I have a friend in ministry who had a very interesting experience a number of years ago. He took his youth group to another town for a Sunday Night gathering for teens. When they walked into the church building he noticed a sign above the entrance into the auditorium that said, “No Visitors Beyond This Point.” He’d never seen that before. He was startled and bewildered.

My friend found the youth minister for that congregation and asked him about the sign. The conversation went something like this:

My friend: “What’s up with the sign? Is that joke or something? Really? No visitors?”
Youth minister: “Oh it’s nothing, doesn’t really mean anything.”
Friend: “Well, it must mean something or it wouldn’t be there. So come on, tell me. Why is it there?”
Youth minister: “Well, you see, we sponsor a soup kitchen three days a week at lunch time. Some of the folks coming to eat were wandering off from the fellowship room and roaming the building. Sometimes they would even come in the auditorium and smoke or make a mess. So we put this sign up to let them know we need them to stay in the fellowship room.”

Now, my buddy had more than a few issues with that explanation. However, his main interest in that moment was the impact that sign might have on guests who came to their worship or Bible class. So the conversation continued.

Friend: “OK. Sounds a little funny, but OK, I guess. But what about people who visit your services on Sunday? Aren’t you afraid that might send the wrong message?”
Youth minister: “No. Folks know what we mean. We’re a very friendly church and surely people here on Sunday know that we’re not talking to them.”
If I didn’t know those involved personally, I wouldn’t have believed this story was real. Surely, I’d have thought, it’s just a preacher-story. But it was real. And for years now it has reminded me to be very mindful of what we communicate to the guests who walk through our doors.

The apostle Paul had that same concern. Listen to what he told the church in Corinth.

*Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all* (1 Corinthians 14: 23-24 [NKJV]).

In this passage Paul is specifically addressing the use and misuse of miraculous spiritual gifts in the first century. Yet there is a secondary principle at work. The Bible makes it clear that we must consider the impact of what we do on those who don’t know Jesus or have not obeyed the gospel. The environment we create for our guests is important to God. The way we treat folks visiting our services matters.

God makes a similar point in James chapter two. James is teaching about favoritism in the church and is addressing the way we treat the poor. Yet again, there is a secondary point to the words of scripture in James 2. When someone comes into our presence, we have to receive them in a spiritual way that communicates the love of God. God cares about our guests and so should we.

A while back another friend of mine made this point very personal to me. He and his family had moved back to the Oklahoma City area after being away for about fifteen years. In the process of deciding upon their new church home they visited almost a dozen congregations, including the one where I minister. Shortly after they placed their membership at another congregation I took him to lunch. My friend told me that they had the exact same experience at every church they attended. He said, “Mark, the only folks who talked to us were folks who were supposed to. Ministers and greeters at the door. We sat in Bible classes where not one person recognized our presence. We sat down in pews to worship and received slight head-nods or maybe a brief ‘Hi, how are
you today.’ But no conversations. No invitations. Few introductions and no real communication.”

This conversation broke my heart. I knew he had that same experience in my congregation and I was ashamed. We may not put up “No Visitors Allowed” signs in our foyers, but the way we treat people can send that exact same message.

I’ve never met a preacher who believed he served an unfriendly church. I’ve never talked with an elder that did not believe that his congregation was, in fact, the most welcoming church in the world. Yet time after time I hear stories of guests at all our congregations who didn’t feel welcome. Of course we think we’re friendly. That’s because we spend all our time talking with our friends. But when a guest comes into your building, how friendly do they think you are?

Our staff has been on a year-long odyssey to improve the way we receive and respond to our guests. We’ve read, studied, and listened. As individuals, we have visited a variety of sister congregations to see what others are doing in this area. Additionally, we’ve researched what various other kinds of churches are doing for their guests. As a group we have even taken a trip to visit a large church in the Midwest that is particularly known for the way they reach out to new people in their midst. Along the way I don’t think we’ve learned one totally new concept or strategy. What has happened is that we’ve been reminded of some very important strategies that we must reclaim in order to treat people the way God would intend for us to treat them. We’re not there yet, but we are committed to improving.

