

Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 1

How to Transform Worship Visitors into Regular Attendees

Why are we gifting you this volume? Because the mission statement of our primary publication—*The Parish Paper: New Ideas for Active Congregations*—is to help the largest possible number of congregations achieve maximum effectiveness in their various ministries. *The Parish Paper* is a monthly newsletter whose subscribers receive copyright permission to distribute to their constituents—more than two million readers in 28 denominations. Go to www.TheParishPaper.com for subscription information.

Purpose of this Volume: Provides in-depth answers to questions that readers of *The Parish Paper* ask regarding how churches can increase the percentage of first-time worshipers who become regular attendees.

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I. Three Kinds of Encouragement

The President of the United States takes an entourage of assistants on trips across the nation and the world. Each assistant plays an essential role, but no one confuses those helpers with the President. In one flourish of a pen, the President accomplishes what no assistant does in a lifetime.

Neither church members nor churches *do* evangelism. God does! Transforming people's lives spiritually *begins* with Grace. God's Spirit raises their consciousness of spiritual need, sometimes totally apart from any kind of human effort. After that initial spark, spiritual transformation *continues* when people connect with Christ through the ministry of a congregation.

Leaders of evangelistically effective congregations do not confuse their efforts and methods with God's power. They know that they are assistants to, not authors of, spiritual transformation. Those assistants recognize the important role that three methods play in the evangelization process:

1. **Methods that encourage people to visit their worship service for the first time.** Few people join a church until they have visited it at least once.
2. **Methods that encourage people who visit their worship service to return a second and third time.** Visitors base their decisions to return on a different set of reasons than those that brought them the first time. More than three-fourths of visitors attend the first time because someone invited them. Visitors who attend a second and third time base that decision on their own impressions of and experiences with your congregation.
3. **Methods that encourage people to become involved with Christ and activities within the congregation.** Without meaningful spiritual, fellowship, and program participation, few visitors continue to attend.

Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 8, How to Attract First-Time Worship Visitors, describes how to accomplish the first of those three methods: encouraging people to visit your worship service the first time (Download free at the www.TheParishPaper.com Web site). The present volume—*Nuggets: Volume 1*—helps churches deliver the second method (encouraging people to return a second time). The third method (becoming spiritually involved with Christ and the congregation) is addressed in *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 7, How to Build Assimilation Bridges for New Members/Attendees*. Download free (www.TheParishPaper.com).

II. Why Do People Join Churches?

Why do adults decide to attend and/or become members of congregations? Research reported in *Vanishing Boundaries* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox) by Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens indicates that two factors seem to most strongly influence whether people move toward church involvement as adults:

1. Religious beliefs formed in pre-college years. A full 85 percent of people who become a Christian in their entire lifetime had a church experience prior to age eighteen.
2. Adult decisions based on current needs and social relationships.

What needs do churches meet for adults? The research reported in *Vanishing Boundaries* indicates that four needs are especially important:

- Religious education for children—which includes moral and character education alongside learning about the Bible and church teachings. (What Sunday school and youth programs offer cannot be purchased elsewhere, except in five-day-a-week religious schools.)

- Personal support and reassurance—especially in settings where they can speak openly and honestly without fear of rejection (small groups of various kinds can provide this).
- Social contacts and a sense of community—a need that is strongest in urban settings where family and friendship ties are weak, especially for newcomers.
- Inspiration and spiritual guidance—which means that they want worship to be uplifting, empowering, and encouraging, especially the music, which sets the emotional tone for all the other elements.

Congregations that encourage people to make a life-changing connection with Jesus Christ and grow spiritually in that relationship meet those four needs in multifaceted ways.

III. Offer a Magnetic Menu

In contrast to fifty years ago, far fewer adults join a congregation because of its denominational affiliation. In the typical American congregations, only 39 percent of new members grew up in that denomination.

The majority of people base their decision to regularly attend a particular congregation on the seven factors listed below. With a few notable exceptions, such as congregations located in age-restricted retirement enclaves like Sun City, Arizona, evangelistically-effective churches possess *all seven factors*. What if several of the seven factors are missing from a congregation's menu? If that is the case, even the proven methods for encouraging worship visitors to return, outlined in Sections IV through Section X below, get sparse results.

1. The worship music's style and tempo fit peoples' age and spiritual preferences.

Whether the congregation offers blended worship that contains more than one type of hymn in every service or multiple worship services that offer a different type of hymn in different venues, the positive, uplifting atmosphere created by appropriate music connects with two kinds of people:

- At least three-fourths of worshippers with *pre-1946* birth dates tend to describe spiritually meaningful worship music with one word: *meditation*.
- At least three-fourths of worshippers with *post-1945* birth dates tend to describe spiritually meaningful worship music with one word: *celebration*.

Whatever worship style the congregation offers—blended or multiple services—churches with a magnetic menu provide hymn-singing characterized by (a) a fast-paced, non-funeral tempo, (b) familiar and/or easy-to-sing hymns, and (c) all four of the hymn types that spiritually nurture the adult worshippers born during four different eras of the 20th century: pre-1946, 1946-1960, 1961-1980, and 1991-present. Without such hymns, the congregation is anti-magnetic, especially to most adults born subsequent to 1945.

See *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 4, How to Increase Worship Attendance* for detailed instructions on how to accomplish the above kind of worship. Download free of charge at the www.TheParishPaper.com Web site.

2. The preaching inspires them with biblical insights about how to live a meaningful life.

Pastors in magnetic churches are enthusiastic about the messages they deliver. The preaching has a high percentage of biblical content. Some experts say that the sermons in many of these churches feel more like teaching than preaching, especially to the ears of worshippers with birth dates prior to 1946. To younger adults, the sermons communicate biblical content that they do not remember hearing in Sunday school—or never got because they never attended Sunday school. For adults in every age range, the sermons come across as “live,” rather than seeming to come from a paper tape recording.

These pastors understand that the broadcast era of communication began replacing the print era of communication in about 1950. Thus, many magnetic-church pastors move away from behind the pulpit. They recognize that people in the generations reared watching television want to *see* the communicator, not just hear the message.

Protestant church attendees tend to select congregations that fit into one of the following theological categories: *charismatic*, *fundamentalist*, *evangelical*, *moderate*, and *liberal*. The content and biblical interpretation style of preaching in each of these church-types reflects its theological persuasion.

Regardless of which theological category they fall into, preachers in magnetic churches communicate in ways that connect with people whose birth dates fall after 1945, while not neglecting the approximately 16 percent of Americans with birth dates before 1946. Three words seem important in the overall preaching/teaching milieu of churches of every denomination, size, and theological persuasion that attract large numbers of post-1946 birth-date people: **Christ**—a high Christology. **Bible**—a high emphasis on biblical authority. **Love**—a high emphasis on caring.

3. The pastors and staff exhibit strong spiritual traits and possess personalities to which prospective members can relate. The following list of traits is a good summary.

Spiritual enthusiasm: Effective pastors give you the impression that they want to lead you, not just someplace, but to a closer relationship with God. Also, their internal drives come from the fact that their own lives have been transformed and currently are in process of change. Therefore, they have something to share.

Theological leadership: Effective pastors believe that the Great Commission has not been decommissioned. They remind their congregation through preaching and teaching that Jesus said, “Go ... make disciples” (Matthew 28:19).

