

TRANSITIONING A CHURCH TO BECOME GUEST FRIENDLY

1. The Pastors Mindset Shift.

Most of us have been Christians for so long we forget what it is like for those who are not Christians. Look at the church through the eyes of a guest. What it is like for those who are first time visitors? When we begin to look at what we do and say through the eyes of a first time visitor, we begin to develop a "Guest Mindset". At Palmerston North we don't use the word "Seeker" because we believe most people who come to church are not seeking, but come as invited guests. The word "Seeker" assumes people are spiritually open and seeking, when they may not be.

At Sutton Coldfield Baptist in Birmingham, in 1989 I first encountered a truly "guest friendly" church. We were greeted in the car park, twice in the foyer and again inside the church. Then we received an invitation to a meal. I later found out it was all part of a deliberate strategy. That church was winning heaps of people to Christ, and was growing, partly due to it's guest friendliness. At Whangaparaoa I was asked by a new staff member "Why don't you introduce yourself on Sundays? Visitors don't have clue who you are." I had assumed people knew who I was. My mindset was "Church is for us".

We have to get inside the mind of our visitors and understand what it is they need and what they are looking for.

2. The Pastor must model guest friendliness.

- Do your own "market surveys" of those who are new to the church. Ask them "What did we do well – what could we have done better?" "What made it easy for you? What were the barriers?" You can do this at newcomers lunches. Encourage feedback, especially from people who have had bad experiences – learn from your mistakes!
- Look out for new people. Greet them personally. Get their name and address. Introduce them to some one else. Send them a follow up greeting letter. Ask someone else to look out for them next Sunday. Tell your leaders that you are not available to talk to them when guests are about as the guests are the priority. Tell them you expect them to make the guests their priority too.
- Introduce yourself every time you are up front, and insist that every worship leader and upfront person does the same. You do this for the sake of the one guest who might be present. It's also reinforcing the "guest mentality" in your people.
- Explain what you are doing in church services – How you are going to serve communion. Where to take the babies out for nursery. How to find the children's programme. Guests are not expected to give to the offering. If guests are present (and we assume that they are in every service) then tongues messages are not appropriate. (1 Cor 14:23)
- Park your car far away from the church, to leave the best parks for guests.
- Tell stories of people won to Christ through being guest friendly.

3. The Staff and Leaders have to model guest friendliness.

- Teach them what you expect of them. – How to start a conversation with strangers. Use the Caleb Course "Picture Stack". Develop systems for passing on names of guests. Instruct your leaders on where they park their cars! Teach them about introducing new people to others with similar interests.
- Develop a team of people who are good at welcoming.
- We have to model that this is high value for us as leaders.

4. Minimise the cringe factor. (Ask your guests what the cringe factors are)

- Stay away from cringe things like; Signing visitors books. Getting guests to stand. Pinning a visitors badge on guests. Guests usually want to remain anonymous for at least two months. (This is difficult in a smaller church) They are checking you out.
- Do things subtly. Different coloured newsletters for guests.

5. Publicity material.

- Look at what you have on offer from the viewpoint of a guest. What does it say about your church and you as a people? What first impressions does it create?
 - What do your guests want to know (as opposed to what you want to tell them!)
 - Wanganui Central – Brochures in the toilets next to the hand dryers!
- 6. Set-up of your information desk – layout of foyer, noticeboards - guest layout.**
- Does your layout declare who gets served first? If the missionary notice board is the first thing a guest sees, it tells them who is the most important in the church.
 - What brochures do you have on display for guests? Are they all of equal value? In other words, is a brochure about how to begin following Jesus stuck alongside a sheet from someone who has a house to rent?
- 7. Appearance of buildings, tidiness, signage etc.**
- When we arrived at Central Baptist we met with 250 members of the congregation in groups of 10. We asked why they didn't bring their friends to church. One of the reasons given by many was that they were ashamed of the buildings. So for us, doing up the buildings was a mission issue.
 - Is it easy to know where to go in your church, or even how to get into the auditorium? Before at Central Baptist, the toilets were down a long, dark corridor and were very poorly signposted. Yet the first thing a guest wants to know is where the toilets are.
 - Rubbish lying around, state of gardens, peeling paint says a lot about who you are as a people.
- 8. The key issue – How much do you really want to be guest friendly? There is a big cost.**
- Cost \$690,000 to do up our buildings at Central Baptist.
 - Cost of winning congregation opinion and getting buy in. Guest friendliness has to become such a core value for your people that they are willing to pay the price.
 - Get some runs on the board with battles you can win, before tackling the “biggies”. There are lots of small changes you can make that won't cost a lot and that won't “rock the boat”.
 - Putting guests first is a value that constantly gets eroded by our selfishness unless we continually reinforce it and model it as leaders.

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