



Strong Communities

Including All Families as a Way to Keep Kids Safe

People of faith often think of themselves as welcoming others – to the faith, to the fellowship, to the family of God. In most congregations, members desire to embrace their fellow worshippers so that no one feels left out. Equally important in most denominations is a belief in the biblical mandate to bring others in – not to allow anyone to remain outside. But are there individuals or groups whom we, perhaps unintentionally, exclude? What about those outside who may have a physical limitation, family configuration, style of dress, lifestyle, economic situation or some other issue that can spark in us a more creative way to be welcoming? What about those who are truly “strangers,” perhaps because they are newcomers to the community or even newcomers to the country?

People of faith are called upon to show love to the stranger. Scripture recounts numerous incidents of people who welcomed strangers and were blessed or spared because of offering their hospitality to others. In the Jewish tradition, hospitality to the stranger is likened to welcoming God, as when Elijah was welcomed and his host enjoyed an abundant supply of food during a time of famine. Among Christians, love of the stranger becomes a form of love for one's neighbor, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus called on his followers to be neighbors to those whom society may cast aside or make invisible.

In fact, welcoming a stranger is an ancient virtue valued by all major faith traditions that have their origin in the Middle East. In that desert environment, to refuse hospitality to one who lacked membership in the community and was vulnerable to the elements, was the equivalent of dooming him to death. The Islamic tradition views the stranger as having a right to sustenance and the host as having a duty to supply it. Furthermore, it is seen as a duty to God, not to the stranger.

What is our attitude today toward this virtue of welcoming the stranger? Do we make a conscious effort to reach out to those who may have special challenges that make it difficult for them to feel that they fit in? How can a “ministry of inclusion” support young families and help to increase safety for children?

In our time, young parents often report feeling isolated and cut off from sources of support. Young adults who lack roots in the community where they live, especially those who have moved to this country from their native land, may be vulnerable to such feelings of being “outside.” That isolation may contribute

to a sense of helplessness about being able to care properly for their young children. Sometimes, neglect or, less often, abuse is the result.

The April observances of Child Abuse Prevention Month, culminating in Blue Ribbon Sabbath on April 29 (or the nearest day of services), offers an opportunity to reflect on how families of faith can be those places in the community where all are welcomed and embraced. Worshipers wear blue ribbons to signify a commitment to share the responsibility to keep kids safe. Both individually and collectively, congregations can increase protection for children by initiating specific efforts to welcome all into the fellowship so that young parents know there is a place to turn to for support.

Families of faith can provide an invaluable component as a community seeks to embrace families with young children who are not already engaged and to form a community that is so strong, it won't allow any young families to remain outside. This can be especially critical in areas of high growth and where many newcomers and immigrant families reside. Immigrant families may be especially likely to face economic difficulties that result in a struggle to provide for necessities, a lack of access to health care and crowded living conditions. Material support offered by churches can be a valuable resource for such families.

Some churches have found the following successful in making young families who are newcomers feel welcome:

- Establish emergency relief programs to meet the material needs of newcomers and others.
- Assist parents with job searches and financial management information.
- Develop family resource centers, including on-site social service, health and other programs.
- Invite young families for a weekend of welcome, including a Saturday breakfast, morning studies for parents, special activities for children, and a family picnic lunch.
- Provide Parents' Night Out opportunities that enable parents to have an evening away from child care responsibilities while the kids enjoy appropriate care and fun activities at the church.

"Leaving No Families Outside" is the Strong Communities theme for April 2007. As people of faith continue the commitment to that principle following Child Abuse Prevention Month, families will be supported and children will be made safer.



For more information on Strong Communities, visit
www.clemson.edu/strongcommunities or call 864-688-2214