

First Impressions: 10 Ways to Make Your Guests Feel Welcome

People never get a second-chance at a first impression. Neither do churches. My family recently visited a church (no, it wasn't your church) and were able to get in and out undetected. Had it not been for our toddler's need for childcare, we could have avoided human contact altogether. Needless to say, we didn't feel very welcome.

Nearly everything about a Sunday morning worship service communicates something to first-time visitors. From the church bulletins to the parking lot layout, churches demonstrate how much - or how little - they care about people. Here are some things I learned from my last church visit.

1. Create a culture of hospitality

Hospitality is not just for Martha Stewart types. In fact, the Bible exalts hospitality as a godly virtue (3 John) for all believers. Emphasize, as often as it takes, the value of hospitality with your leaders.

2. Train your greeters

Not everyone at your church is qualified to be a greeter at the door. Not only should you be selective when you choose greeters, you should invest time in training. A genuine smile that engages the eyes, a handshake, and a friendly "Hello!" all go a long way to make visitors feel welcome.

3. Design a logical flow of traffic

This point applies both to large churches and small ones, both cars and pedestrians. First-time visitors can become easily frustrated when it's unclear where they should go.

4. Spell-check everything

Typos on your website, signage, worship guides, and even song lyrics can send the message you don't care. Set up a system to ensure all written communication is checked for spelling errors.

5. Mark your entrances

When visitors come to your church, do they know what entrance they should use? A well-marked entrance takes some of the pressure off of visitors who might be too nervous to ask for help.

6. Avoid awkward greeting times

Many churches include a time of greeting between members at the beginning of a worship service. For visitors, it's the first day of school all over again. Explain the purpose behind the greeting time and coach your people on how to do it well.

7. Prepare a concise explanation of the child care system

Families with young children will be anxious about leaving their kids with strangers. Don't overwhelm them with information, but explain your church's plan for taking good care of their children while they attend the worship service.

8. Be careful how you gather information

Some churches are too pushy. While it's important to gather information for follow-up with visitors, be careful you don't send the wrong message in how you ask. Consider including a communication card in your church's worship program. Ask everyone, including members, to fill out the card and drop it in the offering basket.

9. Train members to assume they're the only point of contact

Unless everyone has this mindset, everyone will defer their responsibility to be hospitable. Don't miss an opportunity to take an interest in visitors. Invite them to lunch after church if you attend a morning service.

10. Treat visitors like VIPs

Most of all, visitors want to feel respected and welcomed. Offer reserved parking close to the front door. Have volunteers escort visitors from the parking lot to the child care area and auditorium.

Remember, first impressions matter. With a well thought out, pre-service plan, your church can show visitors just how much you care and want them back.

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