



Welcoming Visitors



CONGREGATION & VISITORS



The Growing Church:

Welcoming Visitors

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THE GROWING CHURCH: WELCOMING VISITORS

Leader's Guide

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS.

At BuildingChurchLeaders.com, we recognize that there is no "one size fits all" approach to church leadership training. Every church—and every team—is unique, with its own set of strengths and challenges that stand between where you are and where you want to be. That is why we have created Training Tracks—to help each church get from where you are today to where you can be tomorrow.

This resource, "Welcoming Visitors," is part of *The Growing Church* Training Track—Level One. When you have completed this training, move on through the other downloads in level one, and then on to levels two and three, which also incorporate multiple types of training content to dig deeper into the specific opportunities and challenges that deal with *The Growing Church*.

- 1. Select a learning tool.** This download includes ten articles on the theme of making visitors feel welcome in your church.
- 2. Select a handout.**
- 3. Photocopy the handout.** Photocopy as many copies as you need—you do not need to ask for permission to photocopy any material from Building Church Leaders (as long as you are using the material in a church or educational setting and are not charging for it).
- 4. Prepare for the discussion.** We recommend you read the Scripture passages and identify key discussion questions. How will you apply the principles to specific decisions your church is making?
- 5. Lead the discussion.** Each handout can be read within 5 minutes. After you have allowed time for reading, begin the discussion by asking one of the provided questions. Be ready to move the discussion to specific issues your church is facing.

Each Building Church Leaders handout can be discussed in 15 or 20 minutes. Your board, committee, or team will still have plenty of time to discuss its agenda.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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What the Unchurched See

Put yourself in the shoes of the first-time visitor to our church.

Exodus 23:9

Although there are many complex factors that affect the unchurched, certain issues of friendliness, cleanliness, and comfort directly impact their decision to attend and join a church. The following responses were generated from a survey of formerly unchurched people.

Friendliness

Friendliness of the people is a major attraction. Make sure a friendly greeting is genuine—the unchurched can detect manufactured friendliness, which is almost as bad as being unfriendly. Friendliness of members to non-Christians tends to be correlated to a church's evangelistic effectiveness. The pastor's modeling of friendliness is critical. A relationship is also apparent between the friendliness of a church and the members' willingness to accept change.

Nice Facilities and Adequate Space

Every six months, hire someone from outside the church to do a thorough examination of its grounds and buildings. Give the person a notebook with a page for every room, hallway, foyer, and area of the grounds. Ask them to proceed from area to area taking notes, and then report the findings. You may be surprised what they find. Though many visitors may return to your church, even if they had negative impressions, it is obvious that these issues are vitally important to them.

The Nursery/Preschool/Children's Issue

The issue that generated the most intense comments was the cleanliness, neatness, and safety of nursery, preschool, and children's areas. While parents with young children were among the most vociferous about quality care for children at church, they were not alone. Similar concerns are held by parents with older children, adult children, and no children. It seems that many unchurched people measure the quality of a church by the quality of childcare.

The unchurched expressed repeatedly how difficult it was for them to visit a church. And those who had young children were especially sensitive to their kids' needs. They raised the issues of safety, easy accessibility to their children, the ability to be notified if needed, concern and attitude of adult workers, and cleanliness.

Also cited by several of the formerly unchurched was how up-to-date the children's area was. Old furniture, broken toys, worn carpet, and dated baby beds are sure signs of neglect.

Organization or Chaos

Several formerly unchurched said one of their first impressions was the organization of the church, particularly the organization and flow of the worship service. These former seekers remarked that such attention to detail was an indication that the church was serious about its mission. The worship service is where the most people gather at one time. If that isn't planned well, many visitors believe the church members do most everything else poorly.

Greeters and Welcome Centers

Greeter ministries in particular can be implemented with relative ease. In nearly one-third of the interviews, the unchurched shared positive first impressions when the church had a good greeter ministry and a welcome center. A helpful hand, a friendly smile, and good directions can make an eternal difference.

—THOM RAINER, adapted from "Impressed by First Impressions Part 3: What the Unchurched See"; © 2004 Church Central. Used by permission.

Discuss

1. Where would we rank ourselves in each of these categories? How often do we assess and evaluate them?
2. In which of these categories are we weakest? How can we promptly address that issue?
3. What other environmental factors might influence a guest's immediate response to our church?

The Right Kind of Welcome

Visitors fear being embarrassed, overwhelmed, or ignored.

Luke 14:12–14

There are many less obvious things that might make visitors feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. Often when we have been in the church for any length of time we get so used to our way of doing things that we forget what it might look like or sound like to someone new.

