



## 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**

Depending on the size of your church, you may want to 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. Greeters should shake as many hands as possible. Others watch especially for visitors, ready to answer their questions and give directions. Have a manned information counter. Train ushers how to be friendly and sensitive to those who are new.

### **Welcome from the Pulpit**

The pastor needs to talk about visitors often. Remind the congregation how uncomfortable visitors may feel. Encourage people to welcome one another.

### **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 encourage newcomers into smaller groupings in which they can find a place of belonging.

*Identify newcomers.* Don't put people on the spot or embarrass them, but do create ways of gathering information – informally in conversation, information cards at a desk or in welcome packs.

*Make midweek contact.* Follow-up ministry starts Monday morning. Send a letter of welcome to every visitor, even from out of town.

*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 "Welcome to the Family" opportunities.* This might be a one-off get together or a full six- to eight-week class. It is a relaxed and informal opportunity to get acquainted and feel at ease in the church. Spend time outlining how the church functions and how to build friendships. Watch for specific needs, spiritual problems, and questions newcomers may have. Invite some of those who have recently joined the church to join these brand new ones. Both of these groups are likely to have personal 'space' for making new friendships.

*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