

What Newcomers Notice When They Come to Your Church

What do newcomers notice at your church? Have you ever wondered? The first impression may determine whether they decide to return or just keep shopping. The best ways to be guest-friendly may surprise you. For example, one of the best ways to chase away a newcomer is to focus attention on them. Newcomers typically want to stay anonymous until they become comfortable with their surroundings. And we are more comfortable being acknowledged to strangers by someone we trust. So, when introductions are appropriate, have insiders initiate the introductions. This is especially true in a large group setting, since most visitors feel vulnerable when identifying themselves as outsiders.

In my travels, I have noticed how one parish began worship by inviting everyone to turn to their neighbor and introduce themselves. At another, the presider asked if anyone brought a guest with them and if so, the presider asked the parishioner to say a word of introduction, after which the presider offers a word of welcome and a self-deprecating comment about braving Buffalo weather to all the visitors.

In some churches a commentator or lector expresses welcome to the assembly with a special welcome to guests before making any observations about the order of service, the song selection or location restrooms. All these actions seem redundant to “Regulars”, but they say “Welcome!” loud and clear to those who are least familiar with our space, our way of worship, and our folks.

Ask yourself the following questions. What do first-time guests notice? Do they notice the parking situation? How easy is it to find a parking space within sight of the church building five minutes before Mass starts? Is there a covered drop off point for use in bad weather? Are there “guest parking” spots? Are there sufficient spaces reserved for the disabled, or expectant mothers? Are there clear signs to the entrances, restrooms and meeting rooms? Is there ample seating? Are church members quick and happy to move in at the pews, so that visitors do not have to climb over them? Is there an information center? Are there greeters, or just ushers? Is the information table staffed with a smiling face?

It has been reported that guests, especially females, notice the entry ways, restrooms far more than men. Are these clean? Is there plenty of room? Is there a baby changing table? Are there facial tissues? What about the quantity of sinks and toilets, and their convenience. Many newcomers like to remain anonymous until they get comfortable in new spaces. They do not like to be noticed when they have to step out to address family concerns or physical needs.

Bathrooms located up front without clear signs can create nervous newcomers. Young families look for locations where they can put their child down. This makes perfect sense to someone who cannot physically hold one or more children for an hour. They appreciate a secure playroom (formerly called “cry room”), a gathering room or a nearby, uncluttered hallway.

The best money we ever spent at our parish was for remodeling the restroom. At my parish there are families who walk, ride a bike or take public transportation to church. Coming to church is a significant journey for them, especially if they come with children. Having a clean, neat and attractive restroom has made a world of difference for them.

Take another look at the Mass rites through the eyes of a newcomer. Consider the first historical account of the Lord's supper (1 Cor. 11: 17-32). One purpose for a gathering rite is to recognize the call of Christ to be a community, united in charity, before approaching the table of the Lord, right? A gathering song is not the only way to start worship. On occasion, a parish allowed the assembly to recognize special occasions being celebrated that day. Another parish allowed the congregation to name people with particular prayer needs, or name significant community events as part of the gathering rite. Later in the Mass, another parish asked their people to start the sign of peace by saying "Hi, I'm [Dennis], Peace be with you". It is surprising how many of us sit, week after week, along side of the same people and never know their names.

Whatever small steps we can take to be more welcoming will be appreciated. And we gain valuable insight if we start by seeing ourselves through the eyes of newcomers. Thom Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, recently offered the following Ten Commandments of Guest-Friendly Churches:

- 1. Thou shalt pray for people in the services whom you don't recognize.** They are likely guests who feel uncomfortable and uncertain.
- 2. Thou shalt smile.** You only have to do so for about an hour. Guests feel welcome when they see smiling people. You can resume your somber expressions when you get home.
- 3. Thou shalt not sit on the ends of the rows.** Move to the middle so guests don't have to walk over you. You'll survive in your new precarious position.
- 4. Thou shalt not fill up the back rows first.** Move to the front so guests don't have to walk in front of everyone if they get there late.
- 5. Thou shalt have ushers to help seat the guests.** Ushers should have clearly marked badges or shirts so that the guests know who can help them.
- 6. Thou shalt offer assistance to guests.** If someone looks like they don't know where to go, then they probably don't know where to go. Get out of your comfort zone and ask them if you can help.
- 7. Thou shalt not gather too long in your holy huddles.** Sure, it's OK to talk to fellow members, but don't stay there so long that you are not speaking to guests.

8. Thou shalt offer your seats to guests. I know that this move is a great sacrifice, but that family of four can't fit in the three vacant seats next to you. Give it a try. You might actually feel good about your efforts.

9. Thou shalt not save seats. I know you want to have room for all of your friends and family, but do you know how a guest feels when he or she sees the vacant seats next to you occupied by three hymnals, one Bible, two coats and an umbrella? You might as well put a "Do Not Trespass" sign on the seats.

10. Thou shalt greet someone you don't know. Yes, it's risky. They may actually be members you don't know. And you may get caught in a 45-second conversation. You'll be OK; I promise.

I couldn't have said it better! This is not to suggest that someone will turn around and walk away from your church, because you violated one or more of these prescriptions. But these all factor into a visitor's first impressions of our church. They are coming! Are we ready willing and able to receive them? That is the question.

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