

THE WYCLIFFE BOOKLETS
ON EVANGELISM #6

From Visitor to Disciple



Eight Ways
Your Church
Can Help

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FROM VISITOR TO DISCIPLE: Eight Ways Your Church Can Help

QUESTION: *How are people helped to take steps from first attending your church to being active, contributing, articulate disciples of Jesus?*

Please rate your congregation's present performance by circling a number on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent)—just one mark for each step:

STEP 1: *Is our congregation a community of growing disciples?* 1 2 3 4 5

Is the core of the congregation people who are deliberately following Jesus?

Is the church committed to mission, and not just maintenance?

Do people talk naturally about their journey of faith?

Are people embarrassed to talk about Jesus?

Are people actively seeking to live out their faith from Monday to Saturday?

STEP 2: *What is going to make new people want to come?* 1 2 3 4 5

Do we have a good reputation in the neighbourhood?

Do our members have good friends among their unchurched neighbours?

Are there any Sunday services specially geared to visitors?

Would they receive a flyer in the mail?

Would our members be willing to invite a friend?

STEP 3: *When they come to church, what is their first impression?* 1 2 3 4 5

How is the parking?

How does the building look?

Are our signs informative and attractive?

STEP 4: *How are new people welcomed?* 1 2 3 4 5

Who greets them and how?

How easily do they find the coat rack? Sunday school?

Washrooms? Bulletins?

How easily do they find a suitable seat (e.g. near the back)?

SOME TIME AGO, I WAS INVITED to preach at a big downtown church in a city I had never been to before. Just to be on the safe side, I arrived about forty minutes before the service, parked my rental car in the large parking lot, and walked towards the church. A door was visible, so I headed towards it. It was locked. Hmmm. I looked around: no sign to tell me where to go instead. I wandered round the corner to the next side of the building. Ah, this must be the door! But no, that too was locked. What now? Fortunately, it was a case of third time lucky: this time the door was wide open, and there were the greeters with smiling faces to tell me where to go.

I could not help thinking, however, that if I had been visiting that church for the first time, would I have kept looking for the open door? How many doors would I have tried before I decided that nothing was happening that day, or that they just didn't want any new people? After the service, I was due to make a presentation to the outreach committee. I threw out my prepared notes, and told them what had happened to me before the service. They were embarrassed. Part of their job was to find ways to help outsiders to the church move to become disciples of Jesus. Since for many people, coming to church can be part of that movement, there was obviously a big gap in their strategy.

Together, we began to sketch out all the things that would need to happen for a new person attending the church that day to get to the end of the service, and, as they got back in their car, to say, "Wow, wasn't that great? Why didn't we do this

God's mission? Some of this is covered in programs such as Alpha, but there is also a place for churches to create and run their own programs in their own way. We need to find ways to help people begin at the beginning, and to take their first steps in the Christian life. This is crucial if we want to make disciples.

Is our congregation a community of growing disciples?

STEP 1

To rephrase the question rather more bluntly: Is there something in our congregation that is worth people's while to come to? Before you immediately say, "Well, of course!" consider the fact that there are clergy who say the only reason they go to their churches is that they are paid to be there: otherwise there would be nothing to draw them and keep them. Maybe your church is one of those!

I am not referring here to whether we are a friendly crowd, or whether the services run smoothly, or whether we put on a successful bazaar every fall. Here are some questions to ask about our congregation:

Is the core of the congregation people who are deliberately following Jesus?

Church is not primarily a place we attend out of habit (though it is a good habit); nor is it a place we go because we like the people (although hopefully we do like many of them); nor is it a place to go to provide ourselves with spiritual insurance for the afterlife (though Christianity does have important things to say about the afterlife).

The Christian church is at its heart a very simple thing: it is a gathering place for those who are followers of Jesus, where they come together to worship him and to learn from him how

Where can they explore faith and discipleship?

STEP 8

There is a world of difference between attending church and being a disciple of Jesus. Supposing then, that our visitor is beginning to feel at home in the congregation, making some friends, and coming fairly regularly on a Sunday. Where do they learn about beginning as a Christian? Most Sunday sermons are meant for those who have been on the Christian way for some time, but do not really “begin at the beginning” for those who are just starting out, or thinking about it.

Rick Warren is pastor of Saddleback Church in California. In his first book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, he deals with this very issue, and suggests that there are four steps we should help people with in terms of moving towards discipleship. He likens them to the four points of a baseball diamond.⁷ I will turn them into questions for us to ask of our congregational life:

Is there somewhere new people can learn about Christian faith?

