VISITORS IN YOUR CHURCH

Many of our congregations have parking spots for visitors. Most worship bulletins and pastors welcome visitors. And most churches I visit tell me that that their congregation is very “friendly and welcoming.”

Who are visitors? What is the definition of a visitor? According to Oxford Languages dictionary, a visitor is a person who comes and goes to see a place or a person. Sometimes visitors are tourists. Sometimes they are just checking things out. Often, they are spectators rather than participants.

With that definition, it occurs to me that the word “visitor” may not be the best description for those who come to worship with us. Worship is for participants not for spectators. So I wonder if the word “guest” might be a better term for those who “visit” our churches. A guest is a person who is invited to visit and participate in a function organized by another, a host. Although in our culture guests are usually invited, in older cultures such as the Middle East, guests drop in with or without invitation.

In the biblical times when guests arrived it was not just the job of the immediate host to welcome them, take care of them, and provide for them. It was also the job of the whole neighborhood to do so. The whole community was expected to pitch in, and assist in providing extravagant welcome so when it’s time for the guests to take leave they would say –“we were treated well!”

Welcome and hospitality are deeply rooted biblical values. It is interesting that this ancient Middle Eastern tradition is still very much alive. I believe it is so mostly because social roles of host and guest are clear. It is as if there are job descriptions for these roles and everyone follows them.

I share about this because I believe it would be helpful for our local congregations to think of themselves as hosts and those who visit them as guests. These two words, host and guest, are biblical, and their roles are sacred. The host prepares, expects, and receives guests. Guests shows up, are welcomed with warmth and they participate. Although many congregations think of themselves as friendly and welcoming, they may not think of themselves as hosts. I believe it will benefit us, church people, to think of ourselves as hosts as we welcome people joyfully, with enthusiasm, with preparation and with openness to surprises. We need to receive our guests with delight aware that, just as the biblical guests of the past, the guests of today are sent by God. We who host these guests are hosts in the image of God who is the ultimate Host who invites and welcomes all.

Hosts and guests are quite central to the life of the church. The church is about relationships and community where guests and hosts are already related and each has a role. Hosts invite. Guests respond by accepting the invitation, or not. Hosts prepare the table. Guests show up, share the meal, or not. Hosts welcome, for they are prepared, to receive and provide for their guests. Guests come to see, experience and connect, and to develop relationships, eventually becoming hosts themselves. If not, hopefully guests will still leave saying – we were treated well.

Biblical guests who were sent by God came in a variety of forms - friends, strangers, men, women, nonbinary, married, single, LGBTQ+ and all. I suggest that in the church we replace the word “visitor” with the word “guest” remembering that we, the members of the church, are the hosts.

I wonder - Do the guests who worship with us leave saying – “we were treated well?” I do hope so.

Rev. Nayiri Karjian
Transitional Conference Minister, Florida Conference UCC | July 24, 2025