

Moments of decision

What do guests see, experience, and feel in your church?

As I entered the church I was visiting, a man carrying an armload of papers greeted me. He shook my hand while complaining to another man about some church business that should not have been discussed in my presence. In a nervous attempt to make me feel welcome, he said, “It was nice to meet you. You’ll like our church. It’s a very friendly place.”

When I entered the sanctuary, a woman stood up to give the announcements and said, “We do not have potluck today as the bulletin mentioned. Sorry, we had to cancel it.” A man interrupted her by saying, “No, we moved it to the park.” Another person shouted, “That is not a good idea since it is going to rain.” Finally, the pastor came to the front and made it clear that the potluck had been moved to the following week. This back-and-forth exchange took several minutes; but it felt like an eternity.

I was so embarrassed that I wanted to crawl under the pew. I prayed that there were no visitors. As a seasoned church member, I said in my heart, “I will never come back here.” Imagine how an outside visitor would have felt.

Encounters of the right kind

When a person talks to a member of your church, calls on the telephone, receives a brochure in the mail, or drives into your parking lot, this could be a moment of decision. A moment of decision is any occasion in which a person comes in contact with and forms an impression of your church. This impression in an individual’s mind is generalized to your entire church. The end result of the contact is a feeling positive or negative—about your church.

Think like a guest

To understand a new person’s experience, you need to set aside your “insider” understanding about your church and think like an outsider. Of the many moments of decision, we will look at eight that are faced by newcomers to the church. For each one, think about what happens now and what should happen when a guest encounters these at your church.

1. *Driving up to the church building.* Is the landscaping around your church well-kept and the parking lot nicely paved and clear of debris? Are the exterior walls and windows of the building attractive? Are there parking spaces clearly marked for guests?

2. *Walking up to the front door.* Are there warm and friendly people greeting guests before they enter the building? Is the entrance clearly marked? Does the entrance present an inviting look which says, “Please come in”?

3. *Entering the building.* Are the sounds that guests hear upon entering the building uplifting? Is there a pleasant odor? Does the decor seem attractive and welcoming? Are the directional signs easily visible? Are there people available to answer questions and give assistance?

4. *Meeting friendly people.* Are church members outgoing and approachable? Do they express an attitude of acceptance to newcomers? Is there a comfortable and authentic friendliness?

5. *Experiencing ministries and services.* Is the child care area clean, bright, and open? Are the restrooms clean and free of unpleasant odors? Are classrooms nicely decorated?

6. *Meeting ushers and entering the sanctuary.* Do ushers smile and express a friendly attitude? Is the atmosphere of the worship area vibrant and happy? Is there room to sit without being unduly crowded? Are guests welcomed graciously and treated with respect?

7. *Participating in the worship service.* Is the order of the worship service easy to follow? Are the songs easy for the newcomers to sing? Are the words of the songs available? Do guests feel at ease and comfortable? Do guests find a friendly atmosphere upon leaving the worship area? Are they greeted in positive ways by people around them? Are they invited to a refreshment table to talk and meet others?

8. *Contact follow-up.* Do guests receive a personal contact within 48 hours of their first visit to your church? Are they invited back? Do you, in some way, surprise guests with an extra measure of service like giving them a book or a basket of goodies? Are guests put on your mailing list for appropriate future contact? Do guests receive a church newsletter describing ministries they might find interesting? Do church members call them to extend a personal invitation to special events?

What do guests see, experience, and feel from these moments of decision in your church? What can your church begin to do to make these positive experiences for your guests? As you move forward in these areas, keep in mind to do everything with excellence and spend many hours in prayer so that people who come to your church will experience the presence of God.

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