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Why People Visit, Join and Leave a Church

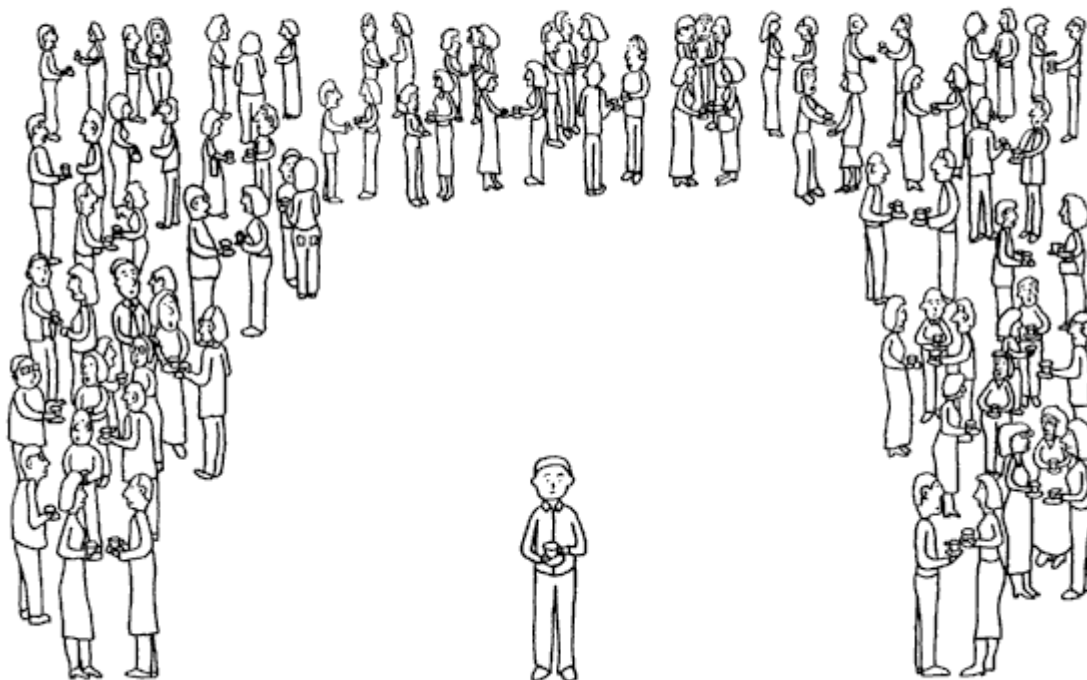
Posted on [November 12, 2012](#) by [Neil](#)

What makes visitors come to your church? Like your church? Decided to join your church? And what makes some members LEAVE a church? There's a lot of anecdotal advice in books and blogs, –including here at my own site! After writing about [my church shopping experiences](#), I was asked to share them at a seminar. Before I did that, I decided to see if there was ACTUAL RESEARCH on the subject of what attracts/repels, what works. And the answer was **YES, there is actual research, and some of it is very enlightening.**

The thing I like about actual research is that it often challenges our cherished misconceptions. When it also confirms our suspicions, research can also help us get past the DECK CHAIR RE-ARRANGING that often passes for outreach ministry in the church. You can read about the 6 churches we shopped here in our new hometown, though this cartoon pretty much sums it up our experience in several of the churches:

AFTER-SERVICE COFFEE

THIS IS THE TIME WHEN NEWCOMERS CAN GET TO KNOW THE CONGREGATION



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Few churches would think of themselves as “unfriendly” as the cartoon lampoons, but in fact, the surveys and church shopping experiences out there, including my own, tell us that many aren’t as good at welcoming visitors as they think. See my notes on “The Front Door” below.

Without posting my entire seminar, here are the highlights, and the actual research I found.

Neil’s Seminar Highlights:

1. NOT ALL VISITORS ARE THE SAME

All visitors are not the same, and therefore *need to be treated differently.*

You have church hoppers, church transplants, church refugees, church neighbors, and church “seekers”. The **transplants** know what the church is about, are looking for a comfortable fit, want to be warmly greeted, and just need plugged in.

The “**refugees**” are carrying baggage from a previous church experience, typically related to a past-minister, and need special attention from your church’s minister to

realize he/she is not going to let them down. The “**neighbors**” are friends of your members or live close, and as you will see, are a great source of visitors when INVITED. **Seekers** are looking for a church and worship experience that moves them. **Church hoppers** come with issues, create issues in the church (or find them), and leave with issues because that is their nature. (These join easily but need identified and converted afterwards!)

What this means is that we need to find out what type of visitor each visitor IS, and respond to their needs. (**Tip from Speed Dating:** *Be a good listener and talk about THEM, not just about your church.* This is almost exactly the opposite of what greeters and church members often did with us. They try to “sell” the church, rather than ask questions and listen.)

