



Invite • Welcome • Connect

Group Study Guide

Invite Welcome

Connect: The Book

# Group Study Guide

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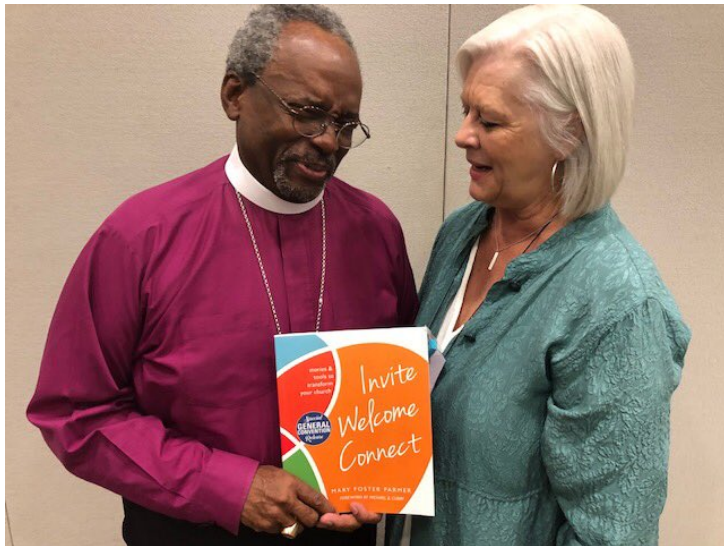
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## Introduction

In her book, ***Invite Welcome Connect: Stories & Tools to Transform Your Church***, Mary Foster Parmer offers a challenge to the 21st Century church:

*For our congregations to thrive—spiritually and numerically—we need more than a newcomer ministry. For us to live into God’s call to share the good news of Christ far and wide, to serve the poor, and to love our neighbors, we need a ministry that is deeper and wider than we have imagined, that not only invites and welcomes visitors but also works to fully incorporate them into the body of Christ.*



Former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry with *Invite Welcome Connect* Founder Mary Foster Parmer.

This is the core philosophy behind the ministry of **Invite Welcome Connect**, to be deeply intentional in our ministries of evangelism, hospitality, and belonging. It’s not a numbers game. If you approach **Invite Welcome Connect** only as a way to grow your congregation, you will fail. **Invite Welcome Connect** is about growing *ourselves* individually and in community as followers of Christ, and then bringing others into that community. We like to say it’s about moving from maintenance to mission.

In this brief study guide, available both on video and in print, we will offer a glimpse into the big picture of

**Invite Welcome Connect**—primarily the book, but also the in-person workshops and the on-demand website—as well as provide brief summaries of each of the seven core chapters of the book. We will then invite you both as an individual and within your larger study groups to consider questions both about your own personal journey into spirituality and into ministry as well as how you and your church connect to the wider community.

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## Buying the Book

**Invite Welcome Connect: Stories & Tools to Transform Your Church** is available from the following online retailers:

- **Forward Movement:** Offers discounts for bulk purchases. [Buy here.](#)
- **Amazon:** Available in paperback or Kindle. [Buy here.](#)

## Organizing Your Study Group

Because there are seven chapters in the book, you may want to split your study group into seven weekly sessions. If you're planning your study group for Lent, you may want to meet once each week in Lent, and then one more time for a celebratory meal and wrapup session Easter week.

Because each chapter is short, you might also do more than one chapter a week, or spend an extra week looking at the resources in the book's appendix.

Ideally, your study group should have a facilitator—someone to organize the meetings, lead discussions, and make sure that all voices are heard. The questions at the end of each chapter call for a lot of self-exploration, and an honest look at ourselves and at our churches. It's essential that your group respect the process and respect one another. There are no bad ideas, no wrong opinions. We're asking you to challenge all your assumptions—the way Christ did—and we know that sometimes that kind of discussion can lead to emotional exchanges. The facilitator helps ensure that such exchanges are made in an atmosphere of love and understanding.

One of the core values of **Invite Welcome Connect** is prayerfulness. Prayer is at the center of all we do. It should be at the center of your study group as well. Begin each session with group prayer, and end it that way, too. Make sure during the seven weeks of the study group that everyone gets at least one chance to lead the group in prayer.

Each study session includes an opening prayer taken from the corresponding chapter from the book. Feel free to substitute your own prayer for that prayer.

For the closing prayer, encourage each person to prayerfully thank God for bringing the group together, and to pay particular attention to some moment in which they felt closer to God. All are also invited to share personal concerns for the group to pray about together and during the time between learning sessions.

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With the preliminaries out of the way, let's get started. You may want to begin with the "Invite Welcome Connect in Five Minutes" video on our Web site, as a way of setting the tone, and then jump in to Chapter 1.

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## Chapter 1: The Story

### Opening Prayer

*Dear Gracious Lord, we pray this day with holy intention to live into our Baptismal Covenant, to become reflections of Christ in everything we do. We ask you, Lord, for the grace to see others as Jesus sees them, with love and compassion and forgiveness. Give us the courage to implement Invite Welcome Connect in our congregation and open our hearts and minds to holy listening and loving souls so we may take the challenge of creativity seriously and serve you faithfully. Amen.*

Storytelling is central to the mission of **Invite Welcome Connect**. The power of personal narratives allows individuals and communities to understand themselves, their faith, and their call to action. The ministry of **Invite Welcome Connect** emerged from founder Mary Parmer's personal faith journey, beginning with her experience of hospitality as a child and later through her transition into The Episcopal Church. She discovered that while Episcopalians are deeply rooted in liturgy and tradition, they often struggle with evangelism and incorporating newcomers into the life of the church.

Parmer's experience developing newcomer ministries at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Beaumont, Texas, demonstrated the transformative power of intentional invitation and hospitality. By focusing on relational ministry and empowering laity, the congregation grew exponentially. This success led to the development of the Newcomer Ministry Project, which expanded across the Diocese of Texas and eventually became **Invite Welcome Connect**. The ministry's core values—prayerfulness, intentionality, relationality, and accountability—have shaped its implementation across The Episcopal Church.

**Invite Welcome Connect** is not a program but a culture shift, moving congregations from maintenance to mission. The chapter challenges individuals and church leaders to embrace storytelling as a means of transformation. The biblical narrative is built on stories—creation, exile, redemption, resurrection—and the sharing of faith stories remains vital today. By creating spaces where people feel heard and valued, churches can foster deeper relationships and build a more welcoming community. This approach aligns with the gospel's call to love and serve others, making church a place where all are truly invited, welcomed, and connected.

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## Questions for Individuals

1. What are your hopes and dreams for your personal journey of faith?
2. What are your personal hopes and dreams for your congregation?
3. Are you willing to step out of your comfort zone into a place of creativity and possibility?  
What are some concrete ways you can do this?

## Questions for Groups

1. Looking at your church through the lens of **Invite Welcome Connect**, do you perceive a genuine opportunity and willingness to implement it?
2. Transformation happens when we see old things in new ways, full of new possibilities. What are some transformational possibilities you can imagine for your congregation?

## Closing Prayer

*The session's prayer leader encourages each person to prayerfully thank God for bringing the group together, and to pay particular attention to some moment in which they felt closer to God. All are also invited to share personal concerns for the group to pray about together and during the time between learning sessions.*

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## Chapter 2: Invite

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.—Matthew 28:19-20*

### Opening Prayer

*Gracious God, who has given us not a spirit of fear, but the power of love, grant us courage to step out of our comfort zones, to invite someone to church, to see and welcome the Other, and to be willing to discern the gifts God has placed within us. Help us claim our life's work as ministry, as holy sacred work. Open our hearts and minds with holy listening and loving souls and give us the moral courage to think outside the box, to imagine the possibilities for this congregation, a beloved community of the Jesus Movement. Amen.*

The act of invitation is fundamental to Christian faith. Jesus himself constantly invited people into deeper relationships with God, urging them to “Come, follow me.” Yet many Episcopalians struggle with the idea of evangelism, often associating it with aggressive or coercive tactics. This chapter seeks to redefine evangelism as an authentic sharing of faith through word and example.

Personal invitation remains the most effective way to bring new people into the church. Research shows that most people who visit a church do so because someone personally invited them. However, many Episcopalians hesitate to extend such invitations, often due to fear of rejection, concerns about seeming pushy, or uncertainty about what to say. The chapter encourages individuals to reflect on their own faith journeys and why their church matters to them—this personal reflection can serve as the foundation for authentic invitations.

Creating a culture of invitation within a congregation requires leadership from clergy and lay leaders. They must model invitation, openly discussing their faith and extending invitations themselves. Churches can also develop structured approaches, such as designated invitation Sundays, small group evangelism training, and providing parishioners with tools like invitation cards or social media prompts.



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The chapter also highlights the importance of community engagement. Churches should not only invite people into their worship spaces but also step out into the world. Partnering with local organizations, hosting community events, and participating in outreach projects are ways to embody the gospel's call to love and serve others. By making invitation a natural and ongoing practice, churches can become places of true welcome and belonging.

## Questions for Individuals

1. Have you ever been invited to church? How did you feel and respond?
2. Have you ever invited someone to church? If not, what has prevented you?
3. Reflect on your faith journey—why are you a Christian? Why do you attend your specific church?
4. Do you agree that courage is the core of invitation? What other traits are essential?
5. What activities in your congregation lend themselves to invitations?

## Questions for Groups

1. Do clergy and lay leaders model personal invitation and evangelism?
2. What structured efforts exist to invite new people?
3. Do members have tools to facilitate invitations?
4. How is the church preparing its members for evangelism?
5. How well does the church engage with the surrounding community?

## Closing Prayer

*The session's prayer leader encourages each person to prayerfully thank God for bringing the group together, and to pay particular attention to some moment in which they felt closer to God. All are also invited to share personal concerns for the group to pray about together and during the time between learning sessions.*

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## Chapter 3: Welcome

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

### Opening Prayer

*Gracious Lord, we pray this day with holy intention to live into our baptismal covenant to become reflections of Christ in everything we do. We ask you for the grace to see others as Jesus sees them in the way of love and compassion and forgiveness. Let us welcome the stranger with open arms. Help us serve faithfully, taking the challenge of creativity seriously, and opening our hearts and minds with holy listening and loving souls. Amen.*

Welcoming others into the church is not just an action—it is a ministry that reflects the love of Christ. A warm and intentional welcome can determine whether a visitor becomes an engaged member or never returns. The Episcopal Church often prides itself on being a welcoming denomination, yet too often, newcomers slip through the cracks due to unintentional neglect. This chapter explores the importance of creating a culture of radical hospitality that extends beyond a friendly greeting.

The chapter begins with a compelling mystery guest experience, where the author visits a church and receives little to no acknowledgment. Though the liturgy and sermon are beautiful, the lack of hospitality makes the experience feel isolating. Many churches assume they are friendly, but in reality, they are simply communities of friends who unintentionally exclude outsiders.

Hospitality begins with **intentionality**. Simple acts such as greeting visitors warmly, introducing them to others, and following up after their visit can make a world of difference. A successful welcoming system includes designated greeters, clear signage, accessible visitor cards, and well-communicated next steps for those interested in joining. However, true welcome goes beyond systems—it requires a **culture shift** in which every parishioner takes responsibility for making others feel seen and valued.

The chapter emphasizes that hospitality is deeply **biblical**. Jesus welcomed the marginalized and sought out the lost. The early church grew through radical inclusion, forming a community where all were valued. Churches today must embody this same spirit, ensuring that every

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newcomer, whether a lifelong Christian or someone exploring faith for the first time, experiences the love of Christ through genuine welcome.

## Questions for Individuals

1. Have you ever attended a church as a guest? What was your experience? Did you feel welcomed or ignored?
2. Do you feel “seen” at your church, valued and known? If not, is there anything you can do to help facilitate connections?
3. How often do you look around during Sunday worship or at other gatherings, intentionally seeking opportunities to talk with guests and/or newcomers?
4. What do you say when you greet a newcomer? How can you become more comfortable engaging visitors?
5. What church activities help incorporate newcomers? How can you play a role in extending hospitality?

## Questions for Groups

1. Do your clergy, staff, and lay leaders model a theology of welcome? In what ways?
2. Do congregation members intentionally seek out visitors?
3. Would you say your church is a friendly community or a community of friends?
4. Who in your congregation has the gift of hospitality, and how can they be empowered?
5. Does your church have a structured welcoming system? How effective is it?

## Closing Prayer

*The session’s prayer leader encourages each person to prayerfully thank God for bringing the group together, and to pay particular attention to some moment in which they felt closer to God. All are also invited to share personal concerns for the group to pray about together and during the time between learning sessions.*

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## Chapter 4: Connect

*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.—Romans 12:4-6*

### Opening Prayer

*Gracious Lord, thank you for the gifts and talents you have bestowed upon each of us. We invite you to stir up these God-given gifts. Give us grace to bear witness to them. Help us claim our life's work as ministry, as holy sacred work. Amen.*

Welcoming people into the church is only the first step; the next is forming meaningful connections. Many visitors return to a church a few times but eventually stop attending because they never establish relationships within the community. This chapter emphasizes that **connection is the key to discipleship**, and building relationships should be an intentional, ongoing effort.

Connection begins with **understanding people's needs and interests**. Every newcomer has a different faith journey—some are seeking a deep theological conversation, others long for social engagement, and some may need pastoral care. Churches must provide various **entry points** for connection, such as small groups, newcomer classes, social gatherings, and ministry opportunities.

The chapter highlights that **deep listening** is an essential component of connection. The early church grew because believers **listened to one another and shared life together**. Today, listening means taking the time to hear someone's story, learning their spiritual background, and discerning how they might find a place in the church. Rather than merely inviting people to volunteer, churches should first ask, "What are your gifts and passions?" and then help them find a meaningful way to contribute.

Practical strategies for fostering connection include:

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- Assigning newcomers a mentor or guide who walks with them through their first months in the church.
- Hosting regular “get-to-know-you” events for new members.
- Encouraging existing members to step out of their comfort zones and build relationships with newcomers.
- Creating **small group opportunities** centered around study, service, or fellowship.

Ultimately, the goal of **connection is transformation**—helping people deepen their faith, feel a sense of belonging, and take ownership of their spiritual journey. When churches create an environment where people feel truly connected, they move beyond simply attending worship services and instead **become active participants in the body of Christ**.

## Questions for Individuals

1. When did you first feel truly connected to a church? What made that experience meaningful?
2. Have you ever attended a church where you struggled to find connections? What was missing?
3. How do you personally foster connections in your church? Are there additional ways you could reach out to others?
4. How comfortable are you in engaging with newcomers? What steps could help you become more intentional about building relationships?
5. How has being connected to a faith community influenced your spiritual growth?

## Questions for Groups

1. Does your church have a structured process for connecting newcomers beyond the initial welcome? How effective is it?
2. What small groups or ministries exist to help new members engage with the community? Are there any gaps that need to be filled?
3. Does your congregation provide opportunities for deeper relationships beyond Sunday worship?
4. Are there ways your church can improve its listening skills, ensuring that members feel heard and valued?
5. How can lay leaders take a more active role in connecting with new members?

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## Closing Prayer

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## Chapter 5: Creativity

### Opening Prayer

*Dear gracious Lord, who has imbued each of us with the gifts of faith and hope, we ask you this day for the courage to be risk-takers for the sake of the gospel. May we be agents of imagination in our congregations, stretching our wings of faith and love and possibility. Help us to live faithfully into our calling as lay and ordained leaders, always seeing and welcoming the other. May we listen long and deeply to the stories of those with whom we worship, and may we model the ways of Jesus, love incarnate. Amen.*

Creativity is at the heart of **Invite Welcome Connect**. It is through creativity that churches can discover new ways to invite, welcome, and connect people into the body of Christ. This chapter explores the role of imagination and innovation in evangelism and ministry, encouraging congregations to embrace a spirit of playfulness and openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Many churches operate out of a maintenance mindset, following long-standing traditions without questioning their effectiveness. This chapter challenges that mindset by calling on churches to cultivate **holy curiosity**—a willingness to ask, "What if?" and "Why not?" It encourages church leaders to dream big, experiment, and take risks, trusting that God is leading the way. The chapter highlights biblical examples of divine creativity, such as God's creation of the world, Jesus' storytelling through parables, and the early church's innovative approaches to spreading the gospel.

Practical examples of creativity in ministry include **rethinking church events**, using **visual storytelling and social media**, incorporating **art and music into worship**, and designing **newcomer experiences that go beyond handing out bulletins**. The chapter underscores that **small, simple changes** can have a profound impact, such as creating an interactive newcomer area or incorporating personal testimonies into church communications.

Ultimately, creativity is an act of faith. When churches embrace innovation, they become more **engaging, dynamic, and mission-driven**. Creativity allows churches to move beyond stagnation, opening doors for transformation and growth in ways that align with God's ever-expanding kingdom.

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## Questions for Individuals

1. How do you define creativity in your personal life and faith?
2. Have you ever had a creative idea for ministry but hesitated to share it? What held you back?
3. How can you personally contribute to fostering a more creative culture in your church?
4. What are some traditions in your church that may no longer serve their original purpose?
5. Where do you see opportunities for innovation in your faith community?

## Questions for Groups

1. How does your church currently encourage or discourage creative thinking?
2. Are there ministries that could benefit from a fresh, creative approach?
3. What are some small but impactful ways to experiment with creativity in ministry?
4. How can clergy and lay leaders support risk-taking in the spirit of creativity?
5. What steps can be taken to shift from a maintenance mindset to one of innovation?

## Closing Prayer

*The session's prayer leader encourages each person to prayerfully thank God for bringing the group together, and to pay particular attention to some moment in which they felt closer to God. All are also invited to share personal concerns for the group to pray about together and during the time between learning sessions.*



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## Chapter 6: Obstacles & Opportunities

### Opening Prayers

*Gracious God, we pray this day for our eyes and hearts to be opened to the obstacles that are holding us back from ministry. We ask you to take away the sin of complacency in our individual lives and in our communities of faith. We pray for wisdom and courage as we discern and confront the sacred cows in our midst, those inflexible and rigid ways that prevent us from doing creative ministry. We ask for boldness as we imagine, create, and envision the gospel truths of Invite Welcome Connect, turning obstacles into opportunities for the glory of God. Amen.*

Every church faces obstacles when implementing **Invite Welcome Connect**. Resistance to change, complacency, and fear of failure are among the most common challenges. However, obstacles can also present opportunities for deeper reflection, growth, and transformation. This chapter explores how churches can **identify barriers to change and turn them into stepping stones for revitalization**.

One of the greatest obstacles churches face is **complacency**—the belief that "we've always done it this way." Many congregations unknowingly operate as **communities of friends rather than friendly communities**, making it difficult for newcomers to feel a sense of belonging. The chapter urges churches to **assess their current culture honestly**, asking whether they are truly open to change or simply maintaining comfort.

Another challenge is **fear of risk**. Evangelism, hospitality, and connection require stepping outside of comfort zones. The chapter highlights biblical figures like Abraham, Moses, and the disciples, all of whom embraced risk and uncertainty as they followed God's call. Churches are encouraged to cultivate **boldness and courage**, trusting that God will bless their efforts even when success is not immediate.

The chapter also addresses **sacred cows**—longstanding traditions that may be hindering growth. For example, a church may pour significant resources into an annual event that no longer attracts newcomers. Recognizing when a beloved practice no longer serves its purpose is essential for making room for new opportunities.

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Ultimately, the key to overcoming obstacles is **prayerful discernment, openness to feedback, and a willingness to adapt**. Churches that embrace challenges as opportunities for growth will find themselves better equipped to fulfill their mission.

## Questions for Individuals

1. What are your personal obstacles to being fully engaged in ministry?
2. How do you respond to change within your faith community?
3. What steps can you take to move beyond fear and embrace new opportunities?
4. How can you be a voice for transformation in your congregation?
5. Reflect on a time when an obstacle in your life led to unexpected growth.

## Questions for Groups

1. Can you truthfully say your church is a friendly community or a community of friends?
2. Where can you identify complacency and inaction in your congregation?
3. What "sacred cows" exist in your church? Are you willing to address them?
4. How can your church become more open to experimentation and risk-taking?
5. What are some first steps your church can take to move past its greatest obstacles?

## Closing Prayer

*The session's prayer leader encourages each person to prayerfully thank God for bringing the group together, and to pay particular attention to some moment in which they felt closer to God. All are also invited to share personal concerns for the group to pray about together and during the time between learning sessions.*

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## Chapter 7: Transformation

### Opening Prayer

*Lord, give us hearts filled with love and courage to step boldly into the work of transformation. May we be ever mindful of our call to be your disciples, welcoming all into the body of Christ. Strengthen us to be beacons of hospitality, invitation, and connection in our communities, reflecting your love in all that we do. Amen.*

At its core, **Invite Welcome Connect** is about **transformation**—not just of individuals, but of entire faith communities. Evangelism is not about recruitment but about **leading people into deeper relationships with Christ and the church**. When churches fully embrace the principles of **Invite Welcome Connect**, they shift from **maintenance to mission**, becoming places of dynamic faith and joy.

Transformation begins at the **individual level**. Those who practice intentional invitation, welcome, and connection often find their own faith deepened in the process. As people say "yes" to engaging more fully with their church, they experience personal renewal and a greater sense of purpose. The chapter shares testimonies from individuals whose lives have been changed through this ministry, reinforcing the idea that **spiritual growth happens through relationships**.

At the **congregational level**, transformation manifests in increased engagement, revitalized ministries, and a renewed sense of mission. Churches that implement **Invite Welcome Connect** report not only numerical growth but also **a cultural shift toward joy, openness, and energy**. They become known as places where newcomers feel truly seen and valued.

The chapter concludes with a call to action: transformation is not a one-time event but an ongoing process. Churches must continue listening, adapting, and deepening their commitment to **creating spaces where God's love is made visible**.

***Note:** Some questions in the following assume you have already begun the **Invite Welcome Connect** ministry in your church. If this is not the case, visualize the changes you hope the ministry will engender in your church and answer from that mindset.*

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## Questions for Individuals

1. How has **Invite Welcome Connect** challenged or deepened your faith?
2. In what ways have you seen transformation in yourself or your church?
3. What does a truly transformed church look like to you?
4. Are you willing to take an active role in helping your church grow and change?
5. How can you help others experience the joy of connection?

## Questions for Groups

1. How has **Invite Welcome Connect** impacted your congregation so far?
2. What specific changes have resulted from implementing this ministry?
3. What further steps can your church take to deepen transformation?
4. How can you ensure that transformation remains an ongoing process?
5. What is your vision for your church's future?

## Closing Prayer

*The session's prayer leader encourages each person to prayerfully thank God for bringing the group together, and to pay particular attention to some moment in which they felt closer to God. All are also invited to share personal concerns for the group to pray about together and during the time between learning sessions.*

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## What's Next?

Congratulations on completing the Group Study Guide for **Invite Welcome Connect: Stories & Tools to Transform Your Church** by Mary Foster Parmer. We hope that your study group can form the nexus of a new ministry of evangelism, hospitality, and belonging within your community.

There are a wealth of resources to help you on your journey. Visit the **Invite Welcome Connect** web site at [www.invitewelcomeconnect.com](http://www.invitewelcomeconnect.com) to learn more about:

### Workshops

Certified **Invite Welcome Connect** facilitators can conduct intensive workshops in your community of faith. These facilitators are experienced practitioners of this ministry in different contexts and congregation sizes. *Learn more at [invitewelcomeconnect.com/workshops](http://invitewelcomeconnect.com/workshops)*

### On Demand

Congregations of every size, location, and resource level can now have access to **Invite Welcome Connect's** full slate of transformative workshops and training through a convenient and flexible on-demand platform. One-year [Subscriptions can be purchased now](#). *Learn more at [invitewelcomeconnect.com/ondemanddescription](http://invitewelcomeconnect.com/ondemanddescription)*

### Coaching

Our team of trained and certified **Invite Welcome Connect** Coaches are available to assist your clergy and lay leaders in the implementation of **Invite Welcome Connect**. Successful engagement with the ministry of **Invite Welcome Connect** depends on intentional collaboration between clergy and lay leaders, and the addition of a Coach significantly increases the ability of a faith community to creatively live into the ethos of this ministry. *Learn more at [invitewelcomeconnect.com/bookacoach](http://invitewelcomeconnect.com/bookacoach)*