

Hospitality; Invitation; Incorporation – Attracting and Keeping New Members

By: *Uchenna Alexander*

E-mailed: March 24, 2008

Hello Archdeacon Hobbs,

It was very good to meet you last month. I was glad to learn about the Nehemiah Process while in Miami, and I'm glad to know that St. Luke's is taking part in such an intentional effort at parish growth & development.

Sorry for the delay in replying - I hadn't ever written this down before, and I ended up writing more than I thought I would, so it took a little while. I wrote down my thoughts when I reflect on my first days of church shopping in DC, but I'd be happy to answer any questions you or anyone else has.

Before I forget, my parish's website is <http://www.epiphanydc.org>. It's a different website now than the one I first saw when I joined... it was redesigned, and was much better, but now our current website needs to be upgraded again - something we're planning on doing this year.

Also, if you're familiar with Diana Butler Bass (the American religion writer), she wrote about Epiphany in her latest book Christianity for the Rest of Us. I haven't gotten around to reading it yet, although I bought a copy for a friend of mine when she was ordained last year - my copy is still sitting on my shelf. But if you see that book around, you might be interested in reading at least the Epiphany part.

Thanks again for all you do for the diocese! I'm thankful that there are folks who are making an effort to help great places like St. Luke the Physician grow!

Peace,
Uchenna

How I Found a Church Home

When I moved to Washington DC in the fall of 2005, one of the first things I knew I had to do was seek out a new church home. I was very involved in the Episcopal campus ministry at the University of Michigan (Canterbury House) and have always been part of a faith community through childhood, adolescence, college, and graduate school. Because I've been part of a number of communities, I had a pretty good idea of the traits that I was looking for.

These included diversity of age, cultural, and socioeconomic background both among the congregation and in the church leadership; a questioning and learning congregation, leadership

that was open to questioners and seekers; and a community that was really dedicated to social justice issues. Factors like music and liturgical style were important to me as well, but they were secondary to my key criteria.

When I was ready to go "church shopping," I went to the diocesan website (www.edow.org) and used their "church finder" engine, which was really useful. It let me check off the factors that were important to me, such as "Metro accessible" (I don't own a car), and "20s/30s activities," and told me which churches fit what I was looking for according to their own self reporting.

Then I checked out the websites of the churches that came out of that first search. You can tell a lot about a church by its website. If a church doesn't have a website, or has a website that hasn't been updated for several years, I pretty much assume that the parish is not interested in communicating with its members or with newcomers, and is very old-fashioned.

Websites that include information about the times of services, activities going on during the week, posted sermons and weekly bulletins, and information about the ordained and lay leadership of the parish are much more appealing to me, and suggest that the parishioners themselves may be more plugged into the day-to-day functioning of the parish, which is the kind of place I want to be.

After I got my list down to two or three parishes, I jumped on the train and went to visit. I also went to visit the Episcopal parish down the street from my apartment. The parish closest to my house was the easiest to get to (a 10 minute walk or 2 minute bus ride), but it didn't really "do" anything for me. **I always notice how friendly parishioners are to newcomers (especially when I am a newcomer) during the peace and the transition period between the service and happy hour. At this neighborhood parish, I didn't really "feel the love" – no invitation to coffee hour, or welcome, or anything. So I decided to keep shopping around.**

The next parish I visited was a parish in a residential community in Washington, DC, a couple stops away from me on the train. It was a very interesting parish, largely non-white, but rather homogenous. I went there two times, and happened to attend during one of their semi-annual new member intake weekends. **Still, apart from the one person assigned to greet and sign up newcomers, I didn't sense much welcome from other people there.** The parish didn't appear to have many younger adults, but they did have older people and some parents with young children – which is great, but since I was new in the area and looking to make friends, I figured I'd have better luck with young adults who didn't yet have children. And, most importantly, my experiences in campus ministry taught me that I thrive in a worship community with a diversity of interests and backgrounds, so I was looking for something a little more diverse.