Persistence in developing an effective evangelization strategy: Effective pastors develop and work with the congregation’s outreach team, not merely as an encourager or a distant observer but as an integral part of the group. Over a period of several years, the team gradually develops evangelistic outreach methods that work for that church type, size, and community.

Iron fist in the velvet glove: Great churches are like great football teams; their coaches have both sensitivity to personal feelings and iron determination.

Balance: Effective pastors focus on all of the biblical responsibilities. Ineffective pastors ride one hobbyhorse (often justifying this by saying that if they do this one task well, the other tasks take care of themselves).

Spiritual vision: Effective pastors are not held prisoner by the perspective and traditions of their congregations. They are sensitive to where people are but not content to leave them there.

Willingness to lead: Effective leaders are sometimes wrong, but they are not so afraid of the consequences of being wrong that they refuse to chart new directions.

Spiritual optimism about the future: The Bible calls this hope. People who dispense this quality are the spiritual equivalent of the first rain after a long drought.

Indiscriminate affirmation: Despite a truckload of reasons to go in the opposite direction, the conversational patterns of effective pastors are praise-full.

Sense of humor: Cartoons collect more followers than turpentine bottles do. Today’s effective clergy are both serious and light-hearted.

Joyful attitude: Oswald Chambers wrote, “Joy is the nature of God in my blood.” People are not attracted to a religious institution whose spiritual leader needs a transfusion.

Open to considering new ideas: The initial response of effective pastors to new ideas from others is usually, “Why not?” The pastor then carefully listens to and examines the proposal. Ineffective pastors tend to immediately block the description of a new idea by citing several

reasons why it will not work. Guess which of those two kinds of pastors people stop coming to with new ideas?

A disposition toward delegation: Good leaders coach the team; poor leaders try to play all of the positions.

High energy level: Morticians in small towns are among the few professionals of any kind who can succeed with a forty-hour workweek. Low-energy pastors usually become ecclesiastical morticians.

Positive appearance: Neat apparel, shined shoes, and well-kept hair do not assure that people enter into the Kingdom of God. But if the messenger package is shabby, people may not bother to examine its contents.

Personal integrity: Remembering promises, functioning responsibly by taking on tasks that are not always enjoyable, serving without a demand for public recognition, and leading a disciplined moral life do not, by themselves, bring people into the kingdom. But the absence of these qualities can block people from wanting to tour it to see whether they might want to live there.

In *summary*, effective pastors balance what social scientists call “Structure Behavior” (organizational leadership skills) and “Consideration Behavior” (personal relationship skills).

4. The excellent children and youth ministries meet an important need felt by young-adult parents. The nursery in magnetic churches is equipped for young parents (recognizing that parents select the church that their infant attends). Magnetic churches have an extroverted Sunday school that goes beyond providing good content for the children who show up; these churches also encourage more children to attend. Magnetic churches frequently and prominently list in the morning worship bulletins their activities for children, youth, and young adults.

5. A wide variety of programs make visitors feel that “there is something here for every member of the family.” Magnetic churches have several core ministries beyond worship and Sunday school. They develop numerous youth and children’s choirs. Large magnetic congregations often have brass ensembles, orchestras, and other musical groups. Midsize and large magnetic congregations have several strong adult Sunday school classes. Small magnetic churches have two adult Sunday school classes. Regardless of size, healthy, magnetic churches usually have a strong “young-adult fellowship nucleus” comprised of people twenty-five to forty-four years of age. In many magnetic churches, 20 percent or more of the various adult groups have been organized within the last two years.

6. The congregation is friendly and visitors feel that they are wanted as a part of the church family. A well-trained greeter-ministry team takes advantage of this first-impression opportunity. Two out of three people are afraid of initiating new relationships. Greeters are the first step in addressing that need. Several suggestions in Section IV through Section X below build on this essential foundation.

7. The church is a reasonable driving-distance from the visitor’s residence. In most cases that is fifteen minutes of drive-time, with a handful of people driving twenty minutes, thirty minutes, or even more. (Approximately 85 percent of American church members can drive to their congregation’s facilities in fifteen minutes or less.) Neighborhood churches have almost ceased to exist. Magnetic congregations therefore schedule their activities, youth ministries, etc. to meet the needs of people from a much larger geographic radius than they did a few decades ago.

Result: When served this seven-dish magnetic menu, more church members enthusiastically invite their friends and acquaintances to visit worship—which increases the number of first-time worship visitors. Also, far larger numbers of those invitees return a second time and eventually become regular attendees and members. Without high quality food, restaurants do not experience repeat customers, regardless of how efficient their servers and how spectacular their atmosphere.

The proven follow-up procedures outlined below increase the percentage of visitors that return. However, these procedures cannot compensate for the absence of a magnetic menu.

IV. Welcome Home to First-Time Visitors

Encouraging people to visit worship the second time includes seemingly mundane and “non-spiritual” factors such as the building’s external appearance, the internal appearance of the entryway, and whether the sanctuary meets the heating and cooling expectations of your community’s citizens.

In addition to the presence of the seven *positive* factors in Section III above, research indicates that the presence of four *negative* factors are the major deterrents to people who consider returning to and/or joining a particular congregation:

- Constantly talking about money problems, particularly from the pulpit
- Inadequate parking
- Inadequate nursery
- Unfriendliness

Build the seven-dish magnetic menu. Remove the four anti-magnetic impediments. To that foundation add warm, “welcome home” friendliness from the moment people enter your church’s front door to the time they exit. Examples:

The Pew Host System. Congregations that average fewer than 150 worshippers benefit from this procedure. *Do not print this method in your church newsletter or worship bulletin.* Never put it on paper anywhere. That makes it institutional instead of relational. Instead, at a governing board meeting or a gathering where leaders such as committee chairpersons are present, tell the group that you heard about a method that “can help our church come across as even more friendly than it already is.” Tell the group that explaining the idea takes about five minutes. Ask if they would like to hear it. They inevitably answer, “Yes.” Who wants to vote against friendliness?

Then say, “We need to go to the sanctuary to illustrate how this works. When you enter the sanctuary, please sit where you usually sit on Sunday morning.” The group chuckles. Everyone knows that they sit in the same place every Sunday.

Go to the front of the sanctuary and say, “All of us know how important friendliness is. I’ll bet all of you have at some point in your lives visited a worship service where you got in and out of the place without anyone speaking to you. The fact that you remember that experience after all these years tells you the importance of friendliness. Yet some visitors arrive late and whisk out so quickly that no one has the opportunity to speak to them. The method I’d like us to test for three months prevents our church from coming across as unfriendly to any visitor.”

Ask, “Would each of you be willing to take responsibility for greeting newcomers seated on your pew and the two-to-four pews immediately in front of you.” Give them two minutes to buzz among themselves and divide up their part of the sanctuary, noting any pews where none of them sit. Suggest, “Please speak to anyone that you have not seen before, either before or after the service. That way, no one can slip through the cracks of our congregation’s warm hospitality.”

Before a closing prayer that asks for God’s help in using our friendliness skills, share the following data:

- Approximately 96 percent of visitors who do not think our church is friendly will not complain to anyone in the church.
- Ninety percent of those visitors will not come back.
- Each visitor who thinks we are not friendly will tell at least nine other people about his or her bad experience.
- About 13 percent of those visitors will tell twenty other people about their bad experience.

