the treehouse off in the distance nearly every time demanded a flood of countless memories of playing outside with my siblings and childhood friends. Occasionally, I would stop where I was to let my mind drift back to the times our yard was full of family and friends for a graduation party, a holiday, or my sister's wedding in the backyard. Turning toward the house and continuing my walk, a smile would come to my face. The house itself was not worth a million dollars, but I am not sure if I'd be willing to sell it for a million.

The trip down memory lane continued after I slipped off my shoes in the mud room and walked up the stairs to the kitchen. As always, I was met by the faint sound of the kitchen radio still playing the country music station 102.9. It might have been 1:00–2:00 a.m. when I rolled in, but it never mattered how tired I was; standing in physical nostalgia gave a type of energy that caffeine on a long car ride cannot. The cherry on top of my return was my two parents, who never failed to stay up until I got home. Their welcome-home hug was typically followed by another hour-long conversation about everything we could not wait to share. It is true I was exhausted and nearly just as tired talking with my parents as I was from pulling all-nighters to finish assignments, but in that moment, it did not matter. I was finally back where it all felt like home.

Desiring Spiritual Home

The ache I felt for my childhood home is not unique to me. This deep desire is part of a universal human longing to return to places and people that remind us of who we are and where we belong. Whether one calls it homesickness or nostalgia, it is a yearning for rootedness, love, safety, and belonging.² Yet this longing for home is not merely restricted to one's geography and family; as Carrie Teller states, it points to something spiritual.³ If "home" can be felt so deeply in a house built of wood and brick, how much more powerful might it be when found among a people gathered in faith?

Perhaps this very question is why one of my favorite things to do as a seminary student is experiencing churches that I have never attended. If a church is truly experienced as "home" by those who gather there, and if they genuinely desire to extend their home to others, I cannot help but be eager to experience how they cultivate a sense of belonging in me. On one particular visit with my wife to a new church, I remember meeting a woman a few decades older than me shortly after finding a seat next to her. Greeting each other, she said, "I don't think we have ever met. I'm Illene." Introducing ourselves, I asked what led her to join this church. She replied, "A few years ago, I was nervous to try this church along with any other, but then I walked in, and I don't know how to describe it, but it just felt like home."

One could argue her answer was vague; yet, in the light of my own experience of the church up to that point, I found myself understanding what she meant. From the moment my wife and I arrived, there was instilled in us a sense of belonging, safety, and hospitality that

2. Buechner, *The Longing for Home*, 9.

3. Carrie C Teller, "The Theology of Home Cultivating Faith and Belonging Through Community and Hospitality as a Reflection of God's Presence in the Community and Church" (PhD Diss., Southern Methodist University, 2025), 9.

moved us to echo each other's words we spoke in the car while driving away, "I'd be excited to come back here. I'd be excited to call this church my church home."

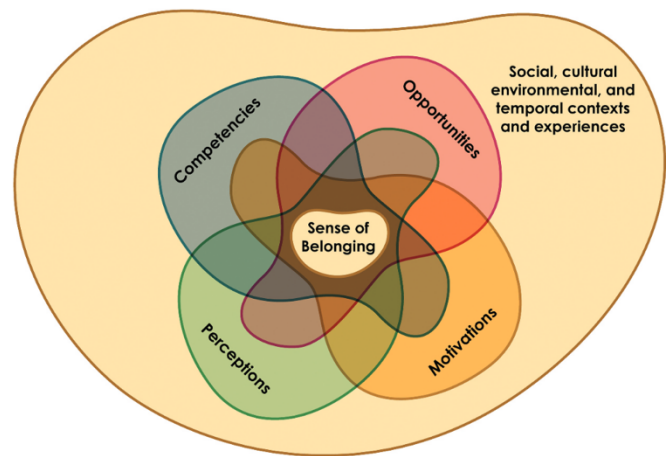
There are natural similarities between general home hospitality and a congregational welcome. Both involve communicating to their guests, "You belong and are welcome here." Yet a church's invitation has infinitely more depth. In fact, the church at its best is a household of faith that intentionally says to the weary and wandering, "Welcome home." But in a culture where fewer people are familiar with church life, religion is viewed with suspicion, biblical literacy is increasingly falling, and the ache for belonging is not commonly associated with the church, the more challenges a congregation must overcome to help a first-time attendee feel at home.

Such tension raises a timely question: How can congregations in post-Christian America intentionally create environments that feel like home for first-time guests, a place where they not only encounter God's Word but also experience relational warmth, safety, and a sense of belonging? To address this, this study will first attempt to define "home" in a congregational setting, establishing a theological and relational framework for how churches can intentionally create such an environment for first-time guests. It will highlight that such an environment is rooted in the biblical call to love God and love one's neighbor, forming a community that reflects both divine truth and relational warmth. To accomplish this, the paper will draw on a combination of the theological foundations of "home," secular psychology on human belonging, and the current religious cultural shift to help congregations initiate strategic conversation to determine practical applications of hospitality and community. Building on this framework, the study will also examine how three current congregations are actively fostering a sense of belonging, recognizing that such strategies are tailored to each church's unique context.

This will include highlights from interviews with pastors who have intentionally incorporated elements of hospitality to make their churches feel like home. Ultimately, this paper will explore subtle yet impactful factors that encourage Christian congregational assimilation in a post-Christian culture environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of belonging is not anything new to psychology. Numerous publications can be found on the subject. The parameters of this paper warrant a brief understanding of what psychologists attribute to forming a sense of belonging. Modern psychology attributes the feeling and experience of belonging to four key factors: Competencies, opportunities, perception, and motivation.⁴ Such factors are also at play in instilling belonging within a congregation.



Psychological Framework for Belonging

The first core component of belonging is competencies. These are understood as the subjective and objective skills and abilities of an individual that enable them to connect with others. Such

4. This study draws primarily on the work of Kelly-Ann Allen et al. (2021) due to the impressive breadth of their research. Their evaluation is chosen for its unique ability to compare and synthesize a wide variety of studies on belonging, compiling them into a single, unified discussion that provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding this complex human need.

skills are valuable to a sense of belonging as they “reduce the likelihood of social rejection.”⁵ In a congregational setting, this is best understood as one’s social skills, such as active listening, verbal and nonverbal communication, and one’s ability to understand acceptable behavior. While one might view competency as purely innate to a person, competencies can develop over time.⁶ In fact, a church has potential to be a prime place for growing one’s competency. For example, a loving Christian congregation seeks to meet all people where they are at, love them as Christ does, and make conscious efforts to relate relationally with them. When a congregation meets a guest with inclusion, it allows a guest to practice and reinforce the innate social skills they do have, making them less likely to experience social rejection. All in all, if people can relate, they have a great stepping stone towards belonging.

The second component is opportunities. These refer to the available people, groups, places, time, and space that enable belonging to occur. Opportunities are often compared to a bridge, which allows people to socially connect and find acceptance with others.⁷ This component is a huge focus of this paper going forward. Motivation is the third contributor to belonging, referring to an individual’s drive to connect with others. Of all the factors, this one is not only deeply ingrained within all people but also understood as the fundamental need for acceptance to take place.⁸ Even with having skills and opportunities, a lack of motivation or excitement about the people present or the space an individual is in ultimately robs one of creating the relationships needed to belong. Churches often refer to inner motivation as their

5. Kelly-Ann Allen et al., “Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research,” *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73, no. 1 (2021): 92.

6. Allen et al., “Belonging,” 92.

7. Allen et al., “Belonging,” 92–93.

8. Allen et al., “Belonging,” 94.

congregational culture. Finally, perception encompasses one's self-confidence and perception of acceptance when entering a new place with unfamiliar people. This feature of belonging implies that every person entering a new church is asking themselves, "Am I wanted here? Do I fit here?"

Belonging in the Church

One of the most recent studies exploring the concept of belonging within the Church includes Carrie C. Teller's dissertation, *The Theology of Home: Cultivating Faith and Belonging Through Community and Hospitality as a Reflection of God's Presence in the Community and Church* (2025).⁹ Teller takes the basic human need to belong and frames it within the context of the church, which is called to function as a spiritual home. Teller suggests the reason for the decline of the modern church stems from congregations becoming institutionalized to the point that many have abandoned the relational emphasis that makes it a spiritual home of belonging. Her dissertation urges the church to renew its emphasis on these key values of relational depth and hospitality, which foster a sense of belonging.¹⁰

While Teller's dissertation addresses a framework for instilling a sense of belonging within the church, she acknowledges that her primary focus is on the essence and characteristics of faith communities rather than providing a detailed guide for implementation. Her narrow focus provides an opening to discuss practical strategies for congregational consideration as they seek to welcome, assimilate, and engage with their post-Christian society.

⁹ Teller, "Theology of Home."

¹⁰ Teller, "Theology of Home," 2.

DEFINING “HOME”

Before exploring how congregations can cultivate such a sense of home and belonging, it is first necessary to create the theological definition of “home.” Such a definition will give further insight into the calling a group of Christians who form a congregation has as they strive to function as “home.” Biblically speaking, “home” is twofold in nature.

Throughout Biblical history and the history of the Christian church, home is not merely thought of as a place, but rather as where God dwells with His people.¹¹ The early church father Augustine (354–430) stated, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”¹² Later reformers, such as Martin Luther (1483–1546), said, “We are Christ’s own; we belong to Him... we are citizens of heaven and have a home there.”¹³ Even the most recent theologians of our time continue to define the truest definition of home to be dwelling with God. These include C.S. Lewis (1898–1963), along with Tim Keller (1950–2023), who stated, “All the beauty we have looked for in art or faces or places and all the love we have looked for in the arms of other people is only fully present in God Himself.”¹⁴ While these men of God all lived and served in different periods of time, they equally express the timeless truth that God’s presence is where one finds true safety, peace, purpose, and belonging; aspects that make up what we call home. Their claims are also nothing less than Scriptural.

11. Teller, “Theology of Home,” 31.

12. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 24.

13. Martin Luther, *The Catholic Epistles*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, trans. Martin H. Bertram and Walter A. Hansen, vol. 30 of *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), 208.

14. Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 112.

At creation, mankind knew and experienced what true home meant. While Adam and Eve were placed in Eden's garden, home was less about their location and more about their perfect relationship with God. To dwell with God was to experience complete safety, purpose, comfort, peace, and belonging. In other words, the humanities' first and truest home was dwelling in God's presence.¹⁵ Yet that home did not last. Sin broke mankind's relationship with God, instilling a desire in man's heart for home that even wandering Eden's garden was not able to satisfy. Shame entered where security once lived; fear replaced peace; and belonging was swapped with a longing to be home.¹⁶

This is where the purpose for the rest of Scripture originates. The Bible is nothing less than the account of God's fulfilled plan of restoring mankind's truest and deepest longing for home, a perfect relationship with God. As Carrie C. Teller states in her dissertation, this relational restoration of home with God begins with Christ's incarnation.¹⁷ In Matthew 1:20–23, the angel told Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (NIV). After these words, verse 24 leaves no ambiguity as to the nature of this child when it quotes Isaiah's prophecy, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means, ‘God with us’)” (Isaiah 7:14). Because mankind could not go to God, God placed Himself into our world, choosing to become flesh and dwell among us through His incarnation.¹⁸ Teller says it well, “More than just a miraculous event, the incarnation becomes the lens through which God's entire plan for salvation

15. Gen 2

16. Gen 3

17. Teller, “Theology of Home,” 31.

18. John 1:14

comes into focus. The theological essence of home being ground in God's presence."¹⁹ This forms the first part of the twofold theological definition of home. And while it is absolutely true one will not experience God's presence in its fullest sense until home in heaven, God promises to be present through means of His Word.²⁰ As a Christian continues to be reminded of God's promises and be strengthened through the Word, God is present; and where God comes to dwell with mankind, there is home. This proclamation of God's continued forgiveness and love is where one finds joy, purpose, safety, belonging, and ultimately home, even while dwelling in this temporary home we call earth. Such a relational reality with God establishes the first pillar of home for a congregation.

