



## Top Tips for Busy Parishes

A collection of simple monthly strategies  
to build friendly, family-sensitive, welcoming parish communities

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Marriage & Family Life Project Office  
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales  
[www.celebratingfamily.org.uk](http://www.celebratingfamily.org.uk)

## January - 'Name Badge Sunday'

*'I have called you by your name... you are mine.' Isaiah 43:1*



It's very unusual for family members not to know one another's names. But how many of us can name all those who worship with us in God's family each Sunday? It's even more of a challenge if people are new to a parish or are not regulars at a particular church. Name badges are an accepted feature of meetings where participants are not assumed to know one another. So as our top tip for January we suggest that parishes choose one (or more) Sunday when everyone attending Mass will be invited to wear a name badge. Parishioners can decide themselves how they wish to be known (perhaps only Christian names or the more formal Mr, Miss, Ms or Mrs Smith, Jones etc).

Prepare in advance by inviting people to make their own badge. Or do it on the hoof having plenty of pens and sticky labels at the ready. (Even if people are asked to make their own in advance a supply of labels for newcomers and those who forget will be necessary.) For children and vulnerable adults to take part in Name Badge Sunday parents or carers must give permission. It is not safe to use surnames on name labels of those who might be at risk.

*Vary the badge theme by inviting guests to add one small (and brief) point of interest about themselves - this could be anything - the number of weeks or years they have been in the parish, their occupation, their hobby, their birthplace - anything that is important to them that their fellow family of God members may not already know about them.*

Make the most of calling each other by name during the Sign of Peace and during coffee time after Mass.

**Scripture References:** Isaiah 43:1 / Isaiah 45:4 / Genesis 32: 26-29

## February - Welcoming the Vocation of Marriage



*‘Let marriage be held in honour by all...’ Hebrews 13.4*

Marriage Week UK takes place each year around 14th February so this month we suggest that parishes consider being especially marriage-friendly. But what does it mean in practical terms to show welcome and appreciation for the vocation of marriage? Here are a few suggestions:

- Organise a parish social for married couples, possibly a romantic candlelit dinner, with a (brief) encouraging talk on marriage to thank them for their commitment
- Arrange a display of wedding photos of parish couples
- Send a card to couples married in the church in the last three years
- Take a collection for a marriage related charity like Marriage Care or Explore and publicise their work
- Offer a Marriage Course programme from Holy Trinity Brompton or Couple Alive course from Family Caring Trust
- Hold a marriage themed film night to get people talking about marriage
- Start the Movement of Continuous Prayer for Marriage in the parish

Find further resources online at [www.catholicmarriage.org.uk](http://www.catholicmarriage.org.uk)

## March - Speak to Someone You Don't Know



*'Let your speech always be gracious...' Colossians 4:6*

This month's top tip for becoming a friendlier parish is to invite everyone at Mass on Sunday to speak afterwards to someone they don't know or haven't spoken to before. It can be difficult to approach a stranger but also rewarding as Mary found when she tried this out. "I thought I'd talk to a lady who always comes to church alone. Afterwards she thanked me and said no-one had ever approached her like that before at Mass. I felt very humble. I really did very little but it obviously meant a lot to her."

People today make judgements based very much on how they feel. A sense of welcome is therefore high on people's register. Many people report that they are looking for community, belonging, friendship, caring and support. So what stops us offering this? The Ministry of Welcome Training Pack (see [www.everybodyswelcome.org.uk](http://www.everybodyswelcome.org.uk)) looks at how to approach someone for the first time. It offers two important suggestions:

1. It is important to remember to introduce yourself by name. Once you have said, 'Hello...' it is vital to say, 'My name is...'. Giving your name this way is like offering a gift – your personal identity!
2. One way of beginning a conversation is to ask a question. Remember that it is far better to use open questions. An open question is one that requires a full answer: "What did you think of the sermon today?" A closed question can be answered by a simple "yes" or "no". Open questions start with words like: How? What? Why? Who? When? Where? But only ask if you have time to listen to the answer. Your time is another gift you can give along with your name.

**Scripture References for March:** Matthew 5:46-48 / 3 John 5-6

## April - Introduce the Welcome Team



*'Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.' Romans 15:7*

This month introduce your welcome team to the rest of the parish. There are a number of ways you can do this:

- during Mass, formally during a rite of commissioning, or informally, perhaps before the final blessing;
- in the parish bulletin
- on the parish website
- on the parish notice board
- as part of a parish handbook
- within a parish social event

However you choose to introduce those who are responsible for welcoming new and established parishioners, certain things are important: a face, a name, a contact point. Remember to ask for more volunteers and to offer parish support to those carrying out this vital ministry.

