



Nailing the Basics: Welcoming by Mikey Lynch

Introduction

0.1 The Newcomer Experience

Describe an experience of going to a new church:

- What did you notice?
- What did it feel like?
- What made things awkward?
- What made a good impression?

“I asked the members of my church to go into a betting shop and place a bet on a horse before the next meeting... The following week I asked people what it felt like. This is a selection of our replies:

- it was an alien environment
- I hadn't got a clue what to do
- it was better with a friend
- I felt very awkward, nervous, very odd and on edge
- I felt that people were looking at me
- no-one talked to me – and I was glad about that
- I wanted to get in and out as quickly as possible
- the people inside were very different to me”¹

¹S. Timmis and T. Chester, *The Gospel-Centred Church: a tool for shaping your church around Christ's mission* (Surrey: 2002), p. 24.

0.2 The Welcoming Potential

“I determined that our average number of guests per week was 1.5. This meant that over the course of a year, we were having between 75 and 80 first-time guests come through our door. Astonishing! I was amazed by the realization that our little congregation could more than double in a year if we were able to keep every first-time guest God was sending us.”²

“On any given Sunday, in an average Sydney Anglican church of 100 there will be:

- 80 people who come often enough to report themselves as ‘weekly attenders’
- 20 fringe or infrequent attendees.

That group of 20 infrequent attendees is made of 40 people who come more than monthly, and 280 people who come less than monthly...

On top of this, the average church of 100 will have at least 600 people come to a special service run by the church (a baptism, funeral or wedding)....

What is equally extraordinary and disappointing is that, given this flow of visitors and infrequent attenders, so few decide to stay. Our ‘conversion rate’ is very low—that is, the rate at which newcomers or visitors find compelling reasons to stay at our churches and become regular attenders....

So why aren’t we growing? The Research Project posits three reasons.

1. The content and presentation of our church meetings are not sufficiently compelling....
2. Lack of genuine spiritual growth among congregation members....
3. Follow-up is inadequate. It is quite common in Sydney Anglican churches for visitors and newcomers to fill in some sort of response/visitors card. And many churches would then send some kind of letter or email to the visitor thanking them for coming, and perhaps inviting them to a newcomers’ lunch.

However, ongoing personal follow-up of visitors is rare—phoning and/or visiting them, sticking with them over time, seeking to understand where they are ‘at’ spiritually and helping them to make progress, personally inviting them to our homes and to our small groups, and so on.

This sort of intensive personal follow-up is highly effective, but clearly cannot be undertaken by the pastoral staff alone—which is why it often does not get done. There is simply no time. The lack of personal follow-up of newcomers, then, is a problem not really of organization but of training. We have not trained our members for this ministry.”³

- If we care for first time visitors better, we start to establish systems that help us care for everyone better. (Searcey 63%)

0.3 Reality Check

- Newcomer ratio:
 - 5 guests/100 regular is healthy
 - 3/100 is maintenance
 - 7+/100 is rapid growth⁴
- Assimilation Ratio:

²N. Searcey with J. D. Hensen, *Fusion: Turning First Time Guests into Fully Engaged Members of Your Church*(eBook) (Grand Rapids: 2013), 11%.

³T. Payne, 'Why Aren't We Growing?', from <http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2011/08/why-arent-we-growing/>, accessed 22nd October 2014.

⁴Searcey and Hensen, *supra*, 17%.

- 1 person net growth in attendance/20 newcomers is average
- 1/5 is healthy
- 1/2 is rapid⁵
- Growing churches spend \$400-500 per person on welcoming newcomers and evangelism each year.⁶

0.4 Goal

What should your goal be with welcoming people to church?

- “Reach rather than reclaim” - growing churches put their efforts into reaching new people.⁷
- Move people from low commitment/low maturity to high commitment/high maturity... from the (wider) community to the (church) crowd, to the congregational (membership), to committed (members) to the core.⁸
- “Welcoming and connecting people warmly, personally and meaningfully into God’s family at EV Church and Helping people move into the life of the Church so that the body of Christ builds itself up in love transformed by the Word of God.”⁹
- Know your front door, close your back door and beware revolving doors.¹⁰
- Beware consumerism/customer service culture developing – eg Searcey and Hensen gift culture.

