

Churches need to welcome guests

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. (BP)—When Thomas Hammond led a workshop eight years ago on how churches can become more visitor- friendly, he had no idea he would stimulate an ongoing series of sessions that continue today.

“I’m amazed at the ride because people have heard about it,” said Hammond, who estimates he has traveled to 20 states to present the workshop. “It’s meeting a need that we’ve neglected.”

The former pastor developed the lesson after he took a job as director of church evangelism with the North American Mis-sion Board and began the search for a new church. Although he had been a Southern Baptist for a long time, Hammond said he and his wife were ignored, ostracized or treated like outsiders when they visited churches in the Atlanta area.

“We hear preaching on the word of God, but we don’t experience it,” said Ham-mond, who left the mission board to become director of missions for the Metrolina Baptist As-sociation in Charlotte, N.C.

His unpleasant experiences prompted an effort to educate churches on how

to prepare for visitors—he prefers calling them guests—on Sundays.

One reason churches fail to make a good impression on first-timers is because they focus on the wrong things, he said.

At a church training seminar sponsored by the Kentucky Baptist Convention, Hammond noted pastors devote considerable time to preparing Sunday morning sermons.

But he cited past research that shows most visitors decide whether to return in the first 10 to 12 minutes, long before the sermon's delivery.

The decision is based on such factors as building appearance and the friendliness of greeters, Hammond said, and the truth is most Christians aren't prepared to be welcoming.

"We tend to stop brotherly love within the four walls of the church," he said. "What if we treated everyone who came to our services this Sunday as an angel, a special guest? Not necessarily for what they've done to this point, but for their potential."

Hammond noted visitor parking as one area that shows whether a church is serious about welcoming newcomers.

While at the mission board, Hammond visited one church that had dwindled from 500 to 300 despite double-digit population growth in its area. When he surveyed the property and asked if they wanted visitors to come, leaders nodded yes. But Hammond said he didn't believe them because they only had two visitor parking spaces.

After Hammond recommended they increase that number to the level of guests they wanted, the church set aside 20 prime spaces.

Over the next two and a half years, attendance doubled, not just because of increased guest parking but because they gained a more hospitable

outlook, he said.

“It’s a change of vision, of re-understanding your purpose,” Hammond said. “It wasn’t just that. But once they got it all straightened out, God blessed them. When people get focused on something besides themselves, their arms are open to whoever God brings to them.”

Another change that can create a more welcoming atmosphere is exchanging the term “visitor” for “guest,” he said.

Nobody wants to be labeled a visitor. While visitors don’t come back, you can’t keep guests away, Hammond said.

Despite the truth that churches can’t grow without guests and they won’t grow if guests don’t return, most spend little time preparing for company, he added.

“How much time do you think the average church spends getting ready for people who don’t come to their church?” Hammond asked.

“Our focus on Sunday morning is on us,” he said. “What would happen if we spent 30, 40 or 50 percent of our time getting ready for guests? Would their experience be different?”

Hammond said some factors that create a good impression include:

- An attractive campus.

This means a clean, well-maintained building that is landscaped outside, is inviting cosmetically and has plenty of directional signs in the parking lot and for such key facilities as the nursery and the front entrance.

- Guest parking.

The parking lot should have an adequate number of guest spaces that are

easy to identify. Not only must they be the best spaces, it helps to have greeters in the parking lot in addition to the front door, Hammond said.

- Friendly greeters.

These people should be the best of the best, he said. They should wear name-tags, escort guests to the welcome center and understand the value of this time.

Training all greet-ers in maintaining a cordial nature is a must, Hammond said. He recalled a visit where a greeter snarled at him to make sure he wasn't a member using visitor parking.

"Preachers, it would scare us to death if we knew how people are treated in our parking lot," Hammond said.

Some other steps Hammond outlined:

- Maintain a central location where guests are welcomed and receive information. He said this information should include such items as a campus map, newsletter, information on upcoming events, summary of all ministries and information on discipleship classes and recreation opportunities.
- Offer a clean, bright, cheerful and secure nursery.
- Teach members to make guests feel valued, have everyone who speaks introduce themselves, and provide a post-service reception where guests can meet the pastor and staff.

Churches need to be attuned to the fact that the main reason guests show up on a Sunday morning is they are hurting or have some kind of problem, even though they won't share that initially, Hammond said.

"Most of the time when people come, they're treated like an annoyance

because they're messing up our gig," he said.

"They don't know how to act; they're not like us. They're lost. Show them some love, and they'll want to listen to what you have to say."

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