Warren first of all offers a course to introduce people to the basic claims of Christian faith. This (logically enough) is first base. Here people learn what Christians believe about such subjects as God, sin, Jesus (his life, death and resurrection), and hear about God’s invitation to join the family. Participants are invited to consider becoming a disciple and being baptized.

they will come because of something we can give them, rather than (in the first place) because of anything they might give us. I remember talking with one young couple who told me they had been involved in church for about six months. “What happened then?” I asked. “Oh, the church was so excited to have people under the age of 60 that we were almost immediately being invited to every event in the church, and to sit on every committee, and we just got burned out.” The church wanted the newcomers to help with the maintenance, rather than welcoming them because welcoming was part of their God-given mission.

Do people talk naturally about their journey of faith?

People who are exploring their spirituality are looking for spiritual authenticity, and they can smell a fake a mile off. Two-thirds of people in Canada say they are spiritual, but only 12% show up in church. Clearly the majority do not expect to find the spiritual reality they are seeking in a church: too often that is the last place they would look.

One way we show that our spirituality is for real is by talking about it. In many churches, it is considered not quite nice to talk about a personal thing like spirituality. We prefer to live our faith rather than talk about it, we say (sometimes rather self-righteously, I am sorry to add). But there is a place for talking about faith, as long as we are also trying to live it out. Certainly in the ministry of the Jesus we follow, words and works went hand in hand: the actions gave credibility to the words, and the words explained the actions.¹

on Monday morning. The letter arrives (we trust) on Tuesday or Wednesday, and the church member visits on the Thursday or Friday.

How do they know what programs are available?

On that visit, it is worth taking an extra copy of the church's information package, just in case the visitor didn't get one or has lost it. You can also ask if there are any particular programs the visitor was hoping to find, and answer any questions they may have.

Are there structures in place to help them make friends in the church?

We have a tendency to think that if a visitor comes a second time, we have "got them" for life! This is highly unlikely. A second visit probably means they are still trying to decide whether this will be a regular commitment. But it does mean they think there is potential here. Potential for what? For opportunities to give their tithe or to teach Sunday School or be on the property committee? Probably not. More likely they are thinking, "These look like nice people. I think some of them might become friends. I wonder what will happen if we go again. Will they talk to us? Will there be any sign that this could really be a place where we could have friends?"

If you have been in a church any length of time, you will know how important friendships are. If church people do not like being together as friends, the church is probably not a very

"Jesus" is rather more awkward—a specific historical character who said and did some rather definite and often difficult things. It's easier to gloss over the Jesus stuff. But we are not Binitarians! Christian faith believes that God is Trinity, that Jesus gives us our clearest picture of what God the Creator is like, and that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, whose work is to point us to Jesus. So while it is fine to talk about God and about the Spirit, we need to be careful to be balanced in the way we think and talk about God the Trinity.

Are people actively seeking to live out their faith from Monday to Saturday?

One minister told me when she started in a new congregation recently she made a point of going to meet people in their homes, to find out who they were. One question she asked in every home was, "How do you find that what you do in church on a Sunday helps you from Monday to Saturday?" To her dismay, she found that time after time the question was met with an embarrassed silence.

Yet if there is no connection between what happens in church and what happens in the rest of our lives, we are in danger of hypocrisy—talking and singing and praying on Sunday about the reign of God in all of life, but then acting the rest of the week as if God hardly existed. Again, people who might come to check out our church know instinctively that this faith is meant to be a wholistic kind of thing, and they will smell the inconsistencies if they are there.

has that the visitor wouldn't know about, but will be delighted to discover. To meet this need, many churches provide an attractively designed information package that outlines all that the church is doing, so people can read about times, leaders, places, content and contact information.

Of course, regulars need to know the package is available, and where it is, otherwise it will gather dust on a shelf in the minister's office as visitors come and go... and do not return because they don't know what else the church offers.

What is going to make new people want to come?

STEP 2

If we have been in church any length of time, we have probably no idea how hard it is to go to church for the first time. Reg Bibby tells the story of a pastor who decided one summer when he was not on duty to go to a church other than his own. To his surprise, he found that, as the time got closer:

“I found my anxiety level rising... As I drove into the parking lot, my anxiety level rose even higher. I didn't know what was expected of me or what they actually do. As I entered the building, I actually found myself perspiring... I sat at the back.”³

If it is that difficult for a pastor, imagine how it feels for someone who has never been before, or only for weddings and funerals.

There is also a tradition, virtually unknown to committed church folk, known as “the leisurely Sunday morning.” I have seldom experienced this myself, but I am told on good authority that it includes sleeping in, a leisurely brunch, reading the Sunday paper, going for a walk, and generally relaxing and having a good time with no deadlines and no responsibilities. It sounds great, doesn't it? But Christians expect their friends and neighbours to give this up—for what? There has to be something really worthwhile to make me give up something I love to embark on something which is totally intimidating. What's going to make me do it?

finally spoke to us. Even then, I had to say eventually, “Is there coffee somewhere? Or a place where we could meet people?” And she kindly directed us downstairs.