At the next two or three governing-board meetings or regular meetings of whatever leadership group you use for this purpose, ask, “How is our pew host system working?” People will spontaneously discuss their experiences. In doing so, they fine-tune the process. Bring up the same question every three months for the next year. This is how churches invent traditions. They talk about them. After a year or so you will hear your leaders say, “We have always done it that way.”

The One-Minute Ministry. Congregations that average more than 150 people in worship need something different than the Pew Host System described above. Many larger churches ask their leaders to conduct a “one-minute ministry” after the benediction. They encourage either their key leaders or all of their members to talk with one person they do not know before they talk to someone they do know.

All such procedures are built on this dependable educational foundation: Telling people to do what they know they ought to do does not always result in a change in their behavior. Often, they listen to those admonitions and continue their deeply-rooted behavior patterns. Educators know that in many situations *it is easier to behave people into a new way of thinking than to try to think them into a new way of behaving*. That is true in many congregations, especially those that have practiced a cold personality for several decades. Ask people to change what they *do*, rather than to change what they *think*.

The Nobody-Sits-Alone Ministry Team. In small congregations, ask four or five extroverted members from across the age range of twenty to eighty to form this team. Use no nametags. The team members agree to function in the following way: When someone visits for the first time, a team member from their age range goes and sits down beside them before the service begins. After a get-acquainted conversation, he or she asks, “Is it okay if I worship with you this morning?”

The pastor who invented this method said that he became sold on it after a conversation with a single-parent mother. She visited the service, returned for several consecutive Sundays, and soon placed her membership with the congregation. A few months later he asked her whether she enjoyed being part of this congregation. She replied, “I liked it from the very first Sunday. When Mary came and sat with me in worship, I knew I was in the right church.”

Combating Pew Ownership. The American custom of paying for and occupying a specific pew stopped about 1860. Some American denominations, such as the *Free* Methodist Church (italics added), were born in a revolt against that practice. Yet, an unofficial form of the pew-rent habit prevails 150 years later. People in many churches tell horror stories of conversational exchanges in which a long-term member said, “You are sitting in my pew!” and asked a worship visitor to move. Church members would never behave this way with guests in their home. Yet, some of them exhibit amazing ignorance of how rude such behavior seems to strangers in their church sanctuary.

How can you change this habit pattern without being as offensive in your teaching procedure as is the habit itself? Approach this educational challenge in a positive way. Twice a year, before

Christmas season and Easter season, remind worshippers of the importance of extending hospitality to “the strangers in our midst.” The Bible speaks of that often, naming it as a virtue among God’s people. Since Christmas and Easter are times when more new people attend, remind members to say something like the following when they find someone sitting in their spot: “I am so glad that you are here this morning. My name is....”

Within 120 seconds of entering a congregation’s worship service for the first time, people decide whether this is a friendly church or a cold church. This quality is so obvious that the congregation might as well print in bold letters on the sanctuary wall, “Friendly Church,” or “Cold Church.” Why does that quality come across to visitors so quickly? When you meet someone for the first time, body language tells you as much as words. The same thing happens when you meet a group of individuals for the first time. Methods such as those outlined above help church leaders move beyond, “We should be friendly with strangers!” to “We are friendly with strangers.”

After your church conveys that signal, people are ready to read your menu. Without that, many of them disregard the excellent menu items.

V. Get Visitors’ Names and Addresses

Your best new-member possibilities are the names on your worship visitor list. Church size determines the best way to collect those names.

Churches of 70 to 300 Average Worship Attendance. If used in the following ways, the attendance registration pad, which some churches call the “Ritual of Friendship” pad, obtains 95 percent of the worship visitor information.

Print the phrase “Ritual of Friendship” in the worship bulletin early in the order of service. An effective location is immediately after “Announcements.” At this point the pastor says, “We are a friendly church, and our Ritual of Friendship helps us to express that quality. The ushers will come forward and hand the people on each pew a Ritual of Friendship pad. Please pass this along the pew. We ask that everyone, both members and visitors alike, write their names, addresses, and other information in the spaces provided. Then send the pad back to the other end of the pew, noting the names of others on your pew. In a few minutes, ushers will return to pick up the pads.”

In conjunction with instituting this procedure, talk with each adult class, group, and ministry in your church. Never, ever, say the following on Sunday morning, but remind members of those groups that “people who fill out forms tend to imitate the information provided by those who completed the blanks above theirs.” Ask every member of those adult classes, groups, and ministries to “help with our reach-out efforts by writing your address and phone number on the pad or card *every Sunday morning*.” This “modeling behavior” by regular attendees increases the number of first-time worship guests who also write their addresses and telephone numbers, thus making your reach-out work much easier.

That procedure takes into account the realities of human nature. About 20 percent of people who visit a worship service for the first time automatically resist all institutional systems. They get an emotional charge out of not doing what leaders request them to do (one of the big reasons why visitor cards in pew racks work poorly). The Ritual of Friendship system images this experience as a way of expressing friendliness. Almost everyone prefers to come across as friendly. Thus, the above-stated procedure’s positive psychological qualities counterbalance the institutional resister’s tendency to evade leaving an address and telephone number. With everyone in the pew (including members) writing on the pad, and with everyone knowing that everyone else is looking at the names of people seated on their pew, less than 5 percent of worshippers fail to write their names, addresses, and telephone numbers—providing the

procedure is conducted in *exactly* the way described above. Disregard or revise some of the above-stated instructional elements and results decrease.

Churches that use a different worship leader each week find it almost impossible to get all of those worship leaders to give the same introductory words prior to the Ritual of Friendship each Sunday morning. Some worship leaders think it is not important to say the same words each week. Others think the words are boring. Holders of either viewpoint forget that the people who most need to hear these words are the first-time worshippers, and that all of *them* are hearing the words for the first time. Therefore, in most churches, the pastor should make the Ritual of Friendship announcement *every week*.

What should you print on the form? Church supply companies print pads of this sort but too many companies label them with institutional words such as "Attendance Registration." Many forms include the date at the top and provide blanks to fill in name, address, and telephone number. Blanks to check often include "member of this church," "attend here regularly," "wish to join this church," "desire a call," "local visitor," "out-of-town visitor," and "if a visitor, please list your church and its address." Study several forms that other churches use. Decide what is missing from or seems unnecessary on your present pad. If you cannot locate a commercial source that has what you want, print your own. Ask for a minimum amount of information. Expect to revise your form through experience, so print a small number of pads the first time.

More than 300 Average Worship Attendance. Many churches of this size prefer to use cards rather than Ritual of Friendship pads. With such a large number of worshippers, cards are easier to process. Then, too, people can write prayer requests on cards and/or write notes to particular staff persons and/or make reservations for attending church dinners. Some churches use a card that is white on one side and says, "Members of This Church." The other side of the card is blue and says, "Worship Guests." Experts disagree on the appropriateness of this method. Some say it is psychologically negative because it labels people. Other experts, including pastors who use it, see it as motivational. Every Sunday it reminds newcomers that they have not yet made a membership decisions.

No-No's.

