

# A WELCOME MAT MINISTRY

## A PRACTICAL WAY TO REACH OUT

by Carol G. Stratton

**H**eather sat cross-legged among the sea of boxes. She knew she'd better start unpacking, but where to begin? *Oh, to have a cup of coffee would be heaven*, she thought, *if I could just find the coffeemaker*. She decided to take the kids to Starbucks, if only to see a friendly face. After ripping open five boxes, she found the girls' winter coats.

Heather strapped her two young daughters into their car seats, climbed behind the steering wheel of her SUV, and cranked up the engine. Through the windshield, she saw the road covered in white. Heather had driven in snow only once, and the knot in her stomach reminded her that she was a long way from home and didn't know what she was doing. She grasped the wheel tightly and choked back the sobs.

Imagine how differently this scene would play out if the local church had reached out to Heather to ease her tran-

sition. Unfortunately, this young mother is one of 40 million Americans who move every year, according to a 2001 census.<sup>1</sup> We are a mobile society, relocating an average of twice a decade. Whether moving is due to a job change, divorce, or retirement, it's never easy. Loneliness and isolation surround the newcomer. Those who have recently relocated find themselves separated from family, friends, and comfortable routines. Their vulnerability opens them up to companionship and, even more important, the gospel.

But churches frequently get caught up in the busyness of Sunday morning as members scurry by to connect with friends or attend a Community Outreach committee meeting. It's easy to overlook new faces in the congregation, particularly if they smile appropriately and appear to be at ease. Yet with moving listed on the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory, it's not surprising that most newcomers feel

a poverty of spirit as they try to connect with people in our modern society. The church that understands this need and purposely seeks out the uprooted can be God's ambassadors in their community.

The first step in starting a welcome-mat ministry is to identify the newcomers in your community. Try contacting one of the building contractors or realtors in your congregation for names. The Welcome Wagon organization might also provide a list. If they aren't willing to release the names, they might consider handing out a flyer from your fellowship.

If your church isn't able to contact new arrivals directly, look for ways to advertise your programs through community bulletin boards. Local cable television channels are terrific ways to get your message out. Of course, the best way to reach people is neighbor to neighbor.

A greeting ministry is crucial to first-time visitors. Your church may have a multitude of programs, but if the newly relocated feel it's too hard to break in, they won't come back. Don't just stop with a hearty "hello." As greeters help families find their way around church, they can ask questions to get to know these first- or second-time visitors.

Another helpful way to minister is by arranging for one or more families to host an after-church brunch for newcomers. One of our best memories when we moved to Ohio with three tiny kids was the older couple who invited our whole brood over for dinner. Not only did they open their home to strangers—a very biblical concept—but the wife also baked the best spoonbread I've ever eaten. I will always be thankful for that couple. With such warm hospitality, we had no problem deciding which fellowship to attend.

Consider having some community welcoming meetings at your church. Someone could set up a time when the mayor, school superintendent, or local librarian might speak. How about having the local parks and recreation director talk about upcoming festivals and events? A brochure that explains all about state DMV regulations, voter registration, garbage pickup, and important government phone numbers could be part of a take-home packet. Even with a lot of information online, the personal touch goes a long way.

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**BE AWARE** of “insider information” when you have someone new join a group of church members. You might be praying for Ted who has cancer, but to talk about it for ten minutes without explanation makes “Nate Newcomer” feel out of the loop. Try to bring your new friend into the conversation.

**PROVIDE** detailed directions if you invite a new person to a get-together—he doesn’t know where the Tylers live. Better yet, offer to drive, if possible.

**TAKE TIME** to hear a visitor’s story. One of the most painful things about moving is that no one knows your identity. Learn the children’s names and the parents’ jobs. For empty-nesters, find out about their grown children and grandchildren.

**INVITE, INVITE, INVITE!** Newcomers may feel overwhelmed with the physical side of moving, but they appreciate an invitation, even if they can’t always accept.

To target the newly relocated, your church could try pairing a new family with someone who has the gift of hospitality. Others could reach out with invitations for coffee, bowling, or book discussion clubs. The important part of this ministry is to provide not programs but friendship. If a new family senses that someone is trying to “sell” his or her church, they may back away. Those who minister must be friends first, whether or not the newcomers ever set foot in their house of worship again. The goal is to be a servant by becoming a friend and nurturing the new family—not to fill up chairs on Sunday morning.

Still not convinced that your church should start a newcomers’ ministry? Here’s something to think about: Imagine waking up one morning without your extended family around. What if your high school friends had disappeared, as well as your small-group fellowship? What if you had to spend the day getting lost in a new town as you filled out job applications? Then, after searching for employment, you stop for groceries, but the cashier won’t accept your check, and you have no debit card. You’d call your spouse for the credit card if you could remember the work phone number. Do you think you might be ready for a few friendly faces who could help you navigate your new town? I can assure you any church that rolls out the welcome mat will have newcomers eager to hear the gospel message.

The Word of God abounds with illustrations of hospitality: Abraham washed his visitors’ feet and immediately arranged for a meal (Gen. 18:1-8); Abigail embodied the proper way to welcome guests, just as her foolish husband was the illustration of what *not* to do (1 Sam. 25); and as soon as Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law, she got up to prepare food for Him (Matt. 8:14-15). We should follow these examples with the hospitable mindset to serve those new to our community. Although a purposeful ministry to the recently uprooted can begin with one person, an entire church standing on the doormat can have powerful results welcoming many into congregations. 🍷

<sup>1</sup> “U.S. Movers Are Southbound, Census Bureau Says,” *CNN.com*, May 31, 2001.