

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



8 Phases

***OF MOVING GUESTS FROM ANONYMITY TO
COMMUNITY AT YOUR CHURCH***

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What is the process by which guests transition from unfamiliarity with your church to becoming raving fans? How do they move through those phases, and how are we helping them at every step along the way?

Understanding how guests transition along the spectrum from stranger to advocate for the church is important for us as we build our programs and processes.

I'm a firm believer that churches need to **think in steps, not programs**. We need to think about how we're moving people from where they *are* to where we want them to *be*, and if everything we do doesn't help them make one step closer on that path, we need to reevaluate what's working and what's not.

In this post, I've attempted to outline what I think are the eight phases that every guest who comes to our church needs to move through, in order to transition from complete anonymity to deep community.

Awareness of your church

Frankly, I think most of our churches stumble on this very first phase. The reality is that most people in our neighborhoods don't know we exist. Don't believe me? Go to the gas station down the road, pretend you're from out of town, and ask them a simple question. Say, "Hey, what do you know about that church down the road? We're thinking about going

there this weekend. What do you know about them?" I think you might be shocked at what people say. (I know I was at first—I've been performing this exercise over the years I've spent visiting churches.) There have been instances where I have been directly across the street from a church and **when I asked that question, the people at the gas station either didn't know the church existed or knew it was there but had no idea what actually went on inside.**

Potential guests need to know that your church exists. This should be pretty obvious, but my personal research has proven otherwise! **How are you building awareness of your church in your community?** What are you doing to get your people out of their seats and into the streets so that folks in your town know that your church exists? If people are unaware of your church, they can't ever take a step inside the door.

What can you do in the next 30 days to help build awareness of your church within your immediate community?

Needs acknowledgment

People come to your church because they have a need they're looking to fill. Now, I know there are people reading this post who are already rolling their eyes and thinking, "Oh, once again, here we are with attractional-driven churches simply trying to scratch an itch that people have." **But the reality is people only take**

action on things that they perceive will make a difference in their life. What is the need that those who are coming to your church are looking to fill?

It might be that they need help with their marriage or maybe they're concerned with parenting, but they might also have questions about their faith or be wrestling with some other life issues. If people in your community don't have self-acknowledged needs, they won't take action on coming to your church. This is important to understand as church leaders because we need to position ourselves early in the communication process around the problems our community is dealing with. What are the pain points that people are looking to us to solve? If we're not clear in the way we communicate our awareness of on-going issues, when people have those pains or needs in their lives they won't realize that we're the ones that can help them with that problem.



Look at the way you communicate about your church externally. How are you communicating about problems that you are able to help people solve?

Arrival...then buyer's remorse!

In this phase, two things are happening at the exact same time. People arrive at your church and at that same moment they have "buyer's remorse." They're already wondering, *did I do something wrong by coming here? Should I turn around and go home?*

Churches that focus on connecting with guests from the parking lot all the way through the service are keenly aware of the fact that when people arrive on your campus they are already considering leaving, even before the service starts.

What are we doing at that moment of arrival to connect with our guests and provide them with whatever they need? Are we at least indicating to them that we're able to help them with their needs? This arrival experience is a

critical juncture because it's the first time that people have made a physical movement towards us, and we need to both acknowledge and thank people for making that step. At this phase, offering gifts to first-time guests is entirely appropriate as a reward for making the right step and to acknowledge the fact that they made a connection with your church.

Does your team receive people in such a way to counteract "buyer's remorse" that guests may feel the moment they first arrive at your location?

First connection

Once people have arrived at your church, at some point they will identify themselves. Between the last phase and this one, they may have already visited multiple times, but **until they reach out and introduce themselves they are not moving closer to connection.** During this phase, our guests still refer to the church as "your" church. They do not yet see it as a place they're a part of but rather as someone else's community that they periodically attend.