1. Do not use *both* a visitor card and a Ritual of Friendship pad, as that works less well than one of the above procedures. Nor should you ask people to stand and introduce themselves. A full 70 percent of new attendees feel negative about doing that. Research indicates that people are more afraid of speaking in public than of death.

2. Do not assume that a Guest Book in the entryway equals a correctly administered Ritual of Friendship pad or card system. Those Guest Books only work if the same one or two people arrive fifteen minutes early every week, have done this for years, know the names and faces of everyone who regularly attends, and aggressively insist that all newcomers "sign our Guest Book." Few churches can meet those four requirements.

Fewer than Seventy Average Worship Attendance. In this size congregation, pads and cards work less well than a more personal approach. In this situation, select two extroverted members who attend regularly, and ask them to work as a team.

Say to those two people, "Be certain that one of you, either before or after worship, visits with and gets the names and addresses of every first-time worship visitor. After you talk with them briefly, ask, 'May I have you name and address? We'd like to mail you some material about our church. What is your telephone number?'"

"Then, after the worship service, please hand me the information you obtain."

VI. Three Contacts within Six Days after Their First Visit

Perfect a system for making three kinds of contacts by three different people within the first six days. The objective of these three contacts: *to communicate friendliness*.

Make the first contact a front-door visit within thirty-six hours. To accomplish this, ask a layperson or laypersons to make a front door visit that says, “We appreciate having you in worship!” and hands them (a) printed information regarding your congregation’s ministries and (b) some cookies or a coffee cup with your church’s logo. The objective is *not* to go inside, but if the people called on *insist* that your callers come inside, don’t stay more than fifteen minutes!

The pastor makes the second contact via a letter or handwritten note on a postcard. See the model for such a letter below.

The third contact is a telephone call the following Saturday from a different layperson than the one who made the front door call earlier in the week.

These three procedures increase the percentage of first-time visitors who return a second time, become regular worshippers, and eventually become members of your church from the national average of 10 percent to at least 20 percent.

Within Thirty-Six Hours. To accomplish the first contact in congregations averaging fewer than 300 to 400 in worship, form a “Visit-the-Visitors Ministry Team” of four to twelve people—probably two to six couples. (See exceptions to the use of the following procedure at the end of this section.) Gear the size of your team to (a) the size of your church and (b) the average number of first-time worship visitors per month. The most effective and enduring “Visit-the-Visitors Ministry Teams” consist of people different from those that serve on the evangelism committee. If possible, include a few age-twenty-five-to-forty-four young adults on the team. *Warning:* Do not rotate the active church members alphabetically each week or month. That system does not work. *Warning:* Do not issue a general invitation for volunteers to attend weekly or monthly calling nights. That never works!

For example, in a church that averages 150 people in worship, the Visit-the-Visitors Ministry Team might total six members. Every Sunday these six people (usually three couples) huddle for five minutes at the end of the worship service with the person who picks up and records the worship attendance sheets each week. That individual knows all of the names and can identify first-time visitors, a skill crucial to the team’s effectiveness.

The team gathers in the church kitchen, or somewhere out of the line of traffic, where it makes an uninterrupted quick decision: each week that the church has one or more *first-time* worship visitors, the team decides which couple or individual will visit a visitor’s home no later than Monday evening.

The individuals or couples usually visit homes geographically near them. They then report their visit on a card that they return next Sunday morning when their team huddles for five minutes. *The team avoids visiting homes immediately after worship.* At that time, many people are either eating lunch in their homes or eating lunch at a restaurant or cafeteria. Between 4:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. on Sunday or between 7:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. on Monday works better.

The individual or couple accomplishes five things on the home visit:

- “It was great to have you visit our church!” (This takes 5 percent of the visiting time).
- Get acquainted (which takes 70 percent of the visiting time).
- Answer any questions the worship guests raise about the church (which takes 20 percent of the visit’s time).
- “We want to invite you to come back next week!” (which takes 3 percent of the visiting time).
- Leave them a color, two-fold or three-fold brochure describing your church (which takes 2 percent of the visiting time).

What if the worship visitors are not at home? Do not ask your callers to return to the home later in the week and try again. That burns them out and destroys your team's effectiveness within two months. Instead, teach team members to leave a brochure in the door; put a yellow sticky note on the brochure that says, "Mr. and Mrs. Smith, it was great to have you folks in church this morning. Sorry we missed you this evening. We hope you will come back next week." Sign your name on the yellow sticky note. For a personal touch, add your telephone number. (Some worship visitors will telephone to say that they appreciated you coming.)

That week, add those first-time worship visitors to your church newsletter list. Leave them on the list until you learn that they have become regular attendees at another church. Many church shoppers return after several months, after checking out several other congregations. In some cases, they become "mental members" of your church due to repeated contact through your church's newsletter.

Churches in rural areas face special challenges regarding addresses. In some counties of the United States, the local Farm Bureau can tell you how to obtain a *Plat Book* that contains an alphabetical listing of every rural family in your township, along with mailing addresses, telephone numbers, and locations.

Congregations of every type report positive results from these home visits within thirty-six hours. The percentage of first-time visitors who return a second time varies, depending primarily on the degree to which all seven factors on the magnetic menu in Section II above are present. Regardless of those variables, the timing of these home visits exerts a powerful influence on worship visitor behavior.

- To get the highest return-to-worship-next-week rate, visit homes within thirty-six hours (by Monday evening).
- Generally speaking, waiting seventy-two hours to make the home visit cuts by one-fourth the percent of visitors who return the following Sunday.
- Waiting more than seven days cuts the return percentage to a micro level.
- Substituting a telephone call for a home visit is usually one-fourth as effective as a home visit.
- Using a letter instead of a home visit usually gets one-tenth the return rate of a home visit *and* a letter from the pastor.

Generally speaking, the pastor should NOT make this first visit to the home because this reduces the congregational friendliness impact. Visitors *expect* the pastor to be friendly; they know that friendliness does not always mean the church is friendly. They are looking for a friendly church, not just a friendly pastor.

An exception to that rule: new church starts, when the pastor is just beginning to gather a congregation. In these instances people are joining the pastor and his or her philosophy; thus, such a contact is more influential than in long-established churches. See the excellent, detailed instructions for an effective pastor-contact procedure on pages 44-47 of Adam Hamilton's *Leading Beyond the Walls* (Nashville: Abingdon Press).

How do first-time worship guests feel about home visits within thirty-six hours? One researcher reported the following data: 6 percent of people did not find them helpful, while 28 percent found them somewhat helpful, and 66 percent found them extremely helpful.

Exceptions: (a) In extremely large churches and (b) in 5 percent to 10 percent of metropolitan neighborhoods, specialized forms of telephone contact effectively substitute for home visits. The pastor or an associate pastor makes these telephone calls on Sunday afternoon and evening or the following Saturday. Do not, however, assume that your church falls into this category until you

have tested home visits for a year. The majority of lay leadership prefers to believe that a telephone call works just as well as a home visit. To test for what works best in your community, telephone twenty, first-time worship visitors. Make home visits to another twenty worship visitors during that same time period. One year later, determine what percentage of each group are now either (a) regular attendees or (b) church members.

