

Practical Ministry Skills: Welcoming Visitors



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Christianity Today International, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This special theme on new visitors is designed to help equip those who are involved in welcoming visitors to your church. You may use it either for a training session or to give individually to key people involved in welcoming visitors. Simply print the handouts needed and use them as necessary.

To help church leaders get a wide view of attracting visitors, see "Who Is Our Target?" (p. 3). The two articles "Why They Don't Come Back" and "Why They Do Come Back" (pp. 6–8) explore what works and what does not work when welcoming visitors. Specific visitor ministry tasks are addressed in articles for greeters (p. 10) and ushers (p. 13).

We hope you enjoy this theme as you seek to teach your congregation to welcome all people in the name of Christ.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.
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WELCOMING VISITORS**Who Is Our Target?**

Three questions to match our church strengths with the needs of visitors.

Romans 12:13

Here is a simple activity to improve the process for connecting newcomers into the life of our church. Spend the first 10 minutes writing your answers to the three questions, and then spend the next 10 to 15 minutes discussing them with the team.

1. What Does Our Church Offer Newcomers?

First, list at least three key strengths of the church. For example, you may write, “Our church provides effective, fun-filled children’s programs.” Try not to write general items such as, “Our church is friendly.” Be specific.

Second, list how some of the strengths you identified could be communicated to visitors. For example, you may write, “We can use letters and e-mail announcements to visitors about our children’s programs.”

Third, based on our strengths, what type of newcomers may likely connect with our church? For example, if our strength is a well-organized children’s program, our church may connect best with young adults with children. If our strength is traditional worship, we may connect with a specific cluster of young and older adults who value historic forms of worship.

2. Who Is Our Audience?

First, focus on the spiritual condition of the person with whom you believe the church needs to connect. Is it the “shuffling saint” coming from another congregation? A pre-Christian with little church background? A de-churched person disillusioned by past church experience?

Second, put yourself in his or her shoes. The greater the difference between that person and those in our church, the more effort it will require to view our church from his or her perspective. (Another way to do this is to interview people similar to those God is calling you to reach.) How will he or she fit in with the social culture of our church? Is she a white-collar person and our church more blue-collar? Is this person younger and is the average age in our church more than 50?

3. What Is Our Process for Drawing Them In?

Draw a simple flow-chart for how you think newcomers connect into the church. For example, in a church that is reaching primarily de-churched people, follow up with a visitor only if they sign a “friendship folder” that is passed in every service. Signing in is the way people signal their willingness to step beyond anonymity. Therefore, base any follow-up process from the time they sign in.

- ◆ Do we track guests in a way that provides anonymity but also the opportunity to step forward?
- ◆ What are appropriate ways for us to seek to make a connection with them, and when?

—WAYNE SCHMIDT

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What the Unchurched See

Put yourself in the shoes of the first-time visitor to our church.

Exodus 23:9

Although there are many complex factors that affect the unchurched, certain issues of friendliness, cleanliness, and comfort directly impact their decision to attend and join a church. The following responses were generated from a survey of formerly unchurched people.

Friendliness

Friendliness of the people is a major attraction. Make sure a friendly greeting is genuine—the unchurched can detect manufactured friendliness, which is almost as bad as being unfriendly. Friendliness of members to non-Christians tends to be correlated to a church's evangelistic effectiveness. The pastor's modeling of friendliness is critical. A relationship is also apparent between the friendliness of a church and the members' willingness to accept change.

Nice Facilities and Adequate Space

Every six months, hire someone from outside the church to do a thorough examination of its grounds and buildings. Give her a notebook with a page for every room, hallway, foyer, and area of the grounds. Ask her to proceed from area to area taking notes, and then report her findings. You may be surprised what she finds. Though many visitors may return even with negative impressions, it is obvious that these issues are vitally important to them.

The Nursery/Preschool/Children's Issue

The issue that generated the most intense comments was the cleanliness, neatness, and safety of nursery, preschool, and children's areas. While parents with young children were among the most vociferous about quality care for children at church, they were not alone. Similar concerns are held by parents with older children, adult children, and no children. It seems that many unchurched people measure the quality of a church by the quality of childcare.