2. INVITING WORKS.

Have you heard or read the statistic that **80% of people would respond to a FRIEND’S INVITATION to attend your church?** I thought it sounded too good to be true, ...until I found the actual survey. It was done in 2006 by Lifeway Research, the research division of the Southern Baptist Convention.

But the news is even better than that... Inviting Works!

According to the same research, over 90% of new church members said they attended church the first time because a friend invited them. This number also gives a greater chance of a second time visit (the crucial one) because they already know someone

As I told the seminar participants.... if the scientific survey of 3000 people is to be believed, then it is probably the GREATEST OPPORTUNITY we have for attracting visitors. And yet, upon polling my seminar participants, ALMOST NONE of their churches had any kind of organized effort to “invite friends” other than the occasional encouragement from the pulpit.

Inviting friends has the added benefit of giving the visitor a BUILT-IN “sponsor”, ...someone who can introduce them to others and make them feel at home quicker. This past Sunday my church took in 6 new members and four of them were friends of someone in the congregation. (btw, My new church is a “church plant”, doesn’t have a building yet, and takes in new members on average once a month. They don’t wait to “have enough for a class”. Visitors are not a number.)

One church did have “invite your friends and neighbors Sunday” and had modest success. But that particular church, wanted to take it to the next level. Here’s the next level: **TEACHING people how to identify and speak with their friends and neighbors as potential invitees**, and then **creating an EVENT that might be particularly attractive when they came!** (btw...there’s nothing wrong with going the extra mile for “visitor events”, we all do as much when we throw a party at home, why not the church?)

3. STOP IGNORING YOUR “VISITOR SUNDAYS”

I ran across an interesting statistic about the **TOP 3 VISITOR SUNDAYS**. You know the first two: Christmas and Easter. But did you know that Mother’s Day is the third most attended service across the US? So let me ask you: what is your church **DOING** to invite, attract, collect info about, and connect with these people **afterwards**? (Notice I continue to differentiate between ‘invite’ and ‘attract’. What we do with them when they attend is important, as is what we do **AFTER** they attend.)

Do you agree that making contact **SOON** after a visit is important?? If so, then the following comment will make me **VERY UNPOPULAR** with your church staff. **Why do many churches TAKE THE WEEK OFF FOLLOWING CHRISTMAS AND EASTER when we’ve just had our biggest influx of visitors, especially, people in our neighborhoods?** It’s an example of how we talk the talk, but often don’t walk the walk. Okay, so you’re exhausted and need to let yourself off the Xmas hook, how about the week after Mother’s Day? These are opportunities handed to us on a silver platter.

4. THE THREE DOORS AT YOUR CHURCH: Front, Exit, and Back

The Front Door is the way you invite, attract, and welcome visitors. This is where most churches focus their attention and have a few good ideas. However, door greeters often come across as “Stepford Greeters”. The problem is that Visitors expect your robot greeters, but will **REMEMBER** the “other greeters” who casually approached them. Thus, many greeting ministry’s talk about **“Visitor Spotters”** who look for people they don’t recognize **AFTER** they have come in the door. These visitor spotters need to work the **EXIT** door as well.

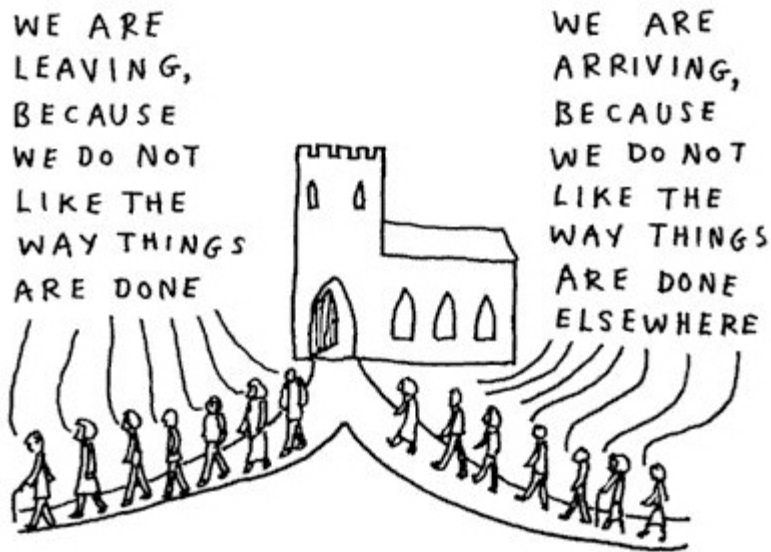
The Exit Door is the path a visitor takes **AFTER** your worship service is over. Statistically, most first-time visitors head for the exit. Thus it is critical that members greet them before they leave the sanctuary and **INVITE THEM** to coffee, juice, fruit. Food is a great ice-breaker and few people turn it down when someone invites them to join them. (In four of the six churches my family church shopped, people “dropped” us as soon as we hit the pastor receiving line.)

