

**Hospitality is Basic—and Specific!**

*by Eunice Benton, Executive Director for the Mid-South District*

In its 7<sup>th</sup> year and with about 40 adult members, a small congregation in the South realized it was stuck—its membership hadn't increased in 3 years. True, a few new folks joined each year, but the new folks only replaced those who had moved or left for other reasons.

“We need to do something!” exclaimed a relatively new member who had joined the Membership Committee and looked at the statistics. “Probably we need to be intentional about a lot of things to change our pattern—but couldn't we start with simple Southern hospitality? We should know how to do that!”

What Pat Miller did in Oxford, Mississippi, soon began to make a difference. She had a very specific way of translating “Southern hospitality” into guidelines for making her congregation friendly and welcoming.

Here are some of the guidelines Pat developed for welcoming newcomers:

- Welcome newcomers as you would welcome people into your home—your spiritual home.
- It helps to have 2 greeters each Sunday who are ready to answer questions about Unitarian Universalism, the congregation, and what it means to be a member. A good way to get new members involved is to pair them with a long-time member to greet people. Greet everyone, not just newcomers.
- When meeting guests, make some connection with them. Find out at least one thing about them that you can mention when they are introduced during the service. Ask them how they found out about the congregation.
- Avoid using words that would exclude newcomers such as “our” this and “our” that. Try not to use abbreviations like RE, UUA, etc. Your guest won't know what you are talking about.

- Invite them to sign the guest book, give them a newcomer's packet and make them a nametag. After someone has come twice, make them a permanent nametag. Ask if they would like to have their name put on the email list.
- If they have children with them, introduce them to the person in charge of Religious Education so the children will feel comfortable.
- Introduce newcomers to another member of the congregation and have that member introduce them to other members.
- If time permits before or after the service, give your guest a tour of the building. That will give you an opportunity to talk about programs that are going on in your congregation and give them an opportunity to ask questions.
- Before and after the service, make sure that the newcomer is never left standing alone.
- As they are leaving, walk them part of the way out and thank them for coming. Mention what will be going on at the service the next Sunday and tell them you hope to see them again.
- Follow up with a personal note during the next week and let them know anything that might be of interest to them that is going on at the congregation in the next couple of weeks.
- Keep a list of all newcomers, along with their emails and addresses.

Pointing out these guidelines, Oxford's congregation president, Gail Stratton, called on board members to be part of the welcoming effort, reminding them how it can feel to be in a whole new group for the first time and suggesting that welcoming newcomers should be a part of their leadership charge.

Three years after Pat Miller chose to be truly intentional about being welcoming to newcomers, her congregation had increased its membership by nearly fifty percent and the good energy in the congregation promises to keep it growing.

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