

Bonus Article

Creating a "Whole Church" Hospitable Culture



FOREWORD BY J.D. GREAR

PEOPLE ARE THE MISSION

*How Churches Can Welcome **GUESTS***

*Without Compromising the **GOSPEL***

DANNY FRANKS

Creating a “Whole Church”

Hospitable Culture

There is a danger that lurks just beyond a healthy guest services team. You can invite the right volunteers to serve on the team, provide excellent training so they understand the *why* behind the *what*, and implement foolproof ways for your first time guests to know where to go and what to do. But even when you cover all of those steps, one crucial piece can still be missing. One danger still threatens to derail the guest experience.

Is your entire church hospitable, or is that just a job for the “professional team”?

As church leaders, we fight this every weekend. First time guests may consistently comment on the kindness of our volunteers, the ease in finding their way around our campuses, and the generosity of the gift they receive when they arrive. But their overall experience is marred once they get past the gauntlet of volunteers in name tags. Follow up comments like these from guests are not uncommon:

- *No one attempted to connect with me besides asking me to fill out an information card.*
- *I didn't really meet anyone after the service. No one came and spoke to us or recognized that we were new.*
- *Although the welcome team was very friendly, the members seemed standoffish.*
- *Everyone looked nice, but nobody said anything to me at all until I went up to the newcomers tent. I went two weeks without anyone really welcoming me or trying to talk to me.*

In one sense, I get it. It's not always easy to know who is new at church. Unless your congregation is fewer than 100 people...or you've been around for years and lock eyes with everyone every time they walk in the door...or you have one of those freakish memories where you never forget a name or a face (#IHateYou) (#WhatKindOfWitchcraftIsThis), knowing who is a first time guest can be a tricky situation.

At any given time in our churches, there is likely one group of people in the congregation – first time guests – who are sitting in the auditorium, nervously wondering what type of plague they have that would cause everyone around them not to speak to them. Then there is another group of people – regular attendees – who are pretty sure they don't know the people around them, but are scared to introduce themselves because they may have already introduced themselves multiple times before to that very person. What's really fun is when two first time guests sit beside each other, each of them thinking, "This guy is so *rude*! Doesn't he realize I'm new? He should be speaking to me!" It's a vicious cycle, I tell you.

So how do we move guest services past the pros in the name tags? How do we foster an organic culture of hospitality in our entire congregation? I certainly don't have all the answers, and it's something that we are obviously still working through in our church, based on the above comments. But I think there are a few ways that we can reclaim an "others focus."

1. “We” has to start with “me.”

If I want my congregation to get better at welcoming guests, *I* have to get better at welcoming guests. I have to structure my Sunday so that I can “walk slowly through the crowd” (thanks, John Maxwell) and meet people I haven’t yet met. That means I have to come to the morning with my game face on. It means all of my tasks have to be checked off before people show up. And it means that I have to *pray in preparation*...not only that God will give me the grace to be others-focused, but that he’ll lead me to the exact people who need someone to focus on them.

2. We need a “tell.”

/tel/ verb. To reveal information to someone in a nonverbal way. Our tell is our first time guest gift bag. It is an almost foolproof way to know that someone is new. When I see that bag, I can confidently introduce myself, because I *know* they’re within their first few weeks of church attendance. Your tell should be communicated to everyone in leadership and all of your regulars. It needs to be the universal signal that people should talk.

3. We have to embrace the awkwardness.

This weekend I had two back-to-back conversations with people I *knew*, but forgot I knew. One has been at our church for eight years, but we’ve only interacted a couple of times. The other moved away several years ago, and it took me half the conversation to work that out in my brain. The point? *It’s never easy* to have conversations with people you think you might know but aren’t sure you know...or people you know you know but you’re blanking on their name. **Just suck it up.** My favorite line is, “Hey I’m Danny...I’m not sure that we’ve met yet. Remind me of your name again?” And yes, eventually you’re going to really embarrass yourself when you introduce yourself to someone who started attending your small group four weeks back. It’s okay. They’ll survive. You will too.

4. We need to serve as connectors.

In his book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell defines a *connector* as a person who enjoys building relationships between other people. "...while most of us are busily choosing whom we would like to know...they see possibility." One of the greatest gifts you can give a new friend is...*another new friend*. Don't just settle for meeting them, help them to meet someone else. ("Oh, you're in the nursing program at Duke? Have you met Stacey? She's in her final year there.") When we connect people to people, we not only help the guest, but we model to our members what relationship building can look like.

5. We need to build in "forced friendship."

I am admittedly not a fan of the "turn and greet your neighbor" moments that many churches have, for three reasons: (a) Usually people just talk to those they already know, (b) invariably there is someone standing alone while a party is going on around them, and (c) germs. So I'd like to offer an alternative proposal. Instead of forcing friendship in the middle of the service (usually to cover an really bad on-stage transition), why not build it in the moments after the service ends? This Sunday, try this: *"As we leave today, let's acknowledge the elephant in the room. Every week you come in here and sit down beside people you might not know. Or maybe you're afraid you do know them, but you've forgotten their name. Right now, glance to your right, your left, in front of you, and maybe even behind you. Can we all just raise our hands and confess together that we don't have a clue who we're sitting beside? (This will get a laugh.) So let's fix it today: I want to challenge you as soon as the service is over, look at the person beside you and just own it. Tell 'em you don't know them and you'll probably forget their name by next week, but you at least want to try. Got it? Alright, prepare for an awkward conversation in 3...2..."*

6. We need to push people to other environments.

It would be wonderful if all of our weekend gatherings could foster deep relationships, but you know it ain't necessarily so. After a service ends, people need to grab their kids, they need to get to their volunteer position, they need to get to grandma's birthday lunch. And if you're in a church with multiple services, usually the auditorium needs to be reset for the next service. I get it: *those things may not be ideal, but they are reality*. What that means is that we need to redouble our efforts to get people into environments where relationships *are* fostered: small groups. A newcomers gathering. Serving on a volunteer team. Give people the place and space to get to know other people, and they'll carry those relationships back into the larger environment.

Those are six quick suggestions to hard-wire a hospitable culture in your church. Pick one and get started this Sunday. Better yet, sit down with a few volunteers and develop your own list. With a little time and attention, your entire church can create a guest-friendly atmosphere.

A version of this article originally appeared on dfranks.com.