

Important Facts About First-Time Guests

You may be the most skilled preacher and your church may have excellent Bible classes, but your first-time guests will never know unless they make a second or third visit. Healthy and growing churches pay close attention to the people they count as members, as well as those people who are not yet a part of the congregation. These congregations know that new people are the lifeblood of a growing church. Like a spigot, they want to keep the valve open for the flow of new people, and most importantly, they want to ensure that nothing impairs or cuts off the flow of new people to the church. With that in mind, Christians need to be aware of five significant facts about first-time guests looking for a place to settle and worship.

1. Visitors make up their minds regarding a new church in the first ten minutes of their visit. Often, before a first-time guest has sung the opening song or heard the scripture reading, they have made up their mind whether or not to return. In fact, if you ask most congregations, far more time and energy are spent on arranging the worship service, with only minimal time spent on preparing for the greeting and welcoming of the first-time guest, which is equally, if not more, important. Most preachers would rather not hear this: The church's ability to connect with first-time guests is not dependent on you, but on those first lines of people who represent your congregation.
2. Most church members are not friendly. Congregations claim to be friendly. In fact, many churches put that expression in their logo or tag line. But my experience in visiting churches as a first-time guest proves otherwise. The truth is that most church members are friendly to the people they already know, but not to guests. Watch to see if your members greet guests with the same intensity and concern before and after the worship service as they do speaking with a member they already know. A lack of friendliness before and after the service sends a mixed, if not hypocritical, message to new people. The six most important minutes of a worship service, in a visitor's eyes, are the three minutes before the service and the three minutes after the service, when church members introduce themselves, seeking genuinely to get to know the visitors (not just obtain personal information like the market research data collectors at the mall), offer to answer any questions, introduce them to others who may have a connection (perhaps they live in the same neighborhood, are from the same hometown or state, or their children attend the same school), or any number of ways to demonstrate to the visitors that they as a church member care. A congregation would be wise to discover their most gregarious and welcoming members and encourage them to talk to

visitors before and after each service, in addition to people who greet visitors at the door. Furthermore, do not make promises the congregation cannot keep. Churches that call themselves "The Friendly Church," but no one speaks to them before the service, and when they seek information from members they are treated as a bother, sends mixed messages and does great harm in a church's effectiveness in welcoming new people. Sometimes we waste so much effort with slogans and logos, and forget the more important part of friendliness!

3. Church guests are highly consumer-oriented. "If Target doesn't have what I need, I just head to K-Mart." "If the Delta airfare is too high, American might have a sale." Capitalism has taught us that if we do not find what we want, someone else down the street or at another web site will have it. If your church building is too hard for newcomers to navigate, if they have to park in the "back 40," if your people are unaccepting and unfriendly, another church down the street may have what they are looking for. Or worse yet, they may decide getting into a congregation is not worth the effort and give up their search altogether. Elders and preachers need to look at their congregations through the eyes of a first-time guest. Unfortunately, the longer a preacher has been a preacher, the less he thinks like a non-preacher. That same thought would apply to thinking like a guest. Churches would be well-served to seriously begin thinking like a non-Christian visitor. We understand the reasons why congregations should be the way they are, but visitors do not. We want them to accept the teaching of Christ regarding the one true church, which is His body. The guest, however, at their level of spiritual maturity, sees all churches as equal in God's sight.
4. The church is in the hospitality business. Though our ultimate purpose is spiritual, one of our first steps toward outsiders is attention to hospitality. Imagine the service that would be given to you in a first-class hotel or a five-star restaurant. Should the church offer anything less to those who have made the great effort to be our guests? Hospitality is almost a forgotten virtue in our society. When was the last time someone invited you to their home for a meal? But it needs to be reawakened. Church members can extend hospitality to guests by offering to sit with them during the worship service, giving them a tour of the church building, inviting them to lunch after service, or connecting with them later in the week.
5. You only have one chance to make a good first impression. More than a truism, first impressions are lasting ones. Little hope of correcting a bad first impression is possible. Your first-time guests have some simple

desires and basic needs. They decide very quickly if you can meet those criteria. The decision to return for a second visit is often made before guests reach your front door. Are you creating the entire experience, beginning with something unbelievably minute such as the tidiness of your parking lot? Are you consciously working to remove barriers that make it difficult for guests to find their way around and to feel at home? Do newcomers have all the information they need without having to ask any embarrassing questions? Are your greeters on the job, attending to details and anticipating needs before they are expressed? Does anything about your guests' first experience make them say, "Wow!" and want to return?

You may be the most skilled preacher and your church may have excellent Bible classes, but your first-time guests will never know unless they make a second or third visit. Will they come back? It all depends on the impression you are making. Make it the right one the first time.

Adapted From Rick Ezell