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This is the second in our two-part series of articles devoted to the practicalities of welcoming people into our churches. It has been adapted from The Usher's and Greeter's Information Manual, written by Rick Lewers for use in his church. You might like to use this series as the basis for a workshop for those who are involved in welcoming people to your church.

The fast food chains, like McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken, ask certain people from the public to be their 'consumer watchdogs'. These people regularly attend outlets as customers (a bit like undercover police) and report back to the company on the service, the quality of the food and the cleanliness of the outlet. Imagine doing that for our churches. Imagine employing 'church watchdogs' from the general public to attend our services incognito and report back to us on how we appear. What sort of business reports would they file concerning our care of assets, quality of service and attitudes of employees?

Church Watchdogs

Going to church as a newcomer is a bit like going to a restaurant as a type of consumer watchdog. When I go out to a restaurant, I don't just go anywhere. I want to make sure of a number of things before selecting where to eat. I want to know that the food I will eat isn't going to do me more harm than good, so I make some preliminary observations about the restaurant:

1. Does it look well cared for? Are the owners taking pride in what they are doing?
2. Do other people eat there? If I hear that the restaurant is always buzzing with diners, I am likely to follow. If I only ever see empty seats through the street-side window, or if people leaving the restaurant look unhappier than before they walked in, I'll avoid the place.
3. What are the chef, owner and employees like? I love it when I go to a restaurant where the chef or owner appears and asks me whether I am enjoying my meal. I love it when the waiter spoils me and goes out of his way to serve me. On the other hand if I am ignored, if the waiters are watching the clock and their wages, if the chef has dandruff and smells like a men's change-room, I won't be back there. In fact I might not even stay.

The analogy is not perfect, but in some ways you and I are the shop window through which the 'church watchdogs' or newcomers look into our church. We can ask the same questions about our church that we ask about our restaurants.

1. Do people get the impression that we believe in the services we are offering? From the way our church is organised, decorated and run, do outsiders get the impression that we care about what we do?
2. Do we have a good reputation in the community? The way we are talked about in the larger community will affect whether unchurched people will be attracted to our meetings. It is a fact that people attract people and happy people attract more. If our church members are known for being depressed, complaining and seeming defeated, then most people will avoid the hassle of joining us.

3. What is the chef like? And the waiters?
4. This is a question that a pastor, along with congregation members, must constantly be asking himself: How am I perceived? Do I go out of my way to make sure that people are properly served? Is my life a signpost to the truth (and a welcome mat to our church!), or am I more like a detour sign?

In the first part of this series, newcomers were described as "people who matter to God" and "potential brothers and sisters in Christ". The people who walk through our doors are genuinely valued customers. We should be at least as diligent as McDonalds by ensuring that newcomers are attracted to our meetings and are not put off by appearances. Our message is often frightening enough; we need to help people relax and feel comfortable so that they hear this message clearly.

Scripture tells us to be generous and hospitable to those who visit us:

"Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity."

(Colossians 4:5)

"Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

(Hebrews 13:1-2)

What should you do?

The main reason you don't welcome newcomers is not because you are lazy, but because you are afraid. You see a person or a regular whom you haven't met, standing alone and looking awkward. You know how awful it is to have no-one speaking to you at church. You want to walk-up and say hello, but your legs are like jelly. What will you say? How will you introduce yourself? How will you finish the conversation?

Here are some tips that should stand you in good stead:

1. Assume nothing

The old saying is true that if you start to assume things you may well make an ASS of U and ME. Don't assume that this person wouldn't be interested in talking to you. Don't assume that, just because no one is talking to him or her, this person is a 'difficult case' and put him or her in the too-hard basket. Don't assume that someone else who has more social skills will see the newcomer and approach him. Don't assume that, just because the person is a regular whom you recognise, he already has good friends in the congregation.

2. Take initiatives

Newcomers need to be welcomed immediately. And the first impressions which you give them can make all the difference. Go out of your way to make sure a newcomer receives a personal welcome to church. It may mean just smiling at some regular attenders whom you would prefer to catch up with, but most regulars will recognise the importance of giving a newcomer V.I.P. treatment.

3. Listen

God gave us two ears and one mouth. On the basis of that fact, perhaps we should do twice as much listening as talking. People love the chance to talk about themselves and it is one thing that they can speak about with unquestionable authority! A newcomer will appreciate the opportunity to talk about himself, particularly if he is finding 'religious conversation' threatening. By your listening, you may learn important things for the benefit of the church as a whole. Take careful note of a newcomer's comments and complaints; they may be of great help in our ministry.

4. Beginnings

Beginning a conversation is an art form. You are trying to make the newcomer feel welcome, searching for a subject in which he is genuinely interested, avoiding the deadly silence after the first few sentences of introduction and all the while trying to be natural! Here are some suggested openings. Your welcoming team might like to discuss the pros and cons of each of these approaches.

- "Good morning; welcome to St Matthew's. It's great to have you along and we hope that you find the service helpful."
- "Hello, are you new to this area or are you just visiting?"
- "Welcome to the service my name is Bob. If there is anything I can help you with, please just let me know."
- "Good morning, I don't think we have met before. I'm Jenny. Have we met before?"
- "Hi, my name is Bruce. Welcome to our service. Let me introduce you to Wendy."
- "Hello. Great to have you folk with us. If you like, I'll introduce you to the minister after the service."