How much better if someone had made a point of coming to us at the end of the service, and saying at the end of casual conversation, “We do have coffee downstairs if you’d like to come down for a few minutes. I’m going myself, if you’d like to come with me. Or maybe you’re in a hurry to get going.” The last sentence makes it easy for the visitor to say “No” (after all, doesn’t God allow us to say No?), but the fact that I’m going means (a) they will find the place (which is not always easy, believe me) and (b) they already know one person when they get there.

Does someone speak to visitors over coffee?

If someone has brought the visitor to coffee hour, obviously that person is responsible for “hosting” them through that time: making sure they get coffee as they like it, maybe introducing them to some people you think they might have something in common with (age, children, style of dress). Don’t assume they want to meet the minister: that might be the last person they want to meet!

But suppose they have found their own way to coffee by themselves? What then? Does someone speak to them? I am an introvert, and I confess it is a real effort to tear myself away from conversation with a friend I am comfortable with to speak to a stranger with whom I may have little in common. Yet it must be done (extroverts might want to take the lead in

discussing the garage one has recently built, or kicking a ball with one another’s children, and I think to myself, “Gee, I wish I had time to do that too. But church is so much more important.” Then a special event comes up at church to which I think a neighbour might like to come, but they’re going to be away, or they’re busy, or something has just come up.

Is there perhaps a message here? People go to events with their friends, not with strangers. And how do you make friends? Quite simply, it takes time—time for just hanging out doing nothing much, time for small talk, time for a casual coffee or beer, time for small kindnesses. And for many church folk, they just don’t have that kind of time. Maybe we need to work on making that kind of time.

Are there any Sunday services specially geared to visitors?

You may not feel able to explain Christianity to a skeptical neighbour, but that’s not everybody’s gift. But everybody can invite a friend to an interesting event. The trouble with church much of the time is that a lot of the things we do are not terribly interesting to a non-church person if they are not into Elizabethan language and 19th century hymns and “religious stuff.” There are also events which are OK for the family, as it were: we are pretty tolerant people. Yet if we were to imagine a friend or neighbour at such an event, what the British call “the cringe factor” enters in: we are embarrassed.

If you want a non-church friend to go to a church event, make it one that will provide a bridge from the world they presently inhabit to the world of faith. Some church-goers roll

or “The word faith is used a lot among religious people, but it’s really not that mysterious: we all exercise faith one way or another every day...”

The goal, I suppose, is that someone who has not been before should leave thinking, “That talk was really interesting. I didn’t know religion could make so much sense and say something about my life today. I wonder what she will say next week?” What we want to avoid is the same person saying, “That religious stuff! I have no idea what he was talking about, but it clearly was nothing to do with me. Reminds me why I gave up on church twenty years ago. And to think they pay him to do that!”

There are more issues around the accessibility of the service itself that I cannot tackle here: do we expect everybody to say the creed, for example? Do we explain why we confess our sins? What we do about new folk who expect to receive communion? All these are issues to be thought through. My only concern here is to raise our consciousness that these are even questions to think about.

Would our members be willing to invite a friend?

Supposing then that your church has a good reputation, that members are involved in their neighbourhood, that there are suitable events at the church, and that they are tastefully advertised. Is that enough to get people to come to church? Well, it may be.

But there is one more way that is more effective than all of the above put together: if someone they like and trust invites them. Try it: “Hey, we have a Blessing of the Animals service next Sunday. It’s really fun. I’m taking our dog. Why don’t you come and bring yours, and we’ll go over to Tim Horton’s afterwards?” Of course, there is always the possibility that they’ll say no, so be prepared for that: but at least you’ve tried, and you can always say, “Oh well, maybe next time.”

There is nothing like a personal invitation. But it does mean that our members must feel the confidence to ask—and feel motivated to take the risk—without embarrassment.

liturgical flow.” Well, yes it does. I can’t help wondering, however, whether God is more impressed with the smooth flow of our liturgy, or our consideration for the outsider in our midst.

Of course, churches that use PowerPoint never have to worry about either paper or books, but that is not to everybody’s taste—at present anyway.

Are the readings introduced and put in context?

I suspect regular church attenders get very used to hearing obscure and largely (to them) meaningless Bible readings. The visitor is less likely to be so tolerant. One student who had been to church occasionally said that the readings made him feel as if he was coming in on the middle of a conversation, and I can see what he meant. Think how many readings begin, “After those things...” “On the third day...” or “When Jesus had finished saying this...”

It only takes a sentence to explain, “This month, we are reading week by week from Luke’s biography of Jesus. Last week we heard how he healed a blind man, and this week we hear what people’s reaction was.” A degree in theology is not required to make some such statement. So why is it so hard? It makes the listener feel they’re being brought up to speed on the conversation: it’s a matter of courtesy.

