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**SOUL
WINNING**
through
**RELATIONSHIP
BUILDING**
*not one way—
the only way*



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Five keys to opening the front door

You should check out our church, it's so warm and friendly!" We had just moved to a new area, and the invitation sounded genuine and appealing. So that weekend my wife, young daughter, and I headed, somewhat nervously, in the direction of my friend's church, even though we knew that she was going to be out of town.

After the umpteenth wrong turn, we arrived a little late, only to discover that the parking lot was full. Finding an innocuous patch of grass, and hoping we were not contravening any church parking rules, we offloaded and headed for the entrance, up a steep flight of stairs, hauling our stroller with us. At least, we thought, it was the entrance. After several attempts, we realized it was locked. So, down the stairs we went to the next door and tried that. That was a mistake! It was a class in session; they anxiously shooed us out and told us to go around the building.

Finally, we hit the jackpot. An unassuming door in the corner of the building revealed a lady in a floral dress, animatedly talking to her friend. Barely pausing in her conversation to mumble "Happy Sabbath," she handed us a bulletin that looked like an artifact from the 1970s. We stood there, confused, hoping she would direct us to the children's division. When that did not work, we guessed a hallway to

our left, and our intuition eventually led us to the right classroom.

The lady in charge of Kindergarten was sweet and friendly. We left the class much more hopeful and certainly less frazzled. Unfortunately, she was also the last person in the church to speak to us. The members talked to each other, but no one even glanced in our direction. We were strangers, lost in an unfamiliar world. We had to find the sanctuary, the bathroom, and the mother's room all by ourselves. The sermon was nice; the music, excellent; but we never felt like this was a place we could call our church home.

I recount this story in order to ask an important question: *How can we open our church doors so that people who attend can feel genuinely welcomed?*

I would like to share with you five keys that have helped churches successfully reach guests and transition them into church life. These keys have been incredibly effective in making churches that I have worked with become "sticky churches" that not only attract guests but keep them coming.

Key 1—Make first impressions count

If you want to open that door wide, you had better do it quickly. First impressions matter. Malcom Gladwell, in his book *Blink*, talks about "thin slicing," where we use little slivers of information about a person to quickly

form a larger opinion.¹ Nelson Searcy states, "Seven minutes is all you get to make a positive first impression. In the first seven minutes of contact with your church, your first-time guests will know whether or not they are coming back."²

An absent-minded greeter, a difficult-to-find bathroom, a crowded foyer, and an awkward Bible study class are enough "thin slices" for people to form a negative impression of your church. I remember a church that we were attending for the first time and where we decided to stay for lunch. At that time, I had three little kids. In the crowded fellowship hall, it was clearly going to be a challenge to seat all of us together. Fortunately, we realized that if we moved one lady's handbag just one seat down, there would be enough space at one end of the table. Two minutes later, the owner of the handbag came across and berated us in front of everyone. It was a lasting first impression of that church's fellowship.

It is helpful to see your church through the eyes of a first-time guest. Some churches even ask "mystery shoppers" to check out their church and give an evaluation of their experience. You may want to visit another church and record your own observations. Is it easy to find parking? Can you locate the entrance? Do you know where the children go? Do you feel alienated, assisted, welcomed, or

smothered? How does it work in your own church? Who gets prime parking? The members or the visitors?

First impressions are often picked up from the little things that we do not notice. A broken window or the stain in the corner all communicate a subtle message. And nothing more quickly makes a bad impression than a dirty bathroom. “When people see that you care for your facilities, they’ll not

Key 2—Be genuine

A mistake that churches make is to turn treating guests into a strategy. This is not about turning our churches into a mall; this is, instead, about connecting with people and letting them know that this is a place where they can find Jesus. Mark Waltz says, “First impressions aren’t about making the institution look good. They are about making Jesus look good. They are

Part of communicating care is not to overwhelm people. When I visited one small church with my family, their eyes lit up as if seeing their first visitor in the last decade. Twenty people greeted us before we could even get to our seat. As Christopher Walker states, “You want to avoid ‘the human wall’—so many layers of greeting and greeters that it seems too friendly or overwhelming, particularly for the

Let’s all create sticky churches where people find grace, a warm welcome, and an opportunity to fall in love with Jesus.

only tend to take better care with your space, but they will also more easily believe you’ll care for them.”³

Because greeters are your first impression of the people at your church, they should be specifically selected for their gift of friendliness. They should know how to pick up on cues about when to engage. “A good rule of thumb is eye contact. If a guest makes eye contact with a greeter, there’s a good chance they want a bit of interaction. But if a guest doesn’t sustain eye contact, they want to be left alone.”⁴ Bear hugs and kisses on the cheek may be appropriate in some cultures, but, in general, they invade the space bubbles of strangers. Good greeters have good instincts on this.

Inside the church, make sure the restrooms are easy to find and there are helpful people at every step of the way. In our church, we do not just point you in the right direction, we walk you there. We also know that guests that come together need to sit together, even if members have to move.

When you get the first seven minutes right, you have already made a lasting impression.

about communicating personal value to the people who matter to him.”⁵

If we simply try to “impress” people with how nice our church is, they see right through the pasted-on smiles and slick strategies. This is the reason for selecting greeters who have a heart for people. When you pull your team of greeters together, “rather than presenting a ninety-nine page how-to manual, paint a broad-stroke picture of the atmosphere you want to create.”⁶ When they care from the heart, guests notice the difference.