The unchurched expressed repeatedly how difficult it was for them to visit a church. And those who had young children were especially sensitive to their kids' needs. They raised the issues of safety, easy accessibility to their children, the ability to be notified if needed, concern and attitude of adult workers, and cleanliness.

Also cited by several of the formerly unchurched was how up-to-date the children's area was. Old furniture, broken toys, worn carpet, and 1980s baby beds are a sure sign of neglect.

Organization or Chaos

Several formerly unchurched said one of their first impressions was the organization of the church, particularly the organization and flow of the worship service. These former seekers remarked that such attention to detail was an indication that the church was serious about its mission. The worship service is where the most people gather at one time. If that isn't planned well, many visitors believe the church members do most everything else poorly.

Greeters and Welcome Centers

Greeter ministries in particular can be implemented with relative ease. In nearly one-third of the interviews, the unchurched shared positive first impressions when the church had a good greeter ministry and a welcome center. A helpful hand, a friendly smile, and good directions can make an eternal difference.

—THOM RAINER, adapted from "Impressed by First Impressions Part 3: What the Unchurched See"; www.churchcentral.com/nw/s/template/Article.html/id/20566. Used by permission.

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Attracting the Outsiders

Take a low-pressure approach to non-traditional visitors.

Hebrews 13:2

Churches receive visitors from two groups: insiders and outsiders. Insiders understand traditional church subculture. They know what to expect before they walk through the door. Outsiders have no idea what takes place during a church service. It's easy for them to feel anxious about their first visit. Here's how to give consideration to the feelings of the outsiders, without writing off the insiders.

Anxiety Reduction

Show people where to park and which door to enter. Place greeters at the entrance to direct people toward the auditorium, where they are handed a program that clearly outlines the order of events. Ushers guide people to open sections rather than specific seats, so they can claim their own space.

Keep anxiety to a minimum with the service itself. Use the first 30 minutes for programming such as a short Scripture reading to introduce the topic, a drama, and a short, easy song or chorus. After the chorus, during which people are standing, say something such as, "As you're seated, turn and greet some of the people around you." Only after these attempts to reduce the anxiety of visitors will you formally acknowledge them.

Tell visitors they are welcome guests we want to serve. If they want to find out more about our church, give them the options of stopping by a counter in the lobby for more information; being contacted later, which they can arrange by filling in a section of the program and dropping into the offering plate; or calling the church. Don't pressure visitors any further.

Intangible Overtures

Strive to achieve two important intangibles. The first is warmth.

Greeters. Train greeters and ushers how to make people feel comfortable, and to be comfortable themselves. Avoid perpetual scowls, arrogant attitudes, or overbearing dispositions.

The building. Warm up the church through interior appointments, plants, and auditorium banners. This is one area where smaller churches can be particularly effective. People also appreciate a clean, well-maintained building. Problems such as cracked paint, litter, dirt, and ugly trash cans can destroy a warm image.

Music. Many church music leaders include long, reverential pauses for prayer and brief silences during transitions. But almost any length of silence can be uncomfortable for visitors. Use pleasant background music anywhere else it might reduce anxiety.

Prayer. When congregational prayers are simple, basic, and conversational, God may not seem so foreign to visitors.

A second intangible is electricity created by the power of anticipation. Keep three things in mind:

Creativity. If the order of events is the same each week, people may not try too hard to attend regularly. We want people to walk into our church with a sense of anticipation, wondering what's going to be different this week.

First impressions. The first 15 minutes of a service are extremely important. Start strong, usually with music, and then vary the intensity level for individual elements of the service.

Scope. Electricity is not the result of trying to do something more and bigger each week. A simple song with piano accompaniment likely will be more effective than an unrehearsed full ensemble.

—DON COUSINS

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Why They Don't Come Back

Visitors can be turned off by behavior, buildings, and disorder.

Matthew 5:47

How do we find out why some visitors never return? Here are some situations that can place barriers before newcomers.

