

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



21 Easy Ways

**FOR YOUR CHURCH TO BE MORE
FIRST-TIME GUEST FRIENDLY**

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This weekend new guests will arrive at your church. Some will be visiting for the very first time, and they will want to know what your church looks like on a regular weekend. Church leaders who want to make a difference always look at how to make their church's experience more compelling and engaging for new guests. Here are 21 things you can implement to make your church more first-time guest friendly:

Don't Be Weird

As a general principle, please don't be weird. Seriously, people coming to your church for the first time may be worried that it's going to be strange and unfamiliar territory. They wonder if it's going to connect with them and the life they are living today. Guests arrive at your church looking for people like them; they aren't looking for people who are weird and strange but rather those they can connect with comfortably.

Clear Website

We all know that your church website is a critical communication piece for people deciding to check out your church. In fact, somewhere around 50% of new visitors will first visit your website to learn more about the church before attending. [ref] While it is important that your church website follows modern design approaches, it is even more critical that you consider the website from a first-time guest perspective. Ensure your

website has everything they would need to facilitate their visit, including the following:

- Easy to find address and service times
- Access to past messages
- Information on kids ministry
- A sense of "what is important" to the church

"What to Expect" Content on Social Media

Your church can do a lot of different things on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and whatever other social media platforms you're using. However, perhaps one of the best uses of these platforms is to provide a sense of "what to expect" for your first-time guests. Post lots of images from inside your environments so guests can see them in action. Use live video features of Sunday mornings to invite people to get in the car and join your church. Make highlight videos of your weekend experiences and share them. Think about these channels as a way to document and demonstrate what the life of the church looks like. (Check out what [Road to Life Church in Northwest Indiana](#) does with their weekly highlight videos on Facebook! So fun!)

Signage at the Road

First-time guests are likely very nervous when they drive up to your church. You can remove some of that fear by making sure that you have clear and compelling signage at the road in front of your church. Learn what the local

bylaw limits are on temporary signage and go right up to those limits! Flags are a popular option for many churches because they might be categorized differently by your town, but they pack the same visual punch as other types of signs. “Sandwich board” signs are great tools to point people in the right direction in your parking lots. Even something as simple as branded safety cones give an added touch to indicate to first-time guests that you are ready for them.

Signage at the Doors

Count the number of doors on the outside of your church. Most leaders will be shocked by how many different ways people can get in and out of the building as we often think people only come in through one or two sets of doors. It needs to be super obvious where you’d like people to enter. If you have a door that’s better for families to arrive at then make that clear too. Think about this signage from multiple distances from the building. Is it obvious when they get out of their cars? What should it look like in order to direct the people who are 35 feet away? Is there something you can do for the people who are right at the door?

Decluttered Lobby

Entering the lobby needs to feel peaceful and inviting. Someone should be assigned the role of decluttering the space on a regular basis. It often seems like church lobbies can be magnets for all kinds of stuff over time, and we need to intentionally remove the visual and spatial noise to ensure that our guests can focus on their experience when they arrive. Be vigilant in removing anything and everything that isn’t 100% needed to help people throughout their visit. Be ruthless and even remove those extra plants and pieces of furniture that aren’t adding anything. Airports are a good benchmark to use with your team on how our lobbies should feel. A good airport is visually appealing, has great signage, and is designed to move people somewhere. Our lobby spaces should do the same!



Clear “Wayfinding” Signage Inside the Doors

A big part of our role when responding to first-time guests is to remove all the guesswork from their experience. Our job is to make it as simple as possible for them to experience what our church has to offer. Stand at the various entrances to your church and ask yourself how you could use signage to make it even easier for visitors to understand where to go. Too many churches are designed by looking at drawings, and we subconsciously assume people will be naturally drawn to where they should go next. This problem is exacerbated by architects who think their designs are inherently intuitive and put too much trust in subtle features like carpet colors and wall angles to move people along. As soon as people step into your building they should see clear and bold signage that answers four questions:

- Where do I drop off my kids?
- Where can I get a cup of coffee?
- Where are the bathrooms?
- Where is the service happening?