Some churches make very basic mistakes when they welcome a visitor. If they welcomed you to a dinner party like they welcome a visitor to their church you would never want to come over for dinner again. They are so glad to see you that they make an embarrassing scene. After shaking your hand they ignore you, leaving you to fend for yourself. They exclude you by talking about things you've never heard of. They even slip into the common jargon of their friends, leaving you out of the conversation altogether. On top of these faux pas, they forget that you are a little nervous to be there in the first place. Who would want to be at that party? Who would put themselves through that a second time?

Don't Embarrass Them

What do you think is the most pressing issue for a first time visitor to your church? The doctrine? I am a doctrinal stickler, but I'm realistic enough to realize that most visitors don't care much about this. The music style? Good music can give a great first impression—whether traditional or contemporary—but most visitors will just sing along with whatever you have. The sermon? While a sermon could definitely cause people to leave a church, I don't think this is the most pressing issue for a first-time visitor. First-time visitors care most about not embarrassing themselves.

There are all sorts of things that can embarrass a church visitor. They might have dressed inappropriately—too formal or too casual. Their children might not know how to act “appropriately” in a church and end up embarrassing their parents. They might be put on the spot as an offering plate is passed to them by a stranger, who they feel is pressuring them to give. They might stand up at the wrong time in the service. They might sing out during the wrong part of a song because the church has a different arrangement than they are used to. The most detrimental embarrassing situation can come from a bad welcome, destroying an otherwise great first impression.

Some churches work hard to make people feel welcome, but they undermine their efforts by making it impersonal. Some churches make all their visitors stand up in the middle of the service—a terrible choice considering how much most people fear standing up in front of crowds. I once visited a large church that apparently realized how awkward this made their visitors feel so they did the opposite and asked their members to stand. There I sat, surrounded by towering members in this intimidating church, each hanging over me as they offered me an obligatory welcome and handshake.

Large churches aren't the only ones with problems embarrassing visitors. One Sunday morning we had planned on going to a new church in town. We thought it would be a good fit because it was small, and we could contribute to it. Like sharks smelling a drop of blood in the water, the small congregation began to encircle us, each one in succession darting in to take a nip at us. The scariest attack was the middle-aged woman who ran up to us with outstretched arms warning, “We're a hugging church!” Luckily that was the only hug that day.

Many of the things that might embarrass a visitor we simply can't control. We might put pictures on our web sites and brochures to give people an idea as to how they should dress or offer a great children's program to minimize the embarrassment of a bored child in the pew, but there will always be some problem we can't prevent. However, we are in control of how a visitor is welcomed to our churches—and we should work hard to make sure we don't screw up what little we do have control over.

Don't Ignore Them, Either

WELCOMING VISITORS

There's a paradox when it comes to welcoming a visitor: on one hand, they want to anonymously investigate the church without pressure; on the other hand they don't want to be ignored.

My wife and I were enjoying a church we had been visiting for a couple of weeks. Over that time the church allowed us to visit freely without making us stand out as visitors. However, the only time anyone said "Hello" to us was when the whole church stood up to "pass the peace." When we eventually tried to find a Sunday School class (or something) to connect with some other people, we couldn't find anyone to ask. We eventually found a table in the lobby with a sign declaring it to be the "Welcome Table" but no one ever showed up. Even though we liked the church, we never returned.

Some churches have resolved the paradox between embarrassing their visitors and making them feel welcome. They've done this by empowering the church members to welcome guests on an individual level. For example, one time my wife and I attended the main campus of a multi-location mega-church. From the beginning we were lost in their maze of a parking lot. We decided just to follow the crowd until they led us somewhere. When we finally made it to the main building I rhetorically asked my wife, "Where do we go now?" An astute regular (passing us in the hallway) excused herself and asked us if we needed any help and then simply pointed us in the right direction. She didn't have a nametag or was serving in any official capacity that we could tell—she was just paying attention and being a welcoming host. Not only were we saved the embarrassment of wandering aimlessly throughout the humungous facility, but we were grateful and immediately felt welcome. If people know they can take it upon themselves to make visitors feel welcome, even a very large church can make someone feel right at home.

—DAVID ZIMMERMAN is a former pastor who lives in Lake Wylie, SC; adapted from "Church from a Visitor's Perspective," from ChurchMarketingSucks.com, © 2007 Center for Church Communication. Used by permission.

Discuss

1. How do our current practices acknowledge the presence of visitors? Might this embarrass some people? Or make them feel ignored?
2. What do our current practices communicate about the type of church we are?
3. How can we better empower church members to act as unofficial greeters?

Attracting the Outsiders

Take a low-pressure approach to non-traditional visitors.

