

The Welcoming Community

HOW MANY TIMES have you heard the words *church family*? It's a phrase with a good tradition—it makes us think of Mark 7, where Jesus widens the concept of family from the biological to the body of believers. When we talk about being a church family, it's shorthand for saying, "As children of God we all belong here in God's house."

I grew up as part of a church family. When I walked in the church doors, I felt at home. I was loved and accepted by people who shared common Christian beliefs and values. Looking back, I realize that most of the people in my church had the same colour skin, cultural background, and economic status. Within that similarity, there was still diversity, and sometimes it was challenging being a family.

Is 'family' a helpful metaphor for church?

I felt part of the church family most clearly in our youth group. I remember one boy from outside the church who came with someone and tried to join our group. He just didn't seem to fit. I'm ashamed when I think how unwelcoming I was. I didn't have the words then to describe why he seemed different, but now I know. He had not grown up with us, and he was from a different ethnic and economic group. After a while he stopped coming. Looking back, I realize that church family for me meant not just a place where I could be together with other believers, it was a place where I could feel at home socially. It was a place where I could be part of "us" instead of "them."

What other metaphors might be helpful?

Right now I'm part of a congregation that is more diverse. Our church is racially diverse, with people from different cultural and economic backgrounds. When I go to church, I don't feel at home in the same way that I felt at home in the church where I grew up. We don't easily understand each other, because many of our beliefs and values are different.

Because there are so many differences, what we share in common is that much more striking: a belief in Jesus Christ. Interestingly, the phrase I hear used in our congregation is not "church family" but "welcoming the stranger." Newcomers are treated with great interest and respect. Looking at the biblical witness, there are many phrases that describe faith communities, "church family" is only one, and perhaps it can be limiting if it is used exclusively.

As we gather for communion in our congregation, we look around the table and see people who are strangers to us in many ways. We pass the bread and the cup and begin to dimly see how wide God's welcome really is.

—Carol Penner



WHAT IS COMMUNITY?

Ask people from different cultures, racial, or ethnic backgrounds to describe what community means to them. How do they practice community? Report your answers back to the group.

