

Helping New People Fit in.

by Allen Ratta

Churches suffer from entrenched practices.



A Customer Service Approach

What is wrong with the above approach? Simple! The responsibility for the visitor to connect to a church is placed almost entirely on THE VISITOR'S SHOULDERS! The visitor must read publications and listen to announcements and then figure out on their own how they might best find a place of belonging and/or service within the church. If businesses operated this way towards customers they would soon go out of business.

Church Talking Heads

The primary blind spot is the singular focus on church communications to promote the message. Great attention is given to the content and quality of church publications and communications. Pulpit announcements are enthusiastic with carefully crafted and appealing phraseology. Many churches augment their communications efforts with PowerPoint presentations and/or high-end video commercials. The underlying thought is, "If we can communicate well enough and relate through culturally "cool" means then our audience will hear, respond and participate in the advertised events and ministry offerings." This may be somewhat true when it comes to involving existing members but it is fatally flawed when it comes to large numbers of today's church visitors.

The Need to Listen and Respond

Everyone knows that good communications involve more than talking. The same is true of good church communications. This is particularly when it comes to your church's visitors who possess no initial loyalty to you. It is critical that a church does more than just talk at its visitors but puts in place some reliable mechanisms where it can listen to its visitors. The failure to do this often leads to significant disconnects and lost opportunities between a church and prospective future members.

The Proactive Approach

If a church is to assume the primary responsibility to connect its newcomers then new church initiatives will have to be developed and put in place. They will need to function with a highly dependable reliability. At a minimum, a cadre of volunteer callers will be required who can communicate easily with the church and each other. They will also need to be mobilized to maintain sustained contact over several weeks with an ever increasing match of callers to the needs and desires of the visitor.

The Proactive, Outward-Focused Posture



The Top Eight Connections Visitors Are Looking for in a Church

1. **Enough Friends**

There is a solid body of research spanning over three decades where visitors rate friendships as the number one factor in whether or not they stay in a church. Studies repeatedly show that when visitors make somewhere between 5 and 7 friends in the church that they become long-term adherents. The key factor is that people feel that they are adequately "known in community," as they walk about the church during weekend services. Without this critical mass of relationships newcomers will continue to feel like outsiders and strangers and will not perceive of your church as their church.

2. **Close Friends**

Over time, the research shows that it is not enough for a newcomer to have a "number" of friends but the caliber of those friendships becomes paramount. If a church does not intentionally provide opportunities where newcomers can develop deep and lasting friendships, they will lose predictably large numbers of their newcomers over time. Small groups are the most reliable mechanism for developing these kinds of relational connections across every segment of a church.

3. **Service Opportunities**

Many churches have an anti-growth wall placed around territorial ministries of the church. This can be particularly true of worship ministries where long term stakeholders have long ago staked claims to certain areas of ministry. Their resentment at the intrusion of newcomers can be quite pronounced. This mindset needs to be addressed ahead of time if a church is to possess an attitude of openness to outsiders. This initial openness or the lack thereof, is a key determinant as to whether or not visitors will stay.

4. **Meaningful Service Opportunities**

The phrase, "use them or lose them," very much applies to church visitors. In the beginning newcomers are just satisfied to serve. Studies show that over time visitors will determine whether they stay based upon the caliber of service opportunities made available to them. It is not enough to serve but newcomers must feel that their service matches their gifts and passion and that it is personally meaningful enough to them.

5. **Meaningful Worship Services**

The key determinant, according to visitors, is whether or not they feel they have experienced a "God encounter" in the worship services. Style of music is superseded by this one over-arching consideration. It is interesting to note that this one consideration far outweighs the content or the delivery of a sermon.

6. **Spiritual Growth**

If people do not feel that they are progressing spiritually, they will begin looking for opportunities and other places where they can experience spiritual growth. Practical need-meeting messages that challenge the status quo (versus profound theological treatises) have a direct impact on personal growth and spiritual maturation. Pastors that take the time to develop sermon homework compete with spiritual exercises and practical applications are seeing exciting results. This can be particularly life-changing if that homework is the curricula for small groups meeting throughout the week.

7. **Quality Children's Ministries**

There is nothing that quite replaces an enthusiastic greeting by one's children who loved the children's ministries. The converse is also true. It is vital to conduct age appropriate programs that can adequately hold the interests of children at various developmental stages. The greatest Bible teacher in the world can be torture to a group of young children. A young energetic adult who gets children dancing and singing can delight the hearts of young congregants and keep them coming back!

8. **Youth Ministries with Impact**

For a parent of teens, there is often no more important agenda on their mind than to find a church that will effectively minister to their youth. Every other aspect of a church can exceed expectations but this one factor can dissuade even the most enthused visitor. A small group of youth with a passionate leader can sometimes meet the deep needs of teens better than a large group where social pressures prevail. It is also very helpful if small churches network closely with leaders of effective para-church youth ministries so they can augment their family ministry offerings with a quality youth program that is at least somewhat identified with the church.

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