How do I connect with my new church family?

This is a challenging question: it is one which a newcomer might ask themselves as they start attending [a] church for the first time. It’s challenging because it pushes the newcomer towards taking some initiative here. Rather than waiting for others to make the connection, the newcomer is encouraged to think, ‘What can I do to make those connections?’ How do we set about turning strangers into friends?

‘Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God’ (Romans 15:7). What has been your experience of Christ welcoming you, and how does/should that inform and direct how you welcome other people? How does welcoming others bring glory to God?

Our vision at Brighton Road is that ‘We are part of God's family, where anyone and everyone is made welcome, and we are all equipped to live our lives for Jesus with a shared sense of unity and purpose.’ In what ways do we make people welcome? Are there ways in which we could improve this? How do you feel about welcoming people into your home?

Why do some newcomers seem to find their feet at Brighton Road more quickly than others, and what does that say about us as a church? How well do we live up to the claim that we make ‘anyone and everyone’ welcome? The other week, our Senior Pastor Tim Carter took the service at Newhaven Baptist Church: their website ([Newhaven Baptist Church](https://www.newhavenbaptistchurch.co.uk/)) says, ‘we welcome everyone. That means that whatever your background, beliefs, sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, health or ability, you will be included as one of the family and are welcome to join any of our activities. In addition, anyone who professes Christian faith may be baptised, anyone who wants to commit to the church may seek membership, and anyone who is so called and gifted may lead or serve.’ That welcome is explicitly inclusive. How do you feel about that? Do you respond with a hearty, ‘Amen!’ or do you have reservations? To what extent are we called to police the borders of God’s kingdom?

Romans 14 begins with these words: ‘Welcome all the Lord's followers, even those whose faith is weak. Don't criticize them for having beliefs that are different from yours. Some think it is all right to eat anything, while those whose faith is weak will eat only vegetables. But you should not criticize others for eating or for not eating. After all, God welcomes everyone’ (Romans 14:1-3 CEV). Are there good reasons for being a vegetarian today? Does it matter if you eat meat? Have you ever been placed in an awkward situation because of your diet?

In the ancient world, the issue was far more important than it is today. A lot of the meat sold in the marketplace would have been sacrificed in a pagan temple, and many of those who refused to eat meat did so because they wanted nothing to do with idolatry. On account of those scruples they were criticised for being ‘weak in faith’ by those who believed that idols didn’t really exist, and whose faith was thus sufficiently robust for them to eat meat without being bothered about its origin.

Christians would often meet in each other’s homes, and sharing a meal was an expression of hospitality and welcome – but if people invited vegetarians into their homes and served them meat, then that would not be particularly welcoming. Worse still, for some vegetarians, the act of eating meat would have been tantamount to denying or compromising their faith. It was a fundamental issue for them, and in their eyes those who ate meat sold in the marketplace were engaging on idolatry. The potential for acrimonious division was huge. Read through Romans 14:1-15:7. Does this scenario help you to make sense of this passage? How does Paul expect the strong and the weak in faith to treat each other? Where does he stand on this issue?

Church unity really mattered to Paul. After formulating some pretty hefty theology in the first 13 chapters of Romans, he does not wander off into an irrelevant digression about how Christians should cope with disagreements over minor issues. His entire argument in this letter – the basis upon which people are put right with God, how they should live their lives and engage with the Old Testament Law – all of that builds up to him addressing this vital question about how Christians should welcome each other, even there are deep-seated and fundamental issues about which they disagree.

In Romans 14-15, the debate was between the weak, whose faith constrained them to adhere closely to the traditional teachings of Scripture, and the strong, whose faith gave them the freedom to reinterpret the law in radically different ways. Diet may not be an issue which is likely to split the church today, but there are other issues with which we grapple today. Are there lessons we can learn from this passage about how we should treat our fellow Christians with whom we disagree?

‘May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Romans 15:5-6).