

RECHARGE 24

CHURCH A PLACE TO BELONG



6 STUDIES ON CHURCH WELCOMING & BELONGING

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READ Hebrews 12:18–24

- 4.** The author of Hebrews contrasts the old covenant assembly at Mt Sinai with the new covenant assembly. What are some of the contrasts?
- Do you struggle to see yourself in this grand heavenly church? Why/why not?
 - What implications do you think this vision has for our physical gatherings as a church now?

The wonderful progression from old to new covenant means that when we come together as a church – indeed, *whenever* God’s people gather in Jesus’ name – God is present among them by his Spirit (Matthew 18:20; 1 Cor 3:16).

READ Colossians 3:12–17

- 5.** How should who we are (‘God’s chosen ones, holy and loved’, v.12) affect our *attitudes* as church members?
- 6.** Consider the activities mentioned in v.16. What happens (and ought to happen) when we gather as a church?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

- 7.** Given the significance of what church is (an earthly 'outpost' of the heavenly assembly of which we're already a part), what place should 'church' have in our lives? How might this affect practical things like attendance and participation?
- 8.** Consider the exhortations of Colossians 3:12–17. What might it look like to live them out in relation to:
- The long-standing church member/close friend?
 - The fringe church member/not-close church acquaintance?
 - The church newcomer/spiritual seeker?

STUDY 2 THE WELCOMING GOD: A BIBLICAL BASIS

1. Can you share a time when you were graciously and generously welcomed into someone's home? What was the occasion and how did it make you feel?

READ Romans 5:6–11

2. How do these verses describe the spiritual state of those for whom Christ died?
3. What does this tell us about Christ's love for us? On what is it based?

The relational dimensions of God's grace are seen in much of Jesus' teaching and parables. There is the emphasis on inviting the 'poor and crippled' to a great banquet that speaks to God's loving grace towards the lowly. And perhaps most memorably: his parable about the lost son.

READ Luke 15:11–24

4. Consider the younger son's actions in vv.12 and 13. What do they reveal about his posture towards his father?

5. Consider the son's return. What is his expectation? What happens instead (note the narrative details Jesus includes)?

6. What does this show us about the character of the father?

In Matthew 11:28 Jesus extends God's gracious invitation to us, sinners burdened with guilt and shame, in some of the most tender, welcoming words found in the Bible: *Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.* This is a 'standing invitation'.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

7. What 'principles of welcome' do we get from these passages? To what extent should they inform our approach to welcoming others?

8. Off the back of these principles, try coming up with a short definition of Christian hospitality/welcome (2–3 lines max).

9. What might it look like to apply these principles practically in the way our church welcomes others (formally and informally)?

STUDY 3 THE WELCOMING CHURCH: 'ONE ANOTHERING'

1. What is one thing that someone has (recently) done for you that you truly appreciated?

READ John 13:31–35

The context for this teaching is Jesus' meal with his disciples the night before his crucifixion. He is preparing them for that dreadful moment, but also for life after his glorious resurrection and ascension. Just before this Jesus has washed his disciples' feet, and here he continues to unpack the meaning and significance of that act.

2. Consider the 'new commandment' Jesus gives his disciples (vv.34–35). In what sense is it 'new'?
3. What is its connection with Jesus' 'going away'?
4. What is its *goal*?
 - How might this 'new commandment' connect with being a welcoming church community (consider especially the outsider/newcomer)?

This 'love one another' commandment is followed up in various parts of the New Testament letters. One such letter is 1 John. The echo of Jesus' commandment here is especially clear (which is unsurprising given it was written by the same author as the Gospel of John – an author who was also a disciple and close friend of Jesus himself!).

READ 1 John 3:16–24

5. What does John say is the definition of love (how do we know 'what love is'), and what is its direct implication for us?

6. What does it look like to 'lay down our lives' for one another? Does it mean literally *dying*? Why/why not?
 - What do you find *powerful* and *comforting* about this commandment?

 - What's the biggest *challenge* of this commandment for you?

There are *many more* direct references in the New Testament to how we should treat 'one another' (well over 30), and in each one we are reminded that love for one another is not abstract or just a 'feeling', e.g. 'Through love, serve one another' (Gal 5:13), '*Tolerate one another in love*' (Eph 4:2), and '*Be devoted to one another in love*' (Rom 12:10).

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

- 7.** Try and think of a time at church/in community when you experienced/witnessed 'one another' love in action. If you feel comfortable doing so, share what happened and the difference it made to you.
- 8.** Think *concretely*: what might 'one another' love look like:
- On a Sunday?
 - In a discipleship group?
 - At youth group/kids' club/D-Teams?
 - Within the church community at large (i.e. outside of formal gatherings and groups)?

STUDY 4 THE WELCOMING CHURCH: SUNDAYS

1. In his book *How To Walk Into Church*, Tony Payne makes the point that the way you walk into church (i.e. the mindset you bring with you) will be determined by *what you think church is*, and *what you think you're doing there*.

What are some different understandings and expectations that people may have about what church is and what they'll be doing there (consider Christians and non-Christians; regulars and visitors)?