Both the greeters and the members need training in how to help guests. Mark Waltz suggests using the HELLO acronym to help people start up conversations more naturally:

- H—“Hello,” or “Hi, how are you?”
- E—Engagement, pausing to look people briefly in the eye, connecting with them and sharing your name.
- L— Listen and tune in.
- L— Listen some more, ask clarifying questions, and restate what you have heard.
- O—Offer assistance if needed.⁷

first-time visitor. You want to be sure your greeting is experienced as sincere and not as artificial friendliness.”⁸

Key 3—Make it memorable

Disney knows all about making guests feel special. In their book, *Be My Guest*, they state that the secret to their success lies in creating “memorable experiences.”⁹ They think through the potential photo albums that people will look at misty-eyed, long after the experience is over. While we are not a company that needs to satisfy customers, we can create “memorable experiences” that will make them want to come back and experience the grace they found in our fellowship.

When the apostle Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta, he noted that the people “showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold” (Acts 28:2, NKJV). Unexpected hospitality, an *unusual kindness*, makes an event memorable.

Imagine meeting Abraham on a hot day in the desert.¹⁰ Would you

be surprised at this elderly man running out to greet you? Would you be amazed as he bowed low before you and implored you to spend a little time with him, bringing you water and serving you? Would you be impressed as he pulled together a delicious meal at the last minute, giving you the very best he had to offer, standing to one side, remaining attentive to your every need? I think you would want to come back and visit him again!

We can plan for “spontaneous” acts of kindness in our congregations. Keep umbrellas on hand for greeters and deacons to escort people when it rains. Have books available that you can give away. Remember people’s names—use their name three times and link it to a person or place you already know.¹¹ As you show attention to people’s needs, remember their names, and listen to them, you create a memorable experience. But all of this requires a plan.

Key 4—Interact intentionally

At our church plant, we have a three-tier system of greeting. The first line is the greeters who meet the guest at the door, warmly greet them, and hand them a bulletin. If our greeters discover they are first-time visitors, we then direct them to a welcome station.

There is no guest book. We found that most people (other than older members visiting from other churches) do not want to write down their names and addresses for everyone else to see. Instead, we have them fill out a welcome card so that we can send them something in the mail to thank them for coming to our church. In one church, we immediately gave them a welcome packet and a rose. In some churches, the welcome card will be collected right away, and in other churches, the welcome card would be dropped into the offering plate. Do whatever works best for you, but be intentional in your approach.

After a brief stop at our welcome station, a guide/host is introduced.

This person will usher them to the children’s division or a Bible study class. If need be, we will sit with the person, or family, to help make them people-comfortable (this is especially important for single people). We chat with them and find out their names and what brought them to our church. We make sure we invite them to either a fellowship meal or to have lunch at our house. We try to think of who we can introduce them to at the church who would have similar interests. The host then emails a short description of that person to the guest coordinator, who puts the information into a Google sheet and matches it with the welcome card. By Sunday evening, the pastor and the elders get an update of all the visitors. By the time a person has visited for three weeks, we know that person’s name and basic background.

This requires not only intentionality but training. We read books (look through some of the resources listed in the end notes) and train our members in how to reach out. All of us can be an Abraham. This intentional interaction has led guests to say that “we are one of the friendliest churches that they know.” We take Paul’s words to heart, “Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity” (Col. 4:5, NLT).

Key 5—Follow-up

It is amazing how many churches do a great job of making people feel welcome, but that is where it all ends. They may get the first seven minutes right, but then you are on your own. “A truly welcoming church” extends that welcome again and again. Here are some proven ways in which you can retain those guests and help them to keep coming back.

Offer a free gift. Many people think that churches are simply here to take your money. When you give without expecting anything back, it motivates them to return. *Have a guest table in your foyer.* This is a place where you can find the pastor or chat with one

of the elders. *Send an email within 36 hours and a card within a week.* We like to have our hosts reach out to thank them for coming and invite them to our next service.¹²

When a guest comes back, we do our best to make their second experience as memorable as the first. We particularly look to connect guests with members. We do not try to persuade them to join our church. We simply show a genuine, caring interest in them and their family. However, we do highlight programs and activities they may be interested in. We try to meet needs that they may have. We communicate that this is a church where you can get involved, but where you can also feel your way along and take it easy.

Conclusion

Using these five keys has helped us grow two church plants from 50 to more than 200 in attendance. I believe they can help your churches grow too. Let us all create sticky churches where people find grace, a warm welcome, and an opportunity to fall in love with Jesus. 

- 1 Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2007).
- 2 Nelson Searcy, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests Into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007), 49.
- 3 Jonathan Malm, *Unwelcome: 50 Ways Churches Drive Away First-Time Visitors* (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Church Communication, 2014), 36.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 5 Mark Waltz, *First Impressions: Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2013), 6.
- 6 Waltz, *First Impressions*, 89.
- 7 Waltz, *First Impressions*, 93–99.
- 8 Christopher Walker, *Church Greeters 101: Putting the Pieces Together for an Effective Greeting Team and Ministry*, 3rd ed. (Glen Allen, VA: EvangelismCoach.org press, 2013), 52.
- 9 Theodore Kinni, *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service* (New York, NY: Disney Enterprises, 2011).
- 10 See Genesis 18:1–8.
- 11 Leslie Parrot, *Serving as a Church Greeter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), has great practical tips for church greeters, including how to remember names.
- 12 Check out more ideas in chapter 5 of *Fusion* by Nelson Searcy.

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