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Ways to Build Strength Welcoming New People

Recognize Hospitality as a Ministry

- Teach that hospitality is at the core of the Gospel.
- Teach your congregation to honor Christ in everyone and that God seeks to be in relationship with ALL persons.

Make a Good First Impression

- Convey a clear invitation and a statement of welcome in all communications directed at the external community -- advertisements, banners, flyers, website, etc.
- Know that 40% of visitors make up their mind about a church before they even see the pastor, according to Barna Research. Within two minutes of the beginning of a service visitors have formed an opinion about whether the congregation is friendly.
- Care for your building and grounds as a way of honoring your attendees and honoring God. A well-cared-for building demonstrates a commitment to excellence and communicates that what the church does is important.
- Have clear exterior and interior signage that guides a visitor everywhere he or she needs to go.
- Reserve special parking places for visitors. Encourage church members and staff to park off-site or in more remote spaces. If parking lot congestion is an issue, recruit volunteer parking attendants.
- Make your nursery clean, safe, sanitary, well-equipped, and visually appealing to children and their parents. Use a space that is easy to find and convenient to the sanctuary. Make sure your nursery workers and procedures inspire confidence on the part of parents.
- Make sure your restrooms are neat and clean.

Be Intentional about Saying Hello and Good Bye

- Station greeters at all entrances, in classroom areas, and in the parking lot or entry walks, if appropriate.
- Identify your greeters and ushers with a special badge or name tag so visitors who need information can easily identify them.
- Encourage friendly, out-going persons with the gift of "hospitality" to serve as greeters and ushers. Don't expect that just anyone can do these jobs well. Provide regular training that helps them see the church through a visitor's eyes.
- Escort newcomers to the nursery, classrooms, coffee hour, etc. Don't just point the way or give directions.



- Adopt the “rule of three,” which says members will not talk to other members in the first three minutes following the service – typically how long it takes guests to exit.
- Enact the “circle of ten” rule – that each member will greet anyone, member or guest, who comes within ten feet of them.
- Say, “I don’t think we’ve met before ...” if you are not sure if the person next to you is a member or a visitor.
- Ask outgoing church members to sit in the pews where visitors most commonly sit, often near the entrance or in the back.
- Post someone at every exit to shake hands and thank people for coming. Ask worship participants (readers, music leaders, liturgists, etc..) to do this since their faces will be familiar.

Help Newcomers Feel at Home in Worship

- Accept and encourage casual attire.
- Do not ask visitors to stand and identify themselves. Seventy percent of new attendees feel negatively about being recognized. However, they do expect people to be friendly and welcoming.
- Provide nametags for the whole congregation and develop the habit of wearing them. Form a “tag team” to organize and promote name tag use.
- Review your church bulletin and other printed material to make sure information is not “insider oriented.” Avoid church jargon and assuming that people understand the context.
- Make sure your order of worship is easy for a visitor to follow. Include written or verbal explanations of what is going on and why. Print the words to all prayers, songs, and responses.
- Sing at least one hymn each Sunday that is well known outside the church, such as “Amazing Grace,” “Joyful Joyful,” or “Morning Has Broken.”
- Include a welcome to visitors in the open words before the service. Make sure the person speaking identifies him or herself. It is best for the pastor to issue this welcome.
- Remember that visitors sometimes arrive a few minutes late. Don’t front load all the information directed at them.
- Place information about your church’s ministries where a visitor can easily find it – preferably in the pew, or a clearly marked location near the entry points used by visitors. Don’t expect them to go someplace else to find it.
- Prepare Visitors Packets to be handed out by greeters with information about your church programs.
- Give visitors with small children a small activity packet (with crayons, pipe cleaners, stickers, etc.) as they enter worship.
- Avoid all talk about money with visitors.
- Keep the discussion of “family business” to a minimum in the services. Limit announcements.



Follow up with your Visitors

- Get the names and addresses of first-time visitors. Some churches use visitors' cards, but asking ALL worshippers to record attendance makes it more likely visitors will sign. Visitors don't want to be singled out.
- Make a special effort to remember visitors' names and call them by name.
- Make at least one follow-up contact with first-time visitors within 24 to 36 hours of their visit – a letter from the pastor, a phone call, a hand-written note, an email message. Many churches deliver a gift, such as freshly baked cookies or a church coffee mug, to visitors' homes. The purpose is to communicate friendliness, not get a membership commitment.
- Develop a system or data base for keeping track of visitors, their contact information, and the frequency of visits. A mailing list of persons who have visited in the past is one of your best marketing tools.
- Don't overlook visitors who come to the church for the first time for an event other than worship.
- Once someone has attended three times, they should be invited to join the church with a pastoral visit and/or an invitation to take part in an inquirers or new member class.
- Encourage visitors to get connected with activities and groups, even if they are not ready to join.

Be More Inviting

- Hold an Open House Sunday at least once a year.
- Organize a "bring-a-friend" Sunday at least once a year.
- Extend extra hospitality during back-to-school time, Christmas and Easter, when persons are most likely to consider visiting a church.
- Start a personal invitation ministry. Three out of four people attend a church for the first time because they were invited. Yet less than half of church members say they have invited someone in the last year.
- Provide training to members on how to invite others to church.
- Print special invitations to Christmas Eve services that people can deliver to friends.
- Plan special events – concerts, lectures, etc. -- that appeal to those outside the church and that members feel comfortable inviting someone to.
- Have special recognition Sundays for scout groups, preschool families, or other community groups meeting in your church to encourage them to attend worship.

Become More Aware of Visitors and their Concerns

- Gather feedback on how visitors respond to your church through surveys, focus groups, or interviews.
- Conduct a "welcome audit" annually.
- Provide training on welcoming at least once a year.
- Send your welcome team to visit other churches and report back on how they experienced their reception.



Some Additional Resources

Bernard, Fred and Steve Clapp. *Widening the Welcome of Your Church: Biblical Hospitality and the Vital Congregation*. Christian Ministry Resources, 1996.

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Hershey, S. Joan. *The First 30 Seconds: Guide to Hospitality for Greeters and Ushers*. Fort Wayne, Indiana: New Life Ministries. (www.newlifeministries-nlm.org)

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Keifert, Patric R., *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

Lindsay, Terry. *The Ministry of Church Ushers and Greeters*. Forward Leadership Resources.

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Oden, Amy (editor). *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 2001.

Swanson, Roger K., and Shirley F. Clement. *The Faith-Sharing Congregation: Developing a Strategy for The Congregation as Evangelist*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996.

For additional resources and to subscribe to the Lewis Center's free biweekly online newsletter, *Leading Ideas*, go to <http://www.churchleadership.com>.