While home in the theological sense is a relational reality with God, in the context of a congregation, that definition would limp if it ended there. Home in the church is not only a relational reality between God and a Christian, but a relational community. Teller frames these two aspects of the definition of home in the light of the two tables of the law. The first table is concerned with our love and devotion to God, while the second is concerned with our love and responsibilities toward others. Teller builds off Matthew 22:36–40 stating:

It is reasonable to say that the first two commandments form the foundation of Christian community and belonging. They affirm that home is not merely a physical structure but a relational reality—built first on love for God and then extended to love for one another. When it reflects these commandments, the church becomes a home where faith is believed and lived in a relationship.²¹

While I am personally hesitant to use the law to as a framework for defining the church as a home, since Christian congregations are gospel-motivated rather than law or commandment-

19. Teller, "Theology of Home," 32.

20. Matt 18:20

21. Teller, "Theology of Home," 33.

driven,²² Teller's assertion does illustrate the calling individual Christians as well as congregations share as they seek to establish belonging within their community of faith. God has not only called congregations to love Him and His Word, but also to extend Christ-like love to their fellow neighbors and the broader community.

Jesus notably emphasized the joyful necessity of Christian hospitality by saying, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35). It is clear that love for one's neighbor cannot be discarded in a congregation's mission to embody "home," but it is equally foundational. Therefore, a congregation's pursuit of establishing home is biblically twofold. First rooted in a love for God and His Word taught in its purity. Second, a love that reaches out in genuine hospitality to those inside and outside its four walls. Both are necessary if a church desires to establish belonging and its fullest calling of home.²³

It is therefore natural to conclude that if a congregation either emphasizes one too much or neglects one of the two aspects, the twofold purpose of home falls apart. For example, if a congregation puts too much emphasis on hospitality and social acceptance, there may be a temptation to sacrifice the truth of the Gospel. While a church may receive positive encouragement from its hospitality, by sacrificing truth, it becomes nothing more than a social institution or a country club-like group.²⁴ But there is also a danger on the other side. While God's Word is absolutely the most important aspect of a Christian congregation, if living

22. Law motivation refers to the approach that emphasizes obligation or external obedience, where gospel motivation flows from God's grace given through Christ. The concern with framing belonging through pure law risks reducing hospitality to requirements rather than gifts that flow from the gospel message.

23. Teller, "Theology of Home," 35.

24. Jim Davis and al., *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?*, with an introduction by Collin Hansen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023), 126.

relationally and creating on-ramps to belonging through hospitality are not prioritized alongside it, the church fails to minister to the whole person (mind, body, and soul). The church also unintentionally create barriers to meeting people where they are at, opportunities to engage with non-Christians, and ultimately hurt their mission.²⁵ God has not called Christians to walk alone, but gives them brothers and sisters to live reflecting together Christian hospitality and Christ's invitation of belonging through the way they engage within a fallen world.²⁶

To state it plainly, mission and confession go hand in hand.²⁷ Expressions of Christian love are unmistakably interwoven with a love for God and His Word. *The Great De Churching* attempts to balance what often feels like a theological/practical tension by quoting an Indiana pastor:

It seems like there are two groups out there arguing how to reach lost people. On the one hand, you've got the seeker-movement people who devise a bunch of methods to reach the unchurched. Then you've got the strong doctrinal group that says preach the Word faithfully, and God will reach these people. I'll tell you what I do. I won't compromise a lick of doctrine to reach the unchurched, but I'll also do everything we can with methods, programs, and ideas to reach them. As I see the Bible, it doesn't teach either/or; it teaches both/and.²⁸

Taken together, these two relational realities allow for a working yet practical definition of "home." Congregational home is a relational community where God's people grow closer to Him through the proclamation and study of His Word, and grow closer to one another through hospitality, encouragement, and Christ-like love.²⁹ A Christian community that emphasizes both

25. Teller, "Theology of Home," 101.

26. 1 Pet 2:12

27. Matt 28:19–20

28. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 137.

29. Teller, "Theology of Home," 100–1.

dimensions not only creates a warm environment but reflects God's heart to gather people into his family and declare, "You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household" (Ephesians 2:19). Now that we have a working definition of home, the question remains: how does a congregation welcome, assimilate, and instill a sense of belonging in those who have never been part of a Christian community? Therefore, the next step in answering this probing question is to comprehend the human need to belong, as well as the context and culture in which we currently operate, as we strive to welcome newcomers into our church homes.

Belonging: The Basic Human Need

From the beginning, Scripture has testified to humanity's deep relational design. Even in a perfect world without sin, God stated, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). God brought Adam to the same conclusion when given the task to name every animal and creature. In the process, Adam recognized mankind's relational design and his personal desire to satisfy it.³⁰

Modern research overwhelmingly confirms that Adam's inner desire for relational belonging is likewise embedded in all humanity. Scholars across multiple disciplines and timeframes agree that belonging is not a luxury but a fundamental human need that is "buried deep within human biology, down to the genomic level."³¹ Consequently, physical and emotional well-being are strongly tied to and impacted by the quality of one's relationships. Science even concludes that the brain and immune system are specifically designed to help people avoid social

30. Gen 2:20

31. Allen et al., "Belonging," 88.

threats and seek out relational safety.³² In turn, if one's social-relational needs for belonging go unmet, negative implications follow. Researchers like Baumeister, Leary, and Maslow go so far as to conclude that belonging is just as important as food, shelter, and physical safety.³³

These studies are attested to as well as built upon in the most recent findings from the well-known 2023 publication of the US Surgeon General. Their studies first confirm that social connection is a strong predictor of longevity, as well as physical and cognitive health. They illustrate the point by comparing/equating the effects of loneliness to the effects of smoking fifteen cigarettes daily.³⁴ Yet, the effects go beyond just the physical. Belonging, positive or negative, affects educational ability, work satisfaction, economic prosperity, and fulfillment.³⁵

From the perspective of Gen 2:18, these conclusions are not surprising. God created mankind as relational beings. Whether introvert or extrovert, every person longs to be connected to people who know them, welcome them, and provide a sense of security. And although the secular world observers longing strictly sociologically and Christians view it theologically, they both come to the same conclusion. Relational belonging is not a new need, but what we have always needed. When such belonging is lost, there are profound impacts and a deep-seated need that remains unmet.

32. George M. Slavich, "Social Safety Theory: A Biologically Based Evolutionary Perspective on Life Stress, Health, and Behavior," *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 16, no. 1 (2020): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-032816-045159>.

33. Allen et al., "Belonging," 88.

34. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 2023): 25.

35. Office of the Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, 23.

THE CULTURE SHIFT: A NATION LOSING HOME

Despite recognizing the foundational, physical, and mental importance of belonging, research reveals a historic downward trend in the sense of belonging within America's current society. A 2018 survey reported that longingness scores have only increased with each generation in America.³⁶ Later, a 2021 study focused on a consistent pattern among US adults, finding that 31 percent claim to experience daily relational loneliness.³⁷

This did not happen overnight. Social connectivity, leading to a sense of belonging, has been declining rapidly and has accelerated significantly over the last twenty years. Research from the US Surgeon General found that, even before the 2020 pandemic, the amount of time Americans spent in social isolation had increased by forty-eight hours per month in just seventeen years. The average American now spends 333 hours per month socially isolated. The same pattern is observed when the study examines friend and family interactions more specifically. In 2003, the average American spent sixty hours a month socially engaging with friends. However, less than two decades later, that number is down to twenty hours a month. Even those from the same family unit (non-household) experienced about a 48 percent drop in their monthly relational engagement with one another.³⁸ So, what are we to make of this? To frame it in the terms of this paper, "Home" is getting lost in our culture. However, while society recognizes the horizontal or relational community loss of home, our previously given definition

36. Cigna, *Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index: Survey of 20,000 Americans Behaviors Driving Loneliness in the United States* (Cigna/Ipsos National Report, 2018), 6.

37. Teller, "Theology of Home," 32.

38. Office of the Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, 14.

of home brings to attention the second and deeper cultural loss of home that our society is equally experiencing.

Culture Shift to a Post-Christian Society

Our contemporary culture readily acknowledges the decline of belonging in earthly, physical, and sociological terms; this recognition often stops there. In doing so, our society overlooks the spiritual dimension of home that has likewise been eroding. Yet understanding its fullest sense, home is comprised of two relational realities: one with God and the other with community. Although society tends to downplay the spiritual or vertical dimension, it cannot be separated from the physical if home is to be thought of in its fullest sense. Unfortunately, American culture is drifting away from this piece of home, too.

There is no denying that America has undergone a profound spiritual and cultural shift. The speed at which this change has occurred has congregations questioning what happened, let alone how to faithfully respond. For most of American history, the local church functioned not only as a spiritual center but also as the center of social, educational, and relational community in everyday life. In many communities, the church was where relationships were formed, families were supported, children were brought up and educated, and belonging was assumed. To some extent, there was even a cultural and generational expectation to belong to a church since community was closely tied to it.³⁹ For generations in America, the church was and felt like home. Flashing forward a few decades, the culture has shifted dramatically.

39. Gary Scott Smith, ed., *American Religious History: Belief and Society through Time*, 3 vols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2021), 17–19.

Many describe our society's shift from Christianity as the dominant social and cultural force with the term "post-Christian." While there are numerous nuances to the term, in its most basic sense, a post-Christian culture refers to the decline of Christian affiliation, participation, and cultural influence within a society.⁴⁰ In other words, Christianity no longer holds an assumed place in American culture. The default is no longer to attend church, feel expectations to join, or raise children within a congregation.

Thom Rainer, in his book *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, illustrates this steep decline by comparing the percentages of each generation and their weekly church attendance. 51 percent of Builders (born before 1946) attend church weekly; 41 percent of Boomers (born 1946–1964); 34 percent of Busters (1965–1976); and only 29 percent of Bridgers (born 1977–1994).⁴¹ Furthering his study, he found that at the time, only 4 percent of teenagers (Bridgers) understood the gospel, even if they attended church.⁴² From this study, it is clear that as one generation moved away from the church, it initiated a snowball effect in future generations. Looking at the data, one can conclude that the generational handoff of the gospel from the Bridger to the next generation would not look much different. However, as we will observe, the Bridger generation not only maintained the trend but also accelerated it.

The 1990s are often regarded as a time when post-Christian culture accelerated. While average weekly attendance declined during the mid-1900s, from the 1940s to the 1990s, church membership remained consistently around 70 percent for US adults. Membership in the last

40. Christopher James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 23.

41. Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 18.

42. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 18.

twenty-five years has declined by a third in all major religious traditions.⁴³ More recent studies reveal what our religious culture looks like since the turn of the century, and the numbers are staggering. Today, approximately 40 million adults in America (16 percent of the adult population) formally attended church but no longer do.⁴⁴ To put those numbers into perspective, “More people have left the church in the last twenty-five years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and Billy Graham crusades combined.”⁴⁵

Along with the term “post-Christian society,” some have used the word “nones” to refer to those with no religious affiliation. Because the 1990s marked a major decline in Christian affiliation, it also began what some refer to as “The rise of the nones.”⁴⁶ Although this term is relatively new, the group already comprises a significant portion of the American population. According to estimates in 2016, the “nones” already comprised 25 percent of all Americans.⁴⁷ Then, just five years later, those numbers increased to 30 percent.⁴⁸ Today, the “nones” are already considered the largest grouping in thirteen states, and it is only expected to grow. Pew Research estimates that fifty-two million people will be added to the “nones” by 2050.⁴⁹

Naturally, the increase in those with no religious affiliation has affected the following generations and their interactions with religious worship. In the 1970s, less than one out of ten

43. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 11.

44. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 3.

45. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 5.

46. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 6.

47. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 24.

48. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 151.

49. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 24.

people had never attended a religious service; by 2014, that number jumped to more than one out of four people.⁵⁰ This acceleration of generational absence from church has also led to further loneliness in America. This is evident when considering that while much of American society operates as a “low context” individualistic culture, the church has historically been the one exception where a “high context” community thrived. It was the unique gathering place in America where one could see four generations, from cradle to walking stick, share a common life and history. As our culture turns away from Christianity, it also drifts further into a more isolated society. Consequently, we are witnessing a reciprocal erosion of both the horizontal and vertical realities of home. While church used to be recognized as a place of home and belonging, the tide has turned. Our society is not just losing the horizontal relational aspect of home, but it has been accelerated through its departure from communal congregations.

At this point, it is perhaps easy for Christians and their congregations to express discouragement and uncertainty about what the future holds for the church functioning as home. Yet there is equal evidence to support that the opportunity to engage with our post-Christian culture, the de-churched, and “nones” is not gone, nor should the situation be rendered hopeless. In fact, such loss of these relational realities provides ample opportunities for churches to engage with a society craving community. After all, the human desire for home still remains, and is frequently being left either unmet or relegated to pursuing “home” in ways that do not end up satisfying. Interestingly enough, while many have walked away from the church, it would be a mistake to assume our post-Christian society has left all religious belief in the rear-view mirror. In fact, around 80 percent of American adults claim that religious faith has personal value for

50. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 24.

them.⁵¹ Similarly, two out of three “nones” still believe in God.⁵² It was even found that of those who have left the church for various reasons, only 3 percent claimed they would never return to church again. With that, over half of the people surveyed stated that they were actively willing to return to church right now.⁵³

The Church’s Slow Adjustment to a Fast-Changing Culture

Despite such a drastic culture shift, evidence suggests that Americans have not totally ruled out church and religion. There is still an ache for home and belonging not only in the physical and emotional sense, but also in the spiritual sense. Taking everything into consideration, we can say two things about our society. First, it is losing both relational realities that make up home. Second, the desire to find and remain in a place of belonging, a place that feels like home, is ever-increasing. This poses an interesting question. If people are religious, if people are searching/longing for home like never before, if our culture is lonelier than ever before, why have churches in these most recent years struggled to welcome and retain?

It would be easy to attribute the entire decline in church participation to a changing culture. But while culture certainty has shifted rapidly and belief systems have been affected, it would be naïve to assign full blame to the rapid cultural change. The fact that there is a universal longing for home, along with the persistence of religious tendencies in America, suggests that

51. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 19.

52. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 25.

53. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 49–50.

this cannot be the primary reason for such decline. There is something to be said about congregational shortcomings as well.

As stated earlier, from the beginning of America's history, church was the centerpiece of a community, and along with that, relational community was also assumed. There was no question that if one wanted to assimilate into a community, church was often the place to do it. Church was where people came to build friendships, establish ties with other families, and local support was given and received. In a sense, relational community was automatic within the church; fostered with little to no effort by the church itself.⁵⁴

As the cultural tides began to turn, the church lost its central position within communities, and the relational reality that was once organic in nature for congregations became no longer self-sustaining. In other words, the church lost one of the two aspects that made it home to so many. Carrie Teller explicitly states, "If the church is to serve as a spiritual home, it must reclaim its identity as a relational community."⁵⁵ Her statement suggests that the loss of the horizontal relational reality is where a congregation's desire to embody home has begun to fall apart over time.

Davis and Graham summarize it well, "As church leaders, it's tempting to point the finger at the de-churched and their lack of commitment or discipline (which may in fact be an issue). But what if we instead held a mirror up to ourselves and asked what the Bible says about belonging in a Christian community? What are we doing to foster it in our churches?"⁵⁶

Therefore, perhaps the biggest question facing congregations is not "how has society changed so

54. See *supra*, 18.

55. Teller, "Theology of Home," 33–34.

56. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 125.

rapidly,” but rather, “has our congregation adjusted how it engages with its society, altered its hospitality strategies, and set itself up to meet and engage with our post-Christian mission field?” Yes, America has evolved rapidly. Yes, cultural and sociological trends have altered the way people relate on an interpersonal level, which has impacted dynamics both within and outside the church. Such changes in secular culture require the church to reevaluate how it interacts with those who are currently unchurched, including the strategies it uses for engagement. This is not to say we compromise doctrine, belief, or sacrifice our emphasis on our relational reality with God won through Jesus. After all, an overcorrection would risk losing the fullest sense of home a congregation can provide by falling off the other side of the horse. Both realities must be present. However, as we will continue to observe, the emphasis on relational community has recently been an area lacking in many churches.⁵⁷

Drawing on conversations with de-churched individuals, *The Great De-churching* concludes that perceived lack of belonging is the primary source of dissatisfaction many de-churched identify within congregational life. Consequently, emphasizing belonging is therefore the greatest key when it comes to reestablishing congregational embodiment of home, and the return of the de-churched.⁵⁸ It is estimated that millions of those who left church did so simply because they experienced some disconnect from congregational community. They did not experience in their context that they were known, loved, or would be missed if they stopped attending worship.⁵⁹ When those surveyed were asked what would move them to return, 28 percent claimed a desire to make new friends, 20 percent to help battle loneliness, and 17

57. Teller, “Theology of Home,” 33–34.

58. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 123.

59. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 125.

percent wanted to be part of a community.⁶⁰ Taking all of this information together, the de-churched flat out tell congregations they desire a place to belong, a place where relationships are prioritized, intentional opportunities to belong are provided, and the individual is noticed. Even the de-churched do not expect church to be something they do on their own. These are not unreasonable expectations for a Christian community. Rather, they reflect a call for churches to emphasize not only spiritual realities but also congregational community.

In reality, churches often have very little say as to how their secular culture ebbs and flows. The difficulty for congregations is not in a changing culture but in understanding how to engage and create new on-ramps for gospel ministry. While developing and matching new mission/hospitality strategies to an ever-changing mission field can present difficulty, it is part of our joyous mission. Now that we have a general understanding of our culture, its background, and its desires, along with our Christian calling to express both the relational realities of home, we can begin to discuss our calling and the current culture together, exploring strategies that congregations may want to consider as they aim to welcome and assimilate newcomers into their church homes.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

As with any mission field, understanding context matters. Because every congregation is different in values, context, and goals, one cannot simply give one-size-fits-all strategies. Each congregation must carefully consider its context and make its hospitality culture its own. Additionally, it would be unrealistic for congregations to assume that incorporating the strategies

60. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 125.

below will lead to a quick or long-term solution. Christopher James makes this a clear point:

“When the general population is not interested in attending a religious event or affiliating with a religious institution, no amount of marketing is going to get them to show up on Sunday.

Personal relationships have always been an important bridge between the church and world, but in a post-Christian context, they are indispensable.”⁶¹ That being said, the following strategies are less prescriptions for congregations and more general observations that congregations may want to consider as they seek to engage individuals shaped by a post-Christian culture and establish a welcoming environment for doing so. The emphasis must not be on mindlessly incorporating programs, but fostering relationships, often first with those outside the church, and then with those brave enough to come into a space and place they may have never been.⁶² Ultimately, strategies and programs are most effective when they follow, rather than precede, a genuine desire to relate relationally to the present culture.⁶³ The following strategies are thus given to spark further discussions for congregations.

It is rightly noted that pivoting a congregation’s strategies is often a daunting decision for leaders, as well as parishioners. Thom Rainer gives one principle for helping such a transition: “The first major step in the path to becoming a welcoming church is to grasp how incredibly important this ministry truly is.”⁶⁴ It can be frightening to try something new or outside a church’s comfort zone. Yet, if an attempt to try something new is grounded in the urgency of sharing the good news with the lost, temporary uneasiness on our part is worth the opportunity to

61. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 227.

62. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1986), 67.

63. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 226.

64. Thom S. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2018), 37.

share a message that has an eternal impact. It is okay to be uncomfortable! The beauty of trying new things is that a church does not have to do them forever and probably should not, as the mission field inevitably changes over time. The goal for congregations is to express their faith in love, and love can be expressed in different ways at different periods of time.⁶⁵

It is important to note that focusing on how a church engages with its post-Christian society does not at all undermine the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, wrestling with new strategies is good stewardship of the gifts God has given. To illustrate, in a seminary preaching class, students are regularly encouraged to preach to the whole person. God created people with a mind, body, and soul. These make up the whole person. While the Holy Spirit certainly works through the inadequacies of imperfect preachers, a pastor will want to do their best to communicate the truths of God's Word in an engaging way to the best of their ability. God's Word works not only supernaturally (Holy Spirit working), but also psychologically (Word shared through imperfect vessels).⁶⁶

In the context of a body of believers, there are things a congregation can and cannot control when it comes to hosting first-time attendees. To the extent God's Word is faithfully taught, neither pastors nor parishioners can control how God's Word lands on one's heart.⁶⁷ The Holy Spirit is the only one who can melt a heart of stone.⁶⁸ Yet, a congregation is absolutely capable of controlling how people experience the richness of their Christian community.⁶⁹

65. Gal 5:6

66. This insight regarding the importance of preaching to the "whole person" (mind, body, and soul) is based on the author's personal experience and homiletical training while attending Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

67. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 120.

68. Ezek 36:26

69. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 133.

Expressions of Christian love and hospitality are how Jesus himself stated that believers can noticeably stand out in a sinful world.⁷⁰ Therefore, Christian hospitality cannot be seen as a lesser aspect within its church community since it is a pre-evangelism tool. Christopher James powerfully states, “As these persons are held before the mind’s eye, they should be imagined not only as those to whom Christ appeals through us, but also as those through whom Christ appeals to us.”⁷¹ We cannot control how the gospel lands on their heart, but we can aim to control how they feel about our Christian community the moment their tires hit the parking lot.

First Impressions

Guests do not just show up; they evaluate every experience.⁷² This truth is what the business world lives off. Think about the last time you entered a new coffee shop or restaurant. From the moment you arrived till the moment you left, your mind constantly questioned every experience. Do I feel safe in the environment? Is this place clean? Are the people here kind? Do I fit in? Most importantly, am I willing to come back? In much the same way, individuals entering a church for the first time ask many of the same questions, suggesting that there are tangible, human-level practices congregations can adopt to invite and encourage further engagement.

70. John 13:35

71. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 197.

72. VisitorReach, “Creating the Best Visitor Experience for Your Church: Assessment Checklist,” VisitorReach (blog), August 12, 2025, <https://www.visitorreach.com/blog/creating-the-best-visitor-experience-for-your-church>. VisitorReach is a recognized resource for church marketing and hospitality. The organization combines research from groups like Barna and Lewis Center for Church Leadership to help understand the relationship between digital first impressions and in person congregational assimilation.