Large family networks. These networks have their own social gatherings in which outsiders aren't included. Such networks can be deadly to assimilating newcomers. Tactfully alert some in these families to the potential problems, challenging them to include outsiders in some of their social gatherings.

Existing friendships. The fellowship of existing friendships can sometimes be difficult to crack. If the energy of the congregation is given to caring for existing members rather than identifying the needs of newcomers, love becomes ingrown.

Facilities. The design of church buildings, especially poor layout of the foyer and other entrances, can be an obstacle to a newcomer's welcome. However, facilities can communicate warmth and friendliness. A small congregation in a large, old building can remove the pews, place padded chairs in a cozy arrangement, and bring the platform closer. Some visitors see a crowded service as a good sign, while others see it as an indication there's no room for them and they aren't needed.

A church's history. People seeking help don't go to a church because it belongs to a historic denomination. People return for a second visit because they experienced God's presence and the acceptance of God's people.

Special events. People attracted to a church by special events likely will stick only if the kind of ministry that first attracted them is sustained.

Philosophy of ministry. If our church life is generated from the platform on Sunday, integration means getting as many people into the sanctuary as possible. If the church emphasizes interaction among members and shared ministry, integration means providing ways for people to build friendships and to become involved in service.

A reputation of tension. A torn church cannot weave in new members. The answer is an emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation.

Confusing service styles. Much of what we do in our services, though familiar to members, is intimidating to visitors. If they didn't bring a Bible, print the Scripture passage in the bulletin. Offerings may make visitors suspect the church only wants their money. Announce that visitors are not obligated to give, but explain, "This is one way the people of our congregation express their worship to God."

Class and cultural distinctions. Some churches try to be all things to all people, but usually one social culture dominates. Sensitize insiders, gently and consistently, to the need to make everyone welcome, while recognizing that a church's growth likely will reflect its cultural and social composition.

Poor attitudes. Church power brokers, fearing a threat to their power base, may resist newcomers. Existing members can resent the financial cost of providing resources to care for the needs of newcomers. Sensitize the congregation by including newcomers on church committees. Their contributions can be a refreshing reminder to old-timers that newcomers think differently and must be taken into consideration.

—CALVIN RATZ

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Why They Do Come Back

Growing churches meet the needs of newcomers.

Acts 28:2

A critical factor in holding newcomers is atmosphere. It's an air that permeates the whole congregation, an intangible that says to first-timers, "We've been expecting you, and we're glad you've come." The sermon and other aspects of the church's ministry need to focus on the quality of the newcomer's social and spiritual experiences, providing the subtle yet overriding message: "Newcomers welcome."

People who hold no official position express the atmosphere of warmth and acceptance most effectively. The most gratifying welcome a visitor can receive is from someone he wouldn't expect to welcome him, in a place he didn't expect it to happen. Welcoming isn't just something done at the door; it's something everyone does all over the building.

Such an atmosphere can't be structured, but it can be fostered. Here are some things to encourage an atmosphere of warmth:

Involve Everyone in Welcoming

Have people direct traffic in your parking lot as people arrive for services. This not only heads off a lot of confusion, it also tells newcomers you want to make it easy for them to find their way. Assign several people to minister in the church foyer. Greeters should shake as many hands as possible. Others watch especially for visitors, ready to answer their questions and give directions. They also attempt to get first-timers to sign the guest book or a visitor's card. Have a staffed information counter. Train ushers how to be friendly and sensitive to outsiders. Assigning at least one or two staff members to serve in the foyer—before, during, and after every service—is a productive means of identifying and welcoming visitors.

Welcome from the Pulpit

The pastor needs to talk about visitors often. Use them in sermon illustrations. Remind the congregation how uncomfortable visitors may feel. During the time for greeting in the service, ask people to welcome at least six to eight people.