To build your Visit-the-Visitors Ministry Team, do not ask for volunteers. Instead, select team members on the basis of four criteria: (1) ability to relate socially, (2) positive personal appearance, (3) adequate knowledge of the congregation and its programs, and (4) positive psychological outlook and style (in contrast with the “dill-pickle personality” some church members exhibit). After selecting these candidates, make an appointment to sit down with them, individually, and explain the goals of this team and its value for your congregation. Tell them that the governing board (or a committee) carefully selected them because they fit the four criteria noted above. Promise to train them before they make their first visits. Deliver on that promise with material in Section VI below titled “Training Your First-Time Worship Visitor Team.”

Congregations that (a) average more than 300 to 400 in worship attendance or (b) have unusually high numbers of visitors, often develop four teams consisting of eight to twelve people per team. The four teams meet in rotation, one Monday night per month, to visit the homes of first-time worship guests.

Pick team coordinators, each of whom will lead a team of not more than fourteen nor less than eight persons. Ask these team coordinators to serve for one year. Pick dependable, outgoing individuals who pay attention to details. Meet with the team coordinators and church staff as a group. Review the membership list, looking for couples and individuals the group feels would make good callers. (In extremely large churches, a meeting of teachers or key leaders of all adult Sunday school classes often locates good callers.) If properly approached, 10 percent of the active members in a typical congregation say yes to serving on teams that make these kinds of home visits.

After the team coordinators have a list of prospective team members, they visit their homes to secure their commitment. During those recruiting visits, team coordinators explain the rotational team system of one week per month and stress these ideas:

- “We know you may feel like you don’t know how to make these visits. Most people don’t know how, but the team coordinators feel that you are the kind of person who can do an excellent job of representing our church.”
- “We have set up a one-evening training session to acquaint members of the calling teams with how to make these brief, friendly visits.”
- “If you attend this training session and decide that you do not wish to serve, we’ll understand.”
- “But we are certain that you will feel very comfortable in making this kind of call.”

Schedule the one-hour training at least two weeks after the recruitment week. This gives people time to work it into their busy lives. Make it a dinner meeting. Send out RSVP letters. Have team coordinators remind their team members with a telephone call. Use name cards at each plate. Seat each team together. This allows them to get acquainted and begin developing a team spirit. Following the meal, hand each person a copy of the instructions in Section V: “Training Your First-Time Worship Visitor Team.” Having a sheet in front of them provides a much higher quality educational experience.

At the end of the training session, each team coordinator reconfirms the commitment of each individual or couple to serve on the team. Very few decline. Work out the details of how often and what dates the team will meet. In most churches teams meet monthly, on Monday evenings. In extremely large churches with more teams, each team may meet every seventh Monday. In those cases, print and distribute at the training session a schedule for the entire year.

Ask team members to commit for one year “to help get this system launched.” After that, reorganize. Some callers will wish to continue. Others will not. Invite some new people to serve for one year. Repeat the training process.

On their scheduled calling nights, team members meet at the church to receive assignment cards from their team coordinators. Give each couple or pair of individuals three to five cards, in case some of the people are not at home. After making their visits, team members return to the church at 8:30 p.m. to turn in the Record Cards and share experiences. Insist that everyone turn in all cards when they return to the church. Otherwise, some of the cards get lost.

Couple-calling works best, but this rule has exceptions. In visits to widows and singles, for example, nothing makes a more natural call than a pair of singles or widows. In a southern retirement community, one team is twelve retired persons. They meet every Monday for lunch at a local cafeteria and visit two-by-two during the afternoon. Since they are calling almost entirely on retired people, this is good timing.

Many large churches add a lat Sunday afternoon telephone call to the mix described above. The same person makes all of the telephone calls every week, thus gaining skill in this ministry specialty. The telephone caller begins with something like the following: “I’m Joan Smith from Community Church. I just wanted to say hello and tell you we were really glad to have you worshipping with us today.” Listen carefully to the person’s response.

The next statement takes one of three or four different forms, depending on what the telephone caller knows about the person who visited the church:

- “I noticed by your address that you live on Clover Street. That’s a new subdivision, isn’t it?” Wait for their response.
- “I understand that you are new in the community.”
- “You have two children?”

The telephone caller does not ask specific questions about the worship visitor’s church relationship or denominational background. However, the visitor inevitably provides that information voluntarily, as a result of the conversational pattern outlined above. The telephone caller writes down this information as it comes up in the conversation.

The telephone caller’s closing statement varies according to the conversational pattern. Some callers invite visitors to coffee and donuts before worship in the fellowship hall next Sunday. Other telephone callers say, “Let me give you my name and phone number. If you have any questions about the church, give me a call.”

The telephone caller in a large church usually transmits the information he or she obtained to the associate pastor on Sunday evening or early Monday morning. He or she then provides it on the Record Cards for the Monday night rotation by one of the Visit-the-Visitors Ministry Teams.

Monday's Mail: For pastors who take Monday as their day off, a Tuesday mailing works, but send the letter no later than Tuesday. Example:

Dear Greg and Lisa:

Memphis is a big place. There are thousands of people around us, and sometimes we can feel "lost in the crowd."

But in our church there are people just waiting to be your friend. We don't force ourselves on people, but we like to be friendly, share our lives with others, and invite people to be a part of the Faith Community family. We are pleased that newcomers usually feel a "warm family atmosphere" at Faith Community.

I certainly hope that was your experience.

Yours in Christ,
Pastor's Name

The Following Saturday: Ask one person, who thereby develops his/her skill, to telephone all first-time worship visitors the following Saturday. The telephone caller expresses appreciation for the worship visitor's attendance last Sunday, gets acquainted, and somewhere in the conversation says, "If you feel led to come and worship with us again, we'd love to have you."

Statistical evidence indicates that those three methods—a home-visit within thirty-six hours, a Monday letter from the pastor, and a Saturday telephone call from a layperson—often double or triple the number of new members a congregation receives. One pastor said, "We set this method in motion last January. I've been here four years and it is the only thing we changed last year. We had forty-four additions for the year. In previous years, we never had more than eighteen."

While church members may fear that home visits might come across as pushy, comments from the people whose homes they visit do not support that view. On the contrary, most "visitees" interpret calling as caring. In a world where many people feel alone in a crowd, that is a positive feeling. Worship visitors respond to churches that care enough to send the very best—not just a piece of paper but a person who took time out of a busy life to say by this contact, "We care about you."

VII. Repeated Contacts with Repeat Visitors

Encouraging people to attend the first time is essential. That happens primarily through inviting.

Why do first-time visitors return a second time? The seven crucial factors listed in Section II above are essential. Friendliness, expressed in three contacts within the first six days, often doubles the number of people who return a second time.

What about people who attend two times or more? Friendliness is still crucial. Church leaders increase or decrease the chance of worship visitors becoming regular attendees by inviting newcomers to participate in their congregation's groups and ministries. The system outlined in Section X below titled "Training Your Repeat-Visitor Hospitality Team" details the best way to do that.

In addition to those repetitive lay contacts, some pastors find valuable a telephone contact with people who visited the church for two or three consecutive Sundays. Pages 48-51 of Adam Hamilton's excellent book, *Leading Beyond the Walls* (Nashville: Abingdon Press) details an excellent procedure he used to telephone worship visitors on Monday evening who had, the weekend before, attended for the third time. His methods for visiting in those homes, once he had secured their permission to do so via telephone, are extraordinarily productive.