I offer these principles as reminders of important things you already know. I challenge each of us to examine our church life in this regard and to make sure that we represent Christ well when someone who doesn’t know us or who doesn’t know the Lord steps into our presence.

Reminder #1: Be Intentional

We must serve our guests on purpose. Typically we simply assume that people are being greeted in a welcoming way. We place smiling men and women at the doors and hope they make a good impression. Someone making announcements says something like,
“We’d like to welcome our guests today. Fill out a visitor card. And please come back again.”

These efforts aren’t bad. They’re just not enough. They can often seem a bit too contrived and formal. They can even unwittingly send mixed messages if we say up front how glad we are to have guests and then the rest of a guest’s experience simply doesn’t confirm that. Imagine a family who is handed a bulletin at the door but then can’t find the right Bible class for their children. Or perhaps they hear the obligatory “We’re glad you’re here” announcement but not one person speaks to them after the last “amen.”

Being intentional about receiving our guests means thinking through a guest’s experience from the time they enter the parking for the first time all the way to when they come back the next time. We need teams of leaders and volunteers in our congregations carefully considering everything we do from the perspective of someone totally new to our church. We can’t allow this to take place by default, hoping that guests just happen to sit by friendly members, and just happen to find their way around our building, and just happen to receive a phone call during the week inviting them back, and just happen to run into someone that invites them to study the Bible. This all has to happen by design.

Here are a couple of specific actions that must happen by design and not by default:

- We must greet by design. We need to screen and train those that welcome guests at the doors, in the auditorium, and in our Bible classes. We can’t allow anyone to serve in these roles that might leave a negative impression or say something embarrassing. No congregation can tolerate having a greeter who is in reality a first line of defense against visitors.
- We must get information from our guests intentionally, yet comfortably. Inviting people to fill out a guest card is good. Having them do so while our members are doing something similar, like filling out prayer requests cards, is even better. Anything we can do to make the atmosphere inviting rather than intimidating is a plus. Asking visitors to stand puts them on the spot. Inviting them to visit the guest-services booth in the foyer to pick up a free gift and get some information about the church allows them to do so in a relaxed manner. While many people like to stay anonymous for a visit or two to a new congregation, eventually most folks want to provide you with information for the express purpose of seeing how
you will respond. We must take that information in a way that guards people’s privacy and ensures our caring response.

Here are two ideas for assessing your “Guest-Preparedness” and ensuring that you are being intentional.

- Invite some “secret-shopper” type guests to visit your services and give you candid feedback about their experience. Contact a sister congregation close by. Ask them for some names from their membership whom you could invite to visit your congregation on a specific date. Following the service, feed them lunch and let them tell you what it was really like to be a guest. Make sure your elders and ministers are present to listen. Get feedback on things like signage, building navigation, friendliness, etc. Don’t dispute their insights or try to argue why they might be wrong in their perceptions. But be forewarned, it takes a lot of courage to listen to this type of input.

- Take your elders, deacons, and ministers to visit another congregation so they can remember what it is like to be a guest. Choose a congregation within driving distance. Travel in your own vehicles rather than a church van. Fan out; don’t sit together; attend different classes. Don’t go in order to judge, but for the purpose of learning how others respond to guests. Eat out together following the visit and compare notes. The most important insights will come from being reminded what it is like to navigate an unfamiliar building and to walk into situations where you don’t know the people. Take these experiences back home and let them inform how you receive others when they attend your services.

