

First Impressions or Last Impressions?

How many first-time visitors does your congregation attract on the average Sunday? What percentage of those who are able to return a second time, actually do so? Rarely do people join a church without having first visited it at least twice. Knowing this seemingly obvious fact, a church can take measures to both attract and encourage the return of first-time visitors. What follows is an observation of some of the things churches are doing to attract and encourage the return of first-time visitors.

Hide and Seek?

The church most likely to be visited by a stranger is the church that makes it easy to be visited. A simple question to ask is: "If I were a newcomer or visitor to this area, would I be likely to hear of this church and to learn where it is located and when it meets for worship?" Many churches do not attract visitors because they do nothing to make themselves known. Similarly, it is amazing the number of churches that have large and attractive signs but give no indication of worship hours. Only a small percentage of the churches are listed in the religion section of the local paper, and the Yellow Pages advertising rarely gives information on the hour of worship and more likely than not, no one answers if the church is called, because such calls are typically made on a Saturday. Brochures delivered to new residents, advertisements in community newspapers, Yellow Page advertising, literature in hotels and motels and an answering machine on the church phone are all helpful vehicles in making the church known...if they give the location of the church and the time of worship.

We Do Judge Books by Their Covers

At least one family found the exterior appearance of the local Presbyterian Church so unattractive that they drove right past it to worship at and eventually join the United Church. The physical appearance of the church's property and building (both inside and out) not only contributes to the overall impression a person has of the congregation but likely reflects the congregation as well. Looking attractive is a big step toward being attractive!

Visitors are Expected and Welcome

An increasing number of churches are providing clearly marked reserved parking for both visitors and the handicapped. These spaces will be those closest to the main entrance of the church. This is a significant gesture, especially when a church has limited or no off-street parking, or where the parking lot is typically filled to capacity.

This Is the Way In

Older church buildings, those with large facilities and those that have added education wings typically have more than one entrance to the building. Visitors frequently will not know which door to enter by. Thoughtful churches will make it clear which door is unlocked and leads to the sanctuary. This saves the newcomer from having to try several long-locked doors before finding the right one or from having to wander through the nursery, kitchen and women's parlour because the wrong entrance was used . . .

Where Do I Find...

The Nursery, Sunday School, Washrooms, Sanctuary, Ministers office? One church has large, attractive signs that point the way to each of these, another has a number of people with tags bearing their name and the offer "Ask Me." Their job is simply to help visitors and newcomers find their way. Other churches may make this the responsibility of the usher or greeter who will volunteer such information to those who are visiting for the first time. One thoughtful church has both male and female ushers visible at all times during the service. When a small girl needed to find the washroom, she was escorted by the usher, who then waited to return her to her seat.

Am I Recognized?

Most visitors appreciate being warmly welcomed. Failure of the usher or greeter to introduce themselves and ask for the visitor's name, suggests that the visitor comes as an observer of worship rather than a participant in the congregation and a potential member of this community of faith. Within 90 seconds a trained greeter can exchange names, discover how and why a first-time visitor has come to the church and learn 3-4 things about the person, their job and interests. All of this helps the visitor feel welcome, known and valued and helps the greeter to introduce them to others within the congregation.

Out Standing!

While not appropriate for all congregations, a number of churches provide visitors with tags that clearly identify them as guests. This may range from a self-adhesive label bearing the word "visitor" or "guest" to a subtler stitched adhesive rose to a nametag. The latter is most frequently used in congregations where members also wear nametags. Such identification of guests is meant to be an encouragement to members to meet, greet and take an interest in those who are visiting.

Introducing....

First-time visitors frequently are interested in knowing more about the church.

Large congregations often have a visitor's booth outside the sanctuary area where questions are answered, directions given and information on the church and its ministries can be found. One congregation has a person designated each Sunday to provide a 60 second introduction to the life and work of the church to visitors, others have visitor-packets containing such things as a devotional booklet, a church calendar, a list of groups and ministries within the church, a brief history of the congregation and a statement of the beliefs and practices. Such a packet not only is an introduction to the church but a reminder of the visit.

Up Front or Out Back?

While those with failing eyesight or hearing may appreciate sitting closer to the front, visitors generally feel conspicuous and awkward in the front pews. Similarly, in crowded sanctuaries the newcomer can often find that their family needs to be split in order to find seating. A few churches are showing sensitivity toward guests by providing reserved seating for guests. Even if seating space is not a problem, reserved seats for visitors or good ushering can eliminate the embarrassment experienced by one visitor who was rebuked for sitting in the pew that was traditionally occupied by a longtime member.

Welcoming and Including Newcomers Hospitality Checklist

Circle **Y** for yes, **N** for no, and **U** for uncertain.

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| 1. Do you advertise special events aimed at non-church members and their concerns and issues? | Y N U |
| 2. Do the special activities of your congregation get regularly reported in your local newspaper? | Y N U |
| 3. Do you attempt to raise public awareness about the life and activities of your congregation through advertising? | Y N U |
| 4. Are your present members encouraged to invite friends, coworkers, and extended family members to attend special events organized for them? | Y N U |
| 5. Do you have designated, prime parking spaces for visitors located near the front doors of your building? | Y N U |
| 6. Are all entryways, buildings, and walkways clearly marked? | Y N U |
| 7. Is the location of the nursery clearly marked? | Y N U |
| 8. Is the nursery located near the worship space? | Y N U |
| 9. Do older, capable, and warm persons staff the nursery? | Y N U |
| 10. Do you have an information table with current newsletters and other information on congregational life located in the main entryway? | Y N U |
| 11. Do you have designated "greeters" besides ushers who are trained to help visitors? | Y N U |
| 12. Do you have a simple, understandable and seeker-friendly bulletin that helps visitors participate in your worship? | Y N U |
| 13. Do the clergy have opportunities to greet visitors before they enter and are seated? | Y N U |
| 14. Do you regularly announce the page numbers and location of music and other worship enhancements? | Y N U |
| 15. Do you welcome visitors early in the service? | Y N U |
| 16. Do you welcome visitors without singling them out, making them stand, or creating awkwardness for them? | Y N U |
| 17. Do your members engage visitors and invite them to coffee or to other social activities after the service, taking the initiative to introduce them to regular members? | Y N U |
| 18. Do you invite "all baptized persons" to receive communion? | Y N U |
| 19. Is your worship bright, vibrant, and well paced? | Y N U |
| 20. Is your music, whatever style, done well and will visitors be able to participate in congregational singing? | Y N U |
| 21. If you use musical settings for portions of the service, is the music readily available to visitors? | Y N U |
| 22. Do you avoid unique, quaint, or idiosyncratic actions in your liturgy that make sense only to long-time members? | Y N U |
| 23. Do all readers speak clearly and move along at a pace that can be understood given the acoustics of your building? | Y N U |
| 24. Does the sermon have "take home" applications relevant to the lives of seekers? | Y N U |
| 25. Does the sermon avoid technical terms, or denominationally specific jargon? | Y N U |
| 26. Do you provide an outline or a place to take notes during the sermon? | Y N U |
| 27. Does the service start on time? | Y N U |
| 28. Does the service end well, i.e., on a strong inspirational note? | Y N U |
| 29. During the peace, do regular members introduce themselves to people they do not recognize? | Y N U |
| 30. Do you have a workable procedure for getting the names and addresses of first-time visitors? | Y N U |

You will want to review your individual N and U items to see how to improve your hospitality ministry. If you have 15 or more N or U answers, you have a definite hospitality problem and will want to improve your hospitality ministry.