Will they be embarrassed when the offering plate comes?

You have probably seen it happen. The visitors suddenly realize what is happening as the big brass plate pauses in front of

creative solutions (providing a shuttle service from the parking lot of the local supermarket, for example) because the lack of parking will limit the number of those who want to come to your church regularly: it’s as simple as that.

And what happens if you do have a parking lot? That day I couldn’t find my way into the building, it would have made such a difference if there had been someone there to smile, greet me and point me in the right direction: “Welcome to our church. The main entrance is just round the corner over there, and someone will be there to greet you.” We generally provide greeters at the doors, which is fine, but check first whether the route from the parking lot to the church is a straightforward one—not for you (you could find your way in the dark), but for a visitor. You could alienate a new person right there before they ever enter the church.

How does the building look?

Andrew Weeks in his popular book, *Welcome!* has created an inventory for assessing the state of your church building.⁴ Members are encouraged to walk round the building and look at it from the point-of-view of a visitor. What would they see? The fact of “making inventory” helps us be more objective than we would normally be, and really look at what is there.

We might want to ask such things as: What state is the paintwork in? Are the steps in good repair? Are the flower beds neatly tended? The list could be longer, but you get the idea. What first impression are we giving?

How user-friendly is the service?

STEP 5

Have you ever been to a service at a mosque or a synagogue? If not, try imagining it. Even if everybody is very friendly, even if you are with a trusted friend who knows the service, there is still a great deal which seems strange and unfamiliar. The same is true when someone who is not familiar with the ways of church comes for the first time. So how do we relieve their fears? How do we make it as easy as possible for them to make their way through the service without confusion? Here are some suggestions to start with:

Are visitors welcomed at the start of the service?

When people visit our home, what is the first thing we do? We welcome them. So why do we behave so much worse when people come to our church? Our own parish has in the past few years begun the service with a lay person giving the “Invitation to Worship” from the front. This is a welcome, especially (though not only) for visitors, a word about who we are as a church, a brief explanation of the coming service (any special themes in the readings, special music or participants, and so on), and finally an invitation to stand for the first hymn as the choir enters. It is simple but much appreciated.

Some churches start with announcements. While there may be advantages for the congregation, what does it tell visitors when they hear things like, “Remember to pick up your tick-

How are new people welcomed?

STEP 4

So something special is happening on Sunday at your church. A flyer in the mail has intrigued someone in the neighbourhood, and they decide to take a risk and “go to church” that Sunday. Parking is easy. The signage is attractive and the building is in good shape. So they arrive at the door. But what happens next? A lot has to happen between this point and the start of the service.

Who greets them and how?

Most churches these days have learned that they need to have greeters at the doors. That is good. But there are some dangers to be guarded against. One is to say too little: “Good morning!” to a new person really is not enough. They are probably thinking, “Who are you? Am I in the right place? Where do I go now?” So, if they are clearly new and uncomfortable, a good greeter will add, “Welcome to St. John’s! Is this your first time here? It’s lovely that you’ve been able to come. Can I show you to a seat?”

But there are also greeters who do too much. Most visitors do not want too much fuss to be made. George Barna has found that:

Exit interviews... indicate that [too much] attention is generally undesired and often causes the visitor to feel violated... Many people visit a church with trepidation, and... prefer to remain a part of the woodwork for a while.⁶

So don't draw attention to visitors. Certainly don't make them stand up and introduce themselves. And don't make them wear distinctive badges, buttons or (especially) flowers.

How easily do they find what they need?

John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard Churches, had a dramatic adult conversion, and then found his way to a church. He reports that on his first visit one of the first things he looked around for was... ashtrays. These days, visitors are less likely to be looking for ashtrays, but there may be other things they might reasonably expect.

Is it clear, for instance, where your washrooms are? Or do you have to attend for a year before you find their location in a remote corner of the basement? If it is coat-wearing weather, where should they hang their coat? Is the Sunday School or nursery easy to find, and is there someone to take them there instead of just directing them?

Perhaps it is too obvious to say visitors need to be given a bulletin. But I am a little puzzled as to who thought the word "bulletin" was a good idea. After all, the word usually means a news bulletin, or the report on somebody's health. Why did someone decide that we should transfer the word and use it for what is basically our weekly program? If we called it "the program," that way people who are used to (say) theatre programs know what it is and what it's for.

Some churches also use a "Welcome Table" (in an obvious place, and with a large sign saying that is what it is), where visitors are directed for more information.

How easily do they find a suitable seat?

