

Eight Confessions of Church Spies

Have you ever thought that a guest at your church might, in fact, be a spy? My church consulting company uses church “spies” to help us evaluate how churches respond to guests. Our spies are “good” spies, though, since their goal is to help a church face reality and move toward health.

Numerous spies have written us reports for more than a decade. Below are some of the most common findings they have sent us.

To be fair, the churches that invite us to work with them know they need help; so, these findings should not be entirely surprising. What concerns me is the number of churches who have not yet recognized that these findings characterize them, too.



1. Church websites are often outdated, boring . . . and useless.

We typically tell the spy only the name of the church and the city, and we ask him/her to learn about the church first from the website. More than one spy has called us to say he cannot find the service times, isn't convinced the map is correct (if there is one), called a phone number no longer in order, cannot determine the church's basic beliefs, or thinks the church will be old and boring based on their Internet presence.

2. Churches are not friendly.

Our spies know to take note of how many people greet them apart from a time when the worship leader tells the congregation to welcome one another. More often than not, no one greets our representative before or after the service. Churches are friendly, but most often *only to people they already know*. I once served as a spy myself, and the church greeter escorted me to the “friendliest class in the church” – where not one of 60+ attendees spoke to me!

3. Church facilities are not generally marked well.

Church signs often have more cluttered information than a person can read when driving by. Guest parking – if any exists – is not apparent until an automobile is far into the parking lot. In larger buildings, which entrance is best to use is not clear. Signage inside the building is not helpful. In some cases, the church can be an easy place to get lost!

4. Churches aren't prepared for guests.

Sometimes there is no guest parking. Often there is no welcome center (or there is a unmanned welcome center!). Our spies have attended churches with no means to secure contact information from guests. Some have attended small groups that gave our spies no study material for the day. I can count on both hands the number of churches that later followed up with our spies – who were, to the church's knowledge, their guests.

5. Churches are poorly equipped for protecting children.

If our spies take their children with them, we tell them *not* to do anything that makes them wary in releasing their children to child care workers. If the children's area is not secure, if the worker does not require needed information, or if our spies simply feel uncomfortable, they keep their children with them. That happens quite often.

6. Worship through music often needs improvement.

Our spies understand that churches have different worship styles, and they know to contextualize their assessment as much as possible. What we hear from them is that worship through music is often *poorly done*, regardless of style. Musicians have not practiced, lyrics are difficult to sing, and leaders lack passion.

7. Preaching is often weak.

This area is the most difficult to consider, as it's often the pulpiteer who invites our team to help the church. Nevertheless, we speak the truth in love. Too many preachers neglect the Bible, misuse it, or quickly depart from it in preaching. Others somehow take the gospel and make it boring. We learn something when our spies report they would not return to that church in the future because of poor preaching.

8. Churches are not always clear in “what to do” in response to worship.

We ask our spies to do their best to think as the unchurched, particularly in trying to follow the direction of worship. Too often for my comfort, our folks reported they would not have known what to do if they wanted to follow Christ, join the church, or deal with a sin issue. I can only wonder if others left the same way.

If there's good news here, it's that churches can address these issues – but they must be honest first. If you want to take a risk, enlist a “good spy” to visit your church. Or, forward this blog to several of your church leaders, and ask them to evaluate your church's health in these areas.

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