

Discussion Paper: Welcoming people to church

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Four stories about welcoming.

My sister moved to Canada earlier this and visited a church with a view to making it her new church home. People were unfriendly and made little effort to connect. Discouraged, she went to another church the next week that was the completed opposites. They are now fully integrated into church life there – she and her husband are in a Bible study, they have dinners with friends they have made, and her husband is in a prayer triplet and playing weekly in the band.

Mark visited a church with his family while on holidays. They arrived early (as newcomers do) and no one else was there. They sat in the pews and no one spoke to them. They could have been a family looking to join the church – but no one asked or seemed interested in getting to know them.

Hayley visited a church in Melbourne. Before the service she stood awkwardly on her own, with no one to talk to. It was a painful experience, and if she wasn't a Christian and determined to go to church while on holidays, she would have left.

A lady walked past church on Saturday afternoon while we were setting up. She expressed interest in coming to a service the next day, but wondered if she needed to buy a ticket, and if there was reserved seating.

What's the point in sharing these stories?

These experiences reveal at least five truths:

1. It's not easy visiting a new church – as a Christian, let alone someone who's never been before.
2. Churches often do a very poor job at welcoming newcomers.
3. A bad experience at a new church makes it very unlikely that you will return.
4. A good experience of welcoming means keeping newcomers, who may continue on to become core members of the church.
5. There are people in our community who are interested in coming along to church, but are very unfamiliar with church.

For many of Christians in churches, the experience of welcoming isn't given much thought until they visit another church. Many Christians rarely if ever consider church from the experience of someone who has never been before.

What is the purpose of this paper?

This paper has been written to assist discussion amongst Christians as to how to most effectively welcome the people who God brings to our churches. There is much that could be said on this topic – the discussion will continue at the Welcoming Roundtable on 19 September (see page 3).

Who visits our churches?

There are different types of people who will visit our churches:

- Christians who are on holidays or visiting as a one-off.
- Christians who are looking for a new church.
- Friends of a member of church who have been invited along.
- People in the local community who have connected with us previously (e.g. via a community lunch) and have decided to come to church.
- People in the local community who have never visited before, but have decided for various reasons to come to church.

What is our goal?

This is a suggested goal for the welcoming strategy (comments welcome):

“Provide an intentional, warm welcome to all newcomers to our church – before, during and after they visit – in order that they might have the opportunity to hear the gospel, develop relationships, and become fully integrated members of our church”.

The elements of welcoming

There are six key elements that contribute to the overall experience of an ‘intentional, warm welcome’. These are:

1. **Before the service (on-site).** This involves making the church property a clean, tidy and inviting space. Who would visit a venue that looked like a dump?
2. **Before the service (online).** This involves providing clear information to potential visitors about when and where church takes place, who is welcome, what happens with kids, etc.
3. **Before the service (in person).** This involves providing a prompt and positive experience for people making enquiries about church (i.e. on the phone or via email).
4. **On the day of the service (on-site).** This involves creating a welcoming environment (no rubbish, clean bathrooms), clear signage (for church, bathrooms), providing information for newcomers, and more.

5. **On the day of the service (in person).** This involves people (not just welcome teams, but the church as a whole) actively seeking out and welcoming new people and seeking to integrate them into the life of our church.
6. **On the day of the service (during the service).** This involves using language that is accessible to newcomers (e.g. avoiding), providing clear directions (e.g. who can participate in what elements – e.g. communion), and explaining to newcomers how they can connect (e.g. how to use the response slips and where to put them, who to speak to if you have questions about church).
7. **After the service.** This involves following up newcomers to consider how we can serve them and integrate them into the life of our church.

It's important to note that each of these elements needs to work together. For example, a church that appears unkempt and uninviting will ensure that some people never make it to a weekend service. A tidy garden but unfriendly people will get people to the front door, but may well result in them never returning.

Welcoming Roundtable

These elements and the strategies of different churches will be discussed at a roundtable in Sydney on Monday 19 September.

You can sign-up for this roundtable via this link: <http://bit.ly/o92fid>.

If you have any questions, please contact me via email: steve@communicatejesus.com.