

How Do New People See Your Church?

The Lewis Center asked church members in several states to attend nearby churches as visitors and report on their findings. Many reflect the difficulty churches have in viewing things from the perspective of persons new to their church. The challenge is to think of everything from arrival to departure from the perspective of someone who has never been to your church before. This new perspective will shape signage, the bulletin, the work of greeters, and a host of other things.



Signage

Most visitors found directional signage inadequate. Try this exercise. Have some people do a “drive in and walk through” as if they had never been to the church before. Was it easy to find the church? Is the entrance clear? Is there visitor parking? Are there greeters near where people park? Is it obvious what door to enter for worship? Are there directions to the nursery and restrooms? When you add signage, current members will hardly notice, but newcomers will immediately recognize that you are “expecting them.” It is somewhat like turning the front porch lights on when you know guests will be arriving. The guests immediately feel you are anticipating their arrival.

Culture of Hospitality

While visitors were welcomed upon arrival, usually by the official greeters and the pastor, most were not greeted by those sitting around them. Help members see themselves as the “hosts of Christ.” A good host knows that the most important person is the stranger or the one left alone. Until hospitality becomes a part of the congregational ethos, take steps through additional greeters stationed inside the sanctuary to welcome people, especially newcomers, and then to make sure they are greeted when the service is over and invited to a fellowship time or a study group. Another sign of hospitality is providing guest parking. This is another strong signal that you have new people attending and that you are expecting your guests.

The Worship Service

Visitors found some parts of the service confusing. Many did not grow up in church and are unfamiliar with worship practices. If there is a part of the worship that most members know from memory, then still indicate in the bulletin the page number where people can find it or print the text. Guests will appreciate your thoughtfulness. If people are to stand at a particular time, you can indicate that in the bulletin or by a lifted hand by the worship leader. Simple instructions for communion and other parts of the service can help bring on board those who are new. Walk through the entire service as someone coming to church for the first time. Make it easy for new people to participate and to feel at home.

Congregational Participation

“Liturgy” means “the work of the people.” Visitors report a high energy level among most worship leaders but not so much within the congregations themselves. Music and singing may be one way to increase the engagement of everyone. Choirs need to remember that leading and enhancing congregational singing may be their most important function. If attendance is far below your sanctuary’s seating capacity, some portion might be roped off. Paying special attention to times in the service when engagement is highest will give an opportunity to build upon those times. Reducing time gaps and staying on schedule will help hold people’s attention.

Involvement of Younger People

Many visitors were struck by how few younger people were in worship leadership. Brainstorm various ways of involving people across all ages in worship responsibilities. Having younger people visible in worship will not go unnoticed by current members and new people. Be creative in thinking of many ways younger people can be involved. Begin slowly and build. When you seek to involve new leaders in worship, be attentive to the extra time required for training and coordination.

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