

Here are ten ways churches signal newcomers they are not wanted.

By Joe McKeever

1. The front door is locked.

One church where I was to preach has a lovely front facade which borders on the sidewalk. The front doors are impressive and stately. So, after parking to the side of the building, I did what I always do: walked to the front and entered as a visitor would.

Except I didn't go in. The doors were locked. All of them.

After walking back around the side and entering from the parking lot, I approached an usher and asked about the locked door. "No one comes in from that entrance," he said. "The parking lot is to the side." I said, "What about walk-ups? People from the neighborhood who come across the street." He said, "No one does that." He's right. They stay away because the church has told them they're not welcome.

One church I visited had plate glass doors where the interior of the lobby was clearly visible from the front steps. A table had been shoved against the doors to prevent anyone from entering that way. I did not ask why; I knew. The parking lot was in the rear. Regulars parked back there and entered through those doors.

That church, in a constant struggle for survival, is its own worst enemy. They might as well erect a sign in front of the church that reads, "First-timers unwelcome."

2. The functioning entrance is opened late.

Even if we understand why a rarely used front door is kept locked, it makes no sense that the primary door should be closed. And yet, I have walked up to an entrance clearly marked and found it locked. The pastor explained, "We unlock it 15 minutes prior to the service."

If that pastor is a friend and we already have a solid relationship, I will say something gracious, like, "What? Are you out of your cotton-picking mind? A lot of people like to come early. Seniors do. First-timers like to get there early to see the lay of the land. That door ought to be unlocked a minimum of 45 minutes prior to the announced worship time."

If the pastor and I are meeting for the first time, I'll still make the point, although a little gentler than that.

3. The church bulletin gives inadequate information.

The announcement reads: "The youth will have their next meeting this week at Stacy's house. See Shawn for directions. Team B is in charge of refreshments."

Good luck to the young person visiting that day and hoping to break into the clique. He has no idea who Shawn is, how to get to Stacy's house or what's going on if he dares to attend.

So, the youth does not return. Next Sunday, he tries that church across town that is drawing in great crowds of teens. For good reason, I imagine. They act like they actually want them to come.

4. The pulpit is unfriendly to first-timers.

The pastor says, "I'm going to call on Bob to lead the prayer." Or, "Now, Susan will tell us about the women's luncheon today." "Tom will be at the front door with information on the project."

By not using the full names of the individuals, the pastor ends up speaking only to the insiders. Outsiders entered without knowing anyone and leave the same way.

5. The congregation sends its own signals.

Is visitors parking clearly marked? And when you park there, does someone greet you with a warm welcome and helpful information? Or, do you find a parking place wherever you can and receive only stares as you approach the entrance?

Did you get the impression that you were sitting in someone else's pew today?

Did anyone make an effort to learn your name and see if you have a question? Or, was the only handshake you received given during the in-service time as announced in the bulletin? (Those, incidentally, do not count when assessing the friendliness of a congregation. Only spontaneous acts of kindness count.)

This week, a pastor and I had lunch at a diner in downtown New Orleans which I've visited only once and he not at all. We were amused at some of the signs posted around the eatery. One said rather prominently, "Guests are not to stay beyond one hour." My friend Jim laughed, "I guess they're saying we shouldn't dawdle."

Churches have their own signs, although not as clear or blatant as that. Usually, they are read in the faces, smiles (or lack of one), and tone of voice of members.

6. The insider language keeps outsiders away.

Now, I'm not one who believes we should strip all our worship service prayers and hymns and sermons of all references to sanctification, the blood, justification, atonement, and such. This is who we are.

However, when we use the terms without a word of explanation--particularly, if we do it again and again--first-timers unaccustomed to the terms feel the same way you would if you dropped in on a foreign language class mid-semester: lost.

We signal visitors that they are welcome in our services when we give occasional explanations to our terms and customs which they might find strange.

7. No attempt is made to get information on visitors.

Now, most church bulletins which I see from week to week have the perforated tear-off which asks for all kinds of information and even gives people ways to sign up for courses or dinners. But I've been amazed at how many do not ask for that information. So, a visitor comes and goes. The church had one opportunity to reach out to him or her and blew it.

A church which is successful in reaching people for Christ will use redundancy. That is, they will have multiple methods for engaging newcomers, everything from greeters in the parking lot to friendly ushers to attractive bulletins and after-service receptions.

8. No one follows up on first-timers.

One of the ministers of my church helped me with this. He said, "Asking people to fill out a guest card implies that there will be some kind of contact with them afterwards." He pointed out that our pastor informs them "no salesman will call," but even so, "Someone phones many visitors and letters go out to most."

The first-timer who visits a church and does everything right has a right to expect some kind of follow-up from a leader of that congregation.

We're frequently told that people today cherish their privacy and do not want to give their name and contact information until they decide this church is trustworthy. My response to that is: it's true, but not universally true. Many people still want to be enthusiastically welcomed and will respond to invitations to give given the grand tour and taken to lunch afterwards.

In most cases leaders can tell from guest cards whether a visit will be welcomed. If not, at the very least a phone call should be made. If the caller receives an answering machine, he/she leaves the message and may decide this is sufficient for the first time. (Every situation is different. There are few hard and fast rules. Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you.)

9. Intangibles often send the signals loud and clear.

In one church I served, a couple roamed the auditorium before and after services in search of anyone they did not know. Lee and Dottie Andrews greeted the newcomers, engaged them in conversation, and quickly determined if an invitation to lunch would be in order. Almost every

Sunday, they hosted a visiting family at the local cafeteria. At least half of these joined our church.

In another church, a husband and wife who sold real estate brought their clients to church with them. Some of the most active and faithful members who joined during my years in that church were introduced by Bob and Beth Keys.

Often, it's nothing more than a great smile that seals the deal. Or a warm, genuinely friendly handshake. A friendly, "Hey, have you found everything you need here?" may be all that's needed.

Some churches install a newcomers desk in the foyer, where visitors can meet knowledgeable leaders, pick up material, and get questions answered. Those can be great, but there is one caveat: you must have the right people on that desk. Individuals gifted with great smiles and servant spirits and infinite patience are ideal.

10. What happens following the service can make the difference.

You the newcomer have enjoyed the service, you were blessed by the sermon, and you would like to greet the pastor and begin an acquaintance with this church. Most churches are set up for you to do just this. But not all.

I've been in churches where within 5 minutes after the benediction, the place was deserted. People were so eager to leave, they hardly spoke to one another, much less guests. The signal they send the visitor is clear: "We don't care for our church and you wouldn't either."

Healthy church congregations love each other and welcome newcomers and their people are reluctant to leave following the end of services.

One wonders if pastors and other leaders realize just how scary it can be for a person new in the city to venture into an unfamiliar church. It is an act of courage of the first dimension.

The Lord told Israel to reach out to newcomers and welcome them. After all, they themselves knew what it was to live in a strange country where the language and customs were foreign and they were missing home. God wanted Israel to remember always how that felt so they would welcome the stranger within their gates. How much more should a church of the Lord Jesus Christ.