

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



5 Emotions First-time Guests Feel

WHEN THEY ARRIVE AT YOUR CHURCH

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Have you ever watched people arrive on Sunday morning at your church and wondered what they're feeling in that moment?

We know that feelings and emotions are incredibly powerful motivators and memory-makers. In fact, [studies have proven that](#) we make more decisions based on emotion rather than logic.

This is especially true when we think about people's reactions to discussions of faith and religion. It's an emotionally charged topic; similarly, people experience a wide variety of emotions when they visit a church for the first time.

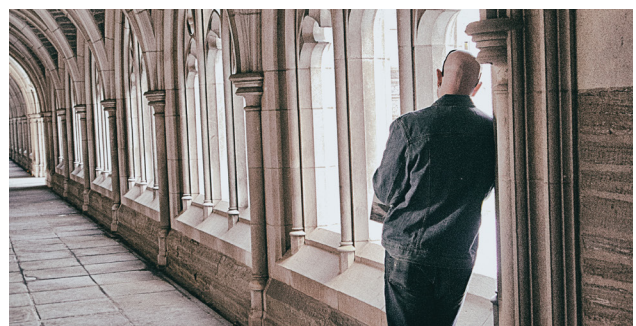
It has often been said that polite conversation excludes both religion and politics, although we seem to live in a day that has discarded the idea of avoiding political conversations. The underlying concept of this "polite conversation" rule deals with the fact that people prefer to avoid emotional conversations, and religion certainly brings emotion to the surface. That being said, part of what we need to do is to understand the emotions people feel when they show up on a Sunday morning and to be able to respond by caring for and meeting people where they're at in life. **Our churches need to be first-time guest obsessed.**

Here are five emotions first-time guests likely feel when they're arriving at your church. I'd love to hear your thoughts, observations, and reflections on this topic in the comments below.

Fear

For a first-time guest arriving at a new church, there's often a running internal dialogue that goes something like this: *am I wearing the right clothes? Can these people see right through me? Can the pastor somehow tell what I did last night? Will I be judged?* All of these unknowns and questions can cause a tremendous amount of fear, which initiates that fight-or-flight reaction. Guests arrive at our churches wondering if they should have their guard up and be ready for a fight or if they should simply give up, turn around, and go home.

Our job is to calm any fears our guests might have by ensuring they know that we expected them. Regardless of where they've come from, we are glad that they are with us, and we should feel honored that they've decided to come and spend some time with us. Our job is to depressurize the environment and ensure that our guests know that God loves them dearly.



Confusion

When you visit someplace new, your brain goes into overdrive trying to establish the patterns of that place's behaviors and processes. When someone checks out a church for the first time, there are so many new things for them to try and to understand—everything is new. Unfamiliar environments often drive us into a state of confusion as we try to figure out how to fit into their patterns.

In fact, people often try to understand what they are currently experiencing through their past experiences. Because so much of what happens in church doesn't connect with their past and feels a bit foreign, it ends up causing a deep sense of confusion.

Confusion is a disorienting emotion and our job is to ensure that we provide clear and obvious next steps to help lessen that confusion. *We need to remove obstacles in order to provide some sense of familiarity.*

Now, I understand that church is a transcendent experience, but **we need to take people from where they are to where we believe God wants them to go.** An early step in this process is to ensure that people understand or are informed about the basics when they come to your church, like where to drop off their kids, where to grab a cup of coffee, and where the bathrooms are located. While those may seem like trivial concerns, they are anchor points for familiarity that help relieve some of the confusion for people when they first arrive.

Regret

Regret has the potential to be the most powerful emotion that people experience when they come to your church. **I like to think of this as comparable to buyer's remorse, the feeling you get when you've purchased an item, walk out of the store, and suddenly feel as if you made a mistake.**

When people step into the lobby of your church for the very first time, they often run into a deep sense of buyer's remorse. Some will almost immediately feel the desire to turn around and walk out. This regret means that they are in over-processing mode and are looking for any excuse to leave. If they get a text from their long-lost aunt that they haven't talked to in 25 years, that will take precedence over what is happening at your church on a Sunday morning. If they forgot the diaper bag, that will cause a mom to bail and decide not to drop her kids off at your programs. Regret drives (or inhibits) an incredible amount of action for first-time guests.

To combat this sense of regret, we need to clearly articulate early on that we are expecting guests to be with us. This impression is important because if a first-time guest with buyer's remorse at least understands that we expected them, it reduces some of their regret and makes them more willing to give us a shot, even for that one moment.

Cultivating an environment of expectation helps our people feel at home and understand that God has a great plan for them.

Hope

A deep sense of hope also fills the hearts of first-time guests. The only reason why guests have come to your church is because there is some sort of need that they are hoping you will fill. **Hope is the driving emotion that brings people to your church for the first time.** As such, we need to ask ourselves a couple of questions:

Do we understand the needs that drive our guests to our churches?

Are we acknowledging what those needs are in order to fulfill that sense of hope?



The reality is that if guests don't believe that the church can meet their needs, they simply won't come back. We know that somewhere close to only 1 in 10 guests ever return to a church in the future. One of the reasons they may decide to come back is because they have a sense that their needs are going to be met by that church sometime in the future. Their needs may be relational or maybe they're struggling with raising their kids or wrestling with theological matters. Some people struggle with who is God and wonder what difference He could possibly make in their lives, while others understand God but wonder why they're here and what their purpose is in the world.

Have a robust understanding of the needs of your people and take the time to address those needs in your printed material or through what you talk about on a Sunday morning.

Distracted

Frankly, when people arrive on a Sunday morning, they're distracted. This may very well be the most prominent mindset that people experience as they join you on a Sunday morning. We are just one, very thin slice of their overall week. In the back of their minds, there are many other things they're wondering about, including:

- What's for lunch?
- Is my team going to win their game today?
- Will my kids enjoy the program?
- Does the pastor at this church have anything to say that's relevant to me?
- I wonder what's going to happen at work tomorrow.
- I wonder what my boss really thinks of me.
- Is my mom going to call today and complain that I haven't called her?
- I wonder what my wife really thinks about that date we went on last night.
- I'm so confused about why this church uses Comic Sans font in their advertising.
- What's going to happen next month? Next year? 10 years from now?

All of these distracting thoughts and many, many more are firing in people's brains at all time. Even as you're reading this article, you are likely distracted beyond belief. Our culture has fed on this habit of distraction and we've heightened it with the cell phones in our pockets. This distraction means that we need to go out of our way to ensure that we are communicating clearly and simply.

We need to simplify what's happening on Sundays. Too often, we try to communicate in subtle ways and that approach simply doesn't work; subtlety doesn't grab attention. We need to make the main thing the plain thing. We need to ensure that whatever it is we are trying to get across to our people that we communicate it in an incredibly simple and straightforward manner. We do not want to distract people with four things that will cause further distraction when we can present one key thought for them to focus on.

What do you feel when you go somewhere new?

To get inside the emotions your guests feel when visiting your church, go somewhere new and evaluate how you respond during the experience. I would encourage you to find a way to train your team and yourself to consider what guests need emotionally upon arrival.

[Click here](#) to learn how to help your team members remember what it feels like to be a first-time guest at a new church.

Leave your comments [here](#) about what you believe your visitors will experience emotionally when they arrive at your church this weekend.

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