If you are new to church, it is difficult picking a seat. Probably your preference would be to sit at the back, where you can observe without being observed, and simply follow what everyone else is doing. But you are not always allowed to do that. In Anglican churches, one of the most embarrassing of such occasions is when there is a baptism, and the family (many of whom are not church regulars) are forced to sit in the front rows, where everybody can observe their discomfort, and where they can have no idea whether the regulars sitting behind them are sitting, standing or kneeling. It is painful to watch—though not as painful as it must be to endure. What are we thinking of? Is it a punishment for the family, to teach them that they should come more often, so that they will know the ropes? If so, I doubt it has much effect. What on earth is going to possess someone who is treated in this way to want to come back and repeat the experience?

No: leave room for newcomers to sit at the back. If in doubt, ask them, Would you prefer to sit near the front or near the back? I know of one church that has a sign on the back pew saying, "Reserved for nursing mothers." Another has padded seats at the back and has created a space where toddlers can play near their parents. Now that's being thoughtful.

Are our signs informative and attractive?

You may know the story of the sign outside an Anglican church which read, “1&3, 8.15 MP, BCP; 2&4 10.30 HC, BAS. All welcome.” I told that to a class not long ago. Half the class laughed. The other half looked puzzled and said, “What?” And I realized that it was funny for Anglicans who could interpret the language, but not for anyone else.⁵ The sign may have said all were welcome, but in practice most people were clearly not.

So how does your church sign look? It is worth comparing with some of those other signs on the street that catch the eye: how are they different? Is ours as friendly, informative, clear—and large enough to read if someone is driving by? Is the information there interesting for someone who doesn’t usually go to church? Is there anything that makes them think, “Hmmm. Maybe I will...”?

ets for the youth group’s concert,” or (worse) “As you all know, Lent begins next week”? It reminds them that they are not part of the community: they don’t belong here. Why start the service with something so exclusive?

Of course, if the first announcement is about the church’s financial deficit (as I heard in one church I visited), that gives a totally different impression, but still not a very inviting one.

The life of a busy parish is like a fast-moving conveyor belt that never stops. If you are hoping that someone will join in the congregation’s life, why not stop it for a few seconds so they can at least think about getting on?

Is the service easy for a newcomer to follow?

Ideally, the whole service is printed in the “program,” so everybody can follow easily. If people complain that this is a waste of paper, since there are so few visitors, it may be a fair compromise to say, “Well, on those occasions when we can be fairly confident there will be visitors (Christmas, Easter, guest services like Mother’s Day), we will use a full bulletin, but not on regular Sundays.”

Then there is the problem of books. In denominations where the minister does most of the service, there is generally only one book, the hymn book (and sometimes a Bible), so that is not a problem. But in traditions where the people are expected to participate in more aspects of the liturgy, there are more books to worry about. Giving careful references to book and page number can help. One minister said to me, however, “Oh, I don’t like giving out page numbers: it interrupts the

When they come to church, what is their first impression?

STEP 3

If you have ever moved house, you have probably had that experience of saying about the previous owners: “How could they *tolerate* the basement (or the windows or the wallpaper) in that condition?” And, of course, the answer is that they had stopped seeing it: it was just the way the house was. (We usually forget, of course, that at roughly the same time the people who are moving into the house we have just left are saying precisely the same about us.)

We only have one chance to make a first impression, and when people take the risk of coming to something at our church, we need to ask ourselves how the building is likely to strike them. We are used to the peeling paint, the cracked sidewalk, the broken hinge, and the dog-eared books. They are part of the familiar building we love. But for a newcomer they smell of neglect, decay and carelessness. They do not recommend our church or (more importantly) our faith. Here are some questions for us to ask ourselves:

How is the parking?

If people are driving to your church, they will expect to be able to park without a lot of hassle. You may throw up your hands, feeling this is too big an issue to tackle, but there is a need for

each person. They panic. They search their pockets or pick up their purse surreptitiously to see what cash they have. Then the choice: “I’ve got two quarters and I’ve got a twenty dollar bill. What do I do?” What would your advice be?

One of the things the person giving our “Invitation to Worship” will often say is, “When you see the plate coming round and people putting money in it, we want you to know that this is for regular attenders, people who have decided they want to support the church in this way. So if you are a visitor here today, when the plate comes to you, please let it pass you by.” Such statements make church treasurers nervous, of course, but the degree of goodwill you earn is worth far more than those guilty quarters you might get otherwise. And it helps to dispel the persistent rumour that “the church is just after your money.”

Would the sermon make sense to them, and make them want to learn more?

Most sermons are prepared with church members in mind. Sounds logical, doesn’t it? But what if there are visitors there, who won’t know the Old Testament from the New, who won’t get the in-jokes and the references to last week, who don’t take for granted the thousand things that a long-term community does take for granted, in terms of language and habits of thought. Not that the preacher has to laboriously explain every little detail so that everybody gets bored, but rather that we explain enough that it will make sense to a new person. We can even say, “If this is a new idea to you, let me put it this way...”

their eyes at the idea of a “Blessing of the Animals” Sunday on the Feast of St. Francis, for example, but the interesting thing is that people come who might well not darken the door of a church otherwise.