Provide Opportunities to Connect

What happens if people like the atmosphere of a church but then find no group of people with whom they can relate? This need not be a problem if a structure is in place to identify and place newcomers into smaller groupings in which they can minister and find a place of belonging. These can be large groups (a subgrouping of 40 to 100 people) or small, intimate groups (informal networks of friends; intimate, task-oriented groups; or structured small-group gatherings). The large groups are big enough not to intimidate newcomers, yet small enough for them to get to know others. Large groups can be based on fellowship, season of life, special interests, or on ministry. For instance, a choir can be a large group.

Assimilating churches build structures that ensure newcomers are identified, cared for, and integrated into the fabric of the church. Here are some ways to do this:

Identify newcomers. During services, ask each visitor to fill in an information card. Greeters and hosts can also get names, and addresses, if possible. Pastors working in the foyer can carry visitor cards to fill in on the spot. Some newcomers don't want to be spotlighted, so try not to overpower them. But if you don't get a name and phone number or address, your chances of holding and helping visitors is greatly diminished. Also, counselors should fill in response cards for those who respond to an altar call. New names and addresses are your prime contacts for ministry through the week. Without those names and addresses, midweek ministry to newcomers suffers.

Make midweek contact. Follow-up ministry starts Monday morning. Send a letter of welcome to every visitor, even from out of town. A staff member should process these names on Monday and Tuesday. This person can make an initial phone call, welcoming the visitor to your church and asking if it would be possible for someone from the church to make a call at the home. Try to gain further information, such as the approximate age of the

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adults and ages of children. Complete a family information form as the call is being made. Following the call, make the home visit. Match the family with the most suitable staff member, taking into account age, spiritual need, and special interests. Copies of the family information sheet should be shared at the next staff meeting. See that the appropriate lay leaders in the youth department, ministry programs, Sunday school, and adult fellowship groups are notified of the new family.

Maintain a newcomers' directory. Keep all newcomers in a separate directory for six months. Review this list at staff meetings. After six months on the list, make a decision to either place the name in the church directory as an assimilated family, delete the name as someone unlikely to come back, or leave the name on the newcomers list for another six months.

Provide a "Welcome to the Family" class. This is a six- to eight-week class for all newcomers, not just new converts. It is a relaxed and informal opportunity to get acquainted and feel at ease in the church. Spend considerable time outlining how the church functions and how to build friendships. Watch for specific needs, spiritual problems, and questions newcomers may have. Through lay leaders, reach out to meet these needs. Strongly encourage people to become involved in the church's activities, stressing that friendships are built as a byproduct of doing things together. After the class is completed, lay leaders should introduce the person to the leaders of the appropriate fellowship group and the pastor assigned to that group. Responsibility for integration is thus passed to the fellowship group.

Integrate into ministry. It's critical for newcomers to become involved in the church's ministry as quickly as possible. Until they do, they will think of the church as "them" rather than "us." Talk regularly about ministry opportunities. Highlight what's being done and share your vision. Encourage the congregation to fill in a ministry opportunity sheet. These sheets give newcomers an opportunity to express their interests.

—CALVIN RATZ

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Greeter Tips

The first face a greeter sees is looking for a warm, genuine welcome.

Matthew 25:35

Visitors are more likely to return to a church, leaders say, if they are genuinely welcomed. Churches, large and small, are recruiting ministry volunteers to staff the doors, parking lots, and welcome centers to greet people and provide information. Here are ideas drawn from churches of varying sizes.

- ◆ Divide your greeters' ministry into three segments: door greeters, welcome center greeters, and ministry department greeters. Door greeters welcome and assist all guests and members who enter the facilities. They open doors and give directions. The welcome center greeters help newcomers fill out guest information cards and escort them to Sunday school departments, where the third group meets them.
- ◆ Develop a rotation of available greeters and set up a schedule so greeters work 30 minutes before and 15 minutes after the start of services.
- ◆ Be aware of the arrival and departure habits of visitors. They can either come early or sneak in five to ten minutes after the start of services. Be ready to greet them during these times.
- ◆ The existence of a greeter ministry does not mean that everyone else in the congregation is off the hook. Emphasize to all members that they are part of the greeter ministry.
- ◆ Use the greeter ministry to help newcomers get connected once they join the church. Do this by extending the greeting process to include a quarterly dinner. If the church is small enough, the pastor can host this dinner at his home. At the dinner, get to know each other better, talk about the history of the church, and find ways to get the people involved. One possibility is to enlist them in the greeter ministry, because their memories of being the visitors are so fresh.
- ◆ Greeters should stand near entrances. If parking lot greeters are used, schedule enough to easily cover the entire lot.
- ◆ Don't be pushy. Some visitors will not want to give personal information on their first visit. If guest registration is used, ask them nicely if they would register.
- ◆ Greeters should be prepared to hand out bulletins, answer questions, give directions, or escort visitors to a welcome center.
- ◆ After a visitor walks away, watch to see if they appear lost or confused and offer assistance.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to ask if someone is a visitor. Make good eye contact.
- ◆ Welcome everyone, not just visitors.