Hebrews 13:2

Churches receive visitors from two groups: insiders and outsiders. Insiders understand traditional church subculture. They know what to expect before they walk through the door. Outsiders have no idea what takes place during a church service. It's easy for them to feel anxious about their first visit. Here's how to give consideration to the feelings of the outsiders, without writing off the insiders.

Anxiety Reduction

Show people where to park and which door to enter. Place greeters at the entrance to direct people toward the auditorium, where they are handed a program that clearly outlines the order of events. Ushers guide people to open sections rather than specific seats, so they can claim their own space.

Keep anxiety to a minimum with the service itself. Use the first 30 minutes for programming such as a short Scripture reading to introduce the topic, a drama, and a short, easy song or chorus. After the chorus, during which people are standing, say something such as, "As you're seated, turn and greet some of the people around you." Only after these attempts to reduce the anxiety of visitors should you formally acknowledge them.

Tell visitors they are welcome guests you want to serve. If they want to find out more about your church, give them the options of stopping by a counter in the lobby for more information; being contacted later, which they can arrange by filling in a section of the program and dropping into the offering plate; or calling the church. Don't pressure visitors any further.

Intangible Overtures

Strive to achieve two important intangibles. The first is warmth.

Greeters. Train greeters and ushers how to make people feel comfortable, and to be comfortable themselves. Avoid perpetual scowls, arrogant attitudes, or overbearing dispositions.

The building. Warm up the church through interior appointments, plants, and auditorium banners. This is one area where smaller churches can be particularly effective. People also appreciate a clean, well-maintained building. Problems such as cracked paint, litter, dirt, and ugly trash cans can destroy a warm image.

Music. Many church music leaders include long, reverential pauses for prayer and brief silences during transitions. But almost any length of silence can be uncomfortable for visitors. Use pleasant background music anywhere else it might reduce anxiety.

Prayer. When congregational prayers are simple, basic, and conversational, God may not seem so foreign to visitors.

A second intangible is electricity created by the power of anticipation. Keep three things in mind:

Creativity. If the order of events is the same each week, people may not try too hard to attend regularly. We want people to walk into our church with a sense of anticipation, wondering what's going to be different this week.

First impressions. The first 15 minutes of a service are extremely important. Start strong, usually with music, and then vary the intensity level for individual elements of the service.

Scope. Electricity is not the result of trying to do something more and bigger each week. A simple song with piano accompaniment likely will be more effective than an unrehearsed full ensemble.

—DON COUSINS served for 17 years on the staff of Willow Creek Community Church and now coaches Christian leaders within churches and para-church organizations; © 2005 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

WELCOMING VISITORS

Discuss

1. When we think about visitors, do we tend to think in terms of insiders? Or outsiders? How does this impact our approach?
2. What typically happens in the first 15 minutes of our service? The first 30? What kind of first impression might this give? How does it help to ease anxiety for newcomers?
3. How can we find a balance between catering to the needs of insiders versus those of outsiders?

Why They Don't Come Back

Visitors can be turned off by behavior, buildings, and disorder.

Matthew 5:47

How do we find out why some visitors never return? Here are some situations that can place barriers before newcomers.

Large family networks. These networks have their own social gatherings in which outsiders aren't included. Such networks can be deadly to assimilating newcomers. Tactfully alert some in these families to the potential problems, challenging them to include outsiders in some of their social gatherings.

Existing friendships. The fellowship of existing friendships can sometimes be difficult to crack. If the energy of the congregation is given to caring for existing members rather than identifying the needs of newcomers, love becomes ingrown.

Facilities. The design of church buildings, especially poor layout of the foyer and other entrances, can be an obstacle to a newcomer's welcome. However, facilities can communicate warmth and friendliness. A small congregation in a large, old building can remove the pews, place padded chairs in a cozy arrangement, and bring the platform closer. Some visitors see a crowded service as a good sign, while others see it as an indication there's no room for them and they aren't needed.

A church's history. People seeking help don't go to a church because it belongs to a historic denomination. People return for a second visit because they experienced God's presence and the acceptance of God's people.

Special events. People attracted to a church by special events likely will stick only if the kind of ministry that first attracted them is sustained.

Philosophy of ministry. If our church life is generated from the platform on Sunday, integration means getting as many people into the sanctuary as possible. If the church emphasizes interaction among members and shared ministry, integration means providing ways for people to build friendships and to become involved in service.

A reputation of tension. A torn church cannot weave in new members. The answer is an emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation.

Confusing service styles. Much of what we do in our services, though familiar to members, is intimidating to visitors. If they didn't bring a Bible, print the Scripture passage in the bulletin. Offerings may make visitors suspect the church only wants their money. Announce that visitors are not obligated to give, but explain, "This is one way the people of our congregation express their worship to God."

