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Friendliness isn't enough

DO THE POOR FEEL WELCOME IN YOUR CHURCH?

by Eddy Hall

The visitors' clothes are worn, their haircuts do-it-yourself jobs. As a member of a middle-income congregation, you wonder, Will this family feel welcome here?

Your concerns are soon put to rest. Church members go out of their way to be friendly, and the family returns. When the Sunday school class plans a hayride, several people invite the newcomers. You're delighted when the couple dedicate their baby. They must be feeling right at home.

Then, a few weeks later, they just stop coming. What went wrong? Didn't they feel welcome after all?

No, they didn't. I know because this family—let's call them Ray and Sandra Thompson—were friends of our who attended church with us at our invitation.

I appreciated, of course, other church members' efforts to make our friends, who were obviously poor, feel at home. The friendliness was genuine, but it wasn't enough. To truly make the family feel accepted would have required something more—a new way of seeing.

Our family began to learn this new way of seeing when we returned to Oklahoma after three years away. I was working as a freelance writer, a job that yielded high personal rewards but low and irregular income. We went back to the same middle-class church we had attended before, where we had felt loved, but after a year of regular attendance, we still didn't feel a part of the body.

The difference? We were poor now. And as a poor family attending a middle-class church, we had run into an obstacle course of barriers that kept us on the outside looking in. Though we had worshiped at the church for years, we'd never before noticed the barriers. In fact, we could now see how we had unknowingly raised similar barriers in a youth program we had directed in that very church. Only when we saw the church through the eyes of the poor did these barriers become visible.

Barrier #1: A Price Tag on Christian Fellowship

On the evening of the Sunday school hayride, Ray was at our house, anguishing over whether to take his family. He wanted to make friends and be a part of the fellowship, but the hayride would cost \$4.50. He was forced to choose—go on the hayride or buy milk for his children.

We'd gladly have taken them as our guests, but we had even less money at the time. Our family couldn't even consider going. In the end, Ray stayed home and bought milk. The price tag on Christian fellowship was simply too high.

The next month our Sunday school social was within walking distance of our home. No expense for gasoline. Admission was just \$1 for our whole family. Maybe we could go. But, no, it came during a time when our only regular income was the \$70 a week my wife was earning from a part-time Christmas job, and we had less than \$15 a week for groceries. On a budget that tight, \$1 is a lot. We stayed home and used the dollar for baby formula.

That's why, after a year at our old home church, we still felt like outsiders. Though our Sunday school class had frequent social events where we could have renewed friendships, most cost money for admission, child care, or both. That left us out. While worship and Sunday school were open to everyone

regardless of income, those unable to pay for Christian fellowship were often excluded.

The leaders of a women's Bible study my wife attended found some creative ways to eliminate financial barriers. The church provided free child care during the Bible study. Once a month, when the small groups ate lunch together, the women brought brown-bag lunches rather than going to a restaurant. To take care of the only remaining financial barrier, scholarships were available on request for the \$10 fee for materials. But while that removed the financial barrier, it raised another in its place.

Barrier #2: Offers of Help That Hurt

In our society, being poor carries a stigma. Even though Jesus called the poor blessed and singled out the wealthy for stern warnings, the world's glorification of the wealthy carries over into many churches. The result: to admit to being poor, even in the church, can be terribly humiliating. To admit you can't even afford the \$10 for a Bible-study notebook is a humiliation few will volunteer for.

To get around this, some groups eliminate fees in favor of suggested donations. That's better, but still less than ideal. When I haven't been able to give the full suggested donation, I've sometimes come away feeling guilty or second class. The challenge is to find ways to share that don't hurt and humiliate, but that communicate love and affirm dignity.

Our present church does an excellent job of this. While expenses for this year's all-church retreat were covered on a donation basis, nobody mentioned a "suggested donation." Instead, the announcement mentioned the approximate cost per person, but emphasized that everyone's participation was wanted. Those who couldn't pay were made to feel just as welcome as those who could cover more than their own expenses. As a result, retreat participation was almost as high as Sunday morning worship attendance, and donations covered all expenses.

The exact method isn't important. What's important is to find ways for those who can't pay to participate on equal terms with those who can—not on a "special case" basis.

Barrier #3: Practices That Say, "You Don't Belong"

Visiting a predominantly middle-income congregation can be uncomfortable for a lower-income family. To make the less affluent feel welcome, the congregation must become aware of lifestyle differences and adopt practices that embrace diversity.

On the Sunday the Thompsons dedicated their baby, my wife and I also dedicated our first child. As I dressed that morning, I debated: should I wear a suit to fit in with most of the other fathers who would be standing before the congregation, or a sports shirt in case Ray didn't have a coat and tie? I compromised. I wore a sweater.

Ray showed up without coat or tie. Sandra wore the same dress she'd worn the previous six Sundays—no doubt her only Sunday dress. I could imagine how conspicuous they felt. I hoped what I was wearing made them feel a little less so. But to make them feel truly comfortable, many in the congregation would have needed to change from dressing for success to dressing for the social comfort of others.

Does this mean banning coats and ties? Hardly. That would only make visitors wearing coats and ties feel out of place. But when visitors can look around on Sunday morning and find blue jeans as well as suits, they won't feel conspicuous no matter how rich or poor.

Social customs can also hinder fellowship.

Once, when our family was looking for a home church, we began attending an affluent suburban congregation shortly before the annual ladies' luncheon. Judging from the description in the bulletin and

the place settings displayed in the lobby, it was to be quite a formal affair. The price of one ticket was more than I'd ever spent on a single meal, more than we usually spent for our entire family to eat out.

One woman, trying to include my wife, not only invited her to the luncheon, but suggested she decorate one of the tables. This required china, crystal and silver for ten, a round linen tablecloth, and a centerpiece. She didn't know, of course, that our "china" consisted of five mismatched plastic plates, our "crystal" of plastic tumblers picked up at the dime store to get us by till we could afford to move our household goods.

Her attempt to make my wife feel welcome had just the opposite effect. In assuming that everyone attending the church would have fine dinnerware and could afford the ticket price, the women planning the luncheon were saying to my wife and others, "This luncheon wasn't planned with you in mind."

We didn't feel welcome in that church.

Putting Out the Welcome Mat

Making the poor feel at home takes more than friendliness and good intentions. It requires learning to see through their eyes, to examine every aspect of church life to see if it includes or excludes. To learn to see this way, we will need to involve the poor in decisions that shape the life of the body. With their help, we can find ways to remove the price tags on Christian fellowship, to avoid offers of help that hurt, and to modify practices that say to the poor, "You don't belong." We can learn to make all the body's basic ministries available to everyone, on the same basis, in settings where people of different socioeconomic levels can be comfortable.

As poor and non-poor come together, not only will the poor benefit from being included, not only will the non-poor grow through their new relationships with these brothers and sisters, but our life together will demonstrate to the world the gospel's power to break down the walls that divide us, its power to make us one.

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