1. General principles for welcoming

1.1 Advertising and enquiries

- Fliers, poster and newspaper.
- Website and Facebook:
 - Instructions: Am I welcome? What time should I arrive? How do I get there (by car, by public transport)? How long does it go for? What should I wear? Where should I sit? What happens during the service? What participation is required? Are children welcome? Accessibility?¹¹
 - Impressions: photographs and design
 - Explanation and examples of who you are and what you do.
- Venue and street signage.
- Enquiries:
 - Across all channels: email, phone, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, church office .
 - Stay on message.
 - Get contact details and follow up at least once.

⁵*Ibid*, 18-21%.

⁶*Ibid*, 53%.

⁷*Ibid*, 54%.

⁸Rick Warren, quoted in *Ibid*, 16%.

⁹Membership @ EV', p. 1.

¹⁰Membership @ EV', p. 5.

¹¹See for example: <http://cbtb.org.au/what-to-expect> accessed 22nd October 2014.

1.2 Who Visits?

- Welcoming different cultures and ages will be different (Welcoming @ EV p. 6)

“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.”¹²

Discuss:

- Why is it important to welcome each of these?
- What are their different needs?
- Is there a priority?

1.3 A Welcoming Environment

“When the kids have been dropped off, Jon notices the smell of coffee and donuts wafting toward him. He turns to discover a table piled with Krispy Kreme boxes, fruit and coffee.”¹³

Discuss:

- What are the things that make a cafe or restaurant feel welcoming upon arrival?
- How effective has this conference been at creating a welcoming feel upon arrival?
- 7 minutes to make a good impression (Searcy 27%)
- Attractive – inside and outside, including bathrooms, lawn, exterior, signs (also smells, sights, sounds, touch- Hunter Bible Church-)
- Warm/cool and light/dim
- Food beforehand not just afterwards? Don't skimp on food.
- Music beforehand and after and in every space.

“Even if you think you have enough signs, you probably don't...I am continually amazed at how difficult it is to navigate the average church building. Whether I'm arriving for a seminar or a service, I'm usually unclear on exactly where to park, where to enter the building or how to find the main sanctuary— and I am generally very good with directions!”¹⁴

- Signage: entrance from every direction, toilets, kids ministry, where to enter.

¹²S. Kryger, 'Welcoming People to Church Discussion Paper', 2011.

¹³Searcy and Hensen, *supra*, 29%.

¹⁴*Ibid*, 33%.

- Extra information – powerpoint, paper, in person.

Different information spaces:

- Usher table – materials for the meeting.
- Info table – especially for visitors.
- Action table – next steps.¹⁵

- Disability, children, smokers, chronic pain
- 80% rule and 50% rule
- Places to hide and places to talk

1.4 A Welcoming People

"The church is a family expecting guests" Andy Stanley.¹⁶

- Want the church to grow.
- Friendly and smiley.
- Non-judgmental.
- Helpful.
- Not pushy or invasive.
- Different cultures this will look different.

2. Welcoming at Church

2.1 Whole Church, Rosters and Teams

Discuss: What are the pros and cons, of trying to do welcoming:

| | Pros | Cons |
|----------------------|--|-------------|
| Whole church culture | Train, value, equip, aware – good. Even if you have a team they are working WITH the team | |

¹⁵M. Lynch 'Ushers table, info desk and action tables', from http://genevapush.com/blogs/xian_reflections/ushers-table-info-desk-and-action-tables accessed 22nd October 2014.

¹⁶Cited in Searcey and Hansen, *supra*, 23%.

| | | |
|---------------|--|---|
| Shared roster | Simple and efficient Everyone learns value of the role. | But a job, not owned. |
| Special team | Spiritual gifts. Ownership. Expertise. | Need enough people to do this. Might let everyone else 'off the hook |

