

Welcoming Guests Well by Glenn Lucas

This article first appeared in the December 2006 New Harvest newsletter from the Center for U.S. Missions. Permission is given to copy this article for distribution within your own congregation. Please credit the author and the Center for U.S. Missions in Irvine, California, www.centerforusmissions.org. For more information, contact the Center at 949-854-8002 x1780.

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 relationship with God. But this relationship first 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,” below.) 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 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., 1997.

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?