Class and cultural distinctions. Some churches try to be all things to all people, but usually one social culture dominates. Sensitize insiders, gently and consistently, to the need to make everyone welcome, while recognizing that a church's growth likely will reflect its cultural and social composition.

Poor attitudes. Church power brokers, fearing a threat to their power base, may resist newcomers. Existing members can resent the financial cost of providing resources to care for the needs of newcomers. Sensitize the congregation by including newcomers on church committees. Their contributions can be a refreshing reminder to old-timers that newcomers think differently and must be taken into consideration.

—CALVIN RATZ ministered for over 30 years in various locations; adapted from our sister publication Leadership Journal, © 1990 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. Which of the items on this list can we control? Which are out of our control?
2. Which of these have posed the biggest problem for our church? What could we do to improve in this area?
3. What feedback have we received from visitors who did not return? How might we go about following up with them?

Why They Do Come Back

Growing churches meet the needs of newcomers.

Acts 28:2

A critical factor in holding newcomers is atmosphere. It's an air that permeates the whole congregation, an intangible that says to first-timers, "We've been expecting you, and we're glad you've come." The sermon and other aspects of the church's ministry need to focus on the quality of the newcomer's social and spiritual experiences, providing the subtle yet overriding message: "Newcomers welcome."

People who hold no official position express the atmosphere of warmth and acceptance most effectively. The most gratifying welcome a visitor can receive is from someone he wouldn't expect to welcome him, in a place he didn't expect it to happen. Welcoming isn't just something done at the door; it's something everyone does all over the building.

Such an atmosphere can't be structured, but it can be fostered. Here are some things to encourage an atmosphere of warmth:

Involve Everyone in Welcoming

Have people direct traffic in your parking lot as people arrive for services. This not only heads off a lot of confusion, it also tells newcomers you want to make it easy for them to find their way. Assign several people to minister in the church foyer. Greeters should shake as many hands as possible. Others watch especially for visitors, ready to answer their questions and give directions. They also attempt to get first-timers to sign the guest book or a visitor's card. Have a staffed information counter. Train ushers how to be friendly and sensitive to outsiders. Assigning at least one or two staff members to serve in the foyer—before, during, and after every service—is a productive means of identifying and welcoming visitors.

Welcome from the Pulpit

The pastor needs to talk about visitors often. Use them in sermon illustrations. Remind the congregation how uncomfortable visitors may feel. During the time for greeting in the service, ask people to welcome at least six to eight people.

Provide Opportunities to Connect

What happens if people like the atmosphere of a church but then find no group of people with whom they can relate? This need not be a problem if a structure is in place to identify and place newcomers into smaller groupings in which they can minister and find a place of belonging. These can be large groups (a subgrouping of 40 to 100 people) or small, intimate groups (informal networks of friends; intimate, task-oriented groups; or structured small-group gatherings). The large groups are big enough not to intimidate newcomers, yet small enough for them to get to know others. Large groups can be based on fellowship, season of life, special interests, or on ministry. For instance, a choir can be a large group.

Assimilating churches build structures that ensure newcomers are identified, cared for, and integrated into the fabric of the church. Here are some ways to do this:

Identify newcomers. During services, ask each visitor to fill in an information card. Greeters and hosts can also get names, and addresses, if possible. Pastors working in the foyer can carry visitor cards to fill in on the spot. Some newcomers don't want to be spotlighted, so try not to overpower them. But if you don't get a name and phone number or address, your chances of holding and helping visitors is greatly diminished. Also, counselors should fill in response cards for those who respond to an altar call. New names and addresses are your prime contacts for ministry through the week. Without those names and addresses, midweek ministry to newcomers suffers.

Make midweek contact. Follow-up ministry starts Monday morning. Send a letter of welcome to every visitor, even from out of town. A staff member should process these names on Monday and Tuesday. This person can make an initial phone call, welcoming the visitor to your church and asking if it would be possible for someone from the church to make a call at the home. Try to gain further information, such as the approximate age of the adults and ages of children. Complete a family information form as the call is being made. Following the call, make the home visit. Match the family with the most suitable staff member, taking into account age, spiritual need, and special interests. Copies of the family information sheet should be shared at the next staff meeting.

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See that the appropriate lay leaders in the youth department, ministry programs, Sunday school, and adult fellowship groups are notified of the new family.

Maintain a newcomers' directory. Keep all newcomers in a separate directory for six months. Review this list at staff meetings. After six months on the list, make a decision to either place the name in the church directory as an assimilated family, delete the name as someone unlikely to come back, or leave the name on the newcomers list for another six months.

