

## Pastor's Ponderings - May-June 2023

Once, when I was not pastoring a church, I started attending a church near my home that was not my regular church and not UCC. I just felt like going somewhere different one Sunday and then because I liked the pastor's sermon and the pattern of worship I kept going there for the summer, about three months. During that entire time, not one person asked my name, engaged me in conversation, or encouraged me to return. I even attended a fellowship time after church on two occasions. I don't think they disliked me or didn't want me there. They just were not the kind of church that paid attention to visitors. I didn't really mind being anonymous, but after a while I did find it very odd. That would never happen here at Faith Church. I have had visitors tell me it is a welcoming and friendly congregation. But I think it is worth reminding ourselves once in a while that how we treat newcomers is important.

People come to worship for differing reasons at differing times. People who attend regularly come to see their church friends, enjoy the familiar patterns of worship, and (hopefully) hear a meaningful sermon and be inspired and nurtured in their spiritual life. Visitors come for different reasons. They are not coming to see friends. If they have been invited by a member, they may know one or two people but generally do not know other worshipers. They also do not know what the worship patterns are. Even if they are familiar with other UCC churches there may be parts of our service that are not familiar to them or there may be things missing from our service that they are accustomed to. Some newcomers may not know what to expect or fully grasp what is going on in worship at all. This means visitors or even newcomers who have been attending several weeks may need a little guidance. If they missed getting a bulletin coming in, then someone needs to get them one. If we are having Communion, they may need a cue about going forward or what to do with their empty Communion cup. If they are first time visitors someone should ask them to sign the visitor log, which we have recently moved to near the sanctuary doors so that it is more visible and convenient. If there is a coffee hour they should be invited. If they have children and we are having Sunday school, they should be told their children are welcome to go to Sunday school or remain with them in worship. It is most helpful to try to greet and assist visitors if possible before worship starts.

On the other hand, some people want to be left alone. Some people just want to observe, and that is fine. Sometimes people begin attending a church because of something going on in their lives that makes them wonder if church in general, or this church in particular may be beneficial to them in some way, so they may be kind of exploring. If they come in late and scoot out early that is a good clue they don't really want people to engage them. This doesn't mean you shouldn't greet them warmly or try to assist them in some way, it just means you should respect their privacy if they want it.

There are two main reasons people attend worship. One is to experience community. They come for the fellowship and to see friends. The other is to experience God. They come in search of spiritual nurture. I hope and pray that after worship here at Faith Church they, and you, leaving having experienced both a sense of warm community and a sense of the presence of God. I invite you to join me in trying to help this be so.

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