Some churches make a big deal of Father’s Day or Mother’s Day (not Mothering Sunday—that means nothing to someone outside of church culture), advertise it widely, and invite everyone to bring their father or mother, and make a point of honouring them during the service.

Why do we not celebrate Valentine’s Day? (Doesn’t Christianity have something to do with celebrating love?) St. Patrick’s Day? (He was a saint, after all.) Or what about the ancient festival of Back to School Sunday? The church knew what it was doing when it put Christmas and Easter at times when the culture was celebrating anyway: we have somehow forgotten that strategy.

Would they receive a flyer in the mail?

Do you advertise special events at your church? Everyone else advertises in our culture: it is just one of those ways we let people know what is going on. It doesn’t need to be splashy or obnoxious. It is really basic courtesy.

Our own church puts out a flyer to all the homes in the neighbourhood three or four times a year. The flyer is simple (black on coloured paper), often quite witty, with enough information (for instance, about children’s programs) for a person to think, “Hmmm, that’s interesting. I should check it out.” If you want your church to grow, this is an essential budget item.

What happens at the end of the service?

STEP 6

I don’t know how it is in your church, but if I am honest I know that during times when I should have been thinking about something more important, I have actually been making a mental list of people I need to see at the end of the service. And as soon as the blessing is done, I’m off to catch them before they leave. It is a real discipline to remind myself that my first responsibility at the end of the service is to welcome newcomers—even if all the people on my precious list have disappeared before I’ve finished. So we need to consider:

Are visitors greeted by neighbours in the pew?

I heard of one church where there was an unwritten agreement that members would not speak to anyone they knew for three minutes at the end of the service, just to be sure no visitor got neglected. It makes sense: though in many churches that would mean a long three minute silence. The person who might really appreciate the silence, of course, is the organist still playing the postlude.

Does someone take visitors for coffee or show them the way?

I did an experiment at a church not long ago. My wife and I were there for the first time, and knew few people. We tried to look aimless and hopeful (an awkward combination), but we were almost the only people left in the church before someone

Do we have a good reputation in the neighbourhood?

What do your neighbours know about you as a church? Are you just the weird people who ring those infernal bells on a Sunday morning when normal people are trying to sleep? Or do you make a contribution to the community such that people would really miss you if you were not there? It is sometimes difficult for us to think in those terms. One minister I know dared to raise the question in a sermon not long ago: his congregation was shocked that anyone would even think it worth considering.

But if we are followers of Jesus, it does matter how people perceive us. If we run a food bank, or offer English lessons to recent immigrants, or have a parish nurse on our staff, neighbours will notice. They have somewhere picked up the impression that Christians are supposed to do good (without being do-gooders, naturally), and they appreciate it when we do and take note when we do not.

This means that if we have been trying to represent Jesus in the neighbourhood, there is a higher likelihood that people will respond positively when they are invited to an event at the church. Not that that's *why* we try to do good, of course, but it's a legitimate side benefit.

Do our members have good friends among their unchurched neighbours?

Sometimes when I am heading off to yet another church meeting, I notice my neighbours chatting over the garden fence, or

this, but it is everyone's responsibility). We are hosts and these are our guests.

Not that everybody should swoop down on the poor unsuspecting person at once—that's one way to guarantee they will never return—but at least one person should talk to them.

Are we prepared to get their contact information if they would like to give it?

Regular members should be alert, not just to greet and chat to visitors, but to see if they would like further contact with us. They might not, of course, and we have no right to be pushy. But we can ask straightforwardly, "You know, if you'd like to give me an address (or email), I can keep you in touch with what's happening in the church. Of course, if you'd prefer not to just now, that's OK too." The phrase "just now" opens the door for them to reply, "Well, maybe another time," so they are not forced to say an outright, "No way!"

Some churches deal with the issue by providing a visitors' book, and that too provides an unpressured way for people to leave contact information if they want to. Of course, it means that the host should be prepared to say, "Maybe you'd like to sign the visitors' book before you leave."

Is there an information package visitors can take about what's going on in the church?

Visitors may be looking for something specific like a children's program. But there may equally be programs that the church

I have spent more time over Step 1 than I will spend over the others, because it is frankly the most important. The rest are relatively simple and practical. But unless we are making progress in the areas I have just described, the rest of the things I have to suggest from here on are merely cosmetic, and will make no lasting difference.

I hope this does not discourage you. Suppose, though, you are shaking your head, and saying, “We really haven’t begun down this road,” what then? Do not despair! There are resources to help you begin growing into this kind of congregation.²

Let us suppose, on the other hand, that you say, “Well, we’re by no means perfect as a congregation, but I think I can say that we are making progress towards being a community of growing disciples. We are at least trying. What then?” That leads us to Step 2:

How are they followed up?

