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WELCOMING CHURCH GUESTS

A Step-by-Step Approach

WARM WELCOMES MATTER

Your church will only get one chance to make a first impression. That's a cliche that likely doesn't surprise you.

But your good first impression starts way before they enter your church and ends long after they walk out of it.

God has given you an incredible mission to make disciples of all nations. That mission starts with your own community. Welcoming your neighbors to your church is your first (and arguably the most important) step to doing this.

BUT IT ISN'T EASY.

This guide will walk you through the process of how your church welcomes guests and how to best help them start their journey with your church.

PRE-ARRIVAL

To understand the importance of pre-arrival for guests at your church, think about how you make a major appliance purchase—like a washer and dryer, a television, or even a new car. Your first step isn't showing up at the store and touring a showroom of the newest models.

You're probably starting with a Google search. You're looking at multiple stores. You're reading reviews. You're comparing products.

Certainly, you show up in person to look at the product, but there are many points along the way where you might say no to the product before checking it out in person.

The same is true for your guests. They'll check out numerous church websites and scan through social media histories before they step foot in your church. Many will watch entire services online before they step inside your building.

Your church's first impression begins way before you'd normally believe. Getting it right could be the difference between people engaging with your church (and ultimately in a relationship with God) and not.

Church website

One of the best ways to look at how you welcome guests to your church is a funnel. At the top of the funnel are experiences that impact the widest amount of people. While a broken part of any link in the process will cause a problem, issues at the top impact the most people and are therefore very important.

Two components sit at the top of your church welcoming funnel—your website and word-of-mouth. Nearly everyone who eventually ends up visiting your church will come through those avenues. (A third group of visitors are people who see your church on the side of the road and decide to check it out. Most of the time this group of church visitors will still check your church's website out first before heading through your doors.)

Of all the entry points to your church, your website is by far the most important for people today. Most church websites have two primary purposes. They give prospective guests an idea of what to expect before checking out your church. They also act as a hub for church members who need information about what's going on in the church. While both are important, this guide will focus on the latter.

So what can you do to ensure an effective guest experience on your website? Here are a few simple first steps.

- **Consider creating a unique website experience for guests.** As explained earlier, your website has multiple purposes. Sometimes, these purposes will run counter to one another. The more effective your website informs members about what's going on, the more the website will seem foreign to guests.

A unique web experience would be where you'd send new guests through any media focused toward people in your community (mailers, social media posts, etc.). This site would have only the basics that a guest would need to know before showing up for the first time, such as your address, phone number, and preferably some sort of guide for what first-time guests can expect. You might even include some kind of introduction video as well.

- **Make your website easy-to-find.** Search engine optimization (SEO) is an important and vast topic that this guide can't fully delve into. At this point, you simply need to recognize that it matters. Many of your guests will not first come to your website by typing your church's name into their search engine. They're looking for things like, "welcoming churches in _____ (enter the name of your town)," or "_____ (denomination) churches nearby," or "churches with a youth ministry near me."

  Your goal isn't to help the search engine. It's to help the individual using the search engine find you so you can engage them.

- **Look at your website like a guest.** Your guests don't have the same questions that your members have. Your members may need an in-depth calendar, a member directory, volunteer schedules, etc. But your guests want nor need any of that. ZZZ

  Guests need to know how to get to your church, where to park, and what time your service starts. They want to know what's available for all members of their family. Some want to know the general beliefs of your church. They also want to know what to wear and what to expect during your worship experience. Make sure all of this easy to find. Have someone who has never attended your church—and preferably someone with limited church experience—review your church website and note what confuses them.

Word of Mouth

Your church has a reputation. Most people don't show up at church without having heard something about your congregation. It's tempting to think you can't control those conversations, but that's not true. Every time your church serves your community, you're impacting those conversations. Of course, that's not why you do it, but it does present your church with an opportunity. People take notice when you serve others. In a world where negativity often rules conversations, your church's compassion will be a signal of hope that can draw people to your church.

Also, give your congregation tools to invite people to your church. Regularly make your congregation aware of upcoming events, sermon series, small group studies, etc., that may engage the felt needs of guests. Provide digital sharing tools that help them make inviting their friends and family easier.

Signage

Ensure you have effective signage around your church and campus. A good host makes it easy to find their way around when they arrive at your place. For your church, that starts with clear signs. People need to know where to park, the location of the welcome desk, the drop-off location for their children, and where your worship service will be.

Think about what your visitors need as soon as they drive (or walk) onto your property. Even if you think finding your way around is easy, it's better to over simplify the experience for your guests. Simplify this process by including special parking spots for first-time guests and have your signs direct people to those spots. This is helpful even if you have a small parking lot.

