



Welcoming Guests Well

by Glenn A. Lucas

Most guests make up their mind about returning to a church within their first ten minutes of contact with it. This reality means that many have decided whether or not to return before the first song is sung, the invocation given, or a pastoral greeting extended. In those first ten minutes, guests observe and process much information, consciously and unconsciously. They make judgments about the church -- based partially on fact and partially on fiction -- and extend their first impressions to the entire ministry.

Welcoming guests well begins with an intentional strategy that focuses on guests. The goal is to have guests return so that they may hear the gospel and come to faith in Christ. Members must see this strategy as central to the ministry of the church. A well conceived welcoming ministry engages guests in genuine, warm and caring ways as soon as humanly possible, and also gives attention to the very real physical experience guests have when attending our church.

Mark L. Waltz, Pastor of Connections at Granger Community Church in Granger, Indiana, says they aim to give first-time guests a "wow experience,"¹ -- a level of greeting, care and relationship that makes them say "Wow!" Waltz and the members of Granger understand that people come to church seeking a positive relation-

ship with God. But this relationship firsts manifests itself in relationship with God's people.

A well greeted guest in the parking lot who is scowled at by someone else in the church is likely to let the latter negate the former. Welcoming guests well must be more than a strategy; it must be part of the culture. Optimally, every member contributes to a positive impression of the church.

The number one reason people give for returning to a church is the friendliness of the members. Conversely, the number one reason guests give for not returning is its unfriendliness. It's important to keep in mind: You're not friendly unless your guests think you're friendly.



In his book, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, Kennon Callahan points out that what he calls "relational characteristics" are sources of satisfaction within a congregation. One could conclude that when congregations give attention to building and sustaining positive relationships with guests, they raise the

level of satisfaction among guests, increasing the likelihood they will return.

Callahan also speaks of "functional characteristics" in *Twelve Keys*. Functional characteristics deal with things such as programs, visibility, accessibility, property issues and financial resources. He suggests that these functional characteristics, when not well in place, contribute to dissatisfaction among members. Therefore they may also be a source of dissatisfaction for the guests.

Try to see your facility as guests see it. (See "Checklist for Welcoming Guests Well" on page 2.) Members grow use to the idiosyncrasies of a facility. They know the entrances that are open. They no longer see the frayed carpet or the water spot on the ceiling. It may be helpful to ask someone from outside the church to do a walk through and provide feedback.

No welcoming strategy is complete if it does not also include an intentional follow-up with guests. When a church follows up, it communicates that it cares. The best follow-up is personal and happens within twenty-four hours of the guest's visit. A personal follow-up may be a hand written note, a brief "door step" visit, i.e. a visit on the guests door step not in the house, or a personal phone call from a church member. This personal

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Checklist for Welcoming Guests Well

Exterior and Approaches

- Do well kept and visible signs identify your church as guests approach it?
- Is landscaping well kept and attractive?
- Are parking lot entrances and exits clearly identified?
- Do you have clearly identified guest parking?
- Do signs help guests find the sanctuary, restrooms, classrooms, offices, etc.?
- Are all the doors at your main entrances unlocked?
- How accessible are your buildings?

Interior

- Is your facility well lighted?
- Are walls (including bulletin boards), floors and ceilings neat, clean and without blemish?
- Are windows and window coverings clean and without blemish?
- Are bathrooms clearly identified, neat and clean?
- Is the nursery/child care facility easily accessible, neat and clean? Is it well staffed by trained personnel?
- Is there signage to help guests find their way once inside?
- How comfortable are the seats/pews?
- Is the sanctuary a comfortable temperature?
- How is your sound system?

Zehnder Installed as Nat'l Worship Consultant



In an October 19 chapel service, Dr. Jack Preus, right, President of Concordia University, Irvine, California, officially welcomes Rev. Michael Zehnder at his installation as National Worship Consultant for the Center for U.S. Missions. See www.centerforusmissions.com and click on 'Worship' for new worship services, resources and seminars available.

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visit has more impact when done by a lay member than by a staff member.