**Scripture References for April:** Romans 12: 13 / Acts 28: 30-31

## May - International Family Fun

International Christian School of Vienna  
Parent Teacher Fellowship



*'...all the members of the body, though many, are one body...' 1 Cor.12:12*

The UN International Day of Families falls on May 15<sup>th</sup> each year. So this month's top tip is to organise some family fun with an international flavour, perhaps through a parish social with an international theme? Invite parish families of various nationalities to bring and share a favourite dish from their country of origin. Incorporate other traditions if you can into the evening – costume, language, dance, stories, song etc. – but don't overlook the needs that might exist in these countries. Enjoy the richness of the diversity of your community. Celebrate the world within your neighbourhood. Reach out in solidarity with those in need.

Check out the campaigns that CAFOD is currently engaged in and other resources available on their website.

**Scripture References for May:** Revelation 15:4 / Psalm 117 / Psalm 100

## June - Visitors Especially Welcome



*'...some have entertained angels without knowing it.'*  
**Hebrews 13:2**

Welcoming visitors at the door of the church can make a deep impression, so this month we are inviting parishes to look closely at how they do this. In a parish in North Wales a team of welcomers greets everyone before Mass begins, finding out who the visitors are and where they are from. This information is then passed to the celebrant, as this story illustrates:

“My only reason for going to Mass was to accompany a friend who had come to stay for the weekend. The experience was amazing: from the greeting at the door and the Canon's welcome to visitors from a variety of places (which he named), I felt an extraordinary welcome and throughout Mass there was a feeling of being in a family and surrounded by love strong enough to make me feel greatly moved and tearful. I went back alone the next week and the next and the next and every time I felt the same emotions. Shortly afterwards I joined the RCIA group. I feel that the church is my other family.”

Visitors are especially common in parishes at Christmas and Easter and when baptisms, funerals and marriages are celebrated. A good welcome at these times can also make a lasting impression.

“I felt really awkward going to Midnight Mass at Christmas with my partner's family, because I am not a Catholic. The first thing the priest did was to welcome all the visitors, especially those who are not Catholics. It made such a difference.”

“I was so moved by how the priest welcomed us at the funeral and explained what was happening so simply. It really helped.”

**Scripture References for June:** Matthew 7:12 / Proverbs 25:11 / Hebrews 13:1-2

## July - A Car Park Welcome



*'...I am sending my messenger ahead....' Matthew 11:10*

Have you ever driven up to a new church and wondered where / how to park and whether there will be room for your car? Imagine visiting a congregation who are so pleased to see people that they have a team of welcomers in the car park, making sure that everyone knows where to go, that there is space for everyone to park safely, directions to alternative spaces and that children, the disabled and elderly parishioners are especially well cared for. Why is this important? Well these true stories are worth thinking about:

- Marianna went to a wedding in a large city parish. Afterwards she returned to where she had left her car, in a large and spacious car park, only to find a parking ticket. The church had an arrangement with the local council and Marianne should have paid and displayed. But there was no-one or nothing to tell her this.
- At Ken's church the car park is nowhere near big enough for everyone's cars so the parish also have an arrangement with the local council - to use their car park on Sundays. But newcomers wouldn't know this and would end up driving around needlessly.

This month think about the car park welcome that is available in your parish. Think about the notices there and the invisible signs that newcomers and the rest of the community might pick up. If you don't have spaces marked out in your car park think about painting them in. If you are concerned about church parking or traffic issues contact your local Road Safety Officers or Police Traffic Management team.

**Scripture References for July:** Matthew 11:10



## August - House Mass Month



***'Greet also the church in their house...' Romans 16:5***

Early Christians gathered in family homes for the breaking of bread and for fellowship (Acts 2: 46-47). So this month we invite parishes to imitate the early church and locate all weekday Masses in people's homes rather than in the parish church building. This will require some forethought:

- Draw up a rota of volunteers willing to host Mass on each weekday - aim to use a different home each day in different areas of the parish.
- Help hosts to work out how to accommodate all those who might wish to attend - the good weather should enable back gardens to be used. Lack of space should not be a deterrent.
- Limit refreshments afterwards to drinks and biscuits so that no-one is burdened by hospitality.
- Use the parish records to send invitations to all parishioners living nearby but also make sure no-one feels excluded simply because they aren't on the doorstep.
- Arrange transport for anyone who needs it.

House Masses might involve a lot of logistical planning but bringing the Eucharist into family homes can be a positive stimulus to deepening relationships in the parish community.

**Scripture References for August:** Luke 14:13-14 / Mark 2: 1-2 / 1 Cor 16:19 / Col 4:15 / Phm 1:2

## September - Offer a Home Visit



*‘The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead...’ Luke 10:1*

The days of home visiting seemed to have passed. Priests, like families, are often too stretched now to do more than visit those most urgently in need. In many places parishioners have realised their shared responsibility for this simple yet effective means of building up the parish community. So this month's top tip is an invitation to parishes to offer a home visit to every member of the worshipping community.

Sheila Keefe, from Portsmouth Diocese, was a member of a parish who did just that. She has written a guide to reaching out from the parish that includes advice on offering home visits called *Keeping in Touch*. You can download a copy at [www.kit4catholics.org.uk](http://www.kit4catholics.org.uk).