READ Ephesians 2:17–22

2. What message did the Messiah (Jesus) proclaim, and to whom did he proclaim it?
3. For the non-Jew Ephesians, what is the result of this new peace?
4. What is the significance of using the 'temple' (vv.21–22) as an illustration of this new reality?

- 5.** How might this reality of 'oneness' (*members of God's household; being built together for God's dwelling*) make a difference to how we approach the Sunday service (and what we will do in and around it)?
- 6.** How might this reality of 'oneness' make a difference to our engagement with visitors and newcomers on a Sunday? Consider:
- What we do or don't prioritise in our welcoming systems?
 - What we do or don't do *before, during* and *after* the formal service time?

In Ephesians 4:1–16 Paul returns to the metaphor of a structure that grows and is built up. In chapter 2 it was a building; here it is a *body* – an entity that is *inherently diverse yet intrinsically unified*. It's also an entity that is *organic* (i.e. it's 'living' and it 'grows') and the way it grows and is built up (and thus, how the people who make up the church grow and are built up spiritually) is 'in love' (Eph 4:15–16).

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

- 7.** Consider your experience of Minchinbury Anglican. To what extent have you found this household/temple/body reality expressed in our Sunday gatherings? In what ways have you found it not expressed?

- 8.** One key part of the church 'building itself up in love' is actually gathering together (i.e. *at church, typically on a Sunday*). What practical implications might this have for:
- Our *attendance* at church?
 - What we do *before* we come to church and what we plan to do *after* it?
 - Our *arrival time* at church and *departure time* from church?
 - The *seating* at church (how it's arranged and where we choose to sit ourselves)?

STUDY 5 INTEGRATION & BELONGING: RELATIONSHIPS

1. Think of the close relationships in your life. How did they develop? What factors make them meaningful and significant?

READ Acts 2:42–47

2. This summary at the end of Acts 2 paints a picture of the first church community – a community of believers brought into existence and shaped by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

To what four things are we told the first believers/church 'devoted themselves'?

3. Consider vv.44–47. What are some of the other spiritual and practical results of the outpouring of the Spirit?

- What do you find *attractive* about this picture of church community, and what do you find *challenging* about it?

The New Testament consistently depicts and promotes church as a community of genuine, ever-deepening relationships (think of our previous study: the 'household' image in Ephesians 2:19 and the 'body' growing together in love in Ephesians 4:16, to cite just two). And so, part of being a welcoming church is *intentionally building relationships* – both informally and formally.

READ 1 Thessalonians 2:8

4. The context for Paul's words here is a defence of his apostolic ministry as one of honesty and gentleness. As he defends himself, he refers to his time in the Thessalonian church community.

What do you think it meant for Paul to 'share not only the gospel but [his] life' with the Thessalonians? What things might this have involved?

- To what extent should we be seeking to 'share not only the gospel but our lives' with one another? What might this look like practically?

READ Romans 12:9–13

5. Consider the exhortations to 'sincere love' in these verses (see esp. vv.10 and 13). What are they, and how do they help us understand the place and nature of intentional relationships within the church?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

6. Think of the *informal* ways that as individuals and as a wider church community we can pursue deeper relationships with Newcomers, Fringe/less-regular members, and Long-standing members? Does it look different with these different 'types' of people? Why/why not?

7. What are some of the *formal* ways that we as a church can help people to belong through relationships?

8. Thinking specifically about discipleship groups:
 - What are some concrete ways that discipleship groups can help us 'share our lives' with one another?

 - What are the relational *pros* of being with the same people for a significant time, and what are the *cons*?

STUDY 6 INTEGRATION & BELONGING: ROLES

1. It is sometimes said that in church 80% of the ministry is done by 20% of the people. What do you think of this statement? Does it ring true in your experience? What are some of the potential downsides of this?

READ 1 Corinthians 12:4–13

2. What does Paul say are 'different' and what is the 'same' (vv.4–6)?
3. To whom is a 'demonstration/manifestation of the Spirit' given? What does this tell us?
 - How would you help those who think they don't have any spiritual gifts?

READ 1 Corinthians 12:14–31

4. Why is the 'body' an evocative and effective metaphor for the church community?

5. Consider the gifts listed in this chapter (vv.8–10 and vv.28–30). Do you think these are exhaustive lists? Why/why not?

6. How specifically is the body metaphor used to explain *belonging*?

7. What does Paul say about 'weaker' and 'less honourable' parts of the body? How does this help us view different spiritual gifts?

When it comes to spiritual gifts these 3 important factors are worth remembering:

- (1) The Bible places more emphasis on *using* our gifts than *searching* for them – so look to serve *wherever you see a need!*
- (2) Our gifting is not simply a reflection of our personalities or preferences.
- (3) Every Christian *has* spiritual gifts to give because every Christian *is* a spiritual gift.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

8. Have you had an opportunity to exercise gifts at church?

- If so, what are they? How have they contributed to your sense of belonging?

- If not, what may be stopping you?

9. What are some *formal* ways people can exercise gifts in the church?

10. What are some *informal* ways people can exercise gifts in the church?
(List as many as you can think of!)

BELONG