Plainly stated, whether one is running a secular business or is in the business of saving souls, first impressions matter.⁷³

No one gets a second chance to make a first impression, churches included. Since only 21 percent of visitors to a church return for a second time, their first experience needs to be positive.⁷⁴ However, the window to make a good first impression is less than we think it is. Throughout the experience, people are looking for reasons to leave or stay. Most studies suggest that first impressions, during one's first encounter, form within about seven seconds. New attendees decide within about ten minutes of being on campus if they will come back.⁷⁵ In most cases, this decision is made before the worship service begins. While one cannot guarantee this is the case for every guest, the general truth is that the tone of their experience is set very early.

At this point, a church may be tempted to think that its friendly first impression is the most important. Yet one of the most surprising truths is that the formerly unchurched claim their second visit impacted their decision to return more than their first. When entering a new place and meeting new people, there is often too much to take in at once.⁷⁶ First-time attendees recall feeling overwhelmed on their first visit with everything they had to process. This is not to say that their first visit did not matter. While a first-time attendee may not have explicitly noticed positive aspects of a church's community, they certainly would have noticed if there were negative impressions. Putting it another way, when things are running well, people don't notice. However, when first impressions are poor, one cannot help but notice. What does this mean for

73. Prince A. Sanders, "Understanding First Impressions," *Hospitality Net*, November 1, 2025, <https://www.hospitalitynet.org/opinion/4095507.html>.

74. VisitorReach, "Creating the Best Visitor Experience."

75. VisitorReach, "Creating the Best Visitor Experience."

76. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 55.

churches? First impressions go hand in hand with the second visit. There is an element of consistency in a congregation's approach when welcoming new folks. Something as simple as remembering a name or putting forth an extra effort to have a conversation on the second visit goes a long way to communicating "We don't view your presence here as a small thing." A true welcoming environment does not take a week off or limit hospitality to one's first visit.

Website

"From the first click to the closing prayer, people are asking, 'Do I belong here? Is this worth coming back for?'"⁷⁷ Making first impressions is drastically different from how it used to be. In our current context, most first impressions occur before stepping on a campus or having an in-person experience. In our age of technology, most people check websites before they go anywhere. Whether a barber, restaurant, or doctor, prospects check it. The same goes for churches. Whether someone has been a Christian their whole life or considers themselves a "none," entering a new church is always accompanied by nervousness. About seven out of ten visitors check out the church website before they ever show up to worship in person. If one wants a church, they look one up. If someone is invited to a church, they look it up. If they have a church in mind but are undecided, they watch a previous sermon or the upcoming service.⁷⁸ Especially if one grew up in a household that never went to church, it is safe to assume they will experience some discomfort when attending the first time. It would be hard to imagine them not visiting the website before visiting in person. Many today call a church's website and its social

77. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 229.

78. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 21.

media the new “front door” or “front porch” for the church.⁷⁹ And while it is true that not everyone will avoid church simply because of a poorly constructed website, negative first impressions are inevitably brought with it when experiencing a church for the first time.⁸⁰ Regardless of intent, a congregation’s website does have a meaningful impact on the formation of first impressions.⁸¹

It is important to note that the purpose of a church website is different than mere traditional marketing. There is no denying that web presence is important, “but it ought to be developed from a logic of hospitality rather than one of marketing.”⁸² A church does not attempt to sell people on something that it is not meant to be. Going back to the definition of “home” helps here. The website will express the church’s purpose to connect people to Christ while inviting them to join a community that grows closer through the Word. You are promising through this first interaction that if they are brave enough to join in person, these two relational realities will always be present.

Following the purpose, a website aims to instill confidence towards an in-person visit. Since the 1980s, Americans’ confidence in institutions has declined, churches included.⁸³ Instilling confidence in safety is especially key for families with children.⁸⁴ It is a must today to communicate safety procedures to parents and guardians, especially those unchurched who may

79. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 229.

80. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 9.

81. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 18.

82. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 229.

83. Gil Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Basingstoke: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 112.

84. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 59.

be leery of how their children will be received and cared for.⁸⁵ On a lesser but still important note, navigation and direction are also a must. We live in a world where directions are taken for granted. When they are not readily available, people get easily frustrated. Thom Rainer lays out a basic list which includes address, worship time, children's ministry explanation, updated information, purpose, and quality graphics and videos.⁸⁶

One may notice that Rainer's fundamental list shares similar principles with traditional business marketing strategies on their website. Yet as was mentioned already, churches must develop their website from the angle of hospitality rather than marketing. The distinction lies in the relational values portrayed for those seeking information about a church. Most individuals visiting a website are looking for one of two things. Either they are seeking relational community or spiritual transparency about the church's mission.

Because the unchurched in our post-Christian society often seek belonging before belief, the website must highlight the congregation's already existing spiritual family along with the opportunities the church provides for assimilation into such a loving group. Such a relational emphasis helps those looking in from the outside see and imagine themselves connecting with this community of believers they have yet to meet. Unlike pure business marketing, which attempts to sell website visitors on their programs or special offers, a congregation highlights the relational ministries they are inviting website visitors to join. These ministries are inevitably unique to each congregation, but examples include men's/women's ministry gatherings, small groups, community service, mommy and me (relational gathering for parents/their kids),

85. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 101.

86. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 22.

fellowship opportunities, etc. The point is not to necessarily highlight the program itself, but rather to highlight the opportunities one will have to connect with those already involved.

While some first-time guests come seeking community, there are others who come seeking some spiritual guidance. Therefore, the website must also include mission transparency. This does not mean every doctrinal statement needs to be included, but to avoid giving the impression that your congregation is merely a social gathering, the mission of the church, along with spiritual growth opportunities, must be highlighted as well.

For whatever reason one may find themselves exploring a church website, one of the most practical expressions of digital hospitality is allowing the guest to tell the church they are coming. Features like a “Plan Your Visit” button allow a congregation to promise their guests they will not walk alone. By offering to meet them at the door or provide a personalized tour, the church removes the barriers of nervousness and social isolation that could prevent a seeker from transitioning from the digital front porch into the spiritual home.

Hospitable Communication and Language

Communication and language are significant factors in becoming a welcoming church. This essay has already addressed entering the four walls of a church can in a post-Christian culture can be a nerve-wracking experience. Yet not every fear is overcome with a positive visit to the website. Communication must not only be clear prior to their arrival but equally clear during their attendance. The two main reasons language is important to consider are that language has the ability to set newcomers at ease/home and because it is how one communicates Biblical truths.

Setting a new person or family at ease through interpersonal communication can and must take place in various moments on a Sunday morning. If no personal welcome is communicated, guests will often walk away feeling either their presence was not valued, they are not part of the group, or confused about the events of Sunday morning. This means those already familiar with the church must communicate a genuine welcome, answer questions, and serve as a host for those unfamiliar with this home called church.⁸⁷ Many congregations, especially large ones where the volume of people makes it difficult to distinguish a visitor from a long-time member, use a formal greeter program. It must be understood in these settings that a greeter is an intentional host specifically tasked with looking for unfamiliar faces in order to make a guest experience the initial hospitality of the congregation.⁸⁸ Yet, Thom Rainer points out that it is not enough to have greeters. Greeters must be strategically placed outside the entrance as well as inside the gathering area and sometimes even the sanctuary. The outdoor presence provides a psychological sigh of relief for a nervous guest, much like when a friend walks out their front door to welcome you into a gathering.⁸⁹ Greeters inside are not confined to a position but rather freed to connect in various locations. The goal of those inside is primarily to engage with those they do not recognize. It is important to note that the task of welcoming new individuals and families should never be limited to formal greeters. Some within the church may be tempted to fall into the trap of the bystander effect where the assumption is made that because there are formal greeters, they no longer have a personal responsibility to host. Yet it is every member's

87. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 36.

88. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 35.

89. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 34.

role to be a relational host since this is their home too. Formal greeters must be seen as a way to augment and ensure that every guest is able to connect with at least one person.⁹⁰

While formal greeter programs do have merit, they are not necessary in every church setting. Small congregations have greater opportunities to thrive without a greeter program because those regularly attending are more likely to recognize those who are new. In these settings, every person is encouraged to be brave enough to engage with those they do not know. Whether through a formal team or an organic culture, the first way to positively communicate to a guest “you are welcome here” is through a congregation that is ready and intentional at verbally welcome people upon arrival and after the service.

Perhaps the first opportunity to communicate on a large scale is the pastor’s verbal welcome at the start of worship. That initial welcome naturally presents a tone about the culture and hospitality within the congregation and therefore can make or break the first experience attending. Those who show up for the first time, whether invited or impromptu, are asking themselves, “Am I truly wanted here? Do I belong here?” So, what does this mean for the initial greeting? Consider how you welcome someone into your home for the first time. As conversation begins, it is natural to thank your guest for their willingness to spend their precious time with you, accepting your invitation, or making the long drive. And while you would not necessarily thank them for this, their presence communicates that they are investing some trust in your ability to host them. The welcome into a church home is no different.⁹¹

In a society that no longer assumes church attendance and increasingly competes for one’s time, it is nothing less than an honor for pastors and their congregation when any person,

90. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 32.

91. Thom S. Rainer, *We Want You Here* (Nashville: B&H, 2018), 4.

new visitor or long-standing member, chooses to spend their time in God's house. Sixty years ago, church attendance was more commonly shaped by cultural expectation. Today, that assumption no longer holds true, nor is it a cultural expectation. For that reason, communicating a sincere thank you carries significant weight. While it is easy to minimize the importance of a simple "thank you," such an acknowledgement communicates that a pastor and their congregation do not take a guest's presence lightly or for granted. It commends and affirms their bravery required to try something unfamiliar while also signaling that your congregation expects and anticipates guests, rather than treating it as unusual or out of place. And while it certainly will not remove every bit of their angst, it individually communicates "You are wanted here."⁹² The initial welcome comes full circle with another thank you post-service. Although similar in nature, this thank you moment is an invitation back into your church home. It may feel redundant, but let us not forfeit an opportunity to communicate true gratitude.⁹³ This does not suggest that bookending the service this way is anything earth-shattering, but the key to instilling confidence and executing a heartfelt welcome lies in avoiding a candid-sounding welcome. The best advice is perhaps to take your time in both pivotal moments.

After a pastor's initial greeting, some congregations have incorporated a common practice known as a "stand and greet." While some congregations use a similar practice called "passing the peace," which has a slightly different approach, both involve a designated time during the service where the pastor invites the congregation to stand and greet those seated near them. While this trend stems from a sincere desire to communicate hospitality, it poses an interesting question regarding the effectiveness and perception of the practice.

92. Rainer, *We Want You Here*, 5.

93. Rainer, *We Want You Here*, 26–28.

Thom Rainer begins the discussion by highlighting both the congregational and guest perspectives on the stand and greet. His research revealed that nine out of ten guests do not enjoy the stand and greet time, and even six out of ten members have negative feelings about the practice.⁹⁴ Rainer's interviews further revealed that many guests felt the exercise was awkward or forced. At times, the practice feels as though one is to see how many people they can greet before the pastor officially begins the service. Others expressed that although they did not mind the concept, they still felt the interaction was artificial since members only spoke to them because the pastor commanded it.⁹⁵

Despite the research, incorporating a stand and greet into worship is not completely without merit. Rainer himself admits it would be an overstatement to claim a stand and greet could never make a guest feel welcomed. The key to executing a natural and hospitable greeting in the service is making sure genuine efforts to greet and connect are being made before and after the service.⁹⁶ In other words, friendliness cannot be limited to the stand and greet in the service. If the stand and greet is one of the multiple moments a guest experiences that regular attendees are going out of their way to connect with them, the stand and greet is less likely to be experienced as ingenuine since these types of connections have already taken place. The guest will understand the stand and greet as one more expression of the congregation's outgoing relational hospitality. Consequently, the stand and greet must function as an addition to the congregation's already robust welcoming culture, rather than be implemented for the sake of incorporating elements of a welcoming church.

94. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 14.

95. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 14.

96. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 14–15.

One significant pro of incorporating a stand and greet is the benefit of what it communicates, not only to long-standing members but also to guests. Specifically, the practice can signal that the congregation is a community willing to do the hard thing by being brave enough to initiate a personal connection. In an interview with Pastor James Hein, he has observed that while there is an inherent nervousness attached to the practice, a congregation willing to learn a new name is a natural expression of hospitality.⁹⁷ This act communicates to both groups of attendees that guests and relationships are a priority.⁹⁸

It is also key to understand that the success of this ritual often hinges on the specific language a pastor uses when introducing it. A generic command to “say hi to someone” often leaves participants questioning the purpose of the interaction, leading to the artificial feeling Rainer reports.⁹⁹ However, providing a clear explanation and purpose for the mutual greeting removes the “why” of the exercise. For instance, a pastor might say, “Before we begin worship together, we would like you to learn the name of one person near you because we understand that we don’t do life alone nor worship alone, and we desire every person to recognize the community they get to worship with.” This minor shift in communication transforms the moment from a social chore into a meaningful interaction. Even more, the pastor can use the conclusion to the greeting to reinforce its relational intent by encouraging that conversions continue after the service. Such a conclusion signals that the connections being made are meant to last beyond the procedure.

97. James Hein, interview by author. In-person, November 7, 2025.

98. For a more detailed exploration of Pastor James Hein’s ministry philosophy and strategies utilized at St. Marcus (Milwaukee, WI), see the interview section of this paper.

99. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 14.

Another strategic variation is incorporating the greeting into a mid-service intermission. As demonstrated by Carbon Valley Lutheran (CVL), their short break after the sermon serves multiple hospitable purposes simultaneously. The key to allowing genuine connections during this break is by giving options for how one can spend their time. For example, CVL invites the congregation to take a moment to stand, stretch, refill their coffee, fill out a prayer request, or introduce themselves to someone unfamiliar.¹⁰⁰ By the nature of providing options, the greeting becomes part of a more organic movement rather than a forced ritual. This approach provides nervous guests with a social “out” if they are not yet comfortable with an interpersonal introduction.¹⁰¹

Ultimately, each congregation must decide for itself if a stand and greet is a tool that fits its unique hospitality plan. It is a practice that requires a clear vision to ensure it remains a meaningful and relational welcome rather than a superficial formality. If a church chooses to omit the practice, the responsibility for the congregation to find other avenues to initiate conversation still remains.¹⁰²

Language also has a huge role in the service itself. Biblical illiteracy has continually increased in our society. What was once common knowledge, such as biblical terms and traditions, can no longer be assumed. This is especially critical when utilizing a historical and robust liturgy, as the value of such is directly connected to verifying that words and concepts are rightly understood. Brief explanations for parts of the service, such as creeds, prayers,

100. Timothy Spiegelberg, interview by author. FaceTime, November 11, 2025.

101. For a more detailed exploration of Pastor Timothy Spiegelberg’s ministry philosophy and strategies utilized at Carbon Valley (Firestone, CO), see the interview section of this paper.

102. Rainer, *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, 15.

confession, and absolution, and introductions to reading often remove obstacles and help introduce new individuals to unfamiliar aspects of worship.¹⁰³

Relational Environment

There is a reason functioning as a host is a little stressful. The reason is that everything one does and the environment they bring people into reflects something about their hospitality. Yet, hospitality and providing a welcoming environment are never the end goal for a host. They are simply a means to foster opportunities to build and strengthen relationships. It is no different in a church setting.

Every week, a church is given the opportunity to function as a twofold relational host. Just as a church puts great effort towards connecting people to Christ, it is also necessary to consider how a church can provide relational opportunities to connect and grow closer with the people around them. At first glance, that may seem to be an overstatement. Yet, psychologists affirm that instilling a sense of belonging is strongly tied to how an environment promotes relational opportunities. If the space and setting do not encourage relationships, people will rarely feel as though they belong.¹⁰⁴ Such relational opportunities are key for churches that desire to reach the unchurched. Today, it is not merely enough to be friendly toward newcomers. If a relational environment or opportunities are not intentionally provided, retaining and assimilating will increasingly be more difficult. Various church leaders have found this to be true:

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

103. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 136.

104. Allen et al., "Belonging," 90.

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.¹⁰⁵

Unhurried time is considered a foreign concept to many in our busy society. If there is a time or place one might admit they feel unhurried, it is probably at home. A helpful way to begin discussions about cultivating a relational atmosphere is for a congregation to ask, “Does our environment provide unhurried time?” This is key to creating relationships, as Greg Finke illustrates, “Unhurried time + proximity + activity (food) = conversation x over time = friendships.”¹⁰⁶ While Finke’s book is originally intended for evangelism outside the church, the application also works inside the church. American culture has obviously struggled as of late to provide a third space to belong, outside of work and home. But if someone brave enough walked into your church for the first time, experiencing a welcoming environment, where time felt unrushed, and conversations led to friendship, one would imagine it would be hard-pressed not to feel a sense of longing to return.

One may have noticed the word “food” in Finke’s evangelism equation above. This is not by accident. In Finke’s experience, food is not only a draw, but it also has a disarming feature that aids conversation.¹⁰⁷ This simple strategy can also be emulated on a Sunday morning. Most regular church attenders would likely vouch that people stay much longer on Sundays when food is provided. This does not suggest having a potluck every Sunday, but it asks congregations to consider even using basic food and drink as a way to encourage parishioners to stick around and

105. Bradford Blake and Kay Kotan, “First Impressions Are Formed Earlier Than You Think,” Lewis Center for Church Leadership, October 24, 2018, <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/first-impressions-are-formed-earlier-than-you-think/>.

106. Greg Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission: How to Be an Everyday Missionary* (Houston: Tenth Power Publishing, 2014), 152.

107. Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, 144.

foster relationships. Incorporating food and drink is often considered a nonnegotiable by those planting brand-new churches.¹⁰⁸

Culture and Hospitality

While the purpose of this paper is not meant to discuss developing or changing church culture, there is undoubtedly an overlap between congregational culture and hospitality that should be briefly noted. The key thing to remember at this point is that the previously stated “strategies” are in no way prescriptions. One cannot simply accept that by adding food, renovating a gathering space, or crafting the greatest website, they will instantly be a top-tier welcoming church. This is because congregational culture and hospitality support each other. A first-time church attender might have viewed a quality website, enjoyed a great cup of coffee, and followed along the whole worship service, but all this adds up to nothing if poor culture is perceived. Poor culture within a church usually shows itself through a lack of relational emphasis or perceived lack of direction and values.¹⁰⁹ The church can have all the bells and whistles of a hospitable congregation, but an unhealthy culture quickly removes the glamor.¹¹⁰

Although a dysfunctional congregational culture can certainly undercut hospitable gestures, it would be inaccurate to assume that a church’s intentional emphasis on hospitality could not also, over time, positively shape its culture. In fact, the two do not just affect each other, but they feed off each other. Rainer endorsed that culture and hospitality are intimately

108. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 230.

109. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 71.

110. Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 125.

connected this way, saying, “There seems to be agreement that church members are hesitant to invite people to church, to develop relationships with the unchurched, if they are not excited about their own church and their own walk with God.”¹¹¹ It would be challenging to find a parishioner who does not want their church to grow and the gospel to be shared. Yet, as Rainer highlights, parishioners who find it difficult to invite friends and engage with those they do not know stem from a lack of excitement about their own church. One might assume, in this case, that culture alone is negatively affecting hospitality, and it is partly so. But it is also true that the congregation’s lack of hospitality could very well be enforcing a lackluster culture.

Consider this illustration. Imagine being invited to a dinner party where past experiences have made you doubt the host’s attentiveness, preparation, and ability to welcome. Even if you personally planned to attend whenever their events take place, you would likely hesitate to invite a close friend. In this case, your hesitancy to extend an invite would not stem from a lack of desire to connect, but from a lack of trust in the environment you would be inviting into.

The same dynamic is present in the church. When members lack confidence in their church’s ability to welcome others well, their reluctance to invite is often not rooted in a lack of enthusiasm for God’s Word, but in a lack of confidence in the church’s ability to instill a sense of belonging or a hospitable welcome. In other words, there is always a social risk a member takes on when they are brave enough to invite a friend to church. Therefore, the difference maker for a congregation may very well be to instill trust in their members to believe that anyone they invite will, in fact, experience a warm welcome. While there is obviously a whole lot more to culture and hospitality dynamics, it is evident that culture and hospitality are entities that reinforce each other and are built simultaneously.

111. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 98.

Follow-Up Process

It was previously mentioned that acknowledging new families and individuals with a general thank you is a simple way to value their attendance. But a congregation does not want to limit its connection to a broad acknowledgement, hospitable and genuine though it may be. Since the rise of post-Christianity, our culture does not feel obligated to return to church because they came once, and we should not expect them to. This is where a well-constructed follow-up process is beneficial.

It is helpful to compare a follow-up process to general home hospitality. In the event of a gathering, both guest and host understand that a welcome and thank you are cultural expectations upon entry and departure. The expectations, however, do not mean such norms are insincere. What it does mean is that there are more personal ways to express and encourage further opportunities to meet up. For example, a host may send a text shortly after a couple left their gathering, saying, “We know we thanked you for coming, but we want to say one more time that we greatly enjoyed spending our evening with you, and we would love to meet up again.” Such a small gesture as this undoubtedly instills a personal touch on a cultural expectation. A good and timely follow-up process functions the same way.

Most churches already have an initial step to gather names and extra information, often through connect cards. The goal is to use the information provided to connect beyond Sunday morning.¹¹² Since the process following this initial step varies for each congregation and context, church size, and culture shape the format, I will let the illustration section of this paper contain the bulk of the information. The main truth to express about follow-up processes is that time is of the essence. Lewis Center for Church Leadership found in a study that guests who received a

¹¹² VisitorReach, “Creating the Best Visitor Experience.”

follow-up within twenty-four hours of their arrival returned 85 percent of the time. Between twenty-four and seventy-two hours, the number dropped to 60 percent. After seventy-two hours, the number dropped to 15 percent.¹¹³ Much like an extra thank-you text from a friend or acquaintance, the longer one waits to follow up, the more likely the message will lose its impact.

What's Next: Instilling Ownership

What's next? This is the inevitable question new people ask the more they attend worship. Although surprising, the majority of those new to the church are more excited than we think they are when it comes to involvement, and they want to be part of something more than showing up on a Sunday morning.¹¹⁴ To put it another way, they want the same thing we want for them. They desire to belong and to feel a sense of ownership that this, too, is their home, and they are comfortable inside. There is a large consensus that relationships have been and continue to be the most effective means of reaching and retaining the unchurched. The difficulty in the past has been devising ways to establish new relationships within the church.¹¹⁵ Congregations have tried multiple strategies to make relationships work. But the overarching truth congregations cannot dismiss is that relationships cannot be programmed. All relationship develops naturally with force. This does not mean churches cannot provide on-ramps for new families and individuals to

113. Yvonne Gentile and Debi Nixon, "3 Key Components of Effective Visitor Follow-Up," Lewis Center for Church Leadership, August 10, 2021, <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/3-key-components-of-effective-visitor-follow-up/>.

114. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 65–66.

115. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 68.

connect with others.¹¹⁶ In fact, carefully planned opportunities have a profound impact on assimilation and retention.

The main point those who study assimilating and retaining the de-churched make is simple: Get them involved. They do not want to sit on the sidelines; instead, they find it more appealing to be part of a community that allows them to take active ownership.¹¹⁷ The two primary opportunities churches have experienced the most success with today are small groups and ministry involvement.¹¹⁸

Around 66 percent of new church pastors claim that small groups are one of the most important pieces of their church culture.¹¹⁹ Small groups are intentional, smaller gatherings of individuals within a congregation designed to bring people together outside of the church building for relational and spiritual growth. While small groups can benefit congregations of nearly any size, they are especially valuable in larger churches, where individuals may seldom encounter the same people more than once in weekend worship. Through intentional and repeated connections beyond services, deeper relationships are fostered. The goal of small groups is that individuals experience a smaller, more personal community that mutually encourages one another and grows together spiritually.

Many attribute small group success to the relational opportunities they give. Not many in our culture today set aside weekly and unhurried time to invite others into their homes. Naturally, the more small group Bible studies one attends, the more opportunity there is to form

116. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 69.

117. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 72.

118. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 69.

119. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 226–27.

deep relationships. Both large and small congregations can benefit from small groups. One of its greatest features is that it provides existing church members with something specific to invite new people to. The fact that small groups typically meet weekly makes the invitation a standing one. This allows the new couple or person to move at their own speed in terms of their involvement with the church. When executed well, small groups are not only an on-ramp to assimilation but also communicate individually to new people that we want them to find belonging here. Studies also show that joining a small group often leads to higher levels of activity in the church. Of those who remain active in the church five years after joining, 83 percent were found to be in small groups.¹²⁰ “While some church leaders debate the best type of small group, most of them agree that some type of small-group organization must be in place both to reach and to assimilate the unchurched. A number of church leaders viewed their small-group organization as indispensable in reaching the unchurched.”¹²¹

Additionally, providing opportunities for small groups to get involved in ministry is a key factor in maintaining high engagement levels within a church. When 353 formerly unchurched were asked what kept them active in the church, 62 percent emphasized some type of volunteer ministry involvement. This was the most significant factor of all.¹²² A separate study also observed that those who transferred their membership found themselves more at home when their new church provided more opportunities to use their talents to serve.¹²³ In the case of either small groups or ministry involvement, the fact of the matter is that people find ownership in a

120. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 69.

121. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 100.

122. Rainer, *Surprising Insights*, 72.

123. Marissa Postell Sullivan, “How Important Is the Feeling of Belonging at Church?,” Lifeway Research, August 7, 2024, <https://research.lifeway.com/2024/08/07/how-important-is-the-feeling-of-belonging-at-church/>.

church when they are involved. And when they are involved, relationships are created organically.

Hospitality Outside the Church

Hospitality is often first associated with how one generously receives guests or strangers within their own home. But while traditional hospitality is often linked with the host, there is such a thing as a guest's ability to reciprocate hospitality. A guest's kindness, humble expressions, and willingness to get involved not only make the experience pleasant for everyone but also communicate a genuine care for the host and other guests present. The church functions in a similar way as it engages with its community. The main difference is that the church functions as both guest and host, and hospitality on both ends is essential in post-Christian America.¹²⁴

It is true that Christians who make up a congregation are not of the world, and yet we are certainly in the world.¹²⁵ Therefore, on this side of heaven, the church is a guest within the world. So, let's be the best guests a church can be! This first means accepting that the church dwells within a wider community than itself and therefore should not be afraid to lay down roots in its location and live life among its community.¹²⁶ Kindness, humility, and involvement are the key avenues for the church to function as a guest.

But just as one cannot program true hospitality within the walls of the church, it cannot be programmed outside either. Hospitality can only be encouraged, modeled, and opportunities

124. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 228.

125. Matt 13:30, NIV11

126. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 228.

given.¹²⁷ The most effective approach for churches to be hospitable guests is simply to be present in their community.¹²⁸ Many congregations already make efforts to do this, which is good. It would be a mistake, however, for one to think that a church's community presence should start with raw evangelism or sharing of the gospel. Sometimes the best guests are those who simply show up to offer support and demonstrate their love for the people there. James makes the same point, "Hospitality, however, should not be thought of as a relational recruitment strategy—thought in numerous churches, especially Evangelical ones, it is conceived in precisely this way. In a missional perspective, hospitality creates contexts for mutual relationships..."¹²⁹ If community presence is done solely with the intent of gaining numbers for a congregation, the church no longer functions as a guest but rather a guest trying to play host where it should not. Such inward church mentalities quickly become apparent to the community. The goal then is simply to be present by supporting and loving community, hoping God will open a door through earthly hospitality. It is understanding a guest's role and instilling a "pilgrim mentality" that refocuses a church on its role within its community and breaks it out of merely looking inward.¹³⁰

This does not mean catering to every need of your community. After all, that is not the main calling of the church.¹³¹ What it does mean is an eager mentality to put Jesus' words into action: "Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Therefore, displaying love for community cannot be thought

127. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 230.

128. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 219.

129. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 228.

130. Teller, "Theology of Home," 60.

131. Acts 6:2

of as a lesser version of hospitality but as equally essential to the church's mission.¹³² The main question every church can ask as they wrestle with how to function as guests within their community is this: "Do people view our church as something objectively good for the community, whether they have an interest in joining our church or not?" In other words, does your community see you as a good guest? If they do, they may be willing to be your guest.

While the church is a guest within a wider community, engagement as a guest often lends opportunities to host. Luckily, even amid a secular community, the church is a home equipped to host and provide the deepest sense of belonging.¹³³ This is none other than an introduction to the loving arms of God, who cannot wait to welcome them into a perfect heavenly home. With that, it is not a surprise that congregations are eager to invite and welcome families and individuals into their spiritual home. But to receive the opportunity to host, relational trust must be established prior to an invitation. Once again, establishing trust leads us back to community circles. Yet this time, community engagement is specifically done by parishioners on an individual level.

The best way to instill excitement in someone for visiting your home is by sharing a beautiful piece of your home, showing what they can expect before they arrive. In the secular context, this can be something tangible, though often, it is simple kindness that fosters trust. The point being, providing a positive element of your home often creates an eagerness to experience it fully. Churches that excel at welcoming are those whose parishioners desire to show the loving nature within their church home in their community. Church welcoming expert, Thom Rainer, vouches that this is what welcoming churches are all about:

132. Teller, "Theology of Home," 101.

133. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 228.

A welcoming church is a going church. The members realize that the church is not a place confined to walls, but a people determined to go. They demonstrate caring and the love of Christ in their workplaces, in their neighborhoods, in the places they shop, and in all the places where they encounter people in their communities. Those people in the community see Christ in the welcoming church members. They decide to visit the church. And when they come to the church, they are welcomed, truly welcomed. That's what the Great Commission is all about. That's what welcoming churches are all about.¹³⁴

This suggests a question all congregations should ask themselves as they strive to function as host. Question: Does (your church name here) make (your community/city here) feel like home?

A welcoming church is one that looks, lives, and loves outside of its four walls. As people inside the church leave and walk out the doors, they naturally take a piece of spiritual home into their community. The best encouragement for congregations, and one that removes pressure, is to live out the two relational realities that make up their spiritual home. That often means inviting them into our physical home before inviting them into our spiritual one.¹³⁵

The church functions as both a guest and host within its community. But the church can only function as both if it leaves its four walls and enters the community God has placed it in. God has interwoven our story with the stories of strangers and wanderers seeking the home they have longed for their entire lives. So, let's be the Church without walls, rooted in relationships, and centered on Christ. One that not only makes home felt within its walls but brings home to its community. While fostering inside and outside the church is what a congregation aims to do, it is only an imperfect reflection of our eternal home.¹³⁶ But until we are in our eternal home with Jesus forever in heaven, big, medium, and small churches, mission starts just getting off the ground, and even a husband and wife reading their Bible in a post-Christian part of the

134. Thom Rainer, "Becoming a Welcoming Church," Outreach, March 19, 2018, <https://outreachmagazine.com/resources/books/church-books/27404-becoming-welcoming-church.html>.

135. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 230.

136. Heb 13:14

country, find their comfort during their pilgrimage home by resting in Jesus' words, "For where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them" (Matthew 18:20).

INTERVIEWS: ILLUSTRATING AND INSIGHTS OF HOSPITALITY

The above points are helpful for congregations as they ponder how to create a welcoming church environment, but they are intentionally broad in their descriptions. Each congregation must independently evaluate its ministry context and wrestle with strategies that make sense in its unique setting. To illustrate, it is valuable to share information from interviews with pastors of three current congregations that have intentionally made choices to help their church feel like home for those experiencing it for the first time. Although these congregations differ in size, demographics, and geography, each has uniquely applied similar welcoming principles that fit their ministry setting. The common theme among all three congregations is their emphasis on relational hospitality. The following section will therefore highlight their strategies, rationale, and include what they believe to be key features of creating a welcoming environment.

Victory of the Lamb – Franklin, WI

This section summarizes insights drawn from an interview with Pastor Bill Limmer and Pastor Ben Sadler, the pastors at Victory of the Lamb.¹³⁷ Victory of the Lamb (Victory) intentionally strives to make guests feel welcomed the moment they arrive on campus.¹³⁸ In the words of their

137. Bill Limmer and Ben Sadler, interview by author. In-person, October 29, 2025.

138. <https://victoryofthelamb.com>

pastors, they want to be a church that personally greets visitors with a smile, communicating that someone is genuinely excited that they came. Victory has intentionally created multiple touch points for such personal greetings. First, every week, regardless of the weather, guests receive a greeting outside of the building either by one of their two pastors or another greeter. The goal of this simple gesture is to let everyone know that Victory acknowledges their presence and is genuinely glad they came. Greeters are strategically placed inside as well. Since Victory is a congregation of over one thousand, they also have a First Impressions team whose goal is to welcome those who are new or unfamiliar, make them feel at home, answer any questions, and be one of the first personal connections established. While one of their pastors often seeks to be the first point of connection outside their building, the other pastor intentionally functions as a conversationalist inside the café gathering area. In their experience, this strategy helps set people at ease as they enter the building and see one of them naturally engaging in relaxed conversation. Seeing one of the pastors naturally engaging with people instills a comfortable atmosphere not just for visitors but also for newcomers. For Victory, every person is to be treated as a guest, even those who have been attending for a long time. As visitors see such consistency, it communicates that genuine hospitality is not something they will only get their first or second time coming, but every single week thereafter.

Both pastors equally emphasized how a church's website and online presence have become increasingly important in today's day and age. In their experience, many of their first-time visitors had already been visiting them online for a year, if not longer, before they ever attended worship in person. They compared this to how people often look up a restaurant's online menu before they decide to dine there. Similarly, Victory's website allows visitors to let Victory know they are coming for the first time. Many guests use this feature, and it has helped

shape their in-house hospitality. When an online guest lets Victory know they are coming on Sunday, the guest shortly receives an email thanking them, while letting them know there will be a gift waiting for them when they arrive, with their name on it. The gift often includes local honey and a gift card. Both pastors mentioned that one thing they hope to incorporate in the future is a specific welcome area, such as a welcome booth, that you can direct them to in your email. Doing so alleviates the anxiety of not knowing where to go or whom to speak with upon arrival.

