



Bingo: The Family Name-O– October 04

“They arrive more than an hour early, many of them. They buy their game sheets, stake out a favorite spot, settle in and wait for Doug Robinson, the caller, to say: ‘I want to welcome everyone to St. Boniface Thursday night bingo.’ And then, ‘Your first number: 1-29.’

By that time –shortly after 7 p.m.—the St. Boniface School cafeteria in Northside is packed with nearly 200 people—mostly women—eager to blot out bingo numbers with ink dauber.

Some players come from the immediate neighborhood. Some drive or bus from miles away. Some come to be with family. Some come to get away from family. Some come to unwind.”

On one level, it’s all about lining up five numbers and yelling “Bingo!” Yet, this is not only about playing bingo and winning a few bucks. They come week after week, month after month, and year after year to connect with others in a public space that is significant for them.

Some may promote that it is impossible to make deep, significant connections in public spaces. Don’t tell these people that. Their connections borrow deep. They do not visit each others homes or get together outside of the bingo hall. Yet, they care for one another—all in public space.

They may not know each other’s names, but they are not strangers. They are family.

Acquainted with Strangers

Rabbi Jennifer Krause shares an anecdote of how powerful and meaningful “acquaintances” can be. In the article *The Ones Who Turn Up Along the Way*, Newsweek magazine, she recounts stories about her acquaintance with Walter, her building super, and Ali, her neighborhood grocery store manager.

“I share these stories because they are part of the puzzle of community. I am well aware that Walter and Ali do not fall into simple categories of family member, co-worker or friend. We are all from different backgrounds, different countries, and we occupy different socioeconomic spheres. We don’t go to each other’s home for dinner or make plans to meet for coffee, and we probably won’t. Our connections are site-specific and episodic. And yet they make real claims on my heart and mind.”

Rabbi Krouse seems surprised that despite her “episodic” and “site-specific” relationships with Walter and Ali, her limited contact with them has grown to mean something to her. She learns that it is possible for acquaintances to hold significant places in one’s “heart and mind.”

People connect

Public belonging is when we connect through outside influences. Connecting in public space isn’t about connecting person to person; it is about sharing a common experience. Think of fans at a sporting event, members of a political party, or shoppers at a grocery store. Some outside influence has brought these people into a common grouping; they connect because of the outside influence not because of shared personal information. In fact, if they do connect by sharing personal information, they will by definition have moved to a different space.

There is a difference between a stranger and a public believer. A stranger does not feel a sense of being connected. A public believer does feel connected. The main difference is this feeling of connectedness. A “stranger” who feels connected has moved from stranger to public believer. It is more about how they feel and less about how the organization feels about them.

Many times we equate “stranger” with “anonymous.” If we don’t know someone’s name we believe they are a stranger. However, I have sat in many sporting events sharing celebratory “high-fives” with nameless people; yet, I did not feel I was sitting among strangers. We belonged to the same team. We connected.

People may want anonymity, but they do not want to be a stranger. They do not want to be a stranger to our communication styles. They do not want to be a stranger to our humor and inside jokes. They do not want to feel like a stranger when looking for the restroom. They do not want to feel like a stranger to the décor, the music, the language. They want to connect. And, they mainly come to church to connect with God and they do not want us to make them feel like they are a stranger to Him.

ABF is one of the unique ways to invite strangers in. As leaders, it will do us well to learn how people connect in significant ways. It does us a great disservice to assume that people only connect in the ways we expect them to. How does your ABF program environment finish the following?

“I was a stranger and you...”

ABF Resources Note:

Joe Myers , Author of the Search to Belong

Joe has written a book called the “The Search to Belong” that is a must read for those interesting in rethinking the “community” conversation. Go to his website at www.searchtobelong.com for articles and other information. Joe will be teaching two breakout workshops at the 2004 ABF Conference held in Cincinnati, Ohio on November 12 & 13.