

ACROSS NORTH AMERICA

Getting Your Church Ready for Company

It's Easter Sunday morning. The Smith family has decided to attend church for the first time in over 12 years. They choose First Church because of its convenient location. As they turn into the parking lot it becomes difficult to find a parking place. After driving around for several minutes, they finally park but aren't sure where to go. The first door they come to is locked and there is no one in sight to help them. Mr. Smith notices a couple walking toward the front of the church so they quickly turn and follow them. Once inside, a bulletin is shoved in their hands, and they are told to find a seat quickly because the service is about to begin. After stepping over three families who would not move down the pew, they are finally seated as the music begins and everyone is told to stand.

After the service, the Smith family left without anyone speaking to them, inviting them to Bible study or expressing any interest. However, the Smiths did make a decision that day—they decided never to go back to First Church again.

It was not because they did not like the sermon. It was not because they did not like the music. It was because First Church was not ready for company.

Your Easter Sunday is quickly approaching. Plans are being finalized to make sure those in your community receive an invitation to attend your church. However, a question demands to be asked. With all this work you are doing to invite people to church Easter Sunday, “Is your church ready for company?”

This day cannot be viewed as business as usual. There must be a plan to make sure each guest feels welcomed, loved, and wanted. Many of the people who will be visiting on Easter Sunday may have never attended church. Their attendance might be revealing a new receptivity to spiritual things or a personal search for answers to life issues. Not being ready for company could mean they will never return or worse, never respond to the gospel.

Some might think that too much attention is being given to Sunday guests. Well let's take a look at what Jesus says on this issue. In Matthew 25:35 Jesus said, “...I was a stranger and you took Me in” (NIV). It sounds like Jesus wants us to be hospitable to strangers. Another passage is Hebrews 13:1-2 where we read, “Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers...” (NKJV). “Brotherly love” should not stop with the brothers. It should continue beyond the borders of those we know. The word “entertain” means hospitality. God's Word commands us to show love to everyone ... even “strangers.”

So what should our church do to get ready for company? In the pages that follow are several easy, yet essential, steps every church can take to make certain they are prepared.

Some churches might feel what they offer is simply okay. It might not be the best, but it is good enough. What is an acceptable level of quality performance? Is it 50 percent of your guests feeling welcomed? Seventy-five percent of your guests feeling loved? Ninety percent of your guests feeling wanted?

Well if 99.9 percent is an acceptable goal for your church, how would this goal impact other areas of life?

- 12 babies would be given to the wrong parents each day in America.
- 200,000 drug prescriptions would be filled incorrectly in the next 12 months.
- 107 incorrect medical procedures would be performed each day.

Since 99.9 percent is not good enough for parents, pharmacists, and doctors, it should not be good enough for churches.

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We have one chance to make a good first impression.

On the Outside

1. Your Church Campus Must:

- Have directional signs in parking areas and outside of buildings
- Be well landscaped
- Be clean, well maintained
- Be inviting cosmetically

Everyone has heard of body language. Well there is building language as well. Your building communicates how much the members of your church value their church facility and the ministries offered.

2. Parking Areas Must:

- Have adequate number of guest parking areas
- Have guest parking that is easy to locate and identify
- Allow guest parking to be your best parking spaces
- Have greeters outside in the guest parking area

Why do we need guest parking spaces? Researchers have discovered that church guests decide whether or not to return to the church they are visiting in the first 10-12 minutes upon entering the church campus. Greeters can ensure the first 10 minutes for your guest are the best. If you do not have guest parking with greeters, you cannot be certain their first 10 minutes will be a positive experience.

3. Guest Parking Greeters:

- Should be your friendliest people
- Must wear name tags
- Need to understand the value of this ministry

This time is critically important and should be used to discover useful information about the guest(s), such as their names, where they are from, how long they have lived in the area, information about their family, interests, and possible needs.

4. Transitioning Your Guests to the Inside

Guest Parking Greeters should escort all guests from the parking lot to the Welcome/Information Center and introduce them to the Welcome Center staff.

On the Inside

Why should our church have a Welcome/Information Center? Most families do not visit a church when things are going well. Usually, they attend during a crisis or other personal matters. They might be looking for help, friendship, or fulfillment in life. If your church does not have a Welcome/Information Center, how will a guest find out about your youth ministry, parenting classes, marriage retreat, women's Bible Study or any of the other wonderful ministries, and activities your church offers?

At the Welcome/Information Center guests can discover many of the benefits your church offers those who attend. You may, unknowingly, discuss how your church can meet one of their most critical needs. They probably will not receive this information during a worship service and certainly will not have the opportunity to ask questions. At the Welcome/Information Center guests are informed and encouraged to get involved in the life of your church.

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1. Welcome/Information Center

- Should have greeters who are very friendly
- Should have greeters who are well-informed about all of the ministries of your church
- Should provide up-to-date information on
 - Upcoming events for all ages
 - Recreational leagues and opportunities
 - Discipleship classes/small groups
 - Church staff and ministry directors
 - All age-graded and affinity ministries
 - Contact information
 - Campus map

After visiting the Welcome/Information Center, the greeter should escort the guest to the appropriate area, such as nursery, children's church, youth ministry, discipleship classes, or worship center. The greeter should introduce the guest to the ministry staff or leader and make sure they are accommodated.

2. Nursery area must be:

- Clean
- Safe
- Secure
- Organized

Some guests may not be ready to leave their newborn in your church's nursery. To assist visiting parents with this emotional dilemma, it might help to encourage them to tour the nursery area and make their own decision. If they do not feel comfortable leaving their baby at this time, you can suggest they sit in the back of the worship center to allow easy access to the foyer if there is a need.

3. Acknowledging Guests During a Worship Service

- Most guests prefer anonymity while visiting a church. They do not want to raise their hand, stand up, or stay seated while everyone else stands. They want to do what everyone else is doing and feel as comfortable as possible.
- It is important for someone to acknowledge them in a way that makes them feel welcomed and wanted. Since they will be blending into the crowd, church leaders must teach their members to value their guests and speak to those seated around them with a kind word and inviting smile.
- It is critical for church leaders to gather the contact information of their guests to follow up with them. Guest cards may be placed in pew racks or in bulletins. Whoever acknowledges the guests should politely encourage them to fill out a guest card and place it in the offering plate or preferred areas.
- Some churches are successfully using a Guest Reception following each worship service to give them an opportunity to meet the pastor and staff.

Most churches consider themselves to be very friendly. The truth is they are, but usually to themselves. It is important for your church to do its best to make sure every guest feels loved and welcomed.

As you incorporate these ideas and your own into the life and ministry of your church, you will be well on your way to "Getting Your Church Ready For Company!"