—MARC S. BOTTS, adapted from "Greeters Help Churches Put Best Foot Forward";
<http://www.churchcentral.com/nw/s/template/Article.html/id/15249>. Used by permission.

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Ushers as Greeters

Showing visitors more than just where to be seated.

1 John 1:3

Even in churches that have greeters who are not part of the ushering team, greeting is still a partial responsibility of every usher. Here are some things for ushers to consider when greeting people.

Remember Names

- ◆ Create enough interest in a person to listen to his name until it is accurately understood in your own mind. Most people do not know the names of other persons because they do not truly listen. If necessary, ask the individual to repeat his or her name and perhaps even to spell it.
- ◆ Relate the name to someone or something that has special meaning. The person's name may be the same as that of a special friend or relative. Or a name may be a reminder of a place or an experience.
- ◆ Use the person's name at least three times as soon as possible. Call the person by name as you speak to her. Use the person's name while introducing her to someone else. Tell someone else about the person you've met, using her name as you tell of the experience of meeting her.
- ◆ Write the name in a notebook as soon as you are alone. After using a person's name several times and then writing it in a notebook, the name is much easier to remember. And in case of a memory lapse, the notebook is a ready reference.

Concentrate on the Other Person

Look the visitor in the eye, smile, shake hands warmly, and above all let your conversation focus on him. Do not let everything he says remind you of something about yourself. Think of good things you can say enthusiastically about your pastor and the people in your church, and let these things become a part of your conversation with all visitors.

Introduce People to One Another

After greeting new people, make every effort not to leave them standing alone. If possible, leave them in a conversation with someone to whom you have introduced them. The more people a new person can meet in the church, the more possibilities there are for building bridges that may cause the visitor to want to return. As far as possible, try to introduce visitors to people who may have some mutual interests.

There are just a few traditional rules of etiquette (though your particular church culture may lend itself to a more informal approach):

- ◆ Begin by calling the name of the honored person. For instance: "Dr. Famous, I want you to meet Mr. Lesser-Known." Your pastor, visiting church dignitaries, older citizens, and well-known persons are among those who are honored, and therefore their name is typically mentioned first.
- ◆ Introduce people of lower seniority, younger age, or lesser distinction to people of higher seniority, greater age, or greater distinction. For instance: "Mrs. Old-Timer, I'd like you to meet Mrs. Newcomer."
- ◆ Use full names. It is generally not good etiquette to use either first names or last names by themselves in introductions.

—LESLIE PARROTT. Adapted from *Serving as a Church Usher* (Zondervan, 2002). Used by permission.

WELCOMING VISITORS



A Safe Nursery

Assure visitors they can leave their children without fear.

Matthew 19:14

Some of the visitors to your church will be parents with small children. If you can show the parents that your nursery is a secure place with the following safeguards, you will increase the chances of the family returning.

State-of-the-Art Products

Show parents that everything in the nursery is safe. Have sanitary products available such as odor-free diaper pails. Portable cribs and playpens are essential in a nursery, especially if they include a bassinet feature. Also helpful are glider rockers and matching ottomans. Consider using stationary play centers.

Safe Products

Make sure the cribs and other furniture are certified by the Juvenile Products Manufacturers Association. Such products will be clearly marked.

