

Saving a seat (and other Christian norms that speak "cliquish")

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Adult small groups welcome participants to gatherings in words and actions, many of which are considered Christian norms – including saving a seat. Some practices are perceived as sincere greetings. Others can appear thoughtful, but may be perceived as the opposite of welcome.

You arrive first and thoughtfully save a seat.

Tactfully setting a Bible on the table or chair next to you, you hold a place for a friend. It's thoughtful.

Picture a first-time participant looking for a seat amidst a landscape of Bibles, coats, and bulletins -- all saving spaces for others. From this vantage point, intended thoughtfulness looks more like your small group has hung an unwelcome sign. We didn't mean to convey that "there's no place for you." But, to the onlooker, saved seats clearly convey, "you can't sit next to me."

We forget how it feels to be new.

Entering a space where no one has saved a seat for you. It's an uncomfortable moment; a moment in which you assess whether you will belong. Or not.

At one of our church's events, every seat had been taken or saved well in advance of the start time. Visitors (who arrived at a normal time) entered to find that there were no open seats. While Bibles occupied saved-seats, the back of the sanctuary filled with people with no place to stand and no place to sit.

It was an angsty leader moment. Asking those who had arrived early and so thoughtfully saved a place, to surrender their friend's seat, would kindle resentment when we needed an outpouring of generosity. What to do?

Some things are better caught than taught. "I'll give up my seat."

What might happen if a few of us gave up our seats for visitors? I had no plan. But, when I mentioned my desire to give up my seat to the event leaders, every front-row speaker, spouse, and friend were on their feet and eager to do the same. As we offered our seats, we watched as those with seats turned to see how many people still stood at the back. Then our worship leader spontaneously asked if anyone else had a seat to share. Almost every hand in the room went up.

It was a moment that took us from "about us" to "about others." It was a transformational.

Whether you're leading from the front, middle, or back, know that you can change unintentional cliquishness into intentional open-heartedness. Your leadership is contagious.

Talk with your small group (or group leaders) about how saving a seat, and other commonplace Christian practices, can unintentionally convey cliquishness.

- Coffee-hour conversations where we hang out with those we know best
- Personalized communion where some people are served by name (and others are not)
- Adult greeters who feel more comfortable greeting other adults
- Classroom etiquette that discourages parents from entering their child's classroom
- Leaders who walk fast through a crowd (we're busy – please don't interrupt me)
- Ticketed events like concerts, dinners, or kick-off parties (without provision for those who can't afford to attend)
- Small groups that say it's too late to join (at least not right now)

Small steps you can take to un-clique your community.

As a church leader, walk slowly through crowds, be attentive. Encourage small groups to try something outward focused, like hanging out with visitors during coffee hour. Work with the education team to figure out ways for parents to engage in classrooms. Open the door to intergenerational teams of greeters. Your leadership can inspire open-hearted community.

In the days and weeks after our leaders gave up their front-row seats, small groups who often sat near one another in worship became intentional about reaching out to visitors.

Young parents began to encourage others with young children to join them. Small groups worked alongside ushers to ensure visitors got seated in the vicinity of someone willing to connect. Classroom teachers began welcoming parents' participation.

And, entire families signed up to greet those entering the building.

In countless ways, our congregation surpassed our leadership. Surpassed expectation. Surpassed prior practices which gave the impression that we were cliquey. It's not who we wanted to be.

Learning to laugh at ourselves, we still talk about the day our Bibles got to save more than seats.