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Churches that are growing are doing so because of God's generosity. But that should not stop us from thinking hard and long about what we do in church, how it affects our fellowship and how it appears to outsiders. What sort of attitudes will God want us to have towards the people with whom we gather once a week?

The growing church is one that identifies everyone who comes through its doors in two ways:

1. As people who matter to God;
2. As potential brothers and sisters in Christ.

When we believe this, our church can become, and be seen by outsiders as, a loving community, which cares for the needs of others. Newcomers will then hear the gospel in an atmosphere of loving concern.

It's a hard task – after all, we are all people who have been odious in God's eyes, at odds with the author of love. It's not easy to turn around and welcome each other into fellowship. But it is what God, in his ongoing mercy, will enable us to do. Jesus said, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away".

Now there is some comfort to the harried, nervous usher.

This two-part series is for the benefit of anyone who is involved in the ministry of welcoming people to church and seeing them move from being strangers to being friends in Christ who are part of God's family, sharing the hope of eternal life. It concentrates upon the practical and organizational issues involved with welcoming and explains how they fit into our wider aims of edification and evangelism. Since all Christians are to be concerned with these aims, read on.

Greet Expectations

The task of welcoming people to church, ushering, talking to them after the meeting and inviting them to be further involved with you is multifaceted and requires certain personal qualities. Some of them are more obvious than others. Here are the qualities, which are most important for job:

- Be Christian. Unless you are someone who lives under the lordship of Jesus, you will not understand the importance of your task.
- Be prayerful. It is God who enables repentant sinners to come together in fellowship. We need to pray that he will continue to build us up in love for each other.
- Be teachable. A good leader is a listener and learner.
- Be a self-starter. You will become a burden if you have to be prodded from behind before you will do anything.
- Be creative and able to adapt to different people and problems.
- Be a team player. Remember that you are not doing a stand-up routine – you are

welcoming people into a family. 'Showing off' is not required.

- Control your tongue. Keep confidentiality, don't gossip, keep your temper when things go wrong, speak to people privately if you have problems with them.
 - Be faithful financially.
 - Lead by example. We must practice what we preach.
- Know what your church can offer the community. We may not be always able to provide what everyone needs, but we may be able to point them towards people who can help further.

Checklists

There are three types of people involved in the ministry of welcoming congregation members and newcomers to church: **ushers**, **greeters** and **coordinators**. The responsibilities of these people will differ according to the specific needs, size and activities of your congregation, but some simple description of duties may be helpful.

1. Ushers

An usher is a member of the church who serves it by getting the building, books and bulletins organized. Most importantly, ushers need to arrive at church with an attitude of joy and expectation. Be thankful to God for your ministry and for the people he provides for you to serve, especially guests and newcomers. You will take responsibility for the following:

Before the meeting

- Apply the B.E.L.L. principle – Be Early, Leave Late. You will need to work out how early to arrive, depending upon your church's location and services.
- Attend to the lights and ventilation (windows/fans/air conditioning/heaters).
- Check that the P.A. system is working and loud enough
- Make sure the crying room is open and tidy.
- Check that the toilets are open, clean and stocked.
- Know where the fire extinguishers, exits and first aid kit can be found.

At the start of the meeting

- Give out books, service sheets and bulletins at the door.
- Spot newcomers and welcome them appropriately.
- Direct people to suitable seating within ample time of the meeting's beginning. Know the particular seating requirements of your building. If people need to be encouraged to sit up the front or in the middle, do it enthusiastically and confidently, but kindly! Keep an eye on where the seats are filling up.
- Direct latecomers so as to make them welcome without disrupting the meeting.
- Be on the ball to help people during the service – directly them to washrooms,

finding Bibles and assisting with problems.

After the meeting

- Pack up the books and bulletins.
- Inform greeters of any newcomers.
- If counting money is part of your job, never do it alone. Always find another usher to count it with you.

2. Greeters

Greeters are members of the church who serve it by acting in an official capacity, on behalf of the congregation, to greet and welcome people to the meeting. Their job is to communicate a sense of fellowship and belonging to church members and to make visitors and newcomers feel welcome and valued. Like ushers, greeters should be thankful for the opportunity that they have to serve the church of Christ and be especially thankful for the guests whom they are welcoming to the meeting. Greeters' specific responsibilities include:

Before the meeting

- Greet at the door everyone who arrives at church. Be warm and friendly.
- Take the initiative to shake a hand or open up conversation.
- Look people in the eye. It demonstrates an interest in them. Be ready with a cheerful comment – a sincere compliment is always appropriate.
- Assess any special needs – crying room, Sunday school, seating for handicapped people. Try to spot these needs before people have to ask.
- Be ready to hand information and visitors' cards to visitors (they may also need a pen). If they don't seem comfortable with the service material, explain how the various books are used and give them page references whenever possible.
- If you can, introduce a visitor to those sitting next to him or her.
- Inform visitors and newcomers about after-service activities such as morning tea and invite them to join in these activities.
- Be prepared to greet latecomers, making them welcome, putting them at ease and helping them to 'catch up' with the meeting.

After the meeting

- Be ready to talk with guests and make them feel comfortable. Look to introduce them to the minister or someone of similar age and interests.
- Assist them in the process of fitting in socially – churches can seem like weird places.

3. Coordinators

A coordinator of ushers and greeters has the task of overseeing and streamlining these ministries. They will need to be well organised and responsible to fulfill the following tasks:

- Construct and update a roster of ushers and greeters
- Meet occasionally with ushers and greeters to improve their success and failures. Train them to do their ministry skilfully and with love. Teach them to explain the gospel using a simple outline, such as “2 Ways To Live”.
- Be prepared for last minute changes due to such problems as illness and holidays.
- Be critical about the welcoming procedures – How can it be improved? Is the number of ushers sufficient? Are the handout materials in good condition?
- Keep an eye out for people with gifts for these tasks. You will regularly need ushers and greeters.
- Be responsible for collecting visitors cards and information and passing this on to clergy or people responsible for follow-up

Simply Affable

It is quite a talent to be able to make a wide range of people from different walks of life feel welcome at church. Some people will be more gifted at this than others and we need to identify those people and encourage them to take on the task of ushering and greeting. But most of us can be affable and pleasant towards people with a little bit of effort. However, it is easy to put people off for very simple and avoidable reasons. If people ever turn around screaming, get them back in their cars and speed off when you greet them at the church door, perhaps you had better read the tips below.

At home

I didn't want to mention it, but some people need to have a few home truths pointed out to them: your appearance affects how people react to you! Dress modestly and appropriately to your church situation, make sure your breath isn't overly offensive and that you and your deodorant are sufficiently acquainted!

At church

Some welcomers appear to be on a seek-and-destroy mission, muscling people into the faith before they are even in the door! Usually your first task as usher is not to evangelize; you are there to welcome people to the church meeting. If someone is very keen to ask questions, show them that you are very keen to answer them, invite them in, suggest that the church meeting will hopefully be a good point to start their enquiry and follow them up at the first opportunity after the service.

We want people to feel welcome in our church so that they will return to hear God's word and eventually find fellowship with believers. Be aware of your place as an usher or greeter in this overall plan.

However, there will arise the occasion when evangelism is the appropriate activity for an usher or greeter. Be prepared to explain your faith to the outsider with conviction and sensitivity.

Guidelines for Conversations

A good conversation is a work of art. We need to hone our conversation skills and learn how to

make the most of these times. There is plenty of room for individuality and style here, but some basic guidelines will get you headed in the right direction.

- a. i. Don't invade an individual's personal space. It is a certain way to make someone uncomfortable and everyone will need different amounts of room. (Be worried if your newcomer seems to need over three metres...)
- b. ii. Maintain good eye contact. Engage people's eyes and faces in your conversation. Stand facing them and use your body language to communicate an interest in what they are saying. Work hard at listening to people and don't become distracted. Nothing is more disconcerting than trying to talk to someone who is always looking for their next conversation partner.
- c. iii. People love to talk about themselves – let this be the visitor or newcomer's privilege. Until you are asked, don't talk about yourself. iv.
- d. iv. Be interesting and informative. Knowing about your church's activities is very useful, since it gives you a chance to invite people to other functions and may allow you to introduce them to those in charge of the various activities.
- e. v. When talking to couples, be careful to direct the conversation to both people. As a rule of thumb, spend more of your time addressing the person of the same sex as you – but don't neglect their partner, either. Make them feel welcome and valued both as a couple and as individuals.
- f. vi. If you can, and it seems appropriate, you might invite a newcomer or visitor home for lunch.