Establishing this ministry will require training and support for volunteers, including safeguarding clearance, so contact your safeguarding coordinator for advice if necessary.

**Scripture References for September:** Matthew 10: 11-13 / Luke 10: 1 / Matthew 10: 40-42

## October - Becoming a Parent-Friendly Parish



Parents Week takes place this month so our top tip for October invites parishes to consider how parent-friendly they are. Sarah Johnson, author of *Daring to be Different: Being a Faith Family in a Secular World* has devised a set of questions to help:

- How easy is it for a parent with young children to feel at home and perhaps become involved in your parish?
  - Are there activities for all age groups and for parents of all age groups?
  - Is support for parents included in programmes for Holy Communion and Confirmation?
- Is there access to a parentcraft course such as that offered by the Family Caring Trust?
  - When organising parish events is sufficient account taken of the logistics for families with several children over a wide age range?
  - How often does the parish review the support available to parents in their parish? See the Family-Friendly Parish Toolkit for a questionnaire that you can use or adapt
  - Does the timing of activities take into account the constraints on parents' lives placed by school term dates and holidays?
  - A well organised children's liturgy group (with regular training and support from the parish, deanery or diocese) can be crucial to making parents feel welcome. The Bishops' Conference Liturgy Office offer guidelines on children's liturgy of the Word.

### The importance of parents

"The joyful love with which our parents welcomed us and accompanied our first steps in this world is like a sacramental sign and prolongation of the benevolent love of God from which we have come. The experience of being welcomed and loved by God and by our parents is always the firm foundation for authentic human growth and authentic development, helping us to mature on the way towards truth and love, and to move beyond ourselves in order to enter into communion with others and with God."

*Pope Benedict XVI. Sermon at the Fifth World Meeting of Families, Valencia 2006*

## November - Offer a Bereavement Service



***“Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted.” Matthew 5:4***

Most of us are only too sharply aware of the loneliness that can arise following bereavement. But the parish family can create many social and liturgical opportunities to support the bereaved and minimise their isolation, particularly after the initial shock has subsided a little. Your parish might consider identifying, gathering and training teams of volunteers to visit, listen to and befriend the bereaved. In one

parish: “Our bereavement ministry group takes on the responsibility of making contact with the families in our parish who have experienced a loss. The group meets together on a regular basis to deepen their knowledge of loss issues through training and to share experiences of this important ministry. Most importantly we pray together for those who have died and those who have been left behind.”

Planning the funeral is an opportunity to minister to parishioners, who might not always be in close touch with their parish community. The funeral service might offer opportunity to comfort and encourage those for whom attending church is not a familiar activity as well as for parishioners. After the funeral, visits and invitations to those bereaved might help ease some of the loneliness and isolation.

The Pastoral Care Project in Birmingham offers a booklet to help with funeral planning – see [www.pastoralcareproject.org.uk](http://www.pastoralcareproject.org.uk) For advice on supporting the bereaved see *What is Life Like if You or Someone in Your Family is Bereaved or has Suffered a Loss*

## December - Everybody's Welcome at Christmas



Advent is a season of waiting, of preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus our Saviour.

Christmas is typically a holiday when parishes welcome many visitors. So our top tip this month is that parishes focus during Advent on preparing to receive their Christmas visitors. How much more can they be made to feel welcome this year? Here are some ideas and links to more resources.

- **Are your website and answerphone information up to date?** Check now that your parish website and/or your answerphone message provide the times of all Christmas services. If you have a small church and you know it's likely to be full, incorporate advice into the Mass-time information. Do people need to be there ten minutes or half an hour beforehand to be sure of a seat? Regulars may know this but strangers probably won't. You need to be publishing Christmas Mass times early in December.
- **Are you ready to accommodate those with special needs?** Plan how you will care for the elderly, infirm and parents/carers of small babies. Do you need to reserve benches for them to avoid anyone standing for longer than they are able to? Can you clearly mark some seats as prioritised for those in need?
- **Maximising your Christmas bulletin/Order of Service.** Use your Order of Service creatively. It's not only a way to provide the words of carols and readings but can be used to promote hospitality throughout Mass. Newcomers may welcome a prompt about when to stand or when to sit or kneel. Parents may need a hint that children should give up their seats to adults without one, if that's what you expect from them. Make sure you have enough Orders of Service. If you run out invite people already seated to share and return duplicate copies to the ushers for redistribution.
- **Are you ready to listen to those who 'come home' this Christmas?** This may be your only opportunity to ask those who rarely come to Church why this is. Clip a brief question sheet to the Order of Service or Christmas bulletin. Use these anonymous stories to help you become even more welcoming, friendly and family sensitive over the forthcoming year.

**Use the Ministry of Welcome material** to review how welcoming your parish really is. In four or five sessions this resource enables all parish groups to understand why welcoming visitors and strangers matters and that all parishioners need an on-going welcome.