For the past several months we have been having an ongoing (guided) conversation at our parish council meetings about church growth, and this past month the theme we highlighted was “Inviting Culture/Personal Invitation/Genuine Community” We act like our culture … and our culture determines our behavior, our actions. We are inclined to blame external circumstances for many of our current woes, especially the past couple of years. But when we are honest with ourselves, we realize that these are not new “woes” … we have been trending some of these ways for quite some time. One of those “woes” is growing, developing, maybe even desiring, cohesive communities. Our culture seems to be splintering, not uniting. Apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians that this is not the culture of the church of Christ. In Ephesians he tells us, “He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth… so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ.” God’s way is to unite. Not to clone one another nor whitewash our differences, but to bring us together in Christ in community. Therefore, the culture of our church is so vital. And the culture God desires might be counterculture with our culture at large. We don’t want to think this way, but the actions of our world, even our nation, tell us something different. Now there is a lot to say and discuss here, but I’m only going to highlight, and not in depth, one thing here. We want to develop a culture where new guests consistently show up at your church and want to stay. There is nothing more powerful, and effective, than when a person invites a friend to attend our church. When people invite others to your church, good things happen. At the heart of it all, in almost every growing church is this: people inviting their friends. If we don’t invite our friends, don’t expect to grow. This assumes Christians have non-Christian friends we can invite. Shockingly, too many Christians don’t. Often, we cocoon ourselves in a little bubble, distraught over the direction the world is heading and angry at or indifferent toward people who don’t hold our values and beliefs. In the first chapter of the gospel of John (vs. 35- 51), we have a slew of stories strung together with people, eventual disciples, and the early Christ community, inviting others to follow Jesus. The invitations are simple, direct and are extended to friends … and effective. But there is something about their invitation that we sometimes miss and fail to implement. They do not primarily invite their friends into their following (church), nor into their way of believing and understanding, nor to a building or program. They invite one another to meet Jesus. You may not like me, but I know you will like Jesus. I may not be able to do a whole lot for you, but Jesus can. I am not a savior, but Jesus is. That is the invitation that makes a difference. I’m going to share a story that highlights this point. There is a story told about a Shakespearean actor who was known everywhere for his one-man shows of readings and recitations from the classics. He would always end his performance with a dramatic reading of Psalm 23. Each night, without exception, as the actor began his recitation - "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want”. The crowd would listen attentively. And then, at the conclusion of the Psalm, they would rise in thunderous applause in appreciation of the actor's incredible ability to bring the verse to life. But one night, just before the actor was to offer his customary recital of Psalm 23, a young man from the audience spoke up. "Sir, do you mind if tonight I recite Psalm 23?" The actor was quite taken back by this unusual request, but he allowed the young man to come forward and stand front and center on the stage to recite the Psalm, knowing that the ability of this unskilled youth would be no match for his own talent. With a soft voice, the young man began to recite the words of the Psalm. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping.

The audience had been so moved by the young man's recitation that every eye was full of tears. Amazed by what he had heard, the actor said to the youth, "I don't understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training - but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. Tell me, what is your secret?" The young man quietly replied, "Well sir, you know the Psalm... I know the Shepherd." That is the difference maker in who we are and in everything we do.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Miguel