



Observations from a Church Visitor: The First Seven Minutes are Crucial

The last several weeks I've been a church visitor. Vivian and I moved to a new town 90 minutes away. This is the first time in 30 years of marriage that we've moved without a church waiting to receive us as a pastor's family.

We've been to six churches so far. The churches know we were there, so I'll be gentle. But here are my observations.



1. The first seven minutes are indeed when people decide whether this might be the place for them. Even for me, a church professional, I found my first impression was set often before the pastor said a single word. The clock is ticking...

2. The churches we have visited so far all offer lovely worship and thoughtfully crafted sermons. We did have a couple of special Sunday experiences where the lead pastor was away but even there the service was meaningful, holy and well designed to bring people into the presence of Christ. We experienced contemporary, post-modern, traditional and creative styles of worship. All were done very well.

3. It was not easy to find our way into worship. One church had a different time of worship on the web than was on the sign out front. We showed up 15 minutes late, thinking we were 15 minutes early and we didn't want to disrupt the service by walking in late. So we had an early brunch instead of an early worship. In another church I followed the signs to the handicapped entrance, thinking that would be the easiest way in. But inside the door the hallway was dark and the entrance looked scary. In a third church I went in the door nearest the parking lot and, again, found myself in a darkened hallway with no clear way marked to the sanctuary. I wandered around the basement of the church until I heard voices. When I climbed the stairs into what turned out to be the Narthex, the greeter seemed surprised to see me coming that way.

4. People spoke to us. But they didn't seem to know how to welcome a first time guest. I was recognized in two of the churches because of my former roles in the conference. But in the other churches, people, including the greeters and the pastors, seemed to be ill at ease speaking to a person whose name they couldn't call. They had developed "Nameless Paralysis," the syndrome that stops us

from talking to someone because we don't want to be embarrassed that we don't know their name. There was one exception. At one church they were having a special worship and had people sitting around tables during the service. The laity who sat with us were very comfortable asking us who we were and how we had come to the church. I'm not sure if it was the setting around the tables or if they had been well trained, but they made us feel very welcome.

In the churches where I was known, the pastors went out of their way to make us feel welcome. That was nice, but it made me wonder what would happen to someone who wasn't known.

5. The churches all had people who were clearly doing the work of “greeting.” These people all said hello.

6. I filled out the registration pad as a visitor. Three of the six churches reached out to me from that contact point. One church reached out via every medium I shared – postal letter, bread delivery, e-mail, phone call and postal letter. I was pleased that they used all the means to connect with me – not put off at all. I wonder what the three churches that didn't reach out by any visible means were intending.

Conclusion and Take Away: Almost every church could do well by reviewing at least quarterly your “First Seven Minutes Plan” for guests. That plan should include at least:

- Your web site (mobile web site, social media, and desktop sites) for ease of navigation, accurate times for worship and other activities, and easy to locate addresses and directions to the church.
- Offer other entry points to the church beside worship. Often people are more interested in first connecting with the church at a mission project or recreational outing than dropping in for worship. Offer an invitation on your web communications, not just a calendar listing: *“We invite you to come to 483 North Roberts Street at 9 am on Saturday to help with the food drive we are conducting on Saturday for the elementary school back pack program. You don't need to be a member of the church to participate. You will be welcome. Come in casual work clothes. Here is more information.”*
- Parking lot greeters are the best greeters. When someone steps out of their car in a new place, they start looking around for where to go. So Parking Lot Greeters have an advantage over greeters at the door. They can notice and respond to the curiosity on display to have a genuine conversation with the newcomers.
- Train at least 15% of your Sunday Morning Worship Attenders to overcome “Nameless Paralysis” and to know how to introduce themselves to someone who might be a member or might be a guest. Basically, it is training to approach anyone whose name you can't call up and say either:

- “Would you help me with your name?” or
- “I’m sorry, I can’t call your name.”
- Follow the sharing of their name by introducing them to someone whose name you can call.

Contact first time and returning guests in the media venues that they share with you. Everyone in 2015 who gives you their e-mail, phone or postal address expects to be contacted by that medium. I am most likely to return to the churches that actually reached out to me. The others are unlikely to see us again.

Those first seven minutes provide a way to succeed with first time and returning guests. Wise church leaders craft and implement a plan for those first seven minutes and execute the plan religiously.

Source: goseelove.org, Steve D. James