Provide a "Welcome to the Family" class. This is a six- to eight-week class for all newcomers, not just new converts. It is a relaxed and informal opportunity to get acquainted and feel at ease in the church. Spend considerable time outlining how the church functions and how to build friendships. Watch for specific needs, spiritual problems, and questions newcomers may have. Through lay leaders, reach out to meet these needs. Strongly encourage people to become involved in the church's activities, stressing that friendships are built as a byproduct of doing things together. After the class is completed, lay leaders should introduce the person to the leaders of the appropriate fellowship group and the pastor assigned to that group. Responsibility for integration is thus passed to the fellowship group.

Integrate into ministry. It's critical for newcomers to become involved in the church's ministry as quickly as possible. Until they do, they will think of the church as "them" rather than "us." Talk regularly about ministry opportunities. Highlight what's being done and share your vision. Encourage the congregation to fill in a ministry opportunity sheet. These sheets give newcomers an opportunity to express their interests.

—CALVIN RATZ ministered for over 30 years in various locations; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 1990 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. What is our follow-up plan for new visitors?
2. Where are the most natural points of entry for drawing visitors into the life of the church?
3. What does our church do to exude a "visitors welcome" atmosphere?

WELCOMING VISITORS

Greeter Tips

The first face a greeter sees is looking for a warm, genuine welcome.

Matthew 25:35

Visitors are more likely to return to a church, leaders say, if they are genuinely welcomed. Here are some ideas—drawn from churches of varying sizes—that you can use to give newcomers an authentic welcome.

- ◆ Divide your greeters' ministry into three segments: door greeters, welcome center greeters, and ministry department greeters. Door greeters welcome and assist all guests and members who enter the facilities. They open doors and give directions. The welcome center greeters help newcomers fill out guest information cards and escort them to Sunday school departments, where the third group meets them.
- ◆ Develop a rotation of available greeters and set up a schedule so greeters work 30 minutes before and 15 minutes after the start of services.
- ◆ Be aware of the arrival and departure habits of visitors. They can either come early or sneak in five to ten minutes after the start of services. Be ready to greet them during these times.
- ◆ The existence of a greeter ministry does not mean that everyone else in the congregation is off the hook. Emphasize to all members that they are part of the greeter ministry.
- ◆ Use the greeter ministry to help newcomers get connected once they join the church. Do this by extending the greeting process to include a quarterly dinner. If the church is small enough, the pastor can host this dinner at his home. At the dinner, get to know each other better, talk about the history of the church, and find ways to get the people involved. One possibility is to enlist them in the greeter ministry, because their memories of being the visitors are so fresh.
- ◆ Greeters should stand near entrances. If parking lot greeters are used, schedule enough to easily cover the entire lot.
- ◆ Don't be pushy. Some visitors will not want to give personal information on their first visit. If guest registration is used, ask them nicely if they would register.
- ◆ Greeters should be prepared to hand out bulletins, answer questions, give directions, or escort visitors to a welcome center.
- ◆ After a visitor walks away, watch to see if they appear lost or confused and offer assistance.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to ask if someone is a visitor. Make good eye contact.
- ◆ Welcome everyone, not just visitors.

—MARC S. BOTTS; adapted from "Greeters Help Churches Put Best Foot Forward"; © 2003 Church Central. Used by permission.

Discuss

1. Where are the points of entry for visitors? Do we have greeters stationed at each of these points?
2. How are we training greeters? What is it most important they do, say, or communicate to new visitors?
3. How are greeters helping connect visitors into the life of the church?

WELCOMING VISITORS

Facility as Ministry

Facility issues can actually be ministry issues.

Matthew 19:14

My daughter was reaching out to Daddy. What a joy to see our nine-month-old longing for me from the arms of the nursery worker following our mid-week service. Hannah was being gently rocked by the wife of one of our elders, but it was clear she wanted down. I thanked the woman for watching our daughter while I led a prayer group and my wife taught some of the older children. She assured me that she held Hannah the entire time, except when Hannah was sleeping in one of the stacked cribs. While I appreciated her diligence, I let her know that Hannah enjoyed crawling.

“I’m not comfortable with her crawling on this floor,” the worker replied.

The floor was carpeted and vacuumed regularly, so I asked why. With a look that conveyed a terrible secret, she confessed, “The carpet may look clean, but it’s laid on a wood floor that was built on top of the original tile floor because we have a water problem. I’m sure you smell the mustiness.”

I acknowledged the damp smell. She continued, “I don’t want to get anyone in trouble, but look at the wallpaper.” She pointed out some dark spots that crept up from below the carpet level. “I don’t let any babies crawl on this floor.”

Ouch. Talk about feeling convicted. And clueless.

I realized changing the nursery was not just a facility issue, but really a ministry issue. I’d heard the clichéd facility priority list—take care of the nursery and the women’s restroom above everything else. But in this case, I felt the issue personally. Though I overcame my guilt—thanks to a supportive wife—I intensified my zeal to address the nursery issue.