Other ways for the pastor and staff to accomplish repetitive contacts with newcomers and provide them information about participation opportunities and church events include brief, weekly, E-mail communications.

The final step, formal church membership, usually happens several months or more than a year later. Only approximately 62 percent of newcomers who eventually join your congregation do so within their first twelve months of attendance. A few decades ago, the incorporation process looked like this: people visited, joined within twelve weeks, and were then assimilated into active-member roles. These days, most people switch that pattern. They visit, assimilate, and join much later. If visitor involvement in groups and ministries does not occur, many of them move on. Like a ship sailing toward the harbor that sees no reason to dock, they return to sea.

After several months of participation in a group or ministry, the number-one reason people give for not accepting Christ as Lord and Savior and/or not joining a church is “nobody ever asked me.” Examples of how to do that:

- In some churches a pastor or a trained layperson makes decision visits to homes at the appropriate time.
- Many large churches schedule a two- to four-session Sunday morning “Information Class” every month, designed to acquaint potential members with the congregation and its ministries and invite them to become members.
- See methods for personal contacts and for organizing a one-session “Coffee with the Pastor” on pages 55-62 of Adam Hamilton’s book, *Leading Beyond the Walls* (Nashville: Abingdon Press). This means of inviting people to consider accepting Christ and placing their membership has worked incredibly well at Church of the Resurrection, a very large, fast-growing United Methodist congregation.

VIII. A Six-Layer Organizational Structure

Do your church’s leaders want a high percentage of first-time worship visitors to return and eventually become fully-committed disciples of Jesus Christ, actively serving God through your church? You can achieve that goal with a six-layer organizational structure:

1. A church governing body theologically committed to The Great Commission—“go, make disciples”—not just to the Great Commandment—love God and neighbor.
2. An evangelism committee that, over time, perfects methods that work in your church and community, in contrast to committees that *study* and *discuss* effective methods.
3. A Visit-the-Visitors Ministry Team of laypersons who visit the homes of all first-time worship visitors within thirty-six hours (working as a ministry team under the evangelism committee).
4. A Friendliness Team that makes repeated contacts with repeat worship visitors over several months (working as a *different* task force under the evangelism committee).
5. A media team (working as a task force under the evangelism committee) to increase the number of first-time worship visitors. For detailed media team suggestions, see *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 8, How to Attract First-Time Worship Visitors*. Download free at the www.TheParishPaper.com Web site.
6. A pastor and church staff who all work in *highly-visible ways* with all aspects of their church’s evangelistic reach-out system.

Trains that deliver significant amounts of freight run on tracks that get them to the appropriate destination. Leaders of churches that want to achieve results in the Great Commission role of working with God to spiritually transform human life run on effective organization tracks. This six-layer structure is such a track.

IX. Training Your First-Time Worship Visitor Team

As you lead this training session, keep in mind four objectives you are there to accomplish.

1. *Change attitudes*: from apathy to energy, from negative to positive, from myths about how evangelism happens to truth about what produces evangelization results.
2. *Teach methods*: in ways simple to understand, that look easy to do, help visitor-team members gain the conviction, “We can do this!”
3. *Answer questions*: in ways that avoid talking down to visitor-team members, encourage them to correct habits that prevent evangelistic effectiveness.
4. *Increase motivation*: to give the best of themselves to the process of encouraging people to make or strengthen their spiritual connection with Jesus Christ.

In preparation for this training session, photocopy the following instructions and distribute a copy to each person. Ad lib your way through it, adding your own comments and personalizing it for your church in whatever ways make sense to you.

Why Make Home Visits?

Christians encourage first-time worship visitors to return for at least four reasons:

1. People have deep spiritual needs that a personal relationship with Christ can satisfy.
2. People who connect with Christ through a congregation find their lives enriched with meaning, purpose, and positive relationships.
3. The Bible tells Christians that evangelism is one of their central tasks. Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19). The Apostle Paul writes, “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20).
4. Brief home visits by laypersons within thirty-six hours after people attend worship the first time often double a congregation’s annual new-member addition rate.

An Episcopal congregation, for example, added forty-nine new members by using these methods—following several years in which total additions averaged thirteen. When asked what made the difference, the pastor said, “One thing. We began making immediate home visits to first-time worship visitors.”

How to Make a Home Visit

What kind of team works best for this kind of visit? Effective churches use different combinations: individuals, couples, two men calling together, or two women calling together. In most instances, couple-calling works best because it feels more natural and is easier to organize.

Thousands of people have experienced positive results with the following steps:

1. **Get out of the car.**
2. **Go to the door.** Some people indicate that this is the hardest part.
3. **Knock or ring bell, whichever seems most appropriate.** If you can handle this decision, with a little training and experience you can make effective visits of this type.
4. **Identify the person who comes to the door.** Saying, “Mr. Smith?” or “Ms. Smith?” tells you whether you are at the right house.

5. Introduce yourself. “We’re calling for Community Church. It was really great to have you in worship this morning. Jane and I wanted to stop by for a minute to get acquainted. I hope we haven’t come at an inappropriate time.” Most people warmly invite you in. Church people who are convinced that worship visitors will not receive them well have never done this kind of visiting.

Handle the few exceptions pleasantly.

Occasionally, Mr. Smith says, “We were just on our way out to our granddaughter’s birthday party.”

Respond with, “We understand. We really appreciate you folks worshipping with us. We want to invite you to come back next week. We’ll catch you another time.” Hand Mr. Smith a church brochure. Say, “This will tell you something about our church,” and be on your way.

6. Enter the home with clear goals in mind. The following outline describes an effective visit:

- “It was great to have you in our worship service” (this takes about 2 percent of your visiting time).
- Get acquainted (takes 75 percent of the time).
- Answer any questions they raise about the church (often, about 20 percent of the clock time).
- “We want to invite you to come back next week” (2 percent of your time).
- Leave them a brochure describing the church (1 percent of the visit’s time).

This kind of conversation accomplishes two purposes: You find out how your church can help meet their spiritual needs. The people on whom you call are reminded of spiritual needs to which they should give attention.

Remember that your presence is more influential than the specific content of your call. Because you cared enough to come, people give their attention to spiritual issues in a stronger way than they would have otherwise. Thus, the *contact* of your conversation is more powerful than its *content*.

7. After leaving the home, note on the Record Card in your car any information you think will be helpful to future callers. If, for example, they send you signals indicating that they are not possibilities for continued contact, indicate that on the card. Or if they are interested in a specific church program, write that on the card.

General Principles for Effective Calling

Just as it does in all social situations, common sense dictates most of what you say or refrain from saying. The following guidelines apply to a variety of situations and circumstances. Following them guards against classic mistakes.

1. Don’t overwhelm people with theological talk. If they ask theological questions that you cannot answer, tell them that you are not sure you can adequately answer that, but you know the pastor can. Suggest that they may want to visit with him or her about it. *You don’t have to know the answers to everything!*

2. Don’t stay very long. Fifteen minutes is plenty. Leave while they are asking you to stay longer. People usually have a planned use for their time during the next two hours. Don’t steal it from them. (Some experts say that if you stay more than thirty minutes on the first visit, you shouldn’t go at all.)

3. Don't try to visit if they have company. Say something like this: "We don't want to interfere with your evening. We'll catch you another time."