STEP 7

So a real live visitor came: we welcomed them, they enjoyed the service, they came to coffee time, and they met nice people. Now we’ve done our job—right? Wrong! It will make a huge difference to visitors’ feelings about their experience if there is suitable follow up. What will that look like? Too much concern may be overwhelming, but too little may look like lack of interest.

What is the next contact? A letter? A visit? A gift?

A brief visit from a lay person (or minister—some will appreciate one, some the other) helps the visitor know their presence was appreciated. Again, this is not intended to be pushy: it is important to say at the door, “I’m not going to come in, because I know you must be busy, but I just wanted to say how glad we were to have you at church last Sunday, and we’ll be delighted if you feel like coming again.” Some churches bring a suitable gift: a home-grown plant, or a loaf of fresh-baked bread are great ideas. Of course, if you get invited in, that’s wonderful too, but that’s not the same as expecting it.

How soon does this happen?

Timing is crucial in this matter of follow-up. Two or three weeks later is not very useful. The Rev. Ed Dallow in Kingston has a system where he writes a letter of welcome to the visitor

Where do people get a chance to talk about their journey of faith in your congregation? There is no magic formula to this: it is simply a place to talk about when you have felt God most real in your life, what you have struggled with, how prayers have been answered, why you still call yourself a Christian. In my congregation during the season of Lent, the sermon time is given over to lay people talking about their faith. Speaking for myself, I have heard some of the most surprising, moving, and challenging talks during those times that I have ever heard in church. And once one or two have done it, others think, Well, I could do that too. And our credibility as a spiritually authentic community grows.

Are people embarrassed to talk about Jesus?

There is one specific aspect of talking about faith that some of us struggle with, and that is learning to say “the J-word.” A clergyman told me not long ago he had been taken to task by a member of the church because he had mentioned Jesus three times in one sermon. Another minister said, “But at seminary I was taught not to talk about Jesus.” Harold Percy tells the story of a clergyman who said to him, “We don’t like to talk much about Jesus in our church. We find it a bit embarrassing.” To which Harold promptly replied, “If you go to Canadian Tire and ask for a wrench, do you expect them to be embarrassed to talk about wrenches?”

There is a tendency these days to talk about “God” and about “Spirit”: those are bland, generic concepts, not offensive to anyone but not especially challenging to anyone either.

healthy place. But you know also how long it took for those friendships to develop: it took more than a week or two.

We need to ask therefore how we can create contexts where friendships can begin to grow. The seed may be there, but we can offer sunshine and water, and Sunday morning coffee hours are probably not enough. Many churches offer a “Newcomers’ Evening” two or three times a year (or more, according to need) where those who have been a few times are invited to a social evening, perhaps with wine and cheese. Members of the congregation need to be there too—not too many, of course, or it will be overwhelming (and members will begin to do church business!), but enough that visitors feel that relationships can go a step further. It can be an occasion for the minister to introduce him or herself, and perhaps some of the church officers, particularly those whose responsibilities may be of interest to visitors. Members may feel it right to say to the visitors, “Why don’t we get together for coffee some time this week and talk some more.” A good friendship will not be limited to the four walls of the church.

to love God and love their neighbour. If newcomers are to experience Christian community, this is what they need to encounter. So the core members of the congregation will be people who understand that this is what it is all about.

I say “core” deliberately because church is also a place for those who are exploring their spirituality, and who are uncertain about what they believe. Church is a great place for people to figure out what they believe, and to learn why it is that Christians think it is worth following Jesus. So (if I may mix metaphors), the “core” needs a substantial “fringe.”

Is the church committed to mission, and not just maintenance?

Those who follow Jesus will want to follow his agenda, and his agenda was to reach out and serve the needs of the world in God’s name. Too many congregations have forgotten that this is who we are called to be. They are satisfied with just keeping things ticking over, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. But a church that is thinking only of its own survival is never going to attract and hold new members.

The test, I suppose, is to ask: Why exactly do you want to attract new people? Is it because the organ needs repairing, and you urgently need new envelope donors? This is what someone has called “the vampire theory of evangelism,” where people stand around in gloomy church basements and mutter to one another, “What we need round here is some new blood.”

No: we want new people because in all humility we believe we have something wonderful to offer to the world. We hope

Is there somewhere new people can learn about spiritual disciplines?

Second base is a course for those who have decided to be followers of Jesus, and helps them know how to move on after baptism and grow as a Christian. Thus it deals with issues of discipleship, particularly involvement in the Christian community, prayer, Bible reading, witness, and participation in worship.

Is there somewhere new people can discover their gifts and find opportunities to use them?

Third base is the place where people learn about spiritual gifts, discover what their gifts are, and consider ways those gifts can be utilized inside and outside the congregation.

