

3. A man wearing tattered clothing and carrying what may well be all his worldly belongings in a bag, appears in church during a Sunday morning worship service. Following the service, you engage the man in conversation and invite him to coffee hour. No one else present engages him in conversation. As a deacon how and with whom will you address this apparent exclusion on the part of the members of the congregation?

My own experience welcoming strangers began in the '70s, with my response to how I was welcomed. When my husband and I were parents of a young family and church shopping, I learned several things not to do. We visited several churches with varying welcome. The one that stands out most clearly in my mind had a line in the bulletin that asked visitors to identify themselves by wearing little cross pin that was in the pew rack. So we did; yet the only person who spoke to us was someone I already knew. (The real kicker was, several days later, an older layman came to visit us. He said he hoped we might join them because they wanted to add on to the church.) There were other congregations we visited where no one introduced themselves or welcomed us. Each was a memorable little sting that has stuck with me all these years and continues to prod me to be sure strangers are welcomed, not just by the clergy, but the laity.

Twenty some years, later, when I came to St. Andrew's, there were some folks who were already good at welcoming. In fact, I may have been a little rude the first time I visited. I had wrestled hard with the decision to leave St. Luke's and look for another church. As I sat in St. Andrew's, I tearfully felt like I had run away from home, and I *did not* want to talk to anyone. I had to move fast to escape those welcomers.

Since then, I think the number of of St. Andrew's people who are good at noticing newcomers in the worship service, welcoming and inviting them to coffee, and engaging them in conversation, has grown. We also have gift bags that include an edible treat, at the ready.

The emphasis we put on being an “open door” church may be partly responsible for that. We seemed to understand instinctively that, “If you invite them, you have to include them in any and all parts of church life.” I'm pretty sure I'm not the only person who was taken by surprise when a sturdy-bodied woman in an obvious wig explained that we had met before—when she was Bill. Most of us quickly moved to learning more about her and supporting her in her transition.

The point is we as a congregation are pretty well prepared to encounter and deal with “nice, clean” people, but both the congregation and I need better preparation for the less fortunate. Lots of us are nervous or even afraid to approach someone who appears homeless, like the man in the question. I've squared my shoulders and done it a few times. Each time it got easier. And yes, that is work for a Deacon.

A situation like the one in the question occasionally happens with “nice, clean” visitors, so I would try solutions that work in those cases. In such cases, I simply take them to a half-filled table or break into a conversation of folks standing around and ask, “Have you met.....?” I can often use clues about a visitor from preliminary conversation. For example, when I learned a new couple was from Maine, I introduced them to another pair that I knew had grown up there. I wonder if it would work to try such techniques with this visitor.

This might also be a case where the best defense is a good offense, to use a sports metaphor. So ideally I would find opportunities to teach the congregation before such a situation arises. I'd challenge the congregation to think about how to handle such a situation, perhaps as an adult ed topic, or even in a sermon, but I like a conversation setting better. I think it would be helpful to use the following personal story:

In the summer of 2019, I learned just how emotionally difficult it is to approach someone who appears homeless. I encountered a couple not unlike the man in this question. Ironically, we were