4. Don't try to high-pressure them into joining your church. Just urge them to attend next Sunday. This is not a decision call. The pastor or someone trained in that procedure makes that call at a later date, after they have begun attending regularly.

5. On the other hand, after the initial pleasantries, keep the conversation as church-centered as possible. Don't get totally sidetracked on the snowstorm, the windstorm, or the ball game.

6. Don't preach. You have employed someone to do that at a stated hour on Sunday morning. Few people respond well to living-room altar calls, so stay away from sermonizing.

7. Don't try to out-talk the TV set. Sometimes, you can deal with that by talking low so they can't hear you very well. Finally, in self-defense, they'll turn it off. In a few cases, you may want to say, "We are probably interrupting one of your favorite television programs."

8. Generally speaking, do not telephone ahead to make appointments. Phoning first often blocks you from productive conversations with people who would have eventually joined your church. (People who have never made this type of home visit tend to think that they should telephone ahead. By contrast, most experienced visitors advise not to telephone ahead.) If your group cannot agree on this issue, make ten of these visits and *don't* phone ahead. Make ten other visits and *do* phone ahead. When you complete those twenty visits, you know exactly what to do in your particular community.

9. Treat people like anyone you meet for the first time. We all know how to meet people. We do it almost every day.

10. Relax and be yourself. If you relax, they will.

11. Remember that God reinforces the good you are trying to do. You are never alone on reach-out calls. The Holy Spirit works in people's lives in ways about which you have no way of knowing.

12. Remember that the most powerful witness is taking the time to make this visit. Your presence says very clearly: We care about you. We care enough to send the very best, which is not just a card or letter but real people.

Worship visitors interpret this kind of calling as caring. In an impersonal world, that's significant, and that is why people respond positively to visits in their homes.

Conclusion

The presenter can use the following as an inspirational close for the first-time worship visitor training session.

An insurance agent learned that he would receive his company's award for having sold more life insurance than anyone else in the state. The big problem: he had to make a speech at the time he accepted the award. In the speech, he was supposed to tell the other insurance agents how he had become so effective. Joe had a phobia about public speaking, but he had no choice. He must rise to the occasion.

Joe wrote and rewrote the speech. Finally, he got it just right. He typed it up on cards and taped the cards to his shaving mirror. Every morning while he shaved, he memorized that speech. Finally, Joe had it printed into the grooves of his brain cells. He was ready.

The great evening came. The huge auditorium was filled with insurance salespeople from all over the country. Pressing a plaque into Joe's hand, the president of the company patted him on the back and said, "Now, Joe, tell us, how did you do it?"

Joe turned to this great sea of eyes waiting expectantly for him to say something profound. He could not think of the first line. Groping for it, he said, "Ah, uh, uh." He could not remember the first line, but he finally thought of a line from down in the middle. (If you are in this kind of situation, you are willing to start anywhere.) So he said, "Ah, uh—see the people"

But Joe was so frightened that he couldn't remember what came after that. So he started again, "Ah, uh—see the people, ah, uh. *See the people!*" And he sat down.

Most of the people in that auditorium thought Joe said exactly what he intended to say. They heard it as a dramatic speech and gave him a standing ovation.

We must not equate selling insurance with influencing people to connect spiritually with Jesus Christ. These two endeavors have different goals, and they have different results. In visiting worship visitors, we plant seeds that help people move toward the most important decision they will ever make: who is going to be the Lord of my life?

Do you want to help people move in that direction through the influence of your church? If so, *see the people!*

X. Training Your Repeat-Visitor Friendliness Team

Every church needs a system for follow-up contacts with people who visit worship the second and subsequent times. One excellent model is a Friendliness Ministry Team. A few evangelism committee members may also serve on the Friendliness Team, but the two groups should not be identical.

Nor should these Friendliness Ministry Team members try to secure commitments for joining the church by transfer of membership or initial faith commitment. A pastor or trained layperson does that at a later time. The Friendliness Team's objective is building positive relationships with people who have shown interest in their church. Wherever possible, team members attempt to incorporate those newcomers into one or more of the congregation's groups and ministries.

To launch the procedure, the pastor and governing board chairperson select/recruit two persons from each ongoing adult group, such as adult Sunday school classes, choir, women's organization, etc., inviting them serve on the Friendliness Ministry Team for one year. If possible, include several couples and some singles from every adult age range.

The Friendliness Team Meets Monthly: The group usually meets around tables. Following the opening prayer, Friendliness Team members take a few moments to share their concerns for one another and the congregation's members. This is especially important in small and midsize congregations.

Next (beginning with the second monthly meeting), the team members report to the entire group the contacts they made during the past month.

Then the pastor distributes a list of all the church's not-yet-members. (The evangelism chairperson, the pastor, or an associate pastor compiles and updates the list each month.) Generally speaking, these not-yet-members have visited worship at least twice. The list indicates known facts such as address, telephone numbers, previous denominational background, etc. The pastor reviews the list orally, noting names that are new since last month and asking for additional information from team members who may know some of these not-yet-members.

Each Friendliness Team member volunteers to contact several of the not-yet-members via a home visit, lunch, a telephone call, or a written note, whatever the team member feels is most natural, within the next thirty days. Wherever possible, team members make contacts over natural relationship networks. For example, Friendliness Team members living in the same neighborhood may have natural relationship bridges already in place. A team member who teaches at the same school as someone on the list has a natural relationship bridge. Someone who works in the same office building, the same profession, or works in close proximity to a not-yet-member may have natural contact possibilities.

Generally speaking, each team member takes a different list of names to contact each month.

The objective: three team members make friendly contacts over a period of several months. This increases the newcomer's sense of belonging and creates a greater opportunity for genuine friendship development. Relationships tend to "click" between some people and not between others. A rotational procedure increases the possibility of this happening with at least one of the three team members.

Some Friendliness Teams conclude with a fifteen-minute study/discussion of an evangelism idea or article that provides training or inspiration.

Friendliness-Team Benefits: This team is much more than a visitation strategy. The team helps individuals, church groups, and entire congregations to develop more extroverted personalities in several ways:

- The team motivates many worship guests to become involved in church groups and ministries weeks and months before they become church members.
- The team increases friendliness on Sunday morning. Team members become much more friendly and outgoing as they look for and greet people they have contacted.
- The team plants a "resident conscience" in each Sunday school class and church group. The more years a church uses the system, the greater the number of members in every class or group who have served on the church's Friendliness Team. Thus, every class and group becomes increasingly likely to think and behave in an extroverted manner toward visitors.
- The team broadens the network of new people the active church members know. Thus, when they need to nominate people for church leadership positions, older members are more likely to broaden the leadership circle. This reverses the natural tendency of most congregations to keep the core leadership-group small.
- The team produces a tremendous "in-service training program." Over a five-year period, for example, many members of the congregation gain experience in reaching out to newcomers. Team members serve for one year and can re-enlist if they wish. If they prefer not to serve the next year, the pastor or associate pastor or governing board chairperson recruits someone else from that class or group.
- The team models behavior for members of all the church groups and ministries, making its corporate personality more outgoing. By their behavior, team members teach the importance of balancing the congregation's efforts to nurture people spiritually and emotionally with its mandate to reach out and involve newcomers.

