

How Does Your Church Look through Visitor Glasses?

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Note from Pastor Kevin Lea: I think we can all take some of this to heart and seek the Lord about what might need to change in our lives.

I opened the door to a freshly painted, warmly decorated church foyer. It was my first time in this rural church of less than two hundred members. People were talking together in small huddles. Some were laughing; others were listening with concern. They greeted each other with hugs. They seemed comfortable and at home with one another.

I made eye contact with a few and smiled. Some looked away; some smiled back, but none left their group of friends to greet me. I took a bulletin from the table and walked into the sanctuary...alone.

The sanctuary was beautiful. Soft music created a worshipful atmosphere. I walked half way down the aisle and sat on the end. People began to fill the pews around me. Several excused themselves to step over me, but no one talked to me. Soon the room was filled, but I felt alone.

For over a year, I attended twenty different churches with similar scenarios. I was an undercover pastor's wife, disguised as a visitor. My mission: to observe. I chose to accept this mission in order to help my husband lead our new church family ten hours away. Dave was already there, but due to a flat housing market, I stayed in our old town trying to sell our house for almost three years. With many Sundays free, I seized the opportunity to visit other churches.

I visited all types—conservative and liberal, various denominations and sizes. I visited to learn what is being taught (and what is missing) from pulpits. I visited to know which churches I could confidently recommend to others. I visited to get ideas for programs that work and didn't work. I attended churches to see how it felt to be a visitor.

What did I see through my visitor glasses? Sadly, all of the questions below were answered in the negative by some church at some time. However, some churches made the "Places to Return" list. What reasons drew me back?

People said more than "hello."

Did they stop to introduce themselves, or did they say, "Hi, how are you?" in passing? Did I catch two women pointing at me, whispering, "Who is she?" but not coming to ask? (Yes, that really did happen.) Did someone offer to hang up my coat and show me the location of the restrooms? Did anyone get to know me by asking more than yes/no questions, for example, "What brings you here today?"

I may have brought a heart full of needs. It may have been my first time in any church. We don't know a visitor's story, but we do know each presents an opportunity to minister encouragement and love, and possibly even the privilege of leading them in the final step to salvation.

The church where the woman said, “Hi, my name is ‘so and so’. I’m glad you’re with us today. Would you like to come sit with my family?” made the list.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. (NASB, Hebrews 13:2)

Personal contact made after my visit.

Was I invited for lunch after church? Did someone offer to accompany me to the visitor reception following the service? Did one of the elders call later to see if I had any questions about the church? Did I get a form letter from the church, or a handwritten note? Churches are built one relationship at a time.

The church where the pastor’s wife sent a personal note that included, “We’re praying for you” made the list.

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord...contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. (Romans 12:10-13)

Members have good relationships.

Did all ages greet each other—kids, adults, teens—or were there age cliques? Did I overhear gossip? Did people walk past each other without acknowledgement? Our greatest testimony to others is our unity and love for one another.

The church where I observed a woman consoling and praying with a younger woman made the list.

Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

I remembered the sermon.

Was I still mulling over a biblical nugget a few days later, or was it the flashy graphics and flawless oration that stayed with me? Did spiritual seed take root, or was the experience an emotional balloon that fizzled during the week? Was the sermon packaged, or was it spoken from the pastor’s heart? Was I distracted from the meaning by a flippant, dry, or showy presentation? Did the sermon contain something for the mature believer, as well as the seeker?

The pastor that stimulated me to reread and meditate on the sermon text in my quiet time made the list.

And He gave some as...pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-12)

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires.
(2 Timothy 4:3)

Members brought their Bibles.

Did the congregation know their way around their Bibles? Did I hear pages turn, or did the congregation depend on an overhead? Did the people take notes? Did the sermon points come from the Scripture text, or did the pastor read a verse or two to back up his outline? We learn the heart and mind of God by listening with an open Bible.

The church that revered the Word of God made the list.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Reverence for God and the cross.

Was respect for God shown through all aspects of the service—announcements, music, sermon, prayer, and appearance? Were the leaders and congregation attentive to and aware that God was present, or were they lulled by meaningless formalities? Had reverence been compromised in an attempt to change from traditional to contemporary? What was the goal of the service, to promote a certain style of worship, to inspire people to be better, to grow in numbers, to entertain, or...?

The church that honored the Savior made the list.

I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ... that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings. (Philippians 3:8-10)

Prayer was important.

What did the people pray about? Was the pastoral prayer packaged, or from his heart? Did prayer requests have a balance between health issues and spiritual needs, between individual needs and global needs? Did leaders give public prayer support to believers in other places? Was there a mid-week prayer service? Content and participation in prayer is a barometer of the health of the church and its individuals. The church that prayed in accordance with God's heart and mind made the list.

... we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience, joyously giving thanks to the Father.
(Colossians 1:9-12)

People were involved: loved the Lord and others.

Did they participate to please a personable pastor? Did they think spirituality was a flurry of church activities? Did the programs meet needs, or tradition? Were they intent on developing mature relationships with Christ? Were the people willing to serve outside their comfort zones? Was attendance out of desire, or duty?

The church where the people participated with passion and courage, according to their spiritual gifts, made the list.

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function . . . since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly...he who gives with liberality, he who leads with diligence, he who shows mercy with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:4-8)

Conclusion

Most ministry leaders do not have opportunity to attend other churches. Even on vacation, we often worship with families and friends. Consequently, we do not have opportunity to listen to the heartbeat of Christendom.

What ways can a ministry leader get to know the spiritual influences on the community, the religious teachings of the area churches, the needs of the local population, and how it feels to be a visitor? Visit churches that meet at times when your church does not meet (i.e., Saturday nights, Sunday nights, midweek services, seasonal services, special programs and speakers.) Send board members to visit different churches every quarter or so. Give them specific things to observe. Use their report as a base for constructive discussion and proactive brainstorming. List the various churches in your community and research their websites on the Internet. Visit a different denomination on vacation.

How does your church look through visitor glasses? Does it reach beyond what is comfortable to promote spiritual growth and service? Is your church comfortable, or is it inviting?

Now the God of peace...equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)