In the interview, there was a huge emphasis on how language in worship is one of the most important, yet often overlooked, aspects that contribute to a warm welcome for guests. This often begins with how a pastor welcomes people into worship. One of the pastors equated the opening welcome to a host who is at the door when a guest arrives at their home. Similarly, the pastor has the ability to set everyone at ease with his opening welcome. One of the pastors usually begins with, “Some of you may have been going here for a long time. Some of you might be new here. But we are so thankful you are here. So, no matter who you are or whatever brought you here, welcome home. Welcome to Victory.” There is a twofold reason for such a welcome. First, it communicates to guests that they are wanted and welcome here. Second, it communicates to members and regular attendees that their church wants this to be a place where they feel comfortable inviting a friend. Victory has also adapted its language in hopes of being as clear as possible for those who may never have experienced a worship service. For example, they express the confession and absolution as “Forgive us, lead us, renew us.” Likewise, the creeds are always introduced with a brief explanation of what is being confessed and why we say it today. An explanation is also given for why the congregation chooses to stand at some points and

sit in others. Ultimately, Victory wants no person to be left behind and everyone to understand what is going on in worship.

Victory's welcoming nature also thrives on its ability to create opportunities for relationships. Not only does Victory have a cozy gathering area (known as Victory Café), but every week, they provide food and coffee for everyone. As their pastors stated in the interview, good food plus good coffee usually gives people a reason to stick around after church. There is something about food that naturally allows people to chat. Even something as simple as sharing coffee and food creates organic opportunities to meet someone new and strengthen relationships that might otherwise remain surface-level. Relationships outside of Sunday worship are also a high priority. Understanding that a church cannot program relationships, Victory creates opportunities for relationships such as service groups, men's groups, life groups, mommy and me, and more. These intentional pathways are especially significant in their congregation of over 1,000 members. Because it is impossible for their pastors to know everyone on a deep level, Victory prioritizes connecting people to smaller relational environments where meaningful spiritual friendships can develop.

On a larger scale, there is also an emphasis on the congregation's presence in the community. In their words, "When a church does things in the community, that sticks out to people." While Victory aims to have or host an event four times every year (Christmas, Easter, Summer, Fall), they have experienced positive relational benefits by partnering with other organizations in the community. In fact, simply joining and volunteering at existing community events has been one of the most effective ways to not only demonstrate their love for the community but also make connections. Rather than always asking the community to come to them, they intentionally go to where the community already is. The goal for the church is simply

to express love and gratitude for the community it gets to be part of. In their experience, simply loving the community, either with one of their events or a partnered event, has often been where new people find the courage to attend for the first time. It is common at Victory for a new person to attend worship sometimes three months after a community event, and yet, the newcomer usually points back to the event as their first exposure to the church. For example, in July, Victory hosted a Touch a Truck event where they created opportunities for community connections. Three months later, in October, one individual decided to attend for the first time. In further conversation, they discovered this individual came for Sunday worship after experiencing Victory's love and involvement in the community and visiting them online.

As Victory has increasingly become involved in the community, it has also become all the more recognized as objectively good for the community by those who do not even attend their congregation. Through consistent volunteering at some of their local school, Franklin Public Schools publicly recognized Victory with an award of appreciation. While receiving recognition was never the goal, it demonstrated that their love for the community was genuinely noticed and valued. In this way, Victory has become seen as objectively good for the community of Franklin.

During the interview, the conversation naturally tipped into congregational culture. In their words, a church cannot simply add amenities like food, coffee, or greeters to become a welcoming church. Rather, core values must first be established. As core values are clarified and embraced, they shape the congregation's culture and guide decisions. Therefore, becoming more welcoming is not a cosmetic fix; culture is always involved. Pastor Ben Sadler noted that if a church's techniques do not align with its stated values, hospitality will not resonate in the same way as it does in a congregation whose practices flow naturally from deeply held values. Values

must lead decisions, not follow them. According to their pastors, there is not necessarily a right or wrong when it comes to core values. A church may make different choices depending on who they are as a congregation and how they desire to serve their community. Nevertheless, clearly establishing core values helps a congregation discern which programs to pursue and which opportunities to decline.

St. Marcus – Milwaukee, WI

St. Marcus is a congregation located just north of downtown Milwaukee.¹³⁹ To better understand how St. Marcus cultivates belonging and utilizes hospitality practices in their urban setting, I interviewed Pastor James Hein, one of their three pastors.¹⁴⁰ Early in our conversation, Pastor Hein highlighted the importance of culture working alongside hospitality strategies. Their greeter program is a wonderful example, with sixty people volunteering in various capacities for each of their three services. Four to five volunteers function as formal greeters, often done as a family unit. Pastor Hein noted that while they maintain a formal greeter program, in the grand scheme of things, welcoming is ultimately less about the program itself and more about the congregation recognizing the importance of making someone feel at home. The real impact of their hospitable welcome stems from their established culture that aims to appreciate the cultural background of everyone present without expecting someone to automatically fit a certain mold to belong. Yet, the presence of a formal greeter team serves a specific role: it communicates to the whole

139. <https://www.stmarcus.org/church>

140. James Hein, interview by author. In-person, November 7, 2025.

congregation that there are always visitors present and, therefore, the church's best hospitality efforts should always be on display.

As worship begins, everyone is encouraged to learn the name of someone seated near them. Pastor Hein acknowledges that while there is typically a nervousness attached to a stand and greet, learning a new name is a natural expression of hospitality. He compared this natural expression to winning the lottery. Generally speaking, whether a person is reserved or extroverted, there is a natural human reaction of excitement to winning the lottery. The same thing is true when it comes to greeting new people. There is a universal way people feel welcomed in a sanctuary, and when a congregation is willing to put themselves out there to meet someone new, it communicates hospitality. Quoting James Hein:

I've never met one person who is good at learning names when you don't know someone else's name. It's usually because the person hasn't registered as important in your life yet. At the end of the day, there are not people who are good at learning names and people who are bad at learning names. It's people who are interested in making others a priority and not. I think the same thing is true, with congregational temperament in welcoming culture. You're either interested in meeting people where they are at and welcoming them in, or you are not.¹⁴¹

Ultimately, St. Marcus wants people to leave experiencing that somebody went out of their way to find out who they are.

The environment at St. Marcus also intentionally encourages further fellowship after worship with a dedicated gathering space outside the sanctuary. Food and beverages naturally create a disarming and casual atmosphere where relationships are encouraged. Yet, as Pastor Hein pointed out, simply having food and drink will not necessarily change a church's culture; rather, culture informs what the congregation perceives as the best practices to implement. It was mentioned that there has been a trend among churches to create a gathering space just as big as

141. J. Hein interview.

the sanctuary. While what happens inside the sanctuary is vastly important, impersonal relationships are not the main focus, and the body of Christ needs interpersonal relationships. This reflects the twofold definition of home previously stated. Therefore, best practices often include intentional meeting spaces, a type of food, and people genuinely interested in learning who somebody is. To paraphrase Pastor Hein, churches cannot expect a new person to believe everything the church does, but what you hope they perceive is a kind and compassionate human being who is genuinely interested in them. As one perceives this to be true, it earns the right to tell them about the truth of their Savior. Pastor Hein draws his application from Scripture when he says, “Jesus is saying by your fruit they will know you are my disciples. Theoretically, you could say by your teaching and your doctrine they will know... but he is saying the thing that will be the most evident, the initial gateway, into learning the doctrines will be the fruit that is more beautiful than that of an unregenerate world.”¹⁴²

Pastor Hein estimates that three-quarters of St. Marcus’s first-time visitors come because a friend invited them. One of the most interesting concepts he highlighted was how invitations given by your members, or lack thereof, typically suggest something about a member’s personal experience at the church. If a person is afraid to invite a friend to church, it typically is not because they fear their friend will hear something so biblical that they will get offended. Rather, it may be linked to trust. When a member goes out of their way to invite a friend, they are expressing trust in their church’s ability to welcome. In this way, welcoming culture and intentional hospitality inside the church go hand in hand.

As St. Marcus engages with new people, it is a priority for them to clearly communicate potential next steps for further church involvement. For non-members, this includes a

142. J. Hein interview.

membership class, followed by a meeting to connect them to other individuals and ministries. When it comes to assimilation, small groups are a huge emphasis. The follow-up meeting also serves to plug everyone into one of their forty small groups. Pastor Hein mentioned the importance of relationally connecting new people, stating, in his experience, if someone new does not develop close personal relationships within the first six to ten months, they are likely to be gone in a year or two. In the end, relationships are key. If people can move into spaces and places outside the church where they are able to learn someone's story, that is where relationships are created, and people find belonging.

It was also mentioned that their growth groups (small groups) also reinforce a hospitality culture within their congregation. As members become accustomed to having people over in their homes, the more socially adept they become at welcoming new visitors in church. The groups ultimately teach members to minister to one another. Pastor Hein points to Ephesians 4:12, "equipping God's people for works of service," as his philosophy for ministry. One small example of this was choosing not to shake everyone's hand as they leave the sanctuary. This allows for further and hurried conversations to take place among those at church. Especially, if there is a new person, it would be much more challenging to engage in meaningful conversation if a massive line of people is waiting behind the new person to shake the pastor's hand. Since this switch, he has experienced his members using their gifts to naturally welcome new people, and he has become more available to spot and engage with newcomers. One thing he consistently says to reinforce his people to exist outside the four walls of church is, "It's really hard to know God without knowing the people he dwells in by His Spirit... If God is going to speak into the lives of your loved ones, it's going to sound shockingly close to your voice."¹⁴³

143. J. Hein interview.

When briefly asked about community involvement, Pastor Hein mentioned it is important and Biblical to love the community God has placed a church in. Whether people in the community attend St. Marcus or not, their church wants to be seen as one that objectively loves and wants to support a community and its needs. St. Marcus is widely recognized in their community for providing quality education to over 1,300 students in the Milwaukee area who historically have not always had access to quality education.

Carbon Valley – Firestone, CO

Carbon Valley Lutheran (CVL) is a relatively young mission congregation that began formal worship in 2015 and recently celebrated its ten-year anniversary as a church plant.¹⁴⁴ It was the first church established in the small town of Firestone, just north of Denver. Pastor Tim Spiegelberg, who started the mission, began our interview discussing how removing barriers was, and still is, a huge emphasis when creating a welcoming environment for those who are new to the church.¹⁴⁵ CVL understands that walking into a new place is always accompanied by nervousness. Especially in a mission setting where everyone is new to the church, the goal week by week is to make people feel at ease, wanted, and welcomed. Obviously, there are often an overwhelming number of aspects to take in when entering a new place, especially a church. One of the first strategies that has worked well for them has been introducing people to their space prior to their first visit with a welcome video on their website. The video walks people through the front doors, providing familiarity with the space before their first visit on a Sunday morning.

