

A Letter to Churches Seeking New Members

My husband and I moved to the city a few years ago and have been “between churches.” We’ve been to visit quite a few of your churches and have some observations you may find helpful in encouraging more new members:

No public humiliation. Please don’t make us stand in a room full of total strangers and introduce ourselves. We want to be anonymous since we’re not sure we want to see you again; and, frankly, we’re still seeing other churches. It’s not you; it’s us. We just don’t know you very well yet.

Acknowledge we exist. Being anonymous is not the same as being invisible. We’re probably going to be a little confused about what to do and where to go, so having someone greet us and ask if we have questions is most appreciated. Plus, if you act like we’re not there, we start to think we might as well not be there.

Put it in writing. Spell out *everything* we need to know in the bulletin: when to sit or stand, where to find the words. Even if you have one of those groovy new digital displays, include in the bulletin what will and won’t be on the screen.

No stalking. Please don’t chase us down the street to tell us you were glad to see us. When you act like it’s a miracle of God that you have visitors, it freaks us out. We may or may not fill out an information card, but that doesn’t mean we don’t like you. It may just mean we found everything we needed on your website.

Remember us. You get a gold star if we come back and you remember our names, but just a friendly “nice to see you again” makes us feel like you noticed we were there.

Have a website. If you don’t have a website, we won’t be coming to your church. That alone tells us you aren’t ready for new people. There is simply no excuse not to have one.

When, where, what. There are basically three things we want to know when we come to your website: when your worship services are held, where you are located, and what you believe. And we really like to see all three on the home page, but at least make them SUPER easy to find and no

more than one click away. If you are having special services like Christmas Eve (when visitors like us are likely to attend), please put those special worship times on the home page. We have encountered any number of church websites that seem to be more interested in looking pretty than actually being useful. You don’t have to be fancy to get what we need to decide whether to come visit.

Tell us what you really believe. Be proud of what you believe and spell it out on your website. Progressive? Great! Theologically conservative? Super! But what do those things mean in the life of your community? It’s really helpful before we show up waving our rainbow flags to know that you’ll be petitioning for an Intelligent Design curriculum in the local schools. If that is your belief, wonderful, but we both know we’re not going to be a good fit there, so let’s save each other the frustration. We’ll find out soon enough, so let’s get that awkward part out of the way online. There is someone out there who would love to find a community like yours if only they knew it existed.

Finding a new church home is not always easy, especially if the one you came from was such an important part of your lives. We were very, very close to our previous faith community; and it’s hard to think of anywhere else coming close. Or maybe we’ve never been to church, and we want to explore that spiritual side for the first time; but it’s all so new and confusing. Or perhaps we’re broken and need a place where we can be broken, and it’s still okay.

Any number of the things that might bring us to your doorstep can make it hard to do much more than show up, sit quietly in the back, and sneak out afterward. But that’s the beautiful thing about church communities — they bring new people into your life, they can open your heart and mind to new experiences, they can mend those deepest of wounds, and affirm your relationship with God. With all that on the line, don’t let the little things mentioned above get in the way of connecting people to the Good News.

This article is by Lyda K. Hawes and appeared in Leading Ideas April 25, 2012. Her blog is “See Lyda Run” at seelydarun.com. Used by permission.

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