

Tips from a “Professional”

Church Visitor

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One of the great delights of doing wider church ministry is the opportunity of worshiping in different congregations of all sizes and kinds, and we are enjoying our first-time visits in the Illinois Conference tremendously. In almost nine years of being in a different church almost every Sunday, my husband Milt and I have gathered some observations from what various churches do and don't do in welcoming first-time visitors.

Nearly every church believes itself to be friendly and welcoming, and most truly are, but that truth is not always readily apparent to the nervous first-time visitor who has just moved into the area or who is having a new sense of spiritual seeking, leading them to visit your church. Even the smallest, most remote rural church should prepare itself to receive visitors with hospitality beyond its assumed “friendliness.” Here are some of the things we've learned that might be of assistance to your congregation.

1. Have your worship time on your answering machine message, written large on the sign in front and, if possible, in the yellow pages of the phone book and/or on a Web site. You'd be amazed how many churches don't make this basic information available to a Saturday night seeker.

2. SIGNS, SIGNS, SIGNS! Those who have been part of a congregation for a long time quickly forget that newcomers may not know where to turn into your parking lot, which of several doors to enter, which hall to turn down once in the door, where the child care is, and so on. We have often found ourselves in a section of an unused church basement with only a few distant sounds to lead us to the worship area!

3. The standard doorway greeters who look at you with that “are you a first-time visitor or an oldtime member I should know?” question in their eyes rarely do more than smile and shake a hand. Other members should be trained and, if necessary, assigned to watch actively for visitors and help them find child care, coat racks, and so forth. A single visitor is especially often missed entirely (since the “ideal” church visitor and potential member is one who comes with children!). Milt has too often entered a church, sat through a worship service, and left afterwards without ever being greeted. To move this one up a notch, it would be great for someone to join that first-time solo visitor in the pew and later take him or her to the coffee hour or adult education. Remember: We may be entertaining angels unaware!

4. During the service, a visitor-friendly bulletin and/or other resources are a “must” in a seeker society. Longtime members know all the responses, like that closing song that the members love so much but the singing of which totally excludes the first-time visitor. Words to every single response should be in the bulletin, or a number in the hymnal noted, or a worship supplement nicely reproduced and laminated or bound and clearly marked available in the pew. Don't overlook the complete Lord's Prayer, doxology, if used (better not to call it that anymore), and other things. Again: Our world is a Spiritual Market-place (as Wade Clark Roof names our culture) and spiritual seekers may hungrily come to your church only to leave confused and lost if not given guidance.

5. Invite, guide, join. First-time visitors won't know what or where your coffee hour or its equivalent is.

Members (not just the pastor) who say “let me take you to our coffee hour” are precious guides indeed. Decisions to become part of a faith community have been made on less than that

The next notch (to a true triple-star visitor rating!) is for several regulars to come up to the visitor standing self-consciously nursing his or her cup of whatever (please offer more than coffee!) and enter into some kind of real conversation. Even large churches can do this! It is far better to risk approaching a longtime absent member than to miss approaching a visitor. Try this line: “I don’t think I know you . . . ?”

6. Follow up on every visitor, even member relatives. Find a mechanism that works for you in seeking the visitor’s address and follow up with a letter, call, or brief visit. Cards in the bulletin are probably ideal but pew pads work IF everyone completes them and they are regularly gathered. We have often signed pew pads because it was requested but old signatures indicated it had never been utilized. Church growth materials differ on how to follow up but all agree there must be something—a letter from the pastor, a phone call from a member, a visit by members. Our all-time favorite

is the church that calls politely and asks if members may stop by briefly to bring a gift—a wonderful homemade pie (from a freezer stock!) Another church brings a gift bag with the congregation’s

specialty candy, a refrigerator magnet with church name and time and letter of welcome and invitation. Any follow-up is better than none (though a too-long visit from chatty members can sink any possibility of a return!).

Lots more visitor ideas can be found, but our urging is for congregations who want to share the good news of God’s love be very intentionally prepared to welcome every visitor who comes in the door (getting them there is another art and another column!). Train the entire congregation and/or special teams of folks to do specific parts of welcoming. No church is too small or remote or too large and busy to take these

steps. We, or some other wandering faith seeker, may appear on your doorstep—if it can be found! And by the way—thank you all who welcome us warmly! You touch our lives for God.

Please feel free to e-mail Jane at illconfjaned@aol.com.

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To develop ways to genuinely welcome others into our communities of faith, contact:

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