2.2 Ushers and Greeters

“Greeted, Directed, Treated, Seated”¹⁷

- Distinction:
 - Ushers and greeters vs welcomers.
 - Free them from set up and pack up. They are there to greet.
- Greeting:
 - Newcomers often come earlier than regulars! (Hunter Welcome Pastor tRaining Course p. 4)
 - Make eye contact and smile
 - Be presentable and modest
 - Be 'on the job' – not on your phone, not talking to friends or other welcomers
 - Make sure you help people know what they need to have (materials)
- Directing:
 - You may have to hold back people until time to open doors
 - Multiple welcomers – outside, foyer, doors, inside usher, floating
- Seating
 - Seating: helping finding a good, engaged seat, not having to push past people. Train regular to sit in middle of rows.
 - Don't just SHOW people where to go... ESCORT them there and introduce them (Searcey 33%)
- Ongoing:
 - Be attentive during the meeting
 - You may have to remove disruptive people

2.3 Welcomers

- Team:
 - Hunter Bible Church has 'SWAT' team who are not ushers/greeters, but solely focussed on chatting and greeting on Sundays (Welcoming.pdf p. 3)
 - Free them up from set up and pack up: they are there to welcoming.

Discuss:

- Why is it so hard talking to new people?

¹⁷*Ibid*, 29%.

- What makes it easier talking to a new person when you are in an 'official' capacity?
- What is awkward about talking to a new person when you are in an 'official' capacity?
- Talking to new people:
 - Find out information – why there, questions, needs, work hours, opinion of their family about church, gender, English level, attend other church. This is like gold and is time-sensitive. Assume nothing
 - Don't ask 'are you new?' because the might not be new and feel offended! Instead 'how long have you been coming?' (COAH p. 3)
 - Talk to all the people in a group (R. Lewers)

“However, there will arise the occasion when evangelism is the appropriate activity for an usher or greeter. Be prepared to explain your faith to the outsider with conviction and sensitivity.”¹⁸

- Helping people make the next step:
 - Know the church well – check through the announcements to be ready to answer questions (COAH p. 3)
 - Bring them to the next step

2.4 Church Meeting

- General up-the-front notes:
 - Presentable and capable up the front
 - Explaining
 - Beware of in-jokes
 - Clear instructions
- What to do next

“At our church the youth group used to give all youth group newcomers a water bottle as a welcome gift. We then started to use the term water bottle as a way of describing how we welcome people.... This system worked well when we were small enough to identify them in crowd and big enough to have a team of people to meet them and greet them.

“As we grew in size we realised that the ‘water bottle’ system wasn’t enough to welcome all newcomers so we added a new system called the ‘waterhole’ which is more of an opt in welcoming system where people choose to be welcomed and connected by coming to the water hole or welcome desk.”¹⁹

- Welcome Kiosk
- very concrete ways: email, Facebook, person, sign up sheet, connect card
- Contact card: HAND it to people, don't just put it in the pews. Require everyone to fill them out. 20% won't fill them out (48%)

¹⁸R. Lewers, '4.02 The Ministry of Welcoming' ,*MTS Training Discussion Papers*, 2003, p. 4.

¹⁹Membership @ EV', p. 11.

- Sign up sheets – have people manning the tables, don't just have them lying there.
- Welcoming book – go up to people.
- Offer a free gift for first timers filling these out? N. Searcey (44%)

2.5 After the meeting

Activity: Draw a map of your church building. What do people do and where do people go in the first 30 minutes after the meeting finishes? Why?

- Different cultures this will look different.
- Quick exit
- Hide and watch
- Stand and eat and chat (don't skimp on food!)
- Go out and socialise – Vine Church go out for pub meal!
- Formal investigate and meet
- Information table and action table – placed in a place near escape

3. Follow up

“Stay-Stick-Serve” or “Return-Relationships-Responsibility”²⁰

- Follow-up must be fast, friendly and functional (Searcey 48%)

3.1 First week follow up

“Research shows that when a variety of lay people as well as the minister are involved, it makes greater impact. Dr E. J. Kolb says: 'The basic finding is summed up in the 36 hour principle'. When lay persons visit the home of a first-time worshipper within 36 hours, 85 per cent of them will return to worship next Sunday. When the visit is delayed for 72 hours, only 60 per cent return; when delayed five to seven days, 15 per cent return.' (Anglican Digest, Pentecost Edition, 1988).

“But then comes a surprise: if the minister makes the first visit, all of the percentages are cut in half.”²¹

Discuss: why do you think that might be?

| | Follow up call/email | ▶ | Follow up letter | ▶ | Second visit |
|---|----------------------|---|------------------|---|--------------|
| When should we expect the following things to happen? | | ▶ | | ▶ | |

²⁰Searcey and Hensen, *supra*, 26%.

