

The Ministry of Meeting and Greeting Visitors to the Church

Ten Basic Rules by Rev. Tom Aicken

Having visited several churches myself over the years, and having been given a wide variety of responses in doing so, everything from being warmly received to totally ignored, I have decided to write a paper on the subject with the hope that it might be of some help and encouragement to those Christians who feel as I do that meeting and greeting visitors to our churches is more than a social custom; it is an important ministry which needs to be constantly monitored, diligently maintained, and aggressively encouraged.

Please note that throughout this paper I have used generic terms such as “our people”, “our visitors”, and others, which are not meant to identify any particular church, but the Christian community at large. It is hoped that this will help every church to personalize, as well as correct, any problems there may be.

No. 1, Just as the two most dangerous times for flying an airplane are taking off and landing, so studies have shown that the two most critical times for anyone visiting a church, especially for the first time, are coming in and going out the door. It is often assumed that, if newcomers never come back, it is because of something that was said (or because of something that happened) in the service itself. Perhaps the sermon was too long, too dull, or just irrelevant; perhaps the singing was poorly performed, or the sound system did not work properly that day. I concede that these can all be problems, that people sometimes do stay away because of one or another of them, and that any church needs to work at overcoming such obvious deficiencies if that is the case. What too many of our people do not know, however, and it is rarely recognized even at the time, is that most newcomers who determine never to return do so as a result of what happened (or more likely what failed to happen, being ignored) as they passed through our doors, whether before or after the service. There is simply no excuse for this, and it would take only a small number of our own people to make certain that it does not occur – ever.

No. 2, The precise time that newcomers are most uptight and anxious in coming to a church which is unfamiliar to them begins when, having parked the car, they take the heart-pumping trek from the parking lot to the church building, and, though that may be little more than fifty feet or so, it may well prove to be a hike which takes them far outside their comfort zone, and is just too far out of it for some people. That is why it is imperative that they be met within five seconds of entering the church door with a warm smile, an inviting hand-shake and a friendly, relaxed word of greeting. They do not need to be pounced on by ten people at one time – one or two people who are prepared to give them a simple ‘meet and greet’ will prove sufficient – but remember that five-second rule. Be sure to speak (at least briefly) to everyone in the pack, including children. Visitors’ children can feel very nervous about this new experience also, may feel slighted if ignored, and the parents themselves will surely feel better, and come away with a more positive first impression of the church, if they can see that their whole family

has been welcomed. What they will appreciate most about it, and need to feel at this critical time, is that this is a church which cares.

No. 3, One thing that many visitors really appreciate, and regular attendees rarely think of, is the quick and simple presentation of the most basic information. Let the newcomers know, if they look puzzled, that you are happy to answer any questions they may have. If they ask about any specific church programs, be sure to answer that inquiry, briefly if you can, but then also have a complete list of programs handy which you can give them for future reference. Try also to address certain potential questions even before they are asked. If, for instance, they have young children, show them where the washrooms are. This kind of thing goes a long way in rescuing first-time visitors from any fears and anxieties that they may have, and in creating something of a comfort zone for them. Studies show that the need to feel comfortable is much stronger than the desire to be feel welcome, yet a warm and timely word of welcome can satisfy both cravings simultaneously and very effectively.

No. 4, Be a conscientious host, someone who is aware of people's natural fears, and take the initiative in meeting those people who are new. Do not wait for visitors to make the first move, and do not assume that one or more of the other members will probably welcome them anyway, in which case you will not have to put yourself out for anybody. I remember attending a party with my wife at the house of some people we scarcely knew. On the way home, we talked together of how much we both enjoyed the party and of what a pleasant surprise that was, especially since we had attended similar functions and rarely ever found that to be the case. It soon became clear, however, what it was about this party that made it stand out, namely, that the host and hostess spent their entire time working the room, waiting on people, and doing everything they could to receive their guests and make them feel at ease. One might argue, I suppose, that they were just good at it, but I would argue that they were good at what they did because they consciously threw themselves into the role of hosting and did not assume that everything would somehow work out without a constant effort on their part. One should not expect a worship service to be seeker-friendly – it is to be governed by the regulative principle of worship – but what we do before and after the service ought to have the needs of our visitors in mind.