Reminder #2. Communicate a Clear Path

Part of becoming more intentional in these efforts is to communicate clearly a simple path for our guests to follow. We no longer live in a world, nor a brotherhood, where we can assume everyone walking through our doors knows what it means to be a member of a church. Even some longtime members of sister congregations may have no idea what “coming forward to place membership” really means. And certainly, the unchurched will find our language strange and confusing.
This does not mean that we stop offering our usual invitations at the end of our sermons. It doesn’t mean we change long-held convictions about scripture. It does mean that we add a line or two during the invitation or at the beginning of worship that offers an easy opportunity to learn more about our congregations in a meaningful and safe way.

For example, we might say something like this: “If you are interested in discovering what it means to be a member of our church family, we have a Bible class just for you that meets every Sunday in room A8.” Of course, you then have to have such a Bible class in A8. Or you might say, “We have a DVD available at our Guest Center that can give you a great introduction to what our church believes and teaches on some important subjects.” Choose what works for you. But make it clear to your guests.

One of the strategies we use every week goes like this: “My name is Mark Taylor and I’m one of the ministers here at Memorial Road. If I don’t know you, I would sure like to meet you. My wife, Karla, and I will be right outside that door immediately after this service and you can come ask us anything you would like about today’s service or our church family.” I point to the specific place where we can be found. When guests come up I am able to engage them in conversation and point them in the right direction based on their specific needs. Just this last week my wife and I met two new families, two new singles, and one man whose family will be moving to town next month. One of the single men we met has been attending for about five weeks and asked me about being baptized. I immediately set him up with one of our other ministers to study the Bible one-on-one, and while I’m typing this he and Ken are studying the scriptures just five offices down.

Reminder #3. *Refuse to NOT Follow-up*

Granted, that’s pretty poor grammar. So let’s say it another way: We must commit to follow-up with each guest as soon as possible every single time!

As we’ve stated, once a person goes to the trouble to fill out a guest card or go out of their way to meet a church leader, they are waiting to see what your response will be.

There are so many great ways to follow-up. Many congregations have a *Monday Night for the Master* program in which teams meet at the building and either phone guests or go
out to visit them. Some congregations process their first-time guest information during Bible class time and have members drop by their guest’s home on Sunday afternoons to deliver a small gift. Some churches give home-made cookies or a loaf of bread.

Some churches have begun to GAG and MUG their guests! GAG stands for Going After Our Guests. It is a congregational commitment to make sure every guest knows that they are special. Mugging refers to the practice of giving first-time guests a nice coffee mug imprinted with the logo, address, phone number, and web address of the congregation. Inside the mug may be a teabag and printed information about the church presented in a concise and attractive way. (While I find GAG and MUG to be clever ways to emphasize these issues, I think I’d save their use for behind the scenes discussions about reaching guests.)

A number of churches make sure that follow-up is customized to the needs or demographics indicated on the guest card. Youth ministers contact the teens within a family that has recently visited. Children’s Bible class teachers send brief notes to kids who have visited their class. Elders call upon any guests that have suffered a recent loss. Such specialized attention communicates genuine love and concern.

**Reminder #4. Talk to your church about guests**

Let me recommend a book. Jim Henderson and Matt Casper’s book, *Jim & Casper Go To Church* chronicles a one-year adventure in which a man who believes in Jesus takes his atheist friend on a cross-country trek to visit a variety of churches. You won’t agree with every observation or belief expressed in this work. It will, however, make you think. And that is why I want you to read it.

After visiting quite a few churches, including huge mega-churches, main-line denominational churches, small community churches, news-making emerging churches, and even a tiny house-church, the pair visits a more traditional church. They are impressed with the way the members have stuck around and are visiting with each other rather than simply running off to lunch like they have witnessed in other places. Then one of Jim and Casper’s friends who is with them on this particular trip makes an observation:
“Casper, it’s nice that they’re talking to each other, but how come no one has come over to greet you and Jim? Aren’t they the least bit curious about why two guys were here typing on laptops? Surely they noticed!”

I told Helen that in all our visits, hardly anyone had voluntarily spoken to us. This was the norm, not the exception.