144. <https://www.carbonchurch.com>

145. Timothy Spiegelberg, interview by author. FaceTime, November 11, 2025.

As stated earlier in this paper, this is of key importance since first-time guests often experience a sense of being overwhelmed by everything that is new. To mitigate the anxiety of entering an unfamiliar space, CVL introduces its space visually to remove one new aspect that often contributes to a guest feeling overwhelmed during their first experience. Pastor Tim states it well, “The more of those barriers we can remove on the front end, the better chance you have of a second visit.”¹⁴⁶

Other attempts to remove these barriers include simplifying the liturgy, an introduction to their kids’ ministry, brief explanations of reading and creeds, and the language throughout worship. The service is bookended by intentional, unhurried communication. As worship begins, CVL makes a point to take their time and set everyone at ease with a welcome and thank you. Every service Pastor Tim Spiegelberg begins with something along the lines of, “You could have chosen to be anywhere on this Sunday morning, and you chose to spend your precious time here, and for that we are so thankful.”¹⁴⁷ CVL never wants to take anyone’s attendance for granted, whether they have attended for ten years or have only been on campus for ten minutes. Everyone’s attendance is valued, so it is important to spend the time to thank them. The same message is intentionally communicated at the end of the service with words such as, “It takes lots of bravery to come to a new place with new people, and if it is your first time here, we want to thank you for being brave.” These unhurried opening and closing statements aim to communicate not only to guests but also to reinforce to members what CVL is all about. In other words, if the new folks at church today are brave enough to come here, we are going to be brave enough to say hello and get to know them.

146. T. Spiegelberg interview.

147. T. Spiegelberg interview.

Relational hospitality is what CVL built its mission on from its very beginning. This is evident in CVL's choices when constructing and renovating their church building. Numerous features were intentionally created to reflect relational aspects of a home. One of the initial decisions when constructing the sanctuary was to have worship itself feel relational. Rather than having two long rows of chairs with an aisle down the middle, CVL recognized a more relational feel when the chairs were arranged along the length of the building. In other words, three shallow sections of chairs, their current seating setup, give a more communal feel to worship. Along with that, the first thing a person will notice when they walk through the doors is a warm space with food and coffee. Much like what was said before, food and drink are disarming features that invite conversation and encourage people to stick around and chat. A unique feature of CVL's building is its garage doors, which not only bring in natural light to the sanctuary but also open to what is equivalent to the church's backyard. After the service, everyone is invited to stick around under the awning, hang out near their gas firepit, or play cornhole on the turf while their children are free to play on the playground. It was important to CVL to provide not just a home for worship, but also to create spaces for relational growth.

While all these home-type features are important, Pastor Tim highlighted that a church cannot simply contain amenities. A church must also be filled with people who reflect that welcoming environment. If a church has one without the other, it will negatively impact what a church is trying to do relationally. Ultimately, such amenities are tools to create opportunities for relationships. One of CVL's unique choices, which has sparked relationships, was to have a short break during their service after the sermon. CVL stumbled upon this variation of a stand and greet out of their desire to allow those present some time to fill out connect cards or prayer requests. What originated out of necessity organically turned into an informal stand and greet.

CVL found that people naturally began introducing themselves and chatting with those around them. Pastor Tim compared it to an intermission where people have an opportunity not only to fill out a connect card, stretch, or refill their coffee, but also to meet someone new. As the break begins, everyone is reminded in one way or another that everyone was new to CVL at one point, and this is a perfect opportunity to help someone feel at home.

Generosity and providing avenues for members to practice hospitality are also a huge emphasis with their congregation. While food was already mentioned, it does play a large role in forming ownership and cultural hospitality within their congregation. In the early stages of the mission, people began asking if they could provide food for Sunday morning, often recipes made in their own households. This turned out to be one of the best ways to instill a sense of home within the church's four walls and instill excitement within their people. As Pastor Tim stated, "Every Sunday there's something new food-wise, which is an expression of someone's own home."¹⁴⁸ Families who sign up are encouraged to turn in their receipts for reimbursement to make sure no one is discouraged from sharing a piece of their own home. CVL does not want church to merely be a second home for its people, but a place that encourages others to bring their personal homes with them.

Apart from food and a thank you, gifts are also given to those brave enough to come. CVL always encourages newcomers to grab one of their customized church Nalgene water bottles in the entry as a small token of their appreciation for coming. If an individual or family is willing to fill out a connect card, they will also receive a gift bag dropped on their doorstep as one more thank you. The bag includes a CVL coffee mug, a gift card to a local coffee shop, CVL water bottle stickers and magnets, and a handwritten thank you note. The congregation has the

148. T. Spiegelberg interview.

goal to be more generous than people think they should be, since gifts communicate who they are and how much they value every guest who comes into their home. If one continues to come and eventually joins their new member class, every new member is given a jar of local honey harvested from CVL's own bees on campus. Pastor Tim states, "If someone does not come back because of theology, I can live with that. It doesn't feel good, but I can live with that. But if they don't come back because they didn't feel welcomed, couldn't find on-ramps, or things were confusing... I don't want to have to live with that if it's within our power to alleviate those."¹⁴⁹ One cannot control how the gospel lands on someone's heart, but what a congregation can control is how a person is welcomed and how generous they are. Their relational generosity has been a huge difference maker in assimilating new people. Recently, a new couple to CVL, who were not even members yet, signed up to make one of their favorite homemade meals to share with everyone on Sunday. It may be something simple, yet there is no doubt that as new people witness these relational aspects, they naturally say, "This is my home too."

As a brand-new mission church in the Carbon Valley area, it was an important emphasis to not be a church hanging on the side of their community but to legitimately become part of it. One of the most significant ways CVL communicated that was through their building. The church they have now was a former plant nursery in an upcoming part of the town. When the nursery closed, and CVL bought the property, they decided not to start fresh but rather renovate the nursery greenhouse into their current building. By remodeling the old building, they rooted themselves in the town's culture while communicating that the church is not there to create its own community but to serve within their existing area. Specifically, when renovating, CVL also saw a community need to have more preschools with the large influx of young families in the

149. T. Spiegelberg interview.

area. Knowing that, they decided to make half of their building into a preschool, which they currently rent out. Through renting, they have not only created relationships with those at the preschool but also addressed a community need. The church did a similar thing when deciding not to build a new storage shed but to purchase and renovate an old boxcar to function as their shed. Once again, this was received with excitement while also reflecting Firestone's history of being a former mining town.

Being in and serving the community is a nonnegotiable within the congregation. It is emphasized that they want church life, home life, and community life to bleed into each other. Pastor Tim regularly reminds his people, "We are not going to be afraid of the community we live in. We are going to love our church, and we are going to love our town."¹⁵⁰ The church provides many avenues to do this. Town festivals such as Trunk or Treat, Miner's Day, or Friends of Firestone are easy ways for their church to be present. But the most recent way CVL implemented to love their community is their Coffee for a Cause program. Each month, CVL provides specialty coffee at its church with an open donation. At the end of the month, they choose a local nonprofit organization to support with all their donations. As people in the community see CVL simply loving local, they see the church as something objectively good for the community, whether they have an interest in going to church or not.

SELF-REFLECTING QUESTIONS

The following self-reflecting questions are designed to serve as an initial way for congregations to self-examine their hospitality culture. Since hospitality may be practiced in various contexts

150. T. Spiegelberg interview.

and demographics, these questions are intended to initiate strategic conversations and help church leaders take an honest inventory of their current level. By working through these prompts together, a congregation can begin to identify its unique hospitality strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities within its own specific ministry setting. These questions aim to serve as a launch pad for further and deeper conversations that move from principles to practical and localized applications that truly help a guest feel at home.

- Is (Insert your church name) making (Insert city/town) and the surrounding community feel like home? How can we express our love for our community?
- What are the best / worst features of your church website? How could it look cleaner, be more user-friendly, and be navigated with greater ease?
- What space on your church campus promotes relationship building the best? How could it be better?
- Apart from church on a Sunday morning, does the church provide something for its members to invite friends to join?
- How does your church equip its members to host and welcome new people? (Think what a member could offer, show, or give to make approaching a new person less scary and more natural).

- What makes your ministry setting unique? How can your church lean into that?
- Survey your congregation. What makes you most excited to attend church each week?
What is one thing/feature that would make it easier for you to invite a friend?
- What efforts could best communicate to first-time attendees, “We cared and noticed you were here?”
- Who are we as a church right now? What do we want to be? What are the steps to get there?
- Secret Guest Challenge: Ask someone who has never attended your church (someone your members do not know) to attend your worship service. After attending, ask them to share their honest experience, and assess your congregation’s hospitality.

CONCLUSION

The universal ache for home is not merely a byproduct of nostalgia for childhood driveways or familiar landscapes. It is an expression of a deep human need for rootedness, safety, and belonging. This paper has explored how, in an increasingly post-Christian and low-context society, the local church has a unique opportunity to answer this ache by reclaiming its identity as a relational community. As shown, the rapid rise of the “nones” and the current epidemic of loneliness are not just sociological trends but reveal the deprivation of both relational realities that make up the theological definition of home.

To address the church's place in such a post-Christian society, this paper proposed that congregations must move beyond a one-size-fits-all mentality and move in directions that intentionally cultivate a twofold reality of home: first, a relational reality where guests find horizontal belonging among community; and second, the vertical reality with God encountered through the proclamation of his Word. By optimizing hospitality practices such as managing in-person and digital first impressions, navigating language barriers, communicating clearly, prioritizing relational on-ramps, and instilling a sense of ownership, a church establishes more opportunities for relational growth that, God willing, lead to further interactions with God's Word. As demonstrated by the practices at Victory of the Lamb, St. Marcus, and Carbon Valley, true hospitality is not a cosmetic program, but a unique congregational decision informed by a congregation's culture, values, and context.

Ultimately, the goal of congregational hospitality is to first genuinely love the people God has placed in that given community. Such loving hospitality often ensures that no seeker is ever turned away by a lack of intentionality or unfriendly environment. As Scripture states, Christian love and hospitality often serve as a gateway to the Gospel and, in turn, provide both relational realities our post-Christian society lacks.¹⁵¹ However, even the most robust earthly welcome is only a beautiful, imperfect reflection of the home for which we were truly designed. As C.S. Lewis states, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."¹⁵²

Until that eternal home is reached, the church's mission is to be a people without walls, functioning as both a humble guest within its community as well as a generous host in the

151. Matt 5:16.

152. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 119.

community it serves. By embracing both the doctrinal truth of the Word and the relational warmth of the household of believers, the congregation offers a lonely society more than just a friendly greeting; it offers an invitation to finally come home.

FURTHER RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

This paper has intentionally narrowed its focus to the observing strategies congregations may consider as they seek to welcome and assimilate guests into a church home within a post-Christian culture. Because of those parameters, this study does not exhaust the full scope of research on Christian hospitality or congregational belonging. Therefore, there are significant areas on this topic that deserve a deeper dive. One particular area includes the relationship between a congregation's culture and its hospitality/welcoming nature. As was mentioned previously, the best strategies falter if the underlying culture does not reflect warmth, openness, or a desire to welcome new people. A future study could examine how congregations whose internal culture does not naturally express a welcoming environment might begin to transition, highlighting what theological and practical steps are required for a culture shift to take root.

Additionally, further research could consider how church size dynamics inevitably shape hospitality practices. Obviously, there are different opportunities, limitations, and relational patterns at play in a congregation of fifty people versus a congregation of five hundred people. Small churches and large churches cannot, and should not, cultivate belonging in identical ways. Exploring how hospitality strategies adapt to a congregation's size would provide valuable insight for churches seeking to welcome in their unique contexts.

While these topics are beyond the scope of this paper, they will be interesting and helpful studies. They would deepen our understanding of how the church can serve, engage, and welcome in our post-Christian mission field.

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