Unburden your pastor from the receiving line. Free them up to greet visitors. Pastors and leaders need to create a “church business free zone” on Sunday morning, so that the pastor can focus on pastoring and greeting. The receiving line creates a “no greeting zone”. First, we all have our backs to each other as we shuffle to the pastor. And if someone was talking to you, this “train of custody” (hahaha) is broken by greeting the pastor, after which the visitor is typically standing alone again.

The Back Door is all the things you are NOT DOING to follow up on visitors, not to help new members connect, and not notice when members start sliding in commitment. What’s the point of outreach if you’re doing things to drive people away? The statistics below should help you discuss what your church’s back door might be caused by.

A lot has been written about **Pastor Visitation: “Does It Work?”** Let me strongly suggest that IT DOES in many cases, and it begins *with visiting me when I’m standing there in your church.* (SEE: I’M LAUGHING –but in the 6 churches we visited, only 2 pastors gave us more than a smiling handshake). A pastor doesn’t need to visit every visitor, but they should make a personal contact. All the literature suggests this be done within 24 hours, and that makes sense to me. Some types of visitors WANT a visit. Others may appreciate a “new kind of visit” ...such as a meet-up at Starbucks, rather than at home. Or a brunch invitation. (Note: ONLY two of the six churches we “shopped” contacted us personally in any way whatsoever. Two of them had no way to collect our contact info. Not surprisingly, those churches also seemed to be the least interesting.)

Aside: I’ve dedicated a large part of my ministry to children and youth ministry because it’s a HUGE FRONT DOOR for church membership, and often the beginning of the EXIT/BACK DOOR if we fail at doing them in an attractive, meaningful way. Look at your classrooms and teaching techniques for example. **What seeds of a future EXIT are they planting and nurturing?** Unfortunately, we have a lot of statistics about this failure. **Our retention of our children and youth as they become adults is ABYSMAL.** Children and youth ministry is very much a ‘greeting and new member’ ministry.



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SOME STATS TO CHEW ON:

Why are they leaving? Lifeway's survey found the following:

Lifeway Research's 2006 survey of former members found 39% left for "life change" reasons (moved, got too busy, divorces, illness). **37% stopped coming due to problems with the pastor.** In another study, they found that 59% of churchgoers left their last church due to a "residential move". For the sake of discussion, round this off at 50-50. 50% leave because of something they didn't like. *Do you know what it was?* If not, then you're engaged in the cover up :-\

The top two specific reasons people leave their church, *other than "moving"*, have to do with "their needs not being fulfilled by their church". Twenty-eight percent of non-mover church switchers indicated "church was not helping me to develop spiritually" as the reason. Another 20 percent of respondents said they left because they "did not feel engaged or involved in meaningful church work." Eighteen percent of respondents indicated "church members were judgmental of others," as a specific reason for switching. Other member-related reasons for switching are "members seemed hypocritical" (15 percent), and "church was run by a clique that discouraged involvement" (14 percent).

Disenchantment with the pastor is also a common reason churchgoers switch. Sixteen percent cite the "pastor was not a good preacher" as a specific reason for leaving their previous church. Also in the top 10 are the following: "pastor was judgmental of others"

(14 percent) and “pastor seemed hypocritical” (13 percent). Sixteen percent of survey respondents said too many changes in general drove them to switch churches.

Here are the survey results broken down:

Top 6 Reasons Why People Leave a Church (research from Lifeway Research, SBC)

1. Move of residence
 2. Change in life circumstance (illness, schedule, work, divorce)
 3. Problems in church
 - Loss of confidence in leadership
 - Loss of morale, lack of participation
 - Hypocritical, judgmental members
 - Change in style of church
 - Change in size
-

The Top Ten Reasons People Pick a Specific Church to Join

from a survey by Barna Research. *(Neil notes: I found similar survey results in almost the same order done by Gallup, and other church organizations.)*

1. The theological beliefs and doctrine of church.
2. The people seem to care about each other.
3. The quality of the sermons that are preached.
4. How friendly the people are to visitors.
5. How involved the church is in helping poor and disadvantaged people.
6. The quality of the programs and classes for children.
7. How much you like the pastor.
8. The denomination the church is affiliated with.
9. The quality of the adult Sunday School classes.
10. The convenience of the times of their weekend.

I hop this article helps your ministry.

You are welcome to excerpt/print and share it.

<>< Neil MacQueen

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