With a nursery that smelled musty and had mold marks on the walls, we were sending a terrible message to visitors: “Your babies may not be safe here, and we aren’t doing anything about it.”

1. Is the facility issues a ministry issue?

The first clouding factor is determining what facility issues are indeed ministry issues. Many views exist on this. At the two ends of the spectrum are quality and humility, each of which can be supported biblically.

Proponents of quality suggest that God deserves the best of everything. The quality of the Temple, tabernacle, and worship elements provide our example for highest quality in our church buildings.

Those who espouse humility point out the vitality of worship by Christians through the centuries and around the world that meet in crude structures—if any at all. Since we are greatly blessed with any facility compared to other Christian cultures, we should limit effort and expense on our facilities.

Both positions reflect some truth.

Given the location of our church, there were basic community standards that people expect to be met. And basic cleanliness and freedom from molds in the nursery were certainly community standards. At that time, the news reported accounts of children dying due to exposure to the mold *Stachybotrys*. Were we possibly endangering our children?

Calls to several environmental services taught me more about molds than I ever imagined! I reasoned that if I could prove that we had *Stachybotrys*, then everyone would have to agree to remodeling or moving the nursery. However, several different molds resembled *Stachybotrys*, so we could only be sure through a costly environmental analysis. Trying to limit expense for our congregation that was stretched financially, I initially kept probing for other options to verify if we had a potentially deadly mold.

Then one environmental expert asked me, “If this is for a church nursery, are there really any molds that would be acceptable—whether they are deadly or not?”

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His question brought clarity to a situation I'd been cluttering with irrelevant detail. In our community, there should be no molds on any nursery walls. It is a clear ministry issue to remove health hazards for our children.

Duh!

Why had I been slow to grasp something that should have been so clear? Because of a second clouding issue.

2. How many “chips” it will cost?

It isn't a very spiritual analogy, but I've never forgotten a *Leadership* article by Leith Anderson that compares pastoral credibility and influence to winning and losing chips at a poker game. His point: you need to know your current chip count before spending your leadership stake on activities that may cost more chips than you've got.

Since I'd only been at the church for a year, I was still assessing my chip count. I assumed that I would lose chips by pushing a nursery renovation, and I thought I needed to save my chips for other new initiatives. But when the environmental expert asked whether any mold was acceptable in a church nursery, this clouding issue disappeared.

But I could move “all in” because no one can rationally defend allowing any molds around infants. In fact, identifying such a readily solved problem could actually gain chips.

We proceeded to move the nursery back upstairs near the sanctuary where it made much more sense for young families. The office moved downstairs to another space. In the room with the mold problem, we tore out the carpet, wood floor, and moldy drywall. A special paint coating and new tile floor provided a space that could get wet if we experienced leaks. We also addressed the cause of the water leaks as best we could.

I think I actually gained chips through the process. With a reasonable presentation of the case, everyone was on board with the changes.

This prompted me to lead the renovation of the next clichéd priority space—the women's restroom. Since it was also in the basement, guess what kept appearing on the walls? Black molds. Since we'd already dealt with mold issues, I reasoned that similar reasoning for renovating the women's restroom would be welcomed by all.

Wrong again. Because of a third clouding issue.

3. Which conditions have become “normal”?

We become easily attached to what we've grown accustomed to over time. When we enter a space for the first time, we notice the abnormalities. But as we grow accustomed to our own spaces, we quickly lose objectivity—and those abnormalities disappear from our minds. That's why it's easier for guests to recognize faded wallpaper than for most residents.

There will always be resistance to change, no matter how well prayed for and planned. Realizing this fact gave me renewed energy to address a full sanctuary renovation—a project I always knew would meet some resistance. But we made it through that project as well to enjoy a renovated facility—a facility I believe pleases God.

Any facility change will meet resistance. Since none of us likes resistance, we can become tentative about the facility changes that are truly necessary for healthy ministry. But getting past the blind spots and pulling back the layers of clouding issues can provide us with clearer vision to see what God wants our facilities to be.

Fresh eyes for a clearer view

A congregation on Chicago's North Shore area built a new worship center two decades ago. When they called a new pastor two years ago, he was shocked to find steep steps leading from the entry area to the worship center. He called them “the climbing wall.”

But recently when I visited the church and commented on the steps, he said that he had gotten used to them and had forgotten how imposing and intimidating they appeared to him as a newcomer.

WELCOMING VISITORS

In a short amount of time, we can lose our ability to see our facilities as a newcomer sees them. We lose our objectivity in evaluating facility issues.

Here are a few ways to look at your building with clear eyes.