No. 5, One of the best ways of consciously serving as a host in welcoming visitors to a church is putting yourself in their shoes, and the way to do that is to try and remember what it was like for you the last time that you visited some other church. Do you have such an experience in recent memory? What was it that you liked and helped you to ease the pain enough to relax your guard? Why not take that same approach and extend that help to someone else? What was it that you did not like and vowed at the time never to do to anyone as it was done to you? Well, now you know what deliberately to avoid! It is the custom of many churches today to ask visitors to stand up, usually sometime early in the service, to declare who they are and where they are from. However, since most people list public-speaking as their number one fear, after death, it seems absurd to me that such a practice should ever be allowed in any

church to continue. Did you enjoy being made such a public spectacle the last time that happened to you? I am guessing that you did not. This may even be the one thing that did occur in that service, if there was anything at all, that will keep you from ever going back.

No. 6, If you never managed to reach your visitors before the service, and possibly that is because you were talking to other visitors, be sure to leave the sanctuary early enough after the service in order to catch them then. This may be very difficult to do in that many newcomers, though not in a hurry before the service, are suddenly eager to escape the building as if it were on fire as soon as the service is over. If, however, you do catch up with them, be sure to invite them to stay for coffee, or, if it is an evening service, let them know that we serve coffee and juice after the morning service, and that you hope that they will be able to come sometime again. That is often enough in itself to get them talking, but if it is not – if they keep walking while you are talking – let them go. I have even run after people on their way out to the parking lot, not wanting to seem too eager of course, but it is important to retreat from the chase if they appear to be taking flight from a possible hostage-taking situation. We need to be honest with ourselves and admit that we cannot hope to succeed in befriending every visitor who pops into the church. Still, however, it is better to have tried and lost than never to have tried at all.

No. 7, Do not ask strangers too many personal questions, or talk to them for too long at one time. Many members of a church are afraid to approach visitors because they think that they have very little to say. In point of fact, though, the briefest encounter with a newcomer is many times better than talking too long or prying too insensitively. These errors are only marginally better than being totally ignored – really. Are you not sure what to say? Speak to your visitors positively about your church – if it has been a particular blessing to you, tell them how. If the service is over, you have an advantage in that you can talk to them also about the sermon. We try to encourage that anyway. You may be pleasantly surprised to learn that not all strangers to the church are awkwardly tongue-tied; many are happy to engage in conversation, and some, when they see your openness to them, are quite able and eager to fill in all the empty spaces for you. You might even find yourself to be taken hostage, but that rarely happens, and, when it does, it usually means that the hostage-taker is a needy soul who desperately requires to be heard.

No. 8, Visitors often come to the church, not alone, but with one of our regular attendees. If that is the case, do not assume that these visitors are already conveniently occupied, and may therefore be ignored by you. Remember, this member wants his friends to be well received by everyone, just as you yourself would want that if you were the one bringing them. Moreover, if any visitor is already talking to someone in the church, do not assume that that member would not appreciate some back-up. When you see a situation like that, walk over, listen in a little bit, and assess how the conversation is really going. If you know that you could not get a word in anyway, do not interrupt; wait for a time, and, if it is going well, walk away. If, however, the conversation is floundering, and your friend is clearly drowning,

do not be afraid to jump in for the rescue. Some of the best hospitality comes as a team effort, and it has happened to me more than once that I have been profoundly grateful for some thoughtful soul who has dared to spare me when he saw me going down for the third time.

No. 9, Once in awhile it happens, though not very often, that someone comes to the church who is not technically a visitor. He has come, rather, on some mission of his own. He may be a minister, for instance, who wants to rent the building for his own church. All such requests should be directed to the elders. He may, on the other hand, be a homeless person who is looking for a hand-out. All such requests should be directed to the deacons. These office-bearers are trained in church policy and are in a better position to deal with these peculiar needs. If any couple should come and ask for marriage or family counselling, direct them to the pastor, who will then arrange to meet with them at some more convenient time. If anyone should come and simply want to know more of the gospel, or a reason for your hope and joy in the Lord, speak to him yourself. Be ready always to give a quiet and reverent answer (1 Pet. 3:15). When you are done, give him a copy of *Ultimate Questions* by John Blanchard.

No. 10, Most visitors do not need to be invited to someone's home for lunch on their first visit to the church. In fact, that may well invade their comfort zone and scare them off. If, however, they keep coming back two or three Sundays in a row, that in itself is a sign that they are interested and may well want to make this their church home. Someone should then be prepared to invite them for lunch, at least by the fourth week, or perhaps for coffee sometime through the week. This is an area of ministry where it helps to be creative, and sometimes spontaneous. Not everyone will be able to take this on, but a small group within the congregation may want to volunteer for this purpose, and it would be helpful to have a roster of names of people who are prepared to take their turn in doing so.