

Dear Class Member,

A recent article about a church in Maine formed as a ministry to bikers who didn't feel welcome in other churches gives us an opportunity to consider the role hospitality -- which is a virtue urged in scripture -- should play in our churches today. So that will be the topic of our next class.

If you wish to start thinking about our topic in advance, below is some introductory material.



Lack of Welcome Elsewhere Leads Bikers to Start Their Own Church

The Wired Word for the Week of March 15, 2020

In the News

How many new congregations, do you suppose, started because some people didn't feel welcome in a church they visited?

There are no numbers we can consult to answer that question, and probably it is unanswerable in any kind of precise way, but a recent NPR article tells of a church in Maine that was born because some Christians who were also bikers (motorcycle riders, not bicyclists) didn't feel especially welcome in some "regular" churches.

"Some churches I went in, and a lot of the people were kind of standoff-ish and stuff," says biker Rick Day. "Because bikers get a bad reputation and stuff, even though they know we've given our lives to the Lord."

But then Day heard about a "biker church" that consisted of a small group meeting in a hotel in Brewer, Maine. He visited a service, Bible in hand.

"I walked in. Everybody was greeting," Day says. "And it was like, 'Yeah. This feels like home.'"

That church has since grown from a small Bible study to full church, meeting in Bangor, Maine. It's called Biker Church USA.

The church's founding pastor, Chris Marley, says that while the church began as a way to reach bikers, the mission has now become broader, with a focus on teaching the Bible and offering services to those in need.

Marley acknowledges that movies that depict bikers pillaging towns have made people who are not familiar with actual biker culture uneasy when bikers walk into church. But Marley says that's not an accurate picture of all bikers. "It's not at all what it's about," Marley says.

Will Dulaney, a professor who has researched motorcycle clubs, says while some bikers can be xenophobic or racist, he's known many to be generous and not violent, despite how they are often portrayed in movies.

Marley also now leads a national organization called the Biker Bible Institute. The group has worked to create a loose connection between hundreds of biker-friendly churches around the country. (In fact, if you Google "biker church," websites for many such congregations come up; you may well find one in your area.)

The original mission-vision behind the institute, Marley says, "was to have 10,000 bikers in the Bible every week. And God said, 'Well, that's great. We can do that.' But we've far exceeded any of those numbers. I can't even tell you what they are today. But we are in New Zealand now. We're in Africa. We're in Canada. We're all over."

Good churches, regardless of the makeup of their parishioners, tend to have some practices in common: teaching the Bible and helping those in need. Biker Church USA is no exception.

Last winter, homeless residents were forced to stay in a police station lobby due to a lack of shelter beds. This winter, the church started an overnight warming center. The building is open nearly every day, offering clothes and classes.

What's more, some of the church's attenders aren't even bikers. Justin Norton discovered the church while living on the street. He says due to mental disabilities, he often feels like an outsider in the city, but not at the church.

Roxanne Lent also isn't a biker, but she first came by to volunteer and fold clothes at the church's clothing program. Now, she visits six days per week and even teaches Sunday school.

"Everybody gets up after church. It's a hug, it's a slap on the back. In the warm weather, they get on their bikes and leave. In the cold weather, they get in their trucks and we all go home. It's just more laid back, she says, referring to the informal dress, including for some worshipers, boots and leather jackets.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Bikers Get a Bad Rep, So They Started a Church Where They Feel Welcome. *NPR*
(<https://www.npr.org/2020/02/29/809973074/bikers-get-a-bad-rep-so-they-started-a-church-where-they-feel-welcome%0d>)

Top Ten Ways Churches Drive Away First-Time Guests. *Thom S. Rainer* (<https://thomrainer.com/2014/11/top-ten-ways-churches-drive-away-first-time-guests/>)

Churches I'd Visit Again -- 5 Things to Make Visitors Feel Welcome! *Master's Image Productions*
(<https://www.mastersimage.com/churches-id-visit-again/>)

The Big Questions

Here are some of the questions we will discuss in class:

1. Is it reasonable to expect church members to welcome people who are significantly different from themselves to their church? Why or why not?
2. Why do you suppose hospitality among followers of Jesus was important in the early days of the church? Compare and contrast those reasons with your own congregation.
3. Is true church hospitality a matter of carefully thought-out plans for making newcomers feel welcome, or is it, at root, a spiritual quality? If the latter, how should that be expressed?
4. It is a good thing that there are congregations where people of similar interests and similar ways of life can feel welcome, or is it a judgment on "regular" congregations that such persons don't feel welcome there? Or do each have their place and purpose? Explain your answer.
5. How should we balance the biblical call for hospitality to strangers with the desire for security in our places of worship?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

We will look at selected verses from these Scripture texts. You may wish to read these in advance for background:

Hebrews 13:1-6 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+13%3A1-6&version=NRSV>)

Matthew 25:41-46 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A41-46&version=NRSV>)

1 Corinthians 16:13-21 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+16%3A13-21&version=NRSV>)

1 Peter 4:7-11 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Peter+4%3A7-11&version=NRSV>)

In class, we will talk about these passages and look for some insight into the big questions, as well as talk about other questions you may have about this topic. Please join us.

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