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# FIRST IMPRESSIONS

By Bill Tenny-Brittian

There's an old saying that reminds us that we don't get a second chance to make a first impression. Although that may seem like a "Duh!" statement, it always amazes me how few churches seem to consider it, let alone take it seriously. As I look back over the past years of consulting, I realize I've made the following recommendations to hundreds of congregations and yet too many blithely skip right over them to focus their attention on more important stuff like worship music, technology, or preaching. Then three years later they don't understand why their retention of first-time guests rarely exceeds 25 percent – after all, don't they have a great worship service?

There's some discrepancy in the research results, but guests make a decision about whether or not they'll be returning within the first few minutes of their visit— like somewhere between two and ten minutes – and the clock begins ticking *when they turn into your church's driveway*. Add 'em up. By the time your guests have actually walked up your steps, almost half of your time to "Wow!" them is gone. Think your great music or sermon is going to convince them? In most cases, before the first chord of the worship band or the strains of the organ fill their ears they already know whether or not they'll likely be back.

Let me illustrate. It was Palm Sunday and I didn't have an "appointment" at any particular church, so I opted to visit one up the street from me that I'd heard had completed a building remodel that was supposed to appeal to the "younger" crowd. I arrived early, just in case, and found a vacant parking spot. I noticed they didn't have any guest parking, so I felt lucky to snag a space between

two SUVs. There was a young family in the parking lot and they got to the sidewalk three or four steps ahead of me. They must have been late for something because the father hustled the children forward putting as much distance between me and them as possible. I guess I must have looked threatening.

There was no sign outside to direct anyone to the front entrance, but I followed the young family and lucked out – it was the right door (though there were several doors in view from where I'd parked). There were two ushers four or five steps into the entryway and they were in rapt conversation. They noticed me right away and wished me good morning, handed me a program, and nodded towards the sanctuary. I followed the unspoken directions, entered the worship space, and looked around for a seat. I had several good options and chose to sit near the back. Knowing that it was Palm Sunday and would likely be crowded (a bad assumption, it turned out), I moved to the center of the pew to make room for any who might care to join me. I sat, I watched, I was totally ignored. People greeted each other all around me and there were plenty of conversations, but I wasn't invited

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into any of them. By then I'd already made my decision that as "cool" as the exposed industrial ceiling was, if I was a "real" guest I wouldn't be back.

On the other hand, there was Dean King. When it comes to first impressions and welcome, I always turn to Dean King because he's *the* reason I'm ordained in the Disciples of Christ denomination. On a Sunday morning in Decatur, Georgia, my wife and I serendipitously ended up parking in the Decatur First Christian Church parking lot to attend worship. We were both attending seminary, and we were both Methodist clergy-bound. Even from the parking lot we couldn't miss the rather tall, red blazered man standing outside what looked to be the front doors of the church. We walked his direction and the closer we got, the bigger his smile – or so it seemed. As we mounted the steps he greeted us with a cheery "It's a lovely morning, isn't it?" We agreed as we drew near and he continued, "I don't believe we've met. I'm Dean King." He stuck his hand out and his eyes twinkled. We introduced ourselves as Bill and Kris and he said, "It's good to meet you. How are you this fine morning?" And being members of polite society we assured him we were fine, and returned the requisite "How are you?" "Feel like a King!" he boomed, winked, and laughed. We were totally disarmed and felt like we'd found a friend. We chatted for a few moments and he discovered we were first time guests so he gave us the briefest overview of the coming service so we wouldn't be unfamiliar. Then he opened the doors for us *and accompanied us into the church's entry hall*. He escorted us to a pair of ushers who smiled ... mostly ... and he slightly bent down towards them as if to let them in on a secret. With a marvelous smile in his voice, and a wry grin towards us, he addressed the ushers. "This is Bill and Kris. They're *personal* friends of mine. Give 'em the best seats in the house *and don't charge them nothin'!*" Then he straightened, smiled broadly, and let the ushers lead us to a seat.

My wife tells me the service was very good and I have to trust her, but it wouldn't have made any difference one way or the other. Within five minutes of getting out of our car in the parking lot I knew we'd be back. The next week, when we herded our five children before us, Dean King was waiting at his designated post and he befriended each one. Eighteen months later I was ordained in that church and if anyone asks why I left the Methodists, I "blame" Dean King ... the man who took St. Peter's place at the Pearly Gates when he died several years ago.

In the briefest possible format then, here's a checklist on how your church can make a winning first impression.

- Outdoor signage should point the way to the worship center and childcare if the two are not close together.
- Hospitality begins in the parking lot. Deploy parking attendants, especially if your parking lot is over 60 percent full.
- Greeters must be friendly, gregarious, and "have never met a stranger" kind of people. Give Grumpy Greeter a different job.
- Greeters take their places no later than fifteen minutes before the service and stay there for fifteen minutes after the service begins.
- Deploy helpful parking lot greeters to welcