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Welcoming closes the distance between us.

“What an Interesting Last Name!”

We think of our faith –and of ourselves – as welcoming. We strive to be welcoming.

And so, as our congregation prepares to formally welcome new members to UUFES today, what makes a good welcome? *A true welcome closes the distance between us.* That’s not as straightforward as you’d think. “Micro-aggressions” – hurtful words – lurk behind the best intentions.

“*We invite you to join us for coffee*” sounds like, “*We are gathering, and you may come, too.*” Not what we meant! How about, “*Everyone’s invited for coffee.*” Our words matter.

Saying, “*You’re new here,*” to someone who’s finally dared come to a meeting, creates distance. What do you think? What would work better than “othering” someone new at the table?

I used to comment on unusual last names as a fine first expression of interest in someone until an Iranian-American minister assured a roomful of colleagues that questions about her name were unwanted, unhelpful and uncomfortable. They created distance.

We say we welcome diverse beliefs. How welcoming are we if we assume something about what each other believes? How welcoming are we if we assume that everyone here is politically liberal? (Not so!) Or if we assume that everyone here is uncomfortable with God language? (Not so!) How to make room – no, we need to go beyond making room – how to *welcome* – atheists as well as those who revere, trust and love the holy? Welcoming is complicated!

5 W’s of Welcoming:

WHAT makes a true welcome? Warmth. Openness. Sincerity. No assumptions. Letting someone know they matter already, just by being here. Watch our own early morning greeters, Lyn and Marshall. Masters of the personal touch, they welcome like nobody’s business.

WHEN does welcoming matter? When does it not? Welcoming matters even when we’re lost in our own problems or when we’re sure that we’re right. If we believe in closing the distance between us, welcoming goes beyond the first visit. It’s daily practice, one person at a time.

WHY does welcoming matter? Because closing the distance between us is why we are here.

WHO needs to welcome? Everyone, no matter our degree, our job, our money, our class, our opinion, our beliefs.

WHERE do we do it? You can apply for a job as welcomer at the bank or at Walmart. Or you can welcome widely, wherever you go, and be “up for love” everywhere. I love the phrase from writer Mary Rose O’Reilly, describing her partner who dribbles sox around the house, “This is the person given me to love.” This is the neighbor given me to love. This is the visitor given me to love. This is a new Member given me to love.

HOW to welcome? With your eyes, your time and your heart. Let us begin our ritual of welcome.