Is there somewhere new people can learn how they can serve in God’s world?

Fourth base is where disciples are introduced to the idea of God’s great mission in the world, and are invited to think about how they are called to play their part in God’s work in the world.

Obviously, this kind of structure does not have to be cloned detail for detail (though one could do worse), but Warren’s outline does extend a challenge to every church. When new people come to our church, where are they given an opportunity to learn such things as what Christians believe, how to grow in faith, how to discover their gifts, and how to participate in

sooner? I can't wait for next week!" What would their experience need to be at each point, from arriving in the parking lot to returning to the parking lot, for that to happen? How would a visit to church on a Sunday morning become a step on the journey to discipleship instead of a roadblock?

It is out of that discussion that this booklet has grown. This is the question I want to focus on:

How are people helped to take steps from first attending your church to being active, contributing, articulate disciples of Jesus?

My assumptions here are two, and they are very simple:

- Firstly, that part of every church's job is to follow Jesus' instructions to "make disciples" (Matthew 28:18-20), and that we are prepared (difficult though it may be) to structure the life of our congregations to make that possible; and
- Secondly, that Sunday morning is one means by which people can be encouraged to move towards discipleship. It is not the only one, and not always the best one, but it is still helpful for some people.

With these things in mind, I want to suggest that there are eight aspects of our congregational life we need to look at, because they are essential in helping anyone who is interested in taking steps towards becoming disciples.

At the end of the booklet you will find a questionnaire based on these eight steps. You are welcome to photocopy it and use it to generate discussion in your congregation.

Where do we go from here?

One individual cannot change the culture of a church alone. If we are serious about becoming a place where people can discover faith and grow as disciples of Jesus, it will require a concerted effort by the majority of the community, starting with the leaders. One way the content of this booklet may be helpful in this is by having the leadership group fill out the questionnaire on the following pages.

My suggestion is that the leader take some time to explain what each question means (you are welcome to use the content of this booklet if it is helpful), and that people then give their congregation a score of between 1 and 5 (one mark for each step, not for each individual question). They can do this individually, and then discuss the scores they have allocated and why. This will reveal where the church is weak and where it is strong in making Sunday morning a place where people can be helped to become disciples. The challenge will then be to keep the strong features strong, and to begin to address the weaker ones. It is a lot of work, but if it helps us fulfill our Lord's Great Commission, it is worth it.

STEP 5: *How user-friendly is the service?* 1 2 3 4 5

- Are visitors welcomed at the start of the service?
- Is the service easy for a newcomer to follow?
- Are the readings introduced and put in context?
- Will they be embarrassed when the offering plate comes?
- Would the sermon make sense to them, and make them want to learn more?

STEP 6: *What happens at the end of the service?* 1 2 3 4 5

- Are they greeted by neighbours in the pew?
- Does someone take them for coffee or show them the way?
- Does someone speak to them over coffee?
- Are members prepared to get their contact information if they would like to give it?
- Is there an information package they can take about what's going on in the church?

STEP 7: *How are they followed up?* 1 2 3 4 5

- What is the next contact? A letter? A visit? A gift?
- How soon does this happen?
- How do they know what programs are available?
- Are there structures in place to help them make friends in the church?

STEP 8: *Where can they explore faith and discipleship?* 1 2 3 4 5

- Is there somewhere new people can learn about Christian faith?
- Is there somewhere new people can learn about spiritual disciplines?
- Is there somewhere new people can discover their gifts and find opportunities to use them?
- Is there somewhere new people can learn how they can serve in God's world?

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#5 CONNECTING YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE GOSPEL

How Trinitarian Love Shapes Youth Ministry

#6 FROM VISITOR TO DISCIPLE *Eight Ways Your Church Can Help*

Notes

1. For more on this balance, see John Bowen, *Evangelism for 'Normal' People* (Augsburg Fortress, 2002), chapter 4.
2. Natural Church Development is a program used extensively to identify areas of strength and weakness and strategies for congregational renewal. Harold Percy's book, *Good News People*, is an excellent primer in the area of congregational health. And other Wycliffe Booklets on Evangelism may also provide a useful starting point.
3. Reginald Bibby, *There's Got To be More! Connecting Churches and Canadians* (Winfield BC: Wood Lake, 1995), 52.
4. Andrew Weeks, *Welcome! Tools and Techniques for New Member Ministry* (Washington: The Alban Institute, 1992).
5. "1&3" means first and third Sundays of the month; "MP" means Morning Prayer; "BCP" means Book of Common Prayer; "2&4" means second and fourth Sundays; "HC" means Holy Communion; and "BAS" means Book of Alternative Services. I suspect other denominations have their equivalents.
6. George Barna, *User-Friendly Churches* (Ventura CA: Regal Books 1991), 177, quoted in Bibby, 107.
7. Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth without Compromising your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 143-145.