First-Time Guest Check-In at Kids Ministry

First-time guests who are also parents can be nervous leaving their children with your kids ministry team. In an age of “helicopter parents” you need to ensure that you go out of your way to make this entire experience as engaging and welcoming as possible. Your church no doubt has some sort of secure check-in process for kids ministry. At that location, it’s important to dedicate a team member to help first-time families through this process. Ensure this person is well trained and free to walk these guests through the drop off and answer any questions they may have. This person might not be busy the entire morning, but the moment a first-time family arrives they should jump into action and be ready to help.

“New Here?” Kiosk in the Lobby

Are guests a big enough deal to your church that you dedicate a space to them in your lobby? Have you ever noticed that first-time guests arrive earlier to your church than your average attendee? What do those guests do when they arrive? If your church had a dedicated “New Here?” kiosk in the lobby hosted by some fantastic team members, they could start the connection process right away. During your service [if you offer your guests a gift](#), then the natural place for them to pick it up would be this location. Too many churches lose the chance to connect with guests because it’s unclear where they should go after the service to pick up this gift. A dedicated “New Here?” kiosk provides a simple landing zone for guests

and helps your volunteers prepare better than if they were at a general “information desk” fielding a wide variety of questions.



More Greeters and Ushers

Your church needs more team members dedicated to ensuring guests are finding their way. This means more than just “human signage”; greeters and ushers help to humanize the experience. They should be trained to guide people through their visit but also be keeping an eye out for people with that “I’m new here” look on their faces. When they encounter these guests, they need to leave their posts and help these people in whatever way they can. In order to do this, you need more greeters and ushers to backfill when these team members jump into helping new guests. Some churches designate specific members of this team to “swim the lobby” and look for people who might need a little extra care and connection. Either way, this team can’t be staffed at a minimum level and provide the sort of service that prioritizes first-time guests.

Sparkling Bathrooms

Bathrooms are a big deal. I’m convinced that guests make a lot of assumptions about your church based on your bathrooms. They need to be clean and in good working order; additionally, having a team member wipe down the counters multiple times on a Sunday morning is a nice touch. If you are looking for a way to add an extra “pop” to your bathroom, you could add those convenience baskets full of supplies like hand lotion, mouthwash, and other helpful items. Think about that time you went into a restroom at a theater or restaurant and it literally “wowed” you. Is there any way to aim your amenities towards that standard? The bathrooms need to be more than just clean; they need to sparkle!

Team Members in T-Shirts

A part of helping people who are new to your church feel welcomed is to ensure that they know where to direct their questions. We ask

team members to wear t-shirts because it allows our guests to identify those individuals who can answer their questions. Prevailing churches have been employing this tactic for a long time, and it really does help guests know who to connect with. The t-shirts need to be in a color and design that stand out and get the guests’ attention. The goal of these shirts isn’t that your volunteers will wear them in other contexts but rather should stem from the intention to help your guests!

Put Away the “Backstage” Stuff

When you have guests over to your home you tidy up and put stuff away. You close the garage door because nobody wants to see the lawn mower and fertilizer when they first arrive. In our house, we put away the blender that normally sits on the kitchen counter because it doesn’t quite match the look we’re going for in that room. The same principle should be true at your church on the weekends. Look around your space and make sure you put away things that just don’t need to be out in the open. There’s no need to have that vacuum sitting out over there in the corner. That stack of chairs that gets used on Wednesday should find another home. We don’t need people to see into the utility closet where the HVAC system is humming along. All of those supplies that help prepare our spaces should be out of sight every weekend.

Calming People in Kids Ministry Area

Kids ministry can be a high energy, exciting aspect of our church. We need to have a lot of over-the-top, fun leaders that infuse these programs with lots of energy. However, this area can sometimes be overwhelming for people who are new to the church. Beyond that first moment when people are guided through the check-in process, it’s helpful to have team members roam the halls of our kids ministry areas during critical check-in and check-out times looking for parents to reassure. Lots of new parents struggle with leaving their kids and do the long, slow walk away while looking back. This is perfectly normal and understandable! Inviting churches will have leaders attuned to parents who are having a bit of trouble separating and will reach out to reassure them with a calm demeanor.

Unassuming Worship Leaders

Worship leaders who don’t assume that everyone in the room is on the same page are a gift to guests at your church. A worship leader that realizes that it’s not about the people in the first couple of rows but rather about engaging

the guys who stand at the back sipping coffee is worth so much to your church. Worship leaders do this through knowing (and loving) their community, careful song selection, thoughtful verbal transitions, and a desire to constantly improve. It's not about watering down the worship experience, but making it more broadly accessible to everyone in attendance.