Here are more tips for evaluating the safety of furniture and accessories:

- ◆ **Baby gates.** Babies can get their heads caught in gates with large V-shaped or diamond-shaped openings. Look for gates with openings less than one-and-a-half inches or that are made of rigid mesh screens.
- ◆ **Highchairs.** Most children fall from highchairs because they're not strapped into them. Be sure highchairs have sturdy straps and belts, and wide bases for stability.
- ◆ **Playpens.** Look for tiny mesh netting and slat spaces that are no more than two-and-three-eighths inches wide. If a secondhand playpen has vinyl-covered top rails, don't use it, because children can bite off and choke on the vinyl.
- ◆ **Cribs.** Any crib should have no missing, loose, or broken screws and brackets. There should be no more than two-and-three-eighths inches between slats. Bumper pads should fit the entire crib, and tie or snap into place. Cribs should have no corner posts more than one-sixteenth of an inch above the end panels, no decorative headboards or footboards with large openings, and no cracked or peeling paint or splinters.
- ◆ **Toys.** Toy chests should have spring-loaded lid supports that won't trap children inside. They should also have ventilation holes in case children do get trapped. All toys in a nursery should be washable, because many children will be using them.

Extra Precautions

Here are a few more suggestions to show that your facility is safe for children:

- ◆ Keep the cords of window blinds out of reach by hanging them at the top of the window covering.
- ◆ Use changing tables that have safety straps and have drawers or shelves that are easily accessible.
- ◆ If you use hook-on chairs that attach to table edges, don't place them where children's feet can push against the table and dislodge the chairs.
- ◆ If the nursery air is dry, consider using a cool-mist humidifier.
- ◆ Make sure babies are strapped safely in chairs or pillow supports, especially if a nursery attendant is watching a lot of children at once.
- ◆ Clean areas where babies have been changed or spit up or left other messes. Make sure all chemicals have child-resistant closures.

—ROBIN DIMATTIA

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A Welcoming Adult Class

Build on a newcomer's desire to be involved.

Proverbs 2:10

Visitors to an adult Sunday school class usually come because they have tried the worship hour, liked it, and are looking for deeper involvement. Bible study happens many places, but accepting new members begins in Sunday school. Set a modest goal for your classes: Have one visitor feel accepted and return. "Accepted" is defined as never having to feel or say, "I'm an outsider."

Acceptance One Step at a Time

Acceptance comes when the class offers natural steps to involvement. Create a progression, repeating it each week in case other newcomers dropped in.

1. Begin with no one seated. A person walking in will see people standing and sipping coffee or tea, talking from behind the protective shield of a Styrofoam cup. At the call to order, let everyone choose seats (from multiple rows) at the same time.
2. Require no previous experience with the group. Prearranged announcements should cover only upcoming events and programs. Begin the lesson with humor but not inside jokes; locking a visitor out of the punch line is fatal to growth. Singing works poorly with fewer than 30, because each person perceives his or her voice as too conspicuous. If you sing, keep songs simple and make words available, displaying them up front so newcomers aren't the only ones looking at the words. If the lesson requires knowledge from the previous week, begin by summarizing salient points from the previous lessons.
3. Require no previous experience with the Bible. State the text at the beginning of the lesson. Once people realize they need Bibles, offer them to everyone who does not have them, with the day's key passage already marked.
4. Prepare people for greater participation. Ask people to form small circles only after they have milled around, chosen seats, and heard some content. Instruct each new person to be prepared to give first and last names and to answer a simple question about him- or herself. By having a few seconds to prepare their comments, people are not as apprehensive about starting conversations. Have people jot their thoughts before asking them to talk with the five or six people they've just met. Only then ask for volunteers to answer the question with the group.
5. Discourage natural group selection. Form circles by various methods—parts of town the attenders are from, or birthdays. This keeps old friends from clustering at the expense of newcomers. Offer other avenues for meeting needs of deeper intimacy and Bible study. Encourage regulars to develop a ministry mentality. Once every five or six weeks, discuss how to help newcomers: What help do people need when they are new in town? What would make a newcomer comfortable in a crowd of strangers?

