

## **“RADICAL WELCOME”**

**by Rev. Stephanie Spellers**

- “Radical Welcome” was published in 2006 and contains 180 pages of thought-provoking, challenging and useful information for any congregation or parish.
- Linda asked that we address you this morning regarding our reaction to the book and how the book has affected our outlook on parish life. We are also tasked with encouraging our fellow parishioners to consider the concept of “radical welcome” and its benefits and advantages to our church.
- I am going to begin with a statement at the end of the book (161) found in her concluding Chapter “The Joy in Struggle”. Rev. Spellers states that perhaps Radical Welcome sounds like an awful lot of work, sacrifice and pain and maybe like “change for change’s sake”.
- After reading the book, this is an accurate assessment – it does take a new outlook, a new mission and vision and a lot of effort to become a radically welcoming parish. But Rev. Spellers also adds that “.....there is joy here. Joy in being among those received, valued and radically welcomed. Joy in opening our hearts to God. Joy in making the church big enough for all people to bring their whole culture, whole self, whole heart inside.”
- So why take this on? Rev. Spellers indicates (162) that, when we engage in “radical welcome” we are engaged “..... in knitting together the very body of Christ and abiding more closely in him....the more complete our joy will be. Christ’s joy is available to us and radical welcome opens us to receive that blessing now.”
- “Radical Welcome” defined: (11) “..... a fundamental spiritual practice that combines the universal Christian ministry of welcome and hospitality with a clear awareness of power and patterns of inclusion and exclusion....It indicates a deep, fierce, urgent commitment to some core ideal...It involves embrace.” (13)
- “The Other”: Rev. Spellers refers to “the Other” as those people who are pushed to the margins of society by poverty, colour, sexual orientation and the like. They are people without power in our society.
- The radically welcoming community seeks to welcome the voices, presence and power of many groups; but especially “the Other”. (15)
- The radically welcoming community is committed to “.....a life that aims to be hospitable, connected, centred, open to conversion....” (17)

- What “radical welcome” is not: (17) The purpose of “radical welcome” is not to assimilate “the Other”, it is not a “feel good” ministry, it does not practise “reverse discrimination”, it is not a “church growth strategy” nor is it about “political correctness”.
- The “inviting congregation” reaches out and listens to others’ hopes and concerns. It risks the possibility of rejection, tells the story of God’s grace and invites others to join in the ministry of the parish. (63)
- How is all this to be initiated and accomplished? I have chosen to concentrate my commentary on the Chapter entitled “Re-imagine Your Common Life”. (97) This is the Chapter that has the most impact on me because it is packed full of useful information and guidance. I looked at this book for ideas on my personal church life and with a view to ideas that could assist our parish in our “radical welcome” initiative.
- Rev. Spellers invites us to assess how our congregation’s life can reflect and further God’s dream in the context of our own parish. We are asked to consider “five broad areas” and start to imagine where change needs to happen if “the Other” is to find a warm, hospitable space and a welcome table. (98)
- The five areas she recommends are: Mission and Vision, Identity, Ministries and Relationships, Leadership and Feedback systems and Worship. Rev. Spellers explains what each area entails and encompasses and asks: *Where are we now?* and *Where is God inviting us to go?* I have found that the ideas of Rev. Spellers here are most thought-provoking and helpful.
- [Refer here to the photocopy of the Chapter: “Re-imagine Your Common Life”. (97)]
- Another Chapter that is of assistance in implementing “radical welcome” is the Chapter entitled “Where Do We Go from Here?” (151) The sub-headings are “Craft a Vision Together”, “Choose your Battles”, “Give Thanks for the Small Victories” and “Be Gentle with Each Other”.
- The second half of this latter Chapter, “The Practices of a Radically Welcoming Community”, is of great assistance in providing ideas on how to “Engage in Formation for Radical Welcome”, “Model New Attitudes”, “Create and Nurture Supportive Structures” and “Prepare for the Journey”. (155-158) Time permits me to refer only to the highlights of each topic.
- In her concluding Chapter “The Joy in the Struggle”(161), Rev. Spellers provides some final advice for the parish that wishes to become truly welcoming. We have to give up our desire to be “...part of a club.” We must faithfully make room for each other’s gifts, voices and images to shape worship. We must trust each other’s skills for leadership.

- “.....we should make it abundantly clear that we are the least stiff, the least unforgiving, least crusty, least homogenous, least fearful, least judgmental people in the world.”
- “We cannot heal the world unless we are simultaneously experiencing healing of our own.”
- “It is simple, breathtaking, frightening and joy-filled.” (163)

Malcolm (Mac) Lindsay  
January 31, 2009  
St. Michael and All Angels