Jargon Free Service

Language at our churches can be littered with confusing jargon if we're not careful. Jargon, by definition, is a subtle social tool used in groups to define the boundaries of who is a part of the group. We need to go out of our way to explain exactly what we mean when we communicate. Our goal as leaders that want to create space for people in our churches is to break down these terms so that they are more inclusive. In fact, if you listen to those who excel at teaching churches filled with unchurched people, you'll notice that a large portion of their time is spent on defining terms. Find the jargon in your midst and root it out! Here are a few terms to start working on removing or at least explaining to people when or if you do use them:

- The Lord is working in my heart.
- During my quiet time...
- ...a lost sheep, straying from the fold.
- We will have a time of communion and fellowship...
- ...hedge of protection...
- Let me share my testimony with you.
- I'd like to share one of the burdens on my heart.
- Do you know where you're going to spend eternity?
- Lord willing...

Clear Acknowledgement of Guests from the Stage

Going back to the example of guests visiting your house, can you imagine how weird it would be at Thanksgiving dinner if your large extended family had three to four guests with you and you never stopped to acknowledge

them? In fact, imagine if everyone just spoke to them like they were always with your family for dinner all the time. By the end of the meal your guests would be totally creeped out by the fact that no one acknowledged that they were indeed visiting and were new to the family. When your church doesn't go out of the way to acknowledge from the stage that there are guests attending it puts people in a strange spot. They are left wondering if the church never gets guests or, even worse, that maybe the church doesn't want guests! A simple message of welcome paired with a clear "next step" is an important piece of the puzzle. Regular attendees might feel weird that you are calling out to guests every week, but you need to push through this resistance and keep acknowledging them!

Invitation to a Clear "Next Step"

How do people get connected at your church? If people want to go beyond just "checking out" the church and get plugged into community, what steps do they need to take? Having a simple, obvious, and clear next step for your guests reassures them that not only do they have the opportunity to get connected further, but it also lets them know what steps to take in order to do so. If it's unclear to our guests what they should do when they want to get plugged into community, then only a small fraction of them will take those steps. It's up to us to make it clear for them!



Parking Lot Team

I was recently visiting a growing church on a Sunday morning. After one service, myself and a senior leader left one of their campuses and were en route to another location. We got stuck in the inevitable long line of cars leaving the parking lot that happens at so many churches. This leader commented to me that they've never seen this line up because they are always inside the church at that time of the morning. As we chatted while waiting, you could see the wheels turning in the leader's head about launching a parking lot team. Most churches

would benefit from a team of people in the parking lot to help facilitate guests as they arrive and leave. This added level of care reassures guests that we are expecting them and helps ease this process as much as possible. We know how important first and last impressions are on people who attend our churches, so let's invest in launching teams that will help us craft those experiences well!

Faster and Friendlier Follow Up

Many churches ask for guest contact information in some form or another. Lots of churches ask for this information in exchange for a gift that costs the church money to acquire. Most of our churches have invested significantly into database infrastructures to store and access guest contact information. All of those investments are wasted if we don't follow up with our guests when they visit with us. How quickly? You should be following up faster than you are now. If you wait until Tuesday to email people who came last weekend, I would recommend moving that follow up back to Sunday evening. We should also be pushing towards our follow up being friendly and engaging rather than mechanical and digital. Phone calls or hand-written notes always beat out emails. We live in a world where people don't just throw around their contact information. When someone gives you their contact information they are making it clear that they expect you to be in contact. Exceed that expectation and help people get connected!

A Compelling Reason to Come Back Next Weekend

Guests journey through visiting your church with one question filtering everything they experience: Why should I return to this church? From the moment their car enters your parking lot until they leave for home, they are wondering if they would ever come back. A part of our job is to give people a reason to come back the following week. Whether it's a plug about a juicy question the speaker is going to talk about next week or something fun happening in kids ministry the following Sunday, you need to lace the experience with reasons for people to come back. Ask your guests to return the next weekend and give them a reason to do so! Ensure that you weave hints throughout the morning as to what's coming up to encourage them to visit your church again!

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