

A Better Church Welcome – Barry Osborne

Twenty-one tips that should improve the welcome your church gives to visitors

1. Stop thinking 'welcome' and start thinking 'hospitality'.
2. Develop a culture of hospitality for the whole congregation
3. The entrance to your church should be bright, warm and clean.
4. Appoint at least one person to be responsible for hospitality. A team would be far better. Use only those people who are naturally hospitable and love having visitors at home.
5. Greet people appropriately. Nothing beats a friendly smile. Use their name if you know them. Handshakes should be brief and firm but not uncomfortable. Hugs and kisses are not normally appropriate for people you do not know well.
6. Think guests rather than visitors. Introduce yourself by name. This will usually automatically bring a response with their name being offered. Make a deliberate act of remembering it!
7. Take an interest in your guests. Ask if they are visiting the area; they will tell you if they have moved in. Never overwhelm them. Never embarrass them.
8. In inclement weather offer to take their coat, show them where umbrellas can be left etc. (You might like to check there is nothing valuable left in a coat if it is left in an insecure place).
9. Some churches are able to welcome people with refreshments. The smell of coffee is very welcoming. But there is not always time and space for this.
10. If you give out books, please explain what these are for (e.g. this is the order of service, etc). If large print is available, you might ask if the print in the usual books is OK for them. If you only use a screen, then inform your guest so that they can sit where they can see the screen.
11. If there is time on arrival, you might invite them to sign a visitor's book if they are willing. Otherwise invite them to sign before leaving.
12. Provide any other useful information including the location of the toilets if these are needed. There is little that is worse than finding you need the loo but are uncomfortable about asking or finding it. If possible, ensure that there are facilities at the back of the church so people do not need to walk to the front. Other useful information might be mentioning when and where refreshments will be available, and who is taking the service if it is out of the ordinary.
13. Hospitality only begins with the welcome. Never leave a guest to find a seat for themselves. Offer to show them to a seat or better still offer to introduce them to a regular member of the congregation with whom they might sit and who can help them with the idiosyncrasies of the meeting. Not everyone knows what to do. Choose someone appropriate for their age and gender.
14. Introduce your guests by name to anyone else. You can add anything else significant you may have gleaned at the door, such as where they are from.
15. If appropriate regular members should be willing to give up their seat to enable a guest to sit somewhere more appropriate.

16. Since the 'welcomer' will be appropriately occupied looking after a guest, someone else on the 'team' needs to be ready to take their place.
17. Keep a friendly eye on your guests to ensure they are comfortable (e.g. glass of water if they have a cough), and talk with them afterwards. If you have refreshments after the meeting, you might ask them at the close what they would like and offer to get it for them. But others might have already been looking after them, of course.
18. Have an information card with a list of activities and contact details. This might be given to them on arrival or before they leave.
19. When they are ready to go offer to get their coat, umbrella, etc. If they have to take a journey you might discreetly remind them where the toilet is should they want to use it. Most importantly, thank your guest for coming. Let them know that you have appreciated it.
20. Ensure your toilets are well equipped. Toilets should be clean, warm, and well signposted. Use good quality toilet paper, warm water, nice soap and clean towels. Most churches use paper towels but I have seen a church that used face cloths as individual hand towels and provided a basket for those used. Any used cloth towels should be replaced and used ones taken home for laundering. Use a nice air freshener.
21. Take special care of any disabled guests. If a person uses a hearing aid they might like to know if there is a sound loop, or sit where they are most likely to hear. If they have sight loss or apparent visual impairment, then think about what that will mean regarding finding their way around the building as well as sharing in the service. Torch Trust for the Blind has a super DVD that helps people to know how to look after visually impaired people properly. You might need to take extra care enabling them to find the toilet but remember to also show them where the paper is, the wash basin, towels etc before leaving them. If someone uses a wheelchair, then think about where they will be best located and where their view of a screen or speaker will not be blocked.

Barry Osborne is an ecumenical mission consultant and trainer based in Market Harborough, Leicestershire. This paper is one of a series designed initially for small and rural churches but useful to others. For more information, go to www.ruralmissionsolutions.org.uk.

Centre for Rural Mission, 4 Clarence Street, Market Harborough, LE16 7NE. 07720 322 213.