

Churches welcome guests with greetings and gifts

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NASHVILLE (BP)—If the average pastor has anything to do with it, church guests can expect multiple greetings—and may even leave with a gift, according to a new study.

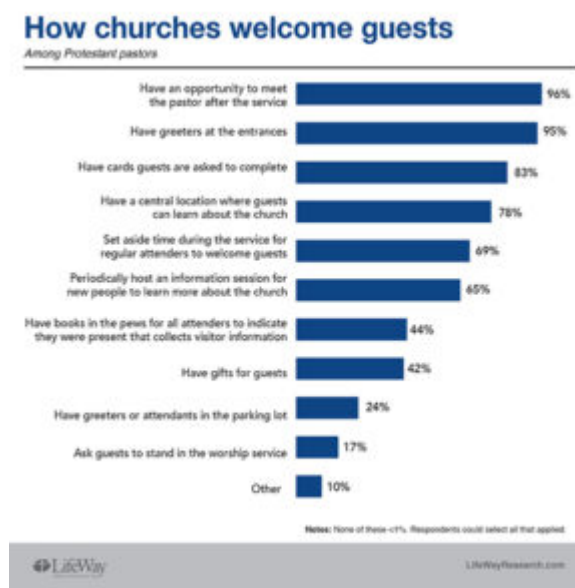
[LifeWay Research](#) asked 1,000 Protestant pastors what their churches do to welcome guests.

Almost all churches seek to welcome guests

According to the study, the average pastor says his or her church does six things to welcome guests, and virtually every church does something. Fewer than 1 percent admit making no effort to welcome guests.

“Pastors are eager to say their churches are actively welcoming visitors to their services,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

More than nine in 10 churches provide an opportunity to meet the pastor (96 percent) and have greeters at the entrance of their building (95 percent).



A majority ask guests to complete cards (83 percent), have a central location where guests can learn about the church (78 percent), set aside time during the service for regular attenders to welcome guests (69 percent) and periodically host information sessions for new people to learn more about the church (65 percent).

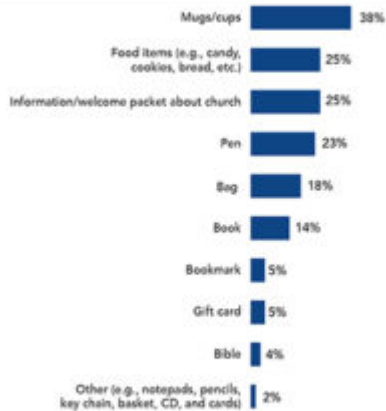
Fewer pastors say their church has books in the pew for all attenders to indicate their presence (44 percent), have greeters in the parking lot (24 percent) or ask guests to stand in the worship service (17 percent).

Offer a gift to visitors

Around two in five churches (42 percent) say they offer a gift to visitors. Of those who use gifts, the most popular are a mug or cup (38 percent), food (25 percent), a welcome packet about the church (25 percent) or a pen (23 percent).

Types of gifts churches give guests

Among Protestant churches that give gifts to guests



Notes: Respondents were asked to specify all gift types.



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Less popular gift items include a bag (18 percent), a book (14 percent), a bookmark (5 percent), a gift card (5 percent) or a Bible (4 percent).

One in 10 churches say they do something else to welcome guests, such as following up by mail (2 percent), with a personal visit (2 percent), with a phone call (1 percent) or with an email (1 percent).

“The Bible is full of verses on hospitality, so churches should be full of hospitality as well,” said Thom S. Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources. “Congregations should strive to create environments where guests are fully welcomed.”

Despite the numerous ways churches say they reach out to guests, Rainer, author of *Becoming a Welcoming Church*, said congregations should ask tough questions about themselves.

“Churches often believe they are a friendly church because the members are friendly to one another. But they don’t think about walking in the shoes of first-time guests,” he said. “Welcoming those new to the church has to be the constant and intentional posture of the entire congregation.”

Approaches vary by congregational size

Larger churches tend to welcome guests in different ways than smaller churches.

Congregations with an attendance of fewer than 50 are the most likely to say they have an opportunity for guests to meet the pastor after the service (98 percent) and ask guests to stand during the worship service (22 percent).

Meanwhile, pastors of churches with an attendance of more than 250 are the most likely to say they have cards for guests to complete (96 percent), have a central location for guests to learn more about the church (88 percent), periodically host information sessions for new people (85 percent), set aside a time for regular attenders to welcome guests (76 percent), have greeters in the parking lot (57 percent) and offer gifts to visitors (59 percent).

“In many ways, larger churches have developed systems to accomplish what may come more naturally in smaller churches,” McConnell said. “Because of their size, bigger churches have to enact plans that may happen spontaneously elsewhere.”

Stand and greet?

In his years of church consulting, Rainer found specific times of greeting during the worship service to be one of the most polarizing methods of welcoming guests. If not done extremely well, those moments can often be awkward for the people churches are trying to welcome, he said.

“Stand-and-greet times could be part of a welcoming experience for guests,

but church members would need clear and firm guidance on being friendly to guests before and after the service,” he said. “Friendliness only during stand-and-greet times can do more harm than good.”

Overall, only 17 percent of churches ask guests to stand during the worship service, but certain churches are more likely to do so than others.

More than three-quarters of African-American pastors (77 percent) say their church asks guests to stand. Pastors in the West are more likely to ask guests to stand (23 percent) than those in the South (15 percent) or Midwest (14 percent).

Large churches, with more than 250 in attendance, are the least likely to ask guests to stand. Only 9 percent of those pastors say they do, but churches with attendance of fewer than 50 (22 percent) and attendance between 50 and 99 (18 percent) are more likely.

“Large churches often assume guests will make themselves known,” said McConnell. “There’s no real place for a visitor to hide in a small church.”

Regardless of church size, McConnell said pastors recognize the importance of being welcoming.

“Churches want to make the most of the opportunity with a guest when it comes,” he said. “With all churches say they do for visitors, the bar is set high for being a welcoming church.”

Researchers conducted the phone survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors Aug. 30 to Sept. 18, 2017. The calling list was a stratified random sample, drawn from a list of all Protestant churches, using quotas for church size. Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister or priest of the church called.

Analysts weighted responses by region to reflect the population more

accurately. The completed sample is 1,000 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.