Then use signs to direct people to other important locations (such as restrooms, the welcome center, the nursery, classrooms, and the worship service). Proofread all signs for errors and to ensure they are easy to understand. Also, make sure your signs have high contrast to improve accessibility.

Do not use insider language for your signage. Your goal is to communicate to guests. In other words, don't get cute with your signs. You don't need to use fun language to describe your children's ministry in your signage. Your guests need to know where to drop the kids off. They really don't care that you call your children's ministry, "Little Stars." Your members may find it funny; your guests will find it confusing.

Look and feel

It's tempting to downplay the aesthetics of your church property, but they are critical to making a good first impression. When people pull into your parking lot and see unkempt grass and structures falling apart, they start to doubt the care you put into other areas of the church (such as how you'll care for their children).

Show you care about the building where your church worships each week. Do your best. Rally your congregation to help with this. You may not be able to do everything you'd like with your building and property, but it'll be obvious if you're not trying.

Your pre-arrival process sets the stage for making your guests feel welcomed and valued—and eventually to them responding positively to the God you represent.

While this may seem daunting, take a first step. Any of the action items above will help. Start with quick wins like tidying up the parking lot, or improving your signage.

YOU'VE GOT THIS!

THE ARRIVAL

Yes, how your church presents itself before a visit is important—critically important. But your goal isn't just to get people through your doors. It's to make sure they'll come back next week as well.

That's why your church's welcome experience needs to kick into high gear when guests step foot into your church.

Think about what it's like to enter an upscale restaurant. When you take your first step into the doors, you're greeted with amazing smells. Your host kindly shows you to your seat. The decor is inviting and gets you in the mood for the style of the food.

A great guest experience at your church has similar attributes. It immediately communicates what your church values and invites them into an experience where they feel welcomed and excited for what's to come.

Greeters

The first person a guest meets will make a big impression. Next to your main speaker for the day and maybe your worship leader, that first person will likely have the biggest impact on their experience.
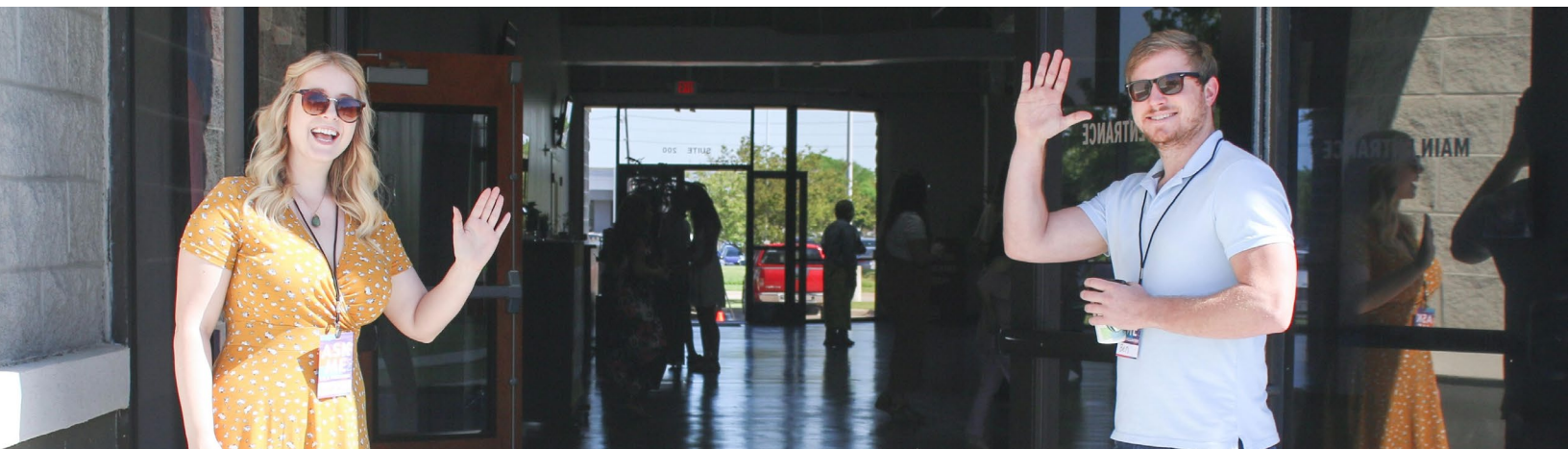
Too often greeters are seen like an entry-level volunteer. Many churches will encourage first-time volunteers to be greeters because they believe anyone can do it.