5. Endings

Finishing a conversation can be harder than starting one! You must continue to care for newcomers at this point. Be sure that they will not be left on their own, feeling awkward. They should sense that you have been pleased to speak with them and will welcome the resumption of the conversation. If they sense that you are relieved to get away and in the future you will avoid them at all costs, you might as well have not spoken! There are many ways to achieve a pleasant ending.

1. Say that you must go home, so long as you are being honest!
2. If the service is about to commence, offer to direct the newcomer to a seat.
3. Offer to return their coffee cup to the kitchen, or their books to the shelves. This is a natural closure of conversation, which still involves serving the newcomers.
4. Explain that there are other people you would like to catch up with. Confirm that you have enjoyed the conversation. For example, "I really should catch up with a few people – I hope you don't mind? Thanks for the chat and I'll look forward to seeing you next week. If I can help you with anything about church, let me know,"

5. Introduce your newcomer to other people who can take up the conversation and excuse yourself.
6. Be on the lookout for other people who are speaking with newcomers.
7. You might be able to ease into their conversation and give the church member a chance to ease out of it.

Follow-up of newcomers

Once we have met a newcomer, and know his name and address, how do we minister to him? Follow-up is most likely a ministry to which certain people are committed and they may be congregation members other than the welcoming team so we will not discuss follow up in great detail. But the ushers and greeters are responsible for the first steps to following up a newcomer.

At our church, we have a 'Visitor Information Sheet', which is filled out by an usher or greeter after each service. It includes the name, address and telephone number of the newcomer, if we know these, as well as anything we now know about the newcomer, which might be helpful when contacting him or her. (For example, you might know that he works shift work and will therefore be sleeping during the day. Or she might have mentioned that her husband would be angry if he knew that she had gone to church.)

Follow-up programs will differ from church to church, but will normally involve the following: a letter, a phone call or a visit. There are many ways to re-contact a newcomer. You might invite him or her to a midweek church activity, or suggest over the phone that he or she join you for tip footy on Thursday night. Perhaps you feel you can simply call up and chat.

Danger!

These articles have been written with a primary focus upon welcoming newcomers to church. But one area which we must not lose sight of in this ministry of welcoming is our love and care for those who are already part of the family of God. We can, without noticing it, become so involved in welcoming newcomers that the established church members get a book and bulletin shoved at them without a word and sometimes without eye contact. Long-term members of the congregation are often neglected. It is nonsense to think that they won't need to be made welcome. Anyone will feel neglected and lonely if they are not reassured of their value to the congregation - even the minister!

When we neglect to welcome our regular members, we end up with one of three types of congregations:

Leavers

Our long-term members start to feel like parts of the furniture and look for another church where their attendance will be valued.

Cardboard

The regular members stay, but only as part of the furniture, they speak to no one and no one speaks to them. Gradually, as newcomers become members, they follow suit and feel that they needn't make an effort to speak to people until the whole congregation is as stiff as a board.

It sounds extreme, but neglected members slowly become despisers of Christianity, because they feel let down. If a person comes to church lonely, finds fellowship and then has it taken away from him, he will become bitter and turn away altogether.

Our regular members are often as needy as our newcomers are and we must be careful to welcome them fully. The Bible gives us good precedents to take extra caution in the way we treat the family of believers:

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

(Galatians 6:10)

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

(Hebrews 10:24-25)

As a welcomer, make sure you give time to those who are already members of your Christian family. The ministry of welcoming should lead towards ongoing contact and eventual fellowship in Christ with the newcomer, and continuing fellowship with our church members. That is always our goal. That is the guiding principle for our welcoming team to observe. Let's make our churches places where people will see Christ at work in us from the time they walk in the front door.

Not all guests are the same

On any given Sunday in almost any given church, you can find an astonishing assortment of people. With your welcoming team, discuss the ministry of hospitality toward the following people who have come for the first time to a church service.

1. Uncle Joe and Aunt Gladys, who are visiting nephew, Ron. Ron is a member of your congregation Joe and Gladys are nominally Anglicans
2. Newlyweds Paul and Joanne who have just moved into the area. Joanne is a member of your denomination, who has decided to bring her husband to church.
3. Carla is a bright student who expects to be living in your area for this year
4. Louise and John have moved into the area of a job transfer. Louise comes to church alone. They have a six-year old daughter and are unmarried, but live together.
5. Peter and Sue have been under pressure from Mum and Dad to have their new baby baptised and have come to church to meet the minister.
6. David is a young physically disabled but pleasant fellow. He seems lonely and spends a lot of time talking to the younger girls in the congregation.
7. A group of older adults from a local migrant hostel and their English is not very good. They always leave immediately the service is over.
8. The Milton family has just moved into town. Steve is a Christian school teacher. The family

have long been members of your denomination.

9. Keith is a rather unusual and unkempt person, who appears to have no fixed address.

Ask yourself the following questions about each of these people:

1. What words of welcome would you give?
2. What information about church would you communicate?
3. To whom in the congregation would you introduce him or her?
4. How will you put this person at ease in the church environment?
5. To which church activities should he or she be invited?