- **Recall your first days at the church.** When you first visited the church, your objectivity was fresh. Think back to your first impressions.
- **Ask your spouse.** Men and women notice different things. My wife knew all about the mold issue in the nursery long before I noticed it.
- **Read past prayer or planning journals.** If you journal, skim through past entries. You may have jotted down facility issues you wanted to address—but have forgotten. Reading past records may jog many helpful recollections.
- **Prayerfully walk around the building by yourself.** The church building seems a much different place when no one else is there. The quiet moments in prayerful reflection may enable the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to an entirely new idea.
- **“Visit” the church with a friend who’s never been there.** A true visitor to the church will have a completely fresh perspective. Also, asking a non-Christian for his perspective may open your eyes to the facilities—and Lord willing, his eyes to the gospel.

—JAMES RODGERS; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2009 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. When was the last time our nursery received an uplift? Our bathrooms?
2. If money was not an issue, which facility issues would we address first? How might these projects improve our church and benefit our ministry?
3. What is holding us back from facility upgrades we need or want?

Ask the Right Questions

Consider the questions visitors will be asking.

Proverbs 3:27–28

The Mystery Worshipper is a secret team of church reviewers who visit churches all over the world. They have a standard set of questions that they ask of each church service—questions that all churches should constantly be asking of themselves. After all, most visitors will be asking these questions too.

How full was the building? If you've ever shown up early to a church with only a few members, or shown up late to a church with too many people, you know how the capacity of the building can make you feel about the service.

Did anyone welcome you personally? That is, who didn't have a name tag that says, "Greeter." The "passing of the peace" doesn't count either.

How would you describe the pre-service atmosphere? Did everyone talk with their friends or include you? Did everyone seem glad to be there or were they so "reverent" that it seemed like a funeral home?

Did anything distract you? I've been to churches that had train tracks run beside them and one that met in a bowling alley. Distractions aren't always auditory. I once met in a Karate studio that couldn't shake the smell of sweaty men.

Which part of the service was like being in heaven? And which part was like being in... er... the other place? Isn't our worship a foretaste of what we'll be doing for an eternity?

What happened when you hung around after the service looking lost?

How would you describe the after-church coffee? I guess in England, they have after-church coffee. Most churches I've been to in the US drink their coffee before church. The point remains—do you include your visitors or just talk with your friends?

Did the service make you feel glad to be a Christian? Or want to be a Christian?

What one thing will you remember about this in seven days' time? Often times it's the bad things that stick in our memory.

Using questions like these can help you notice some things you've never considered before and catch them before you leave your visitors with a bad first impression.

—DAVID ZIMMERMAN is a former pastor who lives in Lake Wylie, SC; adapted from "Church from a Visitor's Perspective," from ChurchMarketingSucks.com, © 2007 Center for Church Communication. Used by permission.

Discuss

1. Think through how a visitor to your church might answer each of these questions based on your last service. Which of the answers most concern you? Which most excite you?
2. How are these questions helpful in evaluating your church's outreach to visitors? Are there any you would add from the list? Any you would remove?
3. How might it be helpful to solicit feedback directly from visitors? How might you obtain this?

WELCOMING VISITORS

Connecting with Young Adults

These nine traits characterize churches that reach young adults.

Colossians 2:19

It is important to consider how all generations will feel when entering your church—especially young adults, who have been dropping out of church (and staying out) at alarming rates. We surveyed almost 200 churches to search for trends and found a series of nine common characteristics in these churches that are effectively reaching young adults. Here's what they're doing:

Creating Deeper Community

Churches that are effective at attracting and developing young adults place a high value on moving people into a healthy small group system. Young adults are trying to connect and will make a lasting connection wherever they can find belonging.

Making a Difference through Service

Churches that are transforming young adults value leading people to serve through volunteerism. More than being pampered, young adults want to be part of something bigger than themselves and are looking to be part of an organization where they can make a difference through acts of service.

Experiencing Worship

Churches that are engaging young adults are providing worship environments that reflect their culture while also revering and revealing God. More than looking for a good performance, young adults desire to connect with a vertical experience of worship.

Leveraging Technology

Churches that are reaching young adults are willing to communicate in a language of technology familiar to young adults. Young adults sense that these churches are welcoming churches that value and understand them, engaging them where they are.

Building Cross-Generational Relationships

Churches that are linking young adults with older, mature adults are challenging young adults to move on to maturity through friendship, wisdom, and support. Young adults are drawn to churches that believe in them enough to challenge them.

Moving Toward Authenticity

Churches that are engaging young adults are reaching them not only by their excellence but by their honesty. Young adults are looking for and connecting to churches where they see leaders that are authentic, transparent, and on a learning journey.