Churches need to create a culture wherein every member values guests and seeks to build genuine relationships with them so that the gospel message finds fertile ground. Welcoming of guests well must be intentional. It demonstrates a passion for those about whom God is passionate, and it values those whom God values, fulfilling the mission Jesus gave his disciples before his ascension. ■

¹Mark L. Waltz, *First Impressions: Creating Wow Experiences In Your Church*, Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, Inc., 2005.

²Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys To An Effective Church*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.,

New Harvest is published four times a year to provide information and encouragement for sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the United States.

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The Center, a partnership of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod World Missions, Concordia University, Irvine, California, and the LCMS North America Mission Executives, exists to provide research and training for mission work among unevangelized people in the United States.

Welcoming Guests Well II

by Michelle Erickson

“You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” It is said that within the first seven to seventeen seconds of meeting someone, they begin to form an opinion about us. Are there things we can do to remove distractions and help a guest feel comfortable long enough so they can envision themselves belonging to – wanting to be a part of -- the church, or see themselves and their family worshipping here?

Is it time to reassess your welcome ministry?

1. Start by attending each of your services with the mindset of a first time guest. Ask a few other people to do the same.
2. Record everything that comes to mind; physical observations as well as spiritual.
3. Begin in the parking lot and continue paying attention through the coffee time at the end of the service. In addition to the questions in “Checklist for Welcoming Guests Well” on page 2, ask:
 - Do we clearly communicate the options parents have for their children?
 - Is it clear how a guest would take the first step toward joining our ministry?
 - Is it easy for someone to communicate with us about a need or question?
 - Do the volunteers understand and carry out their duties?

When you have finished assessing the welcome ministry, brainstorm with your staff different ways you can initiate change. The following are

nine of our best practices. They are easy to integrate and virtually cost free.

1. Divide your welcoming committee into teams such as parking lot greeters, courtyard/door greeters, welcome center greeters, after service coffee greeters, and ushers.
2. Each team has a specific task to carry out Sunday morning.
3. Training on a quarterly basis is vital to a successful ministry. It also allows new members to get connected to the church by joining one of these ministries.
4. Greeters are relational. They welcome everyone, offer directions, answer questions, escort guests to children’s praise or the nursery, and keep a lookout for anyone who appears lost or confused.
5. Ushers are task orientated. They pass out bulletins and Bibles, escort people to open sections for seating, assist during offering or communion, and set out extra chairs as needed.
6. Consider using a particular colored shirt for greeters and ushers with your church logo. During worship, when guests are welcomed, encourage them to seek out someone wearing the shirt if they have questions.

7. Have a tear-off section in the bulletin a guest can use to give

their information or ask questions. This is a non-threatening way for a guest to choose when they are ready to become involved.

8. Encourage both greeters and ushers when ‘off duty’ to continue being part of the team by welcoming guests.
9. Share this philosophy with other ministries in the church, encouraging them to think of guests.

Attention to even the smallest detail tells people that we as a church are committed to connecting people to Jesus. A considerable amount of our staff’s time is spent planning and preparing for worship on Sunday. The music, sermon, flow of the worship service, and announcements



are discussed in detail. Monday morning we ‘debrief’ and take a critical look at Sunday services through the eyes of guests. We strive to remove obstacles that may prevent a guest from feeling welcome, keeping in mind what Elbert Einstein said: "Not everything that counts can be counted." ■

Michelle Erickson is Connections Coordinator at Cross of Christ Lutheran Church, Anthem, Arizona.

More on Welcoming Guests Well

“How to Help Guests Connect with your Church” by Charles Arn
<http://www.pastors.com/article.asp?ArtID=9864>

“50 Ways To Build Strength Welcoming New People”
http://www.churchleadership.com/pdfs/50_Ways_to_Build_Strength_in_Welcoming_New_People.pdf

“How to Get Your First-Time Guests to Come Back” by Rick Ezell.
“4 Keys to Welcoming Guests in the Smaller Church” by Rick Ezell
“6 Simple Steps to a Friendlier Church” by Mitch Martin
Find these three articles by going to www.lifeway.com and using the site search box.

The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21st Century Churches by George Gallup and D. Michael Lindsay. This book is available through Amazon.com.

The Charthouse, at <http://www.charthouse.com>, developed the Fish Philosophy and produces the popular Fish video that helps organizations focus on engaging and serving the customer.

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