

Limits of welcome: The Sunday I told someone to leave

by [Lisa G. Fischbeck](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue



Thinkstock

On Pentecost morning I told a visitor to leave the church. I'd never done this before. I'd never even been tempted. But I did it that morning.

The visitor arrived early for the service, her Bible in hand and a small jeweled cross on her neck, and I welcomed her to church.

"I have an urgent message for you," she said abruptly. "The end is coming. ISIS is on the move. God is going to end the world on Friday. You are all going to hell. I need to talk to everyone here!"

She said a lot more. I had a hard time listening and concentrating. I know she mentioned nuclear weapons, war, sin, and sexual immorality. I asked her name, and she told me it was Vicky.

It was Pentecost at Church of the Advocate. We were setting up for a service outside. I didn't know what to do with Vicky or what impact her presence among us might have. But I knew that I had to keep her from speaking during the liturgy. I didn't want her to say something that would harm or drive out one of those who were gathered for a festival day and a celebration of the Holy Spirit.

As various members of the congregation welcomed Vicky, she took them on with her warnings and her accusations. I told a few of our leaders about the situation. One is a man who is a contemplative, and another is a mature Christian woman who is married to a Buddhist. The woman decided to sit next to Vicky during the service.

The weather was flawless, and the liturgy was grace-filled and glorious. We listened to stringed instruments and a djembe. We heard the reading from Acts 2 about the Spirit descending on the people who gathered, with each one hearing and understanding in his or her native language. I spoke about the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And, I added, "an awareness of unity in our diversity."

Vicky did not interrupt. But after the liturgy things started to rumble. As people were mingling and getting their lunch, the contemplative told me that he had tried to talk with Vicky, but she had responded with verbal venom, denying his faith and slandering him. "I almost hit her!" he said. "I haven't wanted to hit someone since eighth grade. I need some space."

I went to find Vicky and told her that she was upsetting the people with her message of accusation and fear. I asked her to stop. She focused her gaze on someone standing near and shouted, "You are going to hell!"

This tipped the scales for me. Something like the mother bear rose within me, and in that moment I saw Vicky not as a troubled spirit but as a threat. I moved in front of her so that she could not make eye contact with anyone else. And I told her she

needed to leave.

She refused, and shouted, "Demon! Away with you, demon!" She shouted over my shoulder that everyone there was going to hell and would burn.

"You'll be sorry!" she said over and over again.

As I herded her toward her car, I desperately sorted through my motivations and temptations in responding to her. I was fully aware of my love of the congregation and of my need for Jesus.

As her parting volley in the parking lot, Vicky jammed her water bottle into my chest, focused her eyes on mine, and shouted, "Demon! Die, demon!"

I was shaken. I was upset to have the faith that I hold dear attacked so baldly. I was exhausted by the intensity of the exchange, unsure that I'd been right to tell her to leave, and wondering if she would take any further action against the congregation or against me.

I turned and walked back to the congregation. A woman recovering from an abusive marriage was relaxing with others. I greeted a man afflicted with a lifetime of schizophrenia who later asked me for \$10 so that he could get a government-issued ID. I welcomed a woman who was tentatively returning to church after her previous church had tried to cure her of her same-sex orientation. I tried to cheer up a man who is AWOL from the army and sorting through his limited options. It seemed right that these people should be spared Vicky's assault.

The Episcopal Church proclaims, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You!" Our congregation at Church of the Advocate declares, "We welcome people of every kind of household, at every stage of life and faith and doubt." We are proud of that welcome and of the diversity it brings.

We invite people to "come as you are," meaning that we have a casual dress code but also that we are open to a wide spectrum of beliefs and behaviors. One year we had T-shirts made with the Advocate logo on one side and a quote from Desmond Tutu on the other: "God's standards are really very low."

At one point we embraced "radical welcome," defining it as "a welcome that doesn't come easily, that makes us uncomfortable, that changes the community as we are."

At times we've wrestled with our lines of tolerance and the limits of our flexibility.

One member of the congregation perceived in herself a gift for healing and wanted us to put a massage table in front of the altar so that she could lay hands on people there. Is this part of a radical welcome? Where do we draw the line? How do we say, "That isn't the way we do things," while also proclaiming, "All are welcome"?

How do we determine the limit of our acceptance of distracting behaviors? Is it the child who stands on a pew and stamps her feet, an adult who is passed out drunk and snoring, or a teenager with autism who shouts, "Lisa Fischbeck, you smell like an eggplant!" in the middle of the psalm reading?

Some would say that worship needs a certain decorum and that those who interfere with the atmosphere of worship should be asked to leave. Many churches have vergers or ushers who are prepared to be an escort if needed.

Lines of intolerance often lead to miscommunications or sudden departures, with no opportunity for further teaching or explanation or understanding. At best, lines of intolerance lead to conversations about norms, expectations, appropriate behaviors, and faithfulness. These days, being less certain in our venture, we say, "*We strive to practice* radical welcome, though we know it is hard to do."

In the case of Vicky, it was not her disruption that I feared, nor her expression of a different theology. It was her abusive edge, a hostility that hurt others, that emboldened me to ask her to leave.

I reacted from instinct. I lost track of the possibility that Vicky was mentally unstable, and I responded only to her meanness. I was hooked into engaging her with a kind of theological intensity instead of working to calm her down.

In hindsight I wish I had been better prepared and had thought through the possibility of such an encounter ahead of time and discussed it with elders, the wise and faithful in the congregation, or even with teachers and fellow students in seminary.

In the conversations that we'll be having at Church of the Advocate, we'll address the limits and the extent of our tolerance in worship and what we'll do when those limits are tested. Vicky's visit made it clear to me that while we want to welcome all, some squander that welcome with their mean-spiritedness. We cannot tolerate

anyone who's physically violent or who spiritually assaults or verbally degrades another person.

Should I have responded in a different way to Vicky? I don't know. I pray about it. I pray that Vicky will get whatever help and care she needs. I pray that I will be wiser and more faithful if we have another encounter. And I pray that the people in our congregation will be kept from harm.