



Why They Don't Come Back

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

Matthew 5:47

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 may come to a church initially because it belongs to a historic denomination, but it won't usually hold them on that basis. 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 the living of community and shared ministry, integration means providing ways for people to build friendships and to become connected.

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 or have on the screen. Offerings may make visitors suspect the church only wants their money. Announce that visitors are not obligated to give, but explain.

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 and the changes they represent. Existing members can resent the financial cost of providing resources to care for the needs of newcomers.

—CALVIN RATZ