In summary, the Friendliness Team involves church members in building relationship bridges across which newcomers move to involvement, authentic discipleship, and eventual church membership. One pastor put it this way: "The Friendliness Team helped our members move from being *comfortable* with unchurched people to being *connected* with unchurched people—in ways that make a difference in both of their lives."

XI. Resisting Growth-Resistance

Many pastors whose churches grow rapidly in membership know this bittersweet experience: success laced with discontent. Many long-term members who say they believe in the Great Commission from Jesus to “go, make disciples” mutter various kinds of complaints when it starts happening in their church.

Why? What causes this backlash from dream achievement? Several factors, among which the following five are especially prominent:

Change Shock: Progress seldom happens by keeping things the same. Yet, without realizing it, most people who say they want their church to grow actually want progress without change. One pastor put it this way: “Growth usually requires an alteration in procedures and ministry style. This change can feel threatening. Fast success is a far greater shock to long-term leaders than slow failure. Success can produce an anxiety reaction of amazing intensity.”

Group Anxiety: Common phrases heard in the non-growing church: “We love each other so much. We are just like a family.” The in-group, which has become as tight as a mussel shell, neither needs nor desires new personalities in its cloister of mutuality. When the tightly-closed shell cracks open and new life flows in, people feel uneasy. A complaint begins to echo among the longtime members: “I don’t know anyone anymore! There are so many new people in the church.” The more rapid the membership growth, the more often the pastor hears that plaintive cry.

Group Fellowship Re-Formation: When the size of any social group (church or other organization) increases 25 percent, the necessary fellowship re-formation increases anxiety levels in the older group members. For some of these people, anxiety elevates to the level of frustration. For a few, frustration deteriorates into irritation. Then, anger spills out, usually directed toward minor matters that seem puzzling and irrational to the pastor and the newer members.

Leader Displacement: When new people come into the church, some of them end up in leadership roles. The result: more change, fostered by unknown newcomers. The old guard had not expected this. People in shrinking churches that yearn for their congregation to grow often unconsciously mean, “We want the army to get bigger, but we want the officer corps to stay the same size and include the same people.”

The same leaders who eagerly said, “We need more help” now seem to be adding, “to do things our way.” These early settlers feel that they paid the price for building the base camp. Thus, they surely deserve more of a say in how to do things here. As older leaders are replaced and older ideas displaced, jealousy and anger often appear at the hinge points. At this stage, circumstances are ripe for an old guard versus new guard conflict.

Transition Stress: Many pastors report approximately eighteen months of unpleasant readjustment each time the church size changes 25 percent or more. During this period the church revises some of its organizational structure, members adjust to the new organizational procedures required by its new size, and everyone eventually arrives at a plateau of relative tranquility. Each time the church grows again, another transition period ensues. Fortunately, subsequent growth spurts are not quite as tough to handle as the first one. After that, several leaders are familiar with the experience. They remember surviving earlier growth-related changes.

What to Do? Interviews with numerous pastors whose churches experienced rapid membership growth reveal fifteen guidelines for leaders:

1. Through expository preaching, lift up the theological, biblical call of God to evangelistic growth—while not neglecting God’s call to other types of ministry.
2. Encourage members to move over and make room for new people—not as a way to combat resistance to growth but because the biblical nature of the church involves “welcoming the stranger in our midst.”
3. Working through the nominating committee, focus on getting forward-thinking people on the governing board and into key leadership roles.
4. Privately coach and encourage the key leaders to support growth and change.
5. Provide sufficient groups and ministries to meet the needs of both the old guard and newcomer members. Recognize that programming-diversity must grow to fit the congregation’s changing size. The larger the church, the more diverse are its needs.
6. Staff for growth. Hire part-time specialists that focus on various groups and ministries. Examples include ministries such as children/youth choirs, youth ministry, children’s ministry, college ministry, etc. Staffing that develops programs to meet members’ needs helps them feel more comfortable with newcomer growth.
7. Foster fellowship and communication across the old/new lines in every possible manner. This may include Bible study, prayer groups, retreats, prayer partners, and fellowship events. Work with existing groups to include new people in the Sunday school classes, the choir, etc.
8. Attempt to retain the old guard as confidants, giving them and the early leaders as much credit as possible. This may involve honoring and recognizing them as new leadership emerges. Many of the longtime members feel that “once we were somebody and now we are not.” Once, everything and everyone depended on them. Now, nothing and no one seems to need them. Dream up various forms of honorific recognitions, such as forty-year gold pins, etc.
9. Avoid riding a hobbyhorse in ministry. Instead of appearing to focus only one aspect of Christian service, advocate a variety of ministries.
10. Change by addition, not subtraction. Rather than deleting older groups and ministries, start something small and non-threatening for new members and/or for long-term members who want a different type of group, ministry, or approach.
11. Avoid public and private remarks that draw attention to the membership growth. This tends to increase anxiety among older members. Rather, publicize the positive groups and ministries that meet new needs.
12. Recognize that dealing with resistance to change/growth patterns is a normal part of every leader’s role. The only way a leader can remove all resistance to change is to stop changing things. If he or she takes that road, the same people who complain about change will say, “Our church seems to be drifting along toward nowhere. What can we do to make it grow?”
13. Thoroughly immerse the core leader group in the principles and challenges of growth, so that resistance to change does not come as a total surprise.
14. Decide to be patient. Avoid falling into an argumentative reaction to the growth resistance that people express. “Smile and nod” is the best response to many remarks.
15. Remember that 5 percent of church folks are by nature dissatisfied. They grew up in church traditions or in family structures whose atmosphere involved continuous complaining. For them, fixing things never fixes things. They are not happy unless they are unhappy. Death, taxes, and that irritable 5 percent come with the territory in church leadership.

After Moses rescued the Jews from slavery in Egypt, they experienced a significant “stress transition” on their way to the Promised Land. In the midst of that change, “the people murmured against Moses” (Exodus 17:3, KJV).

Peter and the apostles (the old guard) launched the newly minted Church of Jesus Christ. More than twenty years later, the Apostle Paul (the new guard) suggested that their church should be for everyone in the world, not just for the Jews (the old guard). This produced dramatic growth. However, when Paul first suggested that positive change (see minutes of the Jerusalem Council in the Book of Acts), Peter and the apostles staunchly opposed it.

How can a leader handle the pain that comes from resistance to the results of his or her effective leadership?

- Recognize that leaders are by definition people who change things. Leaders who make no changes are not true leaders: their groups stay in the same location, getting the same results.
- Recognize that leaders who make no changes do not get resistance but a comfortable malaise that eventually deteriorates into chronic complaining because “nothing is happening in our church.”
- Recognize that resurrecting a corpse is far more fun than burying one.

Pastors in churches that resist growth should daily give joyful thanks to God. They get the opportunity to deal with the frustration that comes from growth instead of the depression that results from membership decline.

XII. The Bottom Line

God’s evangelism power flows through three spiritual channels:

1. Proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ that focuses on and expects Great-Commission results.
2. Practice of Great-Commission methods whose motive is not just to grow a church’s membership but to grow human beings spiritually in their relationship with God.
3. Prayer for Great-Commission results by church members who believe that encouraging people to make a life-changing connection with Jesus Christ is a major part of their congregation’s mission.

Does your church want to transform more first-time worship visitors into regular attendees and members? Which of those three spiritual channels should your congregation add to its ministry mix?