

**In the Midst of Closures, Can a Welcome Ministry Still Operate?**

Church life looks very different after just a few weeks of physical distancing and an uncertain timeframe with Coronavirus-related closures. Virtual ministries and worship experiences have become vital to keeping church members feeling connected. One welcome ministry expert reminds that guests and unchurched individuals are also “visiting” your church virtually, perhaps now more than ever.

“The online viewership numbers being reported are crazy. What if one percent of those viewers were to show up for services when your church opens again? It won’t be perfect, and it may be messy, but we can be training our volunteers ahead of time to be ready for those visitors when church reopens,” says Mary Ann Sibley, owner of the coaching and consulting business MatterSpark, based in Greenville, S.C. Her work takes her around the country and has allowed her to work with a pastor in Russia. She is also in a new collaboration with Rebecca Carlisle to provide training through Stoke Workshops, slated to launch in April 2020.

Rebecca and Mary Ann will provide training workshops for churches to receive tools for stoking/creating and maintaining a meaningful and long-lasting guest service volunteer culture. In addition to a passion for helping churches, the friends recognize that each brings a unique perspective to the welcome ministry platform.

“I love our partnership because we represent both ends of the spectrum, I grew up in church and Mary Ann did not. I coordinated this at our church as a lay leader, and Mary Ann grew her church’s ministry as a church staff member,” says Rebecca.

Participating CMBA churches will recall that during a 2019 First Impressions training, Rebecca and Mary Ann introduced them to the concept of positioning a welcome ministry for the “who” instead of the “how.” First Impressions is the thread tying together friendly greetings from the parking lot, folks strategically placed with directions, the comfort of a warm cup of coffee and a genuine welcome in the worship center all to prepare visitors to experience worship and the love of Christ. According to Mary Ann, an effective welcome ministry also includes discipleship to its volunteers.

“It’s an area of ministry that allows people who may feel that they aren’t qualified to teach in children’s ministry or lead a Bible study but can stand at a door or in a parking lot. We want to be ministering to them in those roles so that volunteers understand that they have a Kingdom impact,” she explains.

“Younger people are desperate for community and mentorship. Our vision and pathway for a First Impressions ministry offers both. If structured the right way, it can offer community to people who want to get plugged in and even function as a small group. Bringing new volunteers on board is a form of mentorship, and people who have a sense of responsibility to the church will keep coming back and looking for ways to make it better,” says Rebecca, a First Impressions/Guest Services trainer living outside of Atlanta, G.A.

First Impressions, Carlisle maintains, reflects God’s own heart of hospitality that’s shown throughout the Bible. She cites the garden and tabernacle as intentional spaces created to welcome us to have communion with Him and calls the cross “no greater act of hospitality” that welcomes us into the Kingdom.

“Jesus wants you to feel welcomed in His presence. He’s ready for you and for that relationship with you. Through First Impressions people are experiencing the empowerment of interacting with the Holy Spirit and immediately helping people as they see needs,” she says.

To churches with an existing welcome ministry, Mary Ann suggests using creativity to reach deeper into the virtual world during this time of social distancing. Perhaps, you can open an online Welcome Desk staffed by key volunteers who already serve in that role and are made available during a posted time slot to answer questions live or pray when requests are submitted. She maintains being available to the community will speak volumes to people who don’t know your church yet.

“Radical hospitality is connecting people with people. It is what people need right now. You can click on anything and read about it, but people really want to interact with someone else,” MaryAnn says.

To that end, she calls this a perfect time to organize an intentional welcome ministry now before worship services resume. Identify and connect with church members who have the gift of hospitality and a love for people. Use email, phone calls or a free video chat service - Sibley recommends Zoom as being user-friendly – to safely “meet” with each other.

“Anything that a church may try right now doesn’t have to be the formal plan. A church needs to see what fits its DNA, congregation and rhythm. This is a big umbrella that we’re all under right now [while public services are not being held], and churches will figure out what’s best for them,” Sibley advises.

Think through ways to expand existing elements of ministry, too. “There’s so much more that you can be taking advantage of in terms of opportunities to minister to those who desperately need it. It could be recognizing that an usher can be a greeter within the auditorium and minister to those who are new to make them continue to feel welcome. It’s looking for ways to support a single mom entering with her children or noticing someone who seems overwhelmed and offering them a cup of water. What are we missing if we think our job is just handing out a bulletin?” Rebecca suggests.

As more touch points are occurring online, be sure to evaluate your church’s web presence and content. The home page should be easy to navigate and filled with information a visitor is looking for, not necessarily only what you want to tell them. Within one click links to online worship, giving and chatting with a real person should be obvious and easily accessible. Think of your church’s website not as a bulletin board of information but an interactive place to engage with people.

“Prior to social/physical distancing, many people might rarely think to look at their church online, but it’s our only option right now. How are we being seen? What are we telling people about ourselves? When our doors reopen, and they will be opened again, we must be ready, and it must be seamless. What they’ve seen for a month online needs to be what they experience when we meet face to face,” Sibley says.

For her part, Rebecca says churches should ultimately think of a welcoming ministry as the front lines of ministry. “It’s expressing God’s heart for people, and especially for the stranger, in a very loving and comforting way. In terms of discipleship, a lot of times people aren’t going to believe what you’re telling them until they feel like they belong in the space they’re invited to,” she says.

For additional information about MatterSpark visit [www.matterspark.com](http://www.matterspark.com). During this unprecedented time, Sibley has offered to be available to CMBA church staff with questions or assistance related to welcome ministry. She may be reached by email at [info@matterspark.com](mailto:info@matterspark.com).

For additional information about Stoke Workshops visit [www.stokeworkshops.com](http://www.stokeworkshops.com).