The third parish I visited was in downtown Washington, DC. When I walked in, I immediately noticed that the people in the congregation weren't all dressed in the standard Sunday get-ups – many were dressed much more casually. There was also a clear mix of ethnicity, and from what I could see from people's clothes and appearance, socioeconomic status. In fact, it looked as though some of the people sitting in the back of the church were napping, and from the bags they had with them, it looked as though some of them were homeless.

The service was being led by a white, older male priest, and a black, younger female priest. This place was not like any church I'd been in before! When it came time for the peace, people left their pews and milled around, traveling many pews to greet people, much like my home parish in Miami. **Many people had permanent, clip on nametags (which is a big help in icebreaking!).** The altar party, including the clergy, spent a good deal of time greeting people. **Someone asked me if I was new to the place, and when I said yes, others nearby also made a point to say hello, and to invite me to coffee hour after the service.**

At coffee hour, a young woman around my age came over to say hi, told me a little about the parish, and introduced me to a few other people, including one of the rectors. I really felt a welcome there that I hadn't felt at the other parishes. I also learned, from reading the bulletin and from what people told me, that the parish, Church of the Epiphany, had an active ministry with the homeless men and women of the area, which included Sunday morning breakfast after the 8am service. 200 people came to breakfast every Sunday, and many came for the 8 am service and stayed for the 11 am service, appreciating the quiet and safe sanctuary. I liked my initial experience, but wanted to make two more visits to make sure.

When we returned the following Sunday, the rector, Randolph, came up to me during coffee hour. **He remembered seeing me last week, and wanted to introduce himself and find out more about me and what I was looking for.** When he discovered that I was shopping for a church home, he told me that he and **the assistant rector usually sit down for a meeting with new prospective members,** to tell them about Epiphany, to learn about the newcomer, and to discern together the newcomers calling to that particular community. I was **impressed by the intentionality of it all,** so I made an appointment for the following week with the assistant rector, since her schedule was more compatible with mine.

When we met midweek, the assistant rector, Anne Marie, gave me some literature about the parish, including **an inventory of the ministry teams** (committees) that were active in the parish, and the stewardship pledge form. We talked about my church experiences and what I was looking for in a faith community; about her background and experience at Epiphany, and about Epiphany and how I might see myself fitting in. I had already found out about the 20s/30s ministry, geared toward young adults. I found out about some other ministries that look interesting.

Anne Marie told me that one of the things they worked on at Epiphany was making sure that excited, involved parishioners didn't get burned out by getting involved in too many ministry groups. As a person who is still learning how to say 'no,' I greatly appreciated that! We also discussed the importance of stewardship of time, resources, and skills, and **Anne Marie gave me a stewardship form and asked me to intentionally pray and think about what I might be able to pledge as financial support to Epiphany.** Having just come from a stint on the student vestry at University of Michigan, I understood how important financial support from the membership is, and I appreciated the way in which she handled a potentially difficult topic (we all know how much Episcopalians like to talk about money!).

After that discussion, I decided that Epiphany was the place for me. I appreciated the intentionality and the realness of the warm welcome I received as a newcomer. I also really took

joy in the way Epiphany operates as a part of their environment -- in a corner of downtown DC that is an intersection of wealthy and poor, corporate and homeless, Epiphany really engages with all of those groups, providing pastoral care and refuge for homeless men and women and downtown working men and women throughout the week. **I feel, and I think a lot of my peers feel, that 'church' cannot exist as separate from the world.** For me, real social justice and church should go hand-in-hand, so I was happy to find a place that fit into that idea of church.

Now, I'm the financial stewardship ministry team leader, and one of the newest members of the vestry. I've also just joined the healing ministry (we offer prayer and laying on of hands every Sunday during Eucharist, and have a team of pray-ers who participate in that ministry - I'm very excited to join this group!). Epiphany has continued to impress me by seeking to include all people who are interested in ministries where they can grow and where their skills and interests can be put to good use for the whole community -- that is an important part of keeping people engaged in one's parish, which is as important as bringing new people into the parish.