But that's not true. Not every person should be a greeter. In fact, there are people who definitely should not be a greeter at your church. (Admit it. A name and face popped into your mind when you read that last sentence.)

Here are a few of the characteristics to look for in good greeters.

- **They like people.** There are many good roles in the church for introverts. A greeter usually isn't one of them. (There are exceptions to this, though). You need friendly and welcoming greeters. Not everyone does this naturally.

- **They know their way around the church.** This is why it isn't good to throw new people into the role of greeter. Greeters need to know where to find the restrooms, childcare, adult classrooms, the sanctuary, etc. They may also need to answer questions about more complicated topics related to your church. Obviously, training will help with this, but it's good to get experience greeters, if possible.

- **They are patient.** Not every first-time guest will be easy to help. Sometimes they'll have hard questions. Sometimes they'll have lots of questions. You need someone who is willing to take the time to make sure a guest's questions are answered.

- **They are inclusive.** Greeters must welcome people from all different backgrounds. Depending on where your church is, you can expect guests from different socio-economic classes, races, ages, etc. Some will also have disabilities. Make sure your greeters feel equally comfortable with all potential guests.

- **They desire to be helpful.** Greeters must be servant-hearted. You want greeters who are always looking for who needs help. Greeting is more than just shaking hands with people as they enter the church. You want people that have an eye for the anxieties of guests.

Developing an effective greeting ministry is more than just checking off boxes of good attributes. Help people grow through a good training system that teaches basic answers to questions guests have and (this is incredibly important) walks greeters through a variety of situations they'll encounter.

Entrance

Your entrance is the first place visitors see in your church. While aesthetics matter, it's not what is most important about your entrance.

Your entrance must be obvious! Most churches have multiple doors. Mark which door you want people to enter. Your signage needs to point people to that door. You likely have entrances for different purposes. Clarify that with your signage. For example, if you have one entrance for people to go if they need to drop off children and another one if they are going straight to worship, note that on your signage.

Also, make sure your entrance is free of debris, snow, and ice. Your entrance needs to be as easy as possible for guests to get in and out of. It also needs to be well-lit.

Welcome Center

A good welcome center (or information center) provides a place for guests to get more information about the church. If done well, it's a place where your greeters can take guests when they have questions.

The welcome center doesn't need to be fancy. Consider a multiple-stage solution. A first stage can be a simple table with a volunteer and information about the church. While certainly much of this information will be available in a digital format, providing some printed material that describes the church's vision and ministries would be helpful. Or consider a simple brochure with a QR code that goes to a special place on your website with important information for visitors.

Then you can upgrade the experience as you have an opportunity. Consider adding comfortable seating around the welcome center where people can wait for help or their children. If possible, include coffee, water, and maybe a small snack at the welcome center as well.

Children's Ministry

Any time you do a survey of what non-churchgoers with families want to know about churches they visit, a safe childcare experience finishes near the top of the list. People want to know children will be well taken care of when they drop off their kids and head to a worship service.

There are a few non-negotiables every children's ministry needs to be able to demonstrate to guests as they're dropping off children.

- **A safe environment:** This is broad but obviously critical. Guests need to know you take the safety of their children seriously. You're not going to be able to give them a walkthrough of all your church's safety protocols as you're checking in new children. Have a handout ready that explains your children's ministry safety and security protocols. Make sure you have a check-in procedure in place. If parents drop off a child and nothing is in place to ensure they're the only ones who can pick the child up, that's a red flag for parents who have no built-in reason to trust you.

- **A welcoming environment:** It's critical, not just for the comfort level of the parent but the child as well, that guests see smiling faces when they arrive. Frankly, parents may overlook a cold response in the worship service, but it's unlikely they will in the children's ministry.

- **A calm environment:** You may be laughing at this suggestion. But if a parent is dropping off a child with you for the first time, they want the children's leader taking responsibility for their child to be calm. Parents know from personal experience children can make life chaotic, but they want the surrounding adults to demonstrate something different.

Above all else, make it clear that your children's ministry is a priority for your church (not an afterthought).

Accessibility

Providing accommodations for people with disabilities is an important way you show that you care. Like the four friends who helped carry the paralytic to Jesus (Matthew 9:1-8), we need to do all we can to help people hear his message today.

The difficulty with accessibility is knowing where to start. Prioritize your church entrance. Perform an accessibility audit to make sure you're making the most important changes. Realize that making your church accessible is a long-term endeavor. Organize a committee (or team) of congregants who can constantly look for ways to make the church more accessible.

Worship Service

Every other element in this section is important to guests, but your worship service is likely why they came (and likely makes a big impact on whether they'll return).