In the car, Casper and I discussed Helen’s observation. In fact, not only had no one spoken to us at the end, not one person voluntarily spoke to us the whole time we were inside their building.

I told Casper that I’d love to start a new seminar, one that will help churches realize that one very simple action on their part could make a very big difference in how people perceive them.

“You mean the ‘just say hi’ idea?”

“Right,” I said. “In fact I think I’ll call it the ‘Just Say Hi Church Growth Seminar.’ Think about how impressed we are when anyone makes the smallest gesture toward us voluntarily” (Jim & Casper Go to Church, Barna Press, 57-59).

That little interchange reminds me that from a guest’s perspective the most important member of any church is the member he or she is sitting next to on the pew or in Bible class. Long before that first announcement is made or that first song is led and long before the preacher utters a single word from the pulpit, a guest has made up his or her mind about the church. Whether or not a guest comes back is not only, or in some cases even primarily, determined by the song service or sermon. It is often determined by the chance encounter the guest had with an average member.

We have to talk to our members about our guests. We just have to. We must share with them the scriptural principles cited above. We must equip them with the right words to say and the right behaviors to display that will make a positive impact on our guests. Even our most introverted members can learn to be polite and cordial. No one should ever say to a guest, “That’s my seat.” Everyone can learn to say, “Hi, my name is Mark. What’s yours?” and “I’m so glad you’re here. Can I help you find anything or introduce you to anyone?”

Several times a year, usually right before school starts in the fall and right before any major congregational event or a national holiday, we remind our members to do four
things. Everyone can do them. So we say, “Remember, everyone one of us is a representative of Christ, so let’s do these four simple things.” And here they are.

- Reach across the pew.
- Walk across the room.
- Talk across the fence.
- Pray across our town.

Every single able-bodied member should be able to reach across the pew and introduce themselves to those they don’t know. Every single member should be able to notice someone in Bible class sitting alone and simply walk across the room and sit by them. Everyone can meet their neighbors and use conversational evangelism to mention what church they are a member of. And everyone can pray for God to bless our outreach efforts.

**Reminder #5. Pray the Prayers that Empower the Commission**

Praying evangelistic prayers may be the most powerful addition to our current outreach efforts that we can make. In Acts 1:8, Jesus commissioned the apostles to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and then the ends of earth. Before that charge, he had already prayed a prayer in John 17 for increasing levels of outward-flowing influence. Compare the prayer and the commission. Notice the subtle similarities. Jesus prayed to God for what he later asked the apostles to do.

Or notice Paul’s evangelistic prayer in Colossians 4:2-6. Look at the move from praying that the gospel will be proclaimed clearly to the exhortation to use our conversation to impact others for Christ. There is a connection between prayer and outreach.

Finally, read Matthew 9:35. What would our churches be like if we obeyed Jesus’ teaching? What if we asked the Lord of harvest to raise up men and women in our churches who will bring their friends? What if we asked our Father in heaven to equip our members to receive guests with grace and love? What if we prayed the prayers that empower the commission?
When our elders, ministers, and other leaders begin to pray both privately and publically for the lost, two things happen. First, God’s answers these prayers. Second, our members begin to realize just how important our guests really are to God and how important our guests should be to them. Let’s pray evangelistic prayers!

**One Last Thought**

*Are we welcoming GUESTS or just putting up with VISITORS?*

At your own home, what’s the difference between a guest and a visitor? When you invite a guest over to your house what do you do? You prepare for them by cleaning and cooking. You plan activities to enjoy or at least look forward to spending quality time in each other’s company. You are so glad they came and you invite them back again.

A visitor, however, is just someone who drops by. Maybe you like them, maybe you don’t. Chances are you’re not ready for their presence and you’ve been inconvenienced by the fact that they showed up. Truth be known, you are sometimes put out by a visitor and can’t wait for them to leave.

When someone walks through the doors of your church building, are they a welcome guest or just a visitor?