²¹P. Corney, *The Welcoming Church: How to Welcome Newcomers in the Local Church* (Sydney: 1992), p. 20.

- Formal letter – must include next action and more information (Searcey 50%). Also Monday afternoon has better open rate than Monday morning! (51%)
- 96 hour snail mail – including small gift (\$5 fuel for next visit.). Handwritten is more powerful – Searcey 52%)
- Both formal AND informal follow up . Vine church even gets informal Facebook/Twitter 'good to meet you'.
- Which kind of follow up depends on culture: house visit? Letter? Email?

3.2 The Second Visit

- Second visit is a massive signal (Searcey 56%)
- Feedback from second-timers is more engaged and is them giving back (Searcey 61%)
- Aim to have a face to face social – dinner, coffee, beer (within 3 weeks – Vine Church)
- 30 day follow up letter for those who never came back (Searcey 53%)

4. Membership

4.1 Friendship

“Road Two, is, sadly the road second-timers in most churches end up taking. Too many churches fail to recognize the importance of plugging in second-time guests and new attenders. Left on their own, with little insight on how to connect at a deeper level, newcomers will meander the path of least resistance. Oh sure - they may be asked to sign up for a potluck in the fellowship hall or join one of the church's small groups (a group that has probably been together for months or even years), but being uncomfortable with most of the opportunities and they way those opportunities are presented, they will be pushed further down Road Two. Unfortunately, Road Two leads to the church abyss. These travelers will move from being new attenders to transient attenders - that is, until they leave the church for Good.”²²

Discuss: What things help us form new friendships?

- If not found a friend in 6 months, they're gone (P. Corney and Searcey 64%)
- Small groups, fun events, service (66%)

“Assign someone to mentor and care for them... Personalised welcoming and connection trumps strategies and systems every time”²³

4.2 Evangelism and Orientation

- For some, the next step is our evangelistic course.
- Find out about the life of the church – initial info night p 'NEWish' at EV (Welcoming @ EV p. 8)

4.3 Membership

²²Searcey and Hensen, *supra*, 65%.

²³Membership @ EV', p. 9.

- Membership class – theology, values, vision, history, requirements, responsibilities, structures, communication, ministry,
- If not found a way to serve in 12 months, they're gone (P. Corney)
- Overly pragmatic gets people involved too early (contra Searcey 72%)
- Reminder: on't forget to care for those ALREADY part of the church (R. Lewers)
 - Those who leave/drift
 - Those who never really get involved
 - Those who feel disillusioned

Conclusion

“Imagine employing ‘church watchdogs’ from the general public to attend our services incognito and report back to us on how we appear. What sort of business reports would they file concerning our care of assets, quality of service and attitudes of employees?”²⁴

Resources

Articles

Kryger, S., 'Welcoming People to Church Discussion Paper', 2011.

Lewers, R., '4.02 The Ministry of Welcoming' and '4.03 Welcoming the Newcomer', *MTS Training Discussion Papers*, 2003.

Lynch, M., 'Ushers tables, info desk and action tables', from http://genevapush.com/blogs/xian_reflections/ushers-table-info-desk-and-action-tables accessed 22nd October 2014.

Weaver, T., 'I'm Not a Christian But I'm Coming to Your Church this Sunday' from <http://theresurgence.com/2011/05/26/im-not-a-christian-but-im-coming-to-your-church-this-sunday> .

Books

Corney, P., *The Welcoming Church: How to Welcome Newcomers in the Local Church*, Anglican Information Office: Sydney, 1992.

Searcy N. with J. D. Hensen, *Fusion: Turning First Time Guests into Fully Engaged Members of Your Church*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013 (eBook).

Church Papers

City On A Hill Church Welcoming Manual.

EV Church welcoming documents: EV Start up, Membership @ EV Church.

Hunter Bible Church welcoming documents: Welcoming Pastor Training Course and 'Welcoming at Hunter Bible Church' paper.

Vine Church Connecting Paper.

²⁴R. Lewers, '4.03 Welcoming the Newcomer', *MTS Training Discussion Papers*, 2003, p. 1.