Maybe the most important part is what you shouldn't do. Never put guests on the spot. Years ago, it was popular to ask guests to stand and be recognized in worship services. Some may have even had guests introduce themselves. That may have been appropriate in an earlier day. It's definitely not a good idea today.

The content of a church's worship service will depend on its church tradition. Most will have preaching and music. Some churches will also have a liturgical portion as well.

The content of your worship service is up to you. For guests, the important part is that you make it as accessible as possible. When you can use words free of Christian jargon, use them. When you can't, try to provide a place of explanation.

Sometimes church leaders have the mistaken belief that certain topics are out of bounds if you want your church to be welcoming to guests. That doesn't need to be true. Good communication requires that you consider the receiver in how you share a message. Simply keep your guests in mind. Think through what guests will understand and what they won't. Do your best to make sure you communicate clearly to everyone. Using insider language around outsiders will feel rude to your guests.

FOLLOW-UP

Jesus didn't call the church to make visitors. He called us to make disciples. We can't help people become Jesus' disciples unless we have a consistent relationship with them or help them find Christians where they can have that kind of relationship.

That's why follow-up is such a critical part of the welcoming process. You're not just welcoming people to a single visit to your church. You're welcoming them to an ongoing relationship.

Creating a next-step plan

Every church needs a plan for how people will go from first-time visitor to follower in Jesus to committed Christian. Not everyone will follow the plan. That's not the point. The point is that you know where to point people who visit your church.

Take some time with your leadership team to draw up this plan. When you do that, take note of your next steps for new guests. Make every effort to invite guests into those next steps each week. When you connect with guests after their visit, always recommend those next steps.

Make sure that those next steps lead to other next steps. No next step should be a dead end.

Once you've built your next step plan, teach it to the whole church. Share it in your membership class. Your whole congregation should be familiar enough with it to help people (including your weekly guests) find their next step.

Collecting contact information

You'll likely need contact information to consistently communicate with guests about next steps. Unfortunately, that's getting harder and harder to obtain from people. Thanks to the growing number of spam emails and phone calls people get on a regular basis, many will wait until they trust you to give contact information out.

But don't give up. Most people these days expect to get something for the contact information they give up. Consider sending people with a contact card to your welcome desk after the service. Exchange their filled-out card for a welcome gift (maybe a coffee mug or something else with the church logo and website stamped on it).

As you collect information on your guests, be aware of any state laws about dealing with data. Make every effort to go above and beyond those laws. Even if it's just an accident, misusing data will tank your relationship with guests.

Here are a few general rules to remember.

- Only collect information you need. (Don't gather information, particularly from guests, you don't have a plan in place to use.)

- Only give people access to data who need to use it for church purposes.

- Go the extra mile to protect the data from outside intrusions. Commit to spending the money necessary to keep the data safe or don't collect it.

Connecting with guests later

All the great next steps and contact information won't help you if you don't reach out to guests with your information about those next steps. Yet it's not easy to know how to reach out to guests these days. Not everyone wants to get a phone call or text message. Not everyone will read your emails.

It's important to learn your guests' communications preferences as they give you their contact information. Stay within those suggestions.

For those who prefer a phone call, find a consistent time each week to make these calls. As your church grows, empower others to make phone calls. Always have some clear next steps for people. Invite them to the next worship service (tell them the sermon topic, if possible). Recommend a small group or Sunday school class they can attend the next week.

Have a nurture stream of emails ready for people who prefer emails. Nurture streams are a series of pre-written emails that lead people step by step toward an action. Use it to answer some of the frequent questions you get from guests. Make sure each email has a specific action related to it. (Visit this website for more information. Register for the event here. Or even, let us know you're coming this week, and we'll have a special gift ready for you.)

For guests who prefer text messages, try sending personal texts (not a mass delivery). Texts can allow you the personal touch of a phone call without interrupting the other person at a time where they are unavailable. You may want to send a mass text to promote a specific event, but try to make a guest's first text contact personal. Involve multiple staff people if necessary.

Also, don't downplay the value of a handwritten card. Many people get so few personal pieces of mail that a handwritten one really stands out.

Complete the feedback loop

You can always improve the welcoming experience. There's no better people to help you upgrade it than past guests. You can get feedback through short (no more than a few questions) written surveys and digital ones. Include a paper survey with your welcome gift and send out a digital one with any email correspondence you have with guests.

But don't just let feedback gather dust in a desk drawer. Use it to improve the experience for later guests.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE WELCOME EXPERIENCE

By far, the most important part of your guest experience is the people in your church. Guests will overlook bad preaching. They will give you another shot if your lawn doesn't look great.