Leading by Transparency

Churches that are influencing young adults highly value an incarnational approach to ministry and leadership. This incarnational approach doesn't require revealing one's personal sin list so much as it does require that those in leadership must be willing to express a personal sense of humanity and vulnerability.

Leading by Team

Increasingly churches reaching young adults seem to be taking a team approach to ministry. They see ministry not as a solo venture but as a team sport—and the broader participation it creates increases the impact of ministry.

WELCOMING VISITORS

— ED STETZER is an author, speaker, researcher, pastor, church planter, and Christian missiologist; adapted from *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them* (B&H Books, 2008). Used by permission.

Discuss

1. What practices from the list above resemble what our church is doing? What things are these churches doing that we are not doing?
2. In what practical ways can we make our congregation more welcoming for young adults?
3. What obstacles do we currently face that prevent us from implementing practices that resonate with young adults?

Become an Inclusive Church

Sometimes we unintentionally exclude people from the church.

Revelation 7:9

Jesus' kingdom is a welcoming kingdom; however, there are many ways that churches can unintentionally exclude people.

Issues

If the church's message regarding political involvement is simply centered on two issues—preventing abortion and homosexual marriages—then that church may exclude from participation others who believe that in addition, we have an obligation to provide healthcare for the uninsured, we desperately need serious immigration reform, and we need to care for our environment. Exclusion happens when we assume that everyone thinks just like us and especially when we caricature people whose political perspectives are different than ours. Erecting straw men from the pulpit and then knocking them down will turn off people who feel differently than the preacher does.

Ethnicity

Exclusion can also happen when the majority race fails to pursue with intentionality a plan to racially diversify the church. Minorities need to see people like themselves on stage, in videos, and in leadership positions. And minorities need to hear their own sound in worship. But first, churches must become biblically convinced that the church is to be a foretaste of the kingdom of God as represented in Revelation 7:9: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."

Gender

Certainly, becoming an inclusive church also involves issues of gender equity. Are all roles in the local church open to people based upon spiritual gifting and calling, or are certain roles off-limits to women? Intentionality regarding pay, promotion, recruitment, etc. is needed to have gender equity in our churches.

And, when I think of inclusion, I think of Jesus' statement in where he said, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." Our church has been particularly concerned about including people with disabilities. Many people who have children with severe learning disabilities cannot attend church because their children can't be accommodated in ordinary children's ministry classes. We have created a "buddy system" at Vineyard Columbus. Every child with severe learning disabilities is paired with an adult buddy who assists that child in their Sunday School classes.

Inclusion is rooted in a church's conviction that we are to express the huge heart of Jesus toward the whole world.

—RICH NATHAN is senior pastor of Vineyard Columbus in Columbus, Ohio; © 2011 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

WELCOMING VISITORS

Discuss

1. What are the assumptions we might have about the way people in our church think? What is fair to assume, and what is not?
2. How does our church model and celebrate diversity on a Sunday morning?
3. What does gender equity look like in our church? Is this a value we are pursuing? How could we pursue it further?

WELCOMING VISITORS

Further Exploration

Resources for welcoming visitors.

📖 **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

The Growing Church Training Track

Level One: Usher/Greeter
Welcoming Visitors
Connecting Newcomers
Turning Visitors into Attenders
Maximizing Church Membership

Level Two: Is Our Church Discipling?
Building a Culture of Discipleship
Turning Attenders into Committed Members
Cultivating Active Church Members
Discipling Emerging Adults

Level Three: Mentor
Mentoring
Mentoring
Training New Leaders
Mentoring New Leaders

📖 **LeadershipJournal.net**: This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

The First Thirty Seconds: A Guide to Hospitality for Greeters and Ushers by *S. Joan Hershey*. Provides an overview and practical tips for making good first impressions (New Life Ministries & LifeQuest, 2000; ISBN 978-1893270039).

The Five Star Church: Serving God and His People with Excellence by *Stan Toler and Alan Nelson*. Two strong chapters in this book are “The Secret Church Shopper” and “Evaluation and Measurement” (Gospel Light, 2000; ISBN 0830723234).

Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church by *Nelson Searcy and Jennifer Henson*. This innovative, practical guide is full of how-to information, testimonials from the recently assimilated and from participating church leaders, examples of the assimilation materials used, and check points to make sure newcomers are fully integrated into the life of your church community. (Gospel Light, 2008; ISBN 978-0830745319)

Rethinking the Church by *James Emery White*. This takes every aspect of how a church functions and forces the reader to check his or her assumptions. Check out the chapters on “Rethinking Evangelism” and “Rethinking Discipleship.” (Baker Books, 2003; ISBN 9780801091650)

Serving as a Church Greeter by *Leslie Parrot*. Explains the importance of the role of greeters in church services and it offers advice on how to be an effective greeter (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 978-0310247647).