It might be that a friend brought them, and they decided to fill out a contact card and get the free gift that they heard about in the lobby. Don't fumble the ball here. **It's important that when people reach out we're there to receive and respond to that connection.**

As soon as people raise their hands to say, "I am here," they've moved a step closer to community. They go from being part of the invisible mass to signaling that they would like to make a deeper connection. We live in an age where people don't freely give out their contact information, so ensure that you are ready to receive their intention well! To make this step as clear and obvious as possible needs to be a prime concern for your church and your leadership.

How does your church regularly invite people to move from being a part of the invisible mass to identification?

Acclimate

Once people have made a connection with the church, their next step is to acclimate to what it means to be a part of the church. This looks different in various churches. [Church of the Highlands has done an incredible job with the growth track experience](#), providing easy on-ramps on a regular basis to get people plugged in. [North Point has its GroupLink process](#), which regularly attempts to move people from their seats into the smaller circles of small groups.

The goal of the acclimation phase is to move people from referring to the church as someone else's church and to refer to it as "their" church. They get clarity on what it means to be a part of the church on a regular basis and begin to feel it is the kind of place they want to be a part of.

What process do you have in place to see people "know and be known" at your church?

Needs met

People came to your church hoping that it would meet a need. Usually, it won't happen right away. In fact, it might take months or years to meet that original need. Sometimes their need is met without them even consciously acknowledging that it was the reason they came in the first place. People might have originally come to your church for community and after a few years once they feel a deep sense of community and friendship, that need is checked off their list.

But don't miss this: **if the church doesn't meet those needs, eventually those visitors will opt out and no longer attend.** They took the step to visit your church because they hoped the church would help meet the needs they were wrestling with. Understanding why people arrived at your church and then asking them, "Is that need being met?" is an important element in moving people from anonymity to community.

How can you challenge people to acknowledge why they came to your church in the first place? Are you asking people if this experience is living up to their expectations?

Connection beyond needs

Once someone feels that the church has met his or her needs, they realize there's something bigger than them happening at the church. Here we are, *seven* steps in, before we begin to acknowledge that there's something greater than our own needs. This is what happens in the lives of people in a church community when they start to volunteer, and they realize that volunteering at the church is not just about helping make church happen but about living out God's purpose for the community around us.



This is what happens in the life of someone when they move from just focusing on getting answers to their own questions about the Bible to helping others explore their questions. It's at this point that there's an internal shift within our people. They go from focusing on just themselves to feeling driven by more altruistic or external motivations. **Our discipleship process needs to move people beyond their own needs to where they're connected to the broader story that God is trying to write.**

Unfortunately, too many churches start with step seven. They assume a level of maturity and dedication that, frankly, is beyond where most people are at when they first arrive at church and ultimately miss the community that they're attempting to reach.

Who in your church "gets it"? What if you celebrated those people ahead of others to help point people to connections beyond their needs?

Advocate for the church

You know those people at your church that make you sit back and say, "Man, if I had 100 of those people, we could take on the world"? Those individuals are true advocates. They're the folks that have not only internalized the mission of the church but have decided to reorient their life around seeing others get connected to the mission too. They find themselves advocating for the life of the church outside of the walls of the church itself. **They realize that at the end of the day, the local church is the only organization in the world that exists for people beyond it.**

People access the deepest level of discipleship when they look beyond both their own needs and the walls of the church to find other people who have needs that the church can meet.

There may only be two or three percent of your total community that is asking the question, "How do I invest in the relationships I have in my world

and invite those people into relationship with Jesus and with the church?" However, a motivated and focused group of advocates can make a massive difference in the life of a church.

Who are the advocates at your church?

Which phases should you work on next?

Those eight phases, I believe, are active in your church whether you recognize them or not. Each phase is an important transition point to move people from complete unawareness of your church to ultimately become advocates of the church, both inside it and beyond.

Which step do you think you need to work on?

Where does your church excel?

What do you need to change in the coming six months to shore up those areas that need more support?

I'd love to hear your feedback on these eight steps and see if you think I've missed any. Your church needs vibrant examples at every step of the way to help move people to the next phase. I'd love to hear from you about how your church is helping guests move through this transition.

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