—DON MICHAEL McDONALD

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Small and Visitor-Friendly

Growth can happen in a church of any size.

Proverbs 3:27–28

Visitors gauge how friendly a church is by the way it presents itself. Smaller churches may unknowingly project a negative image. Buildings are sometimes old, and there's not always money for proper upkeep. Bulletins and church literature may look amateurish. The people of the church often don't see these things because the church is so familiar. Perhaps they have never known any other standard. However, these clues do not escape the notice of the first-time visitor. The physical plant and public image communicate the personality of the church.

Beyond the material considerations stand the people themselves: how they react to visitors and how they treat each other. No matter how much the church wants to reach out, growth will not happen if the building and the people fail to say, "Welcome!"

Pretend You're a Visitor

To build awareness, walk church members through the building as if they were first-time visitors. Start a block or so away from the church, give them pencils and note cards, and try to create a "first-time visitor" mindset for them. Then "visit" your church. What does the general appearance of the building and grounds communicate about the congregation? How at home do they feel? Can they find the restrooms without having to ask the embarrassing question? Is the foyer cluttered and messy? Are minor repairs left undone? Do the walls and posters tell them anything? If one is not a Christian and has seldom been to church, what would this building say? Would they have any idea where to go or what they were supposed to do? The unwritten signs around the building may say a lot more than any welcoming committee ever does.

Apply the same technique to the Sunday activities. Is any effort made to create a good impression? Or is too much taken for granted? How many people talk to visitors? How much time elapses before someone greets newcomers? Does the church give any impression that it even expects someone new to come?

Sharpen Your Image

Extend image-oriented thinking to the public images your church projects. What does the Sunday bulletin look like? Although it can cost a church a bit of money, consider custom designing the bulletins. Since bulletins generally go home with people, you want them to carry away a good impression, so it pays in the end to bear the expense. Also consider having T-shirts professionally designed with the church's logo. Use the shirts for sports, youth activities, vacation Bible school, and other occasions, and be excited when you see them dot the town.

Whatever you decide to do—even as a small church—maintain a sharp image before the community, one that says, "We know what we're doing, and we intend to do it well."

This, of course, is not to negate the church's spiritual ministry role. But with a little attention to detail and just a little money, much pre-evangelism can be accomplished with first-time visitors before any words are spoken or any visits made. And the members themselves begin to take pride in their church as well.

—GARY HARRISON

WELCOMING VISITORS



Further Exploration

Resources for welcoming visitors.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

- “A Welcoming Church” Assessment Pack
- “Connecting Newcomers” Training Theme

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Leadership Journal—Special Issue on “Reaching & Connecting” (Summer 1998).

The premier journal for church leaders devoted an issue to “Reaching & Connecting.” Read this issue online for free: www.leadershipjournal.net, click on “Archives,” scroll down, and click on the issue. You’ll find a list of articles from that issue that relate to how your church can improve its connecting process.

ChurchCentral.com. This website equips leaders to grow healthier churches. Includes an article archive.

Discontinuity and Hope by *Lyle E. Schaller.*

This book is more conceptual than practical, but it gives the big picture of why attracting and keeping newcomers is so critical in this era of rapid change. See especially “New Generations Bring a New Context” (Abingdon Press, 1999; ISBN 068708539X).

The Five Star Church by *Stan Toler and Alan Nelson.*

Two strong chapters in this book are “The Secret Church Shopper” and “Evaluation and Measurement” (Regal, 1999; ISBN 0830723234).

The Purpose-Driven Church by *Rick Warren.*

A classic on personal evangelism (Nelson, 1995; ISBN 0310201063).

Rethinking the Church by *James Emery White.*

This takes every aspect of how a church functions and forces the reader to check his or her assumptions. Check out the chapters on “Rethinking Evangelism” and “Rethinking Discipleship” (Baker, 2003; ISBN 0801091659).

Serving as a Church Usher by *Leslie Parrott* (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 0310247632).

Serving as a Church Greeter by *Leslie Parrott* (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 0310247640).