

Do We Make Good First Impressions?

First impressions are very important. People will decide about whether they like our church before they even consider its message or worship style. So we need to make each early impression a person receives of the church interesting and enjoyable. Think about each point of contact a newcomer will have with our church. Each contact is an opportunity to make a good first impression:

Our website: More and more people try to get a sense of whether they want to visit a church by looking at its website. Make our site interesting and attractive and, most importantly, keep all information up to date. Be sure to include the church location, service times, a picture of church, pictures of people in the congregation and of activities, schedules of formation and activities, and the latest newsletter information.

Our marketing and advertising: Use the yellow pages just to show service times, location and website. Generate more community awareness with local fliers, ads, door to door or local events. But do not expect people to come except through personal invitations by friends in the congregation.

Our signs: People lose awareness of permanent signs. Change the messages on them to highlight activities, especially for children and families. Make signs interesting by adding balloons, color, cloth, flags or ribbons periodically. Use large temporary banners to highlight special services or events. On Sundays, place twenty sandwich board or realtor-type signs within a six block radius of church to draw people in. These signs should fit in the trunk of a car and just state church and nursery times and a directional arrow. Place them near the street and ask for forgiveness if someone becomes annoyed (rather than asking for permission in advance).

Our answering machine: Keep the message to ten seconds. For people who call at off hours or the last minute, give service times, tell where the church is and the website address. A female voice is considered more welcoming than a male voice and a lay voice is less intimidating than a clergy voice.

Our building and grounds: Keeping our facilities clean, in good repair, bright, well-lit and well-decorated shows we care. Have easy parking and a targeted entrance for newcomers. Place signs all over to help people find the nursery, children's education, restrooms, coffee and parking. Our nursery should be close to the sanctuary, well-marked, clean, well-maintained and with trained paid staff (in all respects as good as the day care centers with which it will be compared). Be sure both men's and women's restrooms have diaper changing stations. Overall, the building should be carefully designed and used as a ministry tool with adequate, non-conflicting space for worship, educational, social and small group activities.

Our hospitality: Treat every person (not just guests) as a guest to our home, not as a visitor to a museum. Hospitality is a true intentional ministry that needs to be coordinated and carried out by the entire congregation and particularly gifted individuals. Everyone should wear nametags to help in the process and to help make new friends throughout the community. A church directory with pictures also helps people get to know one another better.

Parking: The first person to greet people should be in the parking lot entrance: a character wearing an orange vest and happily smiling, waving and assisting if needed. Do not bother signing visitor spaces; no one uses them.

Greeters: Ushers can be intimidating so instead use outgoing women or families whom people will not be afraid to ask for directions. It also helps to have networkers roving around before and after the service to meet people. Remember, however, that guests should feel welcome, not assaulted.

Shepherds: Greeters should hand off guests to regular members who can help them with any needs, familiarize them with a service guide or worship bulletin, find out more about them and introduce them to others. The goal of welcoming is not to hand guests off to the clergy, but to other church members.

Service Welcome: Be sure to welcome guests during the service. If we personally identify them, they may feel shy but still appreciate the welcoming. Make invitations to join in singing or prayers, to stand or to kneel as people feel comfortable.

Fellowship: After the service, shepherds can invite and bring the guests to a hospitable coffee time. Regular members should make a point of not talking to people they know for the first five minutes and seek out guests. Look for members who have special gifts of hospitality to lead conversations.

Our Follow Up: Ask visitors to sign a guest book or card. Follow up with a note from the pastor and a visit from a lay person, perhaps with a gift of bread or cookies and an invitation to return. Gradually help newcomers to connect with as many people as possible and especially with small groups in areas of their interest (such as Bible reflection groups, a prayer group, the choir, etc.). As they express interest in the church, offer an inquirer's class so they may learn more.

Lots more people will return for a second visit to our church if we pay careful attention to these areas of first impression.