

Ideas That Show We Care

Follow-up with Newcomers

Many congregations struggle with the issue of guest follow-up: What do you do? Visit? Send a card? A gift? Make a phone call? It depends upon your area, the guest, and how the guest has provided information to you. These are just a few ideas to stimulate the thinking and discussion of your Welcoming Ministry team. Remember to make sure what you do fits your community.

First, there are many regional differences to consider in handling this question. In some areas, safety concerns present challenges with visiting people. Also, what's considered "friendly" and "neighborly" or "pushy" varies greatly from the South, for example, to other areas of the country. Consider the societal norms of your area and plan accordingly. Something else to try: ask your newest members and regular worship attendees what they prefer. They are likely to be a good indicator of how others in your community prefer to be contacted.

Other things to bear in mind have to do with a guest's level of familiarity and comfort with church norms. An unchurched person is more likely to prefer something less intrusive, like a phone call or card rather than a visit, whereas someone transferring attendance/membership from another congregation might respond well to a visit—or even be offended if they don't receive one.

Something else to consider: Indicate in advance what you will do with their contact information, so they can "opt in" accordingly and not be surprised at your follow up. You could add a short description to your worship program that says something like this:

"Thank you for attending _____ UMC. We are interested in knowing you and we encourage you to record your attendance at today's worship. If you provide your name and address, we will visit your home to drop off a gift and add you to our mailing list for a few weeks." (Or indicate whatever follow up your church decides to do.)

Ideas That Show We Care (continued)

If you have a newcomer card, you can also add a section to it for people to state a preference of how to be contacted for follow up. Have these cards in the pew racks or registration pads or in welcome packets you either give at church, during a visit to the newcomers' home, or mail. A gift available at church is a good idea. You can encourage people to stop by your welcome center and receive the gift, which gives your members an opportunity to talk to the guests and, perhaps, get their names and contact information.

One other bit of advice: If you opt to send cards from members, remember to use the church's return address instead of the member's address. In our current politically charged climate, people might be alarmed to receive mail from unfamiliar people or addresses.

Here are some other simple strategies that churches can employ to show they care:

1. Contact first-time guests within twenty-four hours (by phone, e-mail, a letter, a visit).
2. Provide opportunities to explore membership prior to joining the church so people know what the church believes and what it expects from them.
3. Make 'shepherds' or 'mentors' available for newcomers: offer someone to be their 'first friend' in the church and get to know them.
4. Implement an 'Absentee Intervention Team' to track attendance, watch for patterns that may indicate that someone is leaving the church, and intervene before it is too late (3-4 weeks is the critical window).
5. Have a Caring Outreach Ministry to make calls perhaps twice yearly to all member households and once yearly to all those non-members who regularly attend the church.
6. Call new members three and six months out to ensure they have connected and are still having a good experience with the church.
7. Offer Ministry Connectors to help people get connected with the discipleship and service opportunities within the church.

Ideas That Show We Care (continued)

Why People Leave

Research shows that people who leave a congregation may . . .

1. Long for a sense of community they haven't been able to find in the church.
2. Suffer from an extended illness, or an emotional or personal crisis. If they are not already connected to the church in meaningful ways, they won't turn there for help and support.
3. Not think they have time, especially if they don't have special relationships or other connections at the church.
4. Realize the theology isn't a good fit for them.
5. Have lost the energy and enthusiasm they once had for staying. They have found it difficult, if not impossible, to get connected to something that could sustain them.

Application for Our Church

What would be effective follow up strategies for our church and community, both with newcomers and non-attenders, to show that we care?