

Teach Your Entire Church to Welcome Visitors

The five-minute rule and other tips

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After being part of the same church community for more than 15 years, my husband and I found ourselves looking for a new church home last year. During the 30-plus years I've been following Jesus, I have been a member of only three churches. (This has more to do with the fact that I have not moved outside the region than that I am exceptional human being.)

Because I was part of the leadership in each of these three churches, I knew at least half of the people in church every Sunday. Prior to this year, I've never had the uncomfortable experience of walking into a sanctuary, sitting by myself, and then leaving without speaking to anyone. (Saying "Thank you!" to the person who kicked the tissue box in my direction after I sneezed multiple times doesn't count.)

Some visitors, perhaps those who are part of the witness relocation program (hat tip to Anne Lamott), prefer to slip in and out unnoticed. That profile probably counts for a small percentage of church visitors. Until this year, I took for granted how relationships enrich Sunday morning. Hearing my friend's laughter when the pastor made a joke, sitting behind a couple whom my husband and I had in premarital class, and giving hugs to those who had become dear to me all made me want to get out of bed on Sunday mornings.

I was primed and eager to find new friendships, or at least not be invisible. However, week after week, as soon as the benediction was given, folks scattered and soon became engaged with their friends, leaving me—and all the others visitors—very much alone.

My experiences are not isolated. One of the top reasons visitors do not return to a church is that they don't feel welcome. Many of the churches we attended over the past year have been friendly—offering cheerful hellos and smiles—but that won't convince people to return. As leaders, we need to intentionally engage with our visitors and go beyond opening the door and handing them a bulletin.

Treating Sunday morning visitors as we do those who step over the threshold into our literal homes makes all the difference. Certainly, none of us would greet someone who just walked in our front door and then turn and walk away—yet that happens in far too many churches on Sunday morning. The basics—making eye contact, offering a warm handshake, asking if they need help finding kids' ministry—go a long way in easing the anxiety that many of us feel as we enter an unfamiliar space, but there's more we can do.

Obviously, not everyone comes to church with the same set of relational needs. Pay attention to your guests' behavioral choices. Do they come in just as the service has started and sit in the last row? They may be Anne Lamott's friends and need space. Do they go directly into the fellowship hall/coffee queue? That's a great time to casually greet them and ask a few non-threatening questions. If you are part of a large church, particularly one with multiple services, try to avoid the potentially awkward "Is this your first time here?" Someone asked me this in year 11 of our last assignment. *Um, no. But is it yours?* (I promise I didn't say that.)

After the service, being genuinely curious about others will often lead to engagement and help visitors feel like someone actually cares that they show up. Try asking non-threatening, non-status questions such as “Do you have plans to watch the Oscars/Downton Abbey season finale/local sporting event this afternoon?” or “How do you spend your days?” (versus “What do you do for work?” which can make some folks feel cornered).

Listen without an agenda and watch their body language. It will be obvious when they are done. If discernment is not one of your gifts, watch their eyes. If they search furtively for the exit or can't stop checking their handheld, offer a simple “Thanks for coming and hope to see you again.” There's no need to pressure them to return next week or check out a small group. Here's an important tip: Look for that person next week, if only to say, “Hi! Good to see you” as you head for a bagel. Continuity raises the possibility of friendship, which ultimately all of us are hoping for.

To help your leaders and teammates execute this well, you might consider instituting a five-minute rule. Essentially, both leaders and regular attenders are discouraged from talking to their friends for five minutes once the service ends. If you can convince at least 20 percent of your leaders to buy into this, friendly people on a mission will be searching for new faces every week. The goal is not to swarm visitors but to avoid what has happened to me so many times in the past year—no eye contact, no conversation.

Effectively and intentionally welcoming visitors to your church is really quite simple. View Sunday morning through the eyes of a newcomer, be willing to guide your leaders, and make gradual adjustments when needed. It might be as simple as reminding them to warmly and authentically extend hospitality. I'm convinced that if we mean it when we say, “I'm glad you came. I hope to see you again,” chances are, we will.