



Avoid First-Time Visitor Nightmares: Red Carpet Hospitality

By Christopher Walker

Over a meal one night with an unchurched couple, we got to talking about church life, faith, Christ, and so on. They hadn't been to church regularly for nearly forty years. Their children weren't churchgoers and grew up without any real knowledge of the grace of God.

They both attended church three times a week growing up, but once they married and relocated, they stopped going.

I asked, "Why did you stop going?"

"When we were newly married," they replied, "we relocated hundreds of miles away from our home town, away from family, friends, and our support network. We visited a few churches of our brand and not one person said hello or took interest in us." Forty years ago. Ouch.

How can you ensure this doesn't happen in your church?

With nearly 80 percent of churches with Sunday morning attendance under a hundred people, chances are it's pretty obvious who's visiting for the first time. But even if you attend one of the mega churches, there are ways to help make sure visitors get greeted.

First-time visitors often show up either right on time or early, use the front entrance, and generally sit in their seat looking at their bulletin, waiting for the service to begin. In churches with large campuses, visitors may look bewildered and lost in the halls. At the coffee cart afterwards, if they stay (a good sign), they may stand around looking a bit lost or else take to reading the information displays while sipping their coffee.

Greeting the Visitor

When I spot a possible visitor, either before or after the service, I walk up and introduce myself: "Hi, I'm Chris.

I don't think I've met you yet." Usually, they volunteer that they are visiting. I've learned to avoid asking, "Is this your first time here?" It may not be. I've embarrassed myself once too often by greeting a long time member who was back in town or someone who had visited while I was away.

In our international church, I find out what country a person is from, and then introduce them by name to other people in our church from that nation, or who may speak that same language. Country of origin is a point of

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relational connection and pride. Other times, I connect them to people in the same occupation, or with other students in the same field of study.

I also ask our visitors if it seems appropriate, "Is there anything I can pray about for you?" This helps me to go beyond the surface talk and into personal care. Sometimes I pray with them before they leave.

The key to successful visitor greeting is to train church members to take the initiative and do it. So often we get caught up with our own friends or church business that we forget the importance of greeting, welcoming, and getting to know others.

The "Secret" Dress Code

One of our first time visitors had only been in America for three days. She had never been in a church. Her shorts redefined "mini-shorts" and her choice of plunge

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cut and tight fitting blouse was perhaps more fitting for an urban nightclub. Our church had a hard time welcoming her because of her wardrobe. It was a socially awkward morning. Instead of being welcomed, she was practically shunned. Five years later, that visitor is still remembered by the men—for none of the right reasons. They didn't see the immigrant searching for God.

On the other hand, our family once attended a church whose tradition required women to wear ankle length skirts and head veils and men to wear suits. Unfortunately, we didn't know any of this until after we appeared at a morning service. We felt awkwardly out of place since we didn't know the secret "dress code." Yet the people in the church approached us, greeted us, and welcomed us. We didn't feel the stares of church members (or notice any); instead, we were warmly and enthusiastically welcomed and invited to return which overcame our personal sense of embarrassment. The people in this church took initiative to engage us, even though we didn't "look" like them.

Jesus didn't call those who were refined or who practiced either high society or "Christian" ways of living. He called fishermen, prostitutes, and thieves to be his companions. We do not see him chastising them for their way of life, color of their hair, or their wardrobe. Instead, they were welcomed and accepted as they were. It was their relationship with Jesus that changed their lives.

First Impressions: From Parking Lot to Pew

Recently, I visited a medium-sized church where my friend was pastor. I pulled into the crowded parking lot and drove around trying to find an available parking spot. Some churches have clearly marked spaces for visitors while other churches have parking attendants who guide visitors to available parking. These help create a warm welcome. This day, however, I was on my own.

I got out of my car and looked around. It was difficult to find the right entrance. As I searched for the way in, I reminisced about the first church I pastored. Visitors

often tried to use the "front" door but found it locked because regular attenders never used it (or unlocked it). We fixed that problem by putting signs up on the exterior of our building; however, be careful to proofread your signs. I have a photo of one that reads "_____ Church: Public Welcome Except During Church Functions."

When I finally found the right door, a greeter with a name tag held the door open for me, extended her hand to shake mine, and offered "Welcome to our church. I'm Nancy. I've not met you yet." Then she walked me to the

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visitor information booth and graciously passed me off to another greeter standing behind the table.

The lady behind the table took an interest in me and asked where I was from, and then asked me if there was anything I needed, or if I needed any specific information about the church. Inviting me to peruse the information table, I saw a color map of the building with rest rooms clearly marked, a brochure about children's ministry, and an informational brochure about the church.

The professional greeters at the door, the conversation, and the information at the table helped me feel warmly welcomed as a first time visitor. Sadly, that warm feeling didn't last beyond the narthex.

Beyond the "Professional" Greeters

When I entered the sanctuary, an usher handed me a program without looking away from his ongoing conversation about a college ball game. Some churches train

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a week, send the latest newsletter immediately following the guest's visit. (For best results, send it on a different day than the Requisite Welcome Letter above.)

Email. Many folks prefer email to almost any other method of contact. Savvy churches send an email note to guest sinviting them to some sort of a hand-off event. Savvier churches add the guests' email address to their regular email update lists.

The Telephone Call. Sometime during the week a friendly call from a volunteer asking if they can answer any questions can go a long ways towards building relationships. It is best if the caller at least met the guest, but of course that's not always possible.

The Gift. Many churches effectively take a small gift to the visitor during the week. These offerings are often homemade breads or cookies, handmade crafts, or small house plants. These gifts are marked from the church and are delivered by a lay volunteer during a "sidewalk" visit, that is, a visit that doesn't include accepting an invitation to "come in."

Let's wrap up by getting back to Christmas Eve and the hand-off. If you take the time to create and plan a targeted hand-off for your guests; if you put details of the event in their hands; if you get their names and contact information; and if you engage a follow-up plan, you're much more likely to see the return of these guests sooner than later.

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ushers to help guide people to seats, share childcare opportunities, and provide another welcome to the church. Ushers should be well informed about the church's programs and facilities so they can answer virtually any questions that may be asked. They are part of the public face of the church.

During worship, we were invited to participate in the "ritual of friendship" where we passed a registration pad down the pew. I was the first one in the pew, so I filled out the name and address and put a big check in the "first time visitor" column. Eventually the pad came back to me. Looking it over I noticed everyone in the pew had checked "member." Moments later, the liturgy called for the "passing of the peace." We stood up, but no one in the pew welcomed me, said hello, or shook my hand. Instead they chatted with the people they apparently knew in the pews in front and behind them.

The warmth of professional greeters had been sabotaged by inattention from the ushers and the rest of the congregation.

Red Carpet Hospitality

People attend church for the first time for a variety of reasons. They may have relocated from another city, been hurt in a prior church, or reached a crisis point in life and want to give God a try.

Over the past year I've had the opportunity to be a "first time visitor" a lot. I have a firsthand sense of what a visitor goes through. The size of the church doesn't seem to matter. I've been overlooked in large churches with exceptionally high quality worship productions, and I've been well welcomed in large churches. I've been ignored in churches with lukewarm preaching and off key singing, and I've been warmly welcomed by churches like that as well. It doesn't matter what size your church is, Red Carpet Hospitality makes a big difference to visitors.