

Welcoming the Unchurched to Church

I recently read an article from a professional "mystery worshiper" who works with churches to help evaluate and improve their friendliness and guest relations.

It was a good and helpful article. I found myself nodding in agreement with almost all of it.

Almost.

Not every guest who ventures to visit your church is created equal. On the broadest level, there are churched guests and unchurched guests. By churched, I mean they have a church background, are relatively comfortable and familiar with church world, and are there as a consumer. The unchurched do not have a church background, are not comfortable or familiar with church world, and are there (at best) as an explorer.

What difference does this make?

Quite a bit.

Consider one of the most commonly suggested steps to making a first-time guest feel welcome: designated parking. I've seen this done in many ways, such as signs that direct first-time guests to turn on their headlights (and based on that, they are guided toward special parking), or signage that simply directs first-time guests toward a designated parking area.

The parking is clearly marked for "Guests" or "VIPs". Beyond being close to the church, those parking there are often met by volunteers who greet them, offer first-time guest materials, and even escort them into the church and through any children's ministry registration needs they might have.

It sounds impressive.

In practice it looks impressive.

But who wants this kind of treatment?

Only the churched.

Churched people want to be welcomed, recognized, get questions answered, meet staff and, yes, park in designated guest parking.

The typical first-time unchurched guest wants anything BUT recognition. They don't want to be singled out. They don't want to be targeted. We used to joke that they didn't want to "say anything, sing anything, sign anything, give anything or do anything." We find that many first-time guests do not even want to take advantage of putting their child in children's ministry.

At least, not at first.

It's the same with special tabs on websites for "planning your visit", which can include preregistering your child for children's ministry, being escorted around by a volunteer, and more.

Again, that's good.

But for churched people.

(I couldn't help but smile at one church's "planning a visit" page that also housed their online giving portal. Forget "churched" or "unchurched" – I'm not sure they understood the idea of "guest.")

So design your guest experience any way you want. Just remember to put yourself in your guest's shoes.

And know which guest that is.

> [Read more from James.](#)