BUT IF THE PEOPLE IN YOUR CHURCH DON'T HAVE A WELCOMING ATTITUDE, YOU CAN'T MAKE UP FOR THAT.

Model a passion to welcome guests. Make sure every leader in the church understands they are expected to welcome guests with open arms. At the end of the day, a good welcome isn't about personality. It's about caring for people you don't know.

YOUR WARM WELCOME CHECKLIST

Pre-Arrival

Your Church Website

- ○ Clear, accessible contact information
- ○ Address and directions to the church
- ○ Description of what guests can expect for worship
- ○ Statement of beliefs
- ○ Description of children and youth ministry
- ○ Clear and jargon-free navigation
- ○ Optimized for local search

Signage

- ○ Signage is set up for:
- ○ Parking lot
- ○ Entrance
- ○ Children's ministry
- ○ Worship space
- ○ Restrooms
- ○ Adult classrooms
- ○ All signage is clear and jargon-free
- ○ All signage is proofread

Campus look and feel

- ○ Parking lot is free of trash and debris
- ○ Designated parking spots for guests
- ○ Lawn is neatly mowed and landscaped
- ○ Walkways are clear of obstructions
- ○ Exterior building is in good repair
- ○ paint
- ○ siding
- ○ windows
- ○ roof
- ○ Lawn is maintained
- ○ Church sign is up to date and proofread well
- ○ Exterior lighting works, and the property is well-lit

Arrival

Greeters

- ○ Training provided
- ○ All have name tags
- ○ All have a simple FAQ document with questions you expect from guests

Entrance
- ○ Clearly marked
- ○ Clean and debris free
- ○ Snow cleared
- ○ Greeter stationed
- ○ Large enough for the expected volume of traffic

Welcome Center
- ○ Trained volunteers
- ○ Simple, concise information about the church
- ○ Comfortable place for guests to sit
- ○ Small gift to exchange for guest contact information
- ○ Coffee and water

Children's Ministry
- ○ Clear signage
- ○ Safe check-in process
- ○ Document with safety precautions to hand out to guests
- ○ Trained volunteers who are calm and welcoming
- ○ Clean place where kids are taught

Accessibility
- ○ Signage is high contrast
- ○ Volunteer to communicate worship service with sign language
- ○ Entrance prepared for wheelchair access
- ○ Ongoing updates based upon the work of an accessibility committee/team

Follow-up

Next-Step Plan
- ○ Clear flowchart of how the church disciples people
- ○ Leadership discussed plan are behind it
- ○ Next-step plan described in membership class and in print for guests

Collecting Contact Information
- ○ Leadership agreed upon list of guest contact information needed
- ○ Contact cards (or the digital equivalent) available for guests
- ○ All contact requests include a question of preferred communication method

Connecting with guests later
- ○ Plan in place to contact guests in their preferred method of contact within four days

Completing the feedback loop
- ○ A printed feedback form to provide with guest gift
- ○ A digital feedback form ready to send

Choosing the Right Ministry Partner

The know-how you need from experts you trust.
ACS Technologies is the original pioneer of Church Management Software (ChMS). We are firmly dedicated to serving local churches all over North America by providing the best-in-class ministry software and service solutions that help you fulfill Christ's mission for your Church.

Tools and support to strengthen churches.
We build great software, but we don't stop there. We have a "service-first" approach that truly sets us apart. With hundreds of dedicated support and consulting personnel, your staff can reach our team 24/7. We're in your corner to help you with the ministry challenges you face every day.

Ideas and solutions powered by integrity.
Integrity is real for us, and it means consistently being faithful stewards by doing the right thing for church success. We have earned the trust of pastors, church staff, congregants, our employees, and colleagues for over 40 years.

A plan to meet your needs and move your ministry.
We're not just interested in satisfied customers. We see ourselves as your real ministry partner and will work with you to make disciples that will last for an eternity. We're excited to talk about your goals, create a plan together, and set you up with the software, service, and resources you need.

We believe in YOU!
ACS Technologies believes in the local church. Over 75% of our team has experience serving in their local churches. We know firsthand that serving the Church means serving people, and we take seriously our commitment to helping ministries like yours achieve their God-given mandate - to make disciples in their communities, states, and across the world.

Let's Talk

We know the challenges of switching or implementing new technology and how that can be intimidating. But we also know the unbelievable changes that have happened within churches that have partnered with us for their ministry needs. Let's connect and see how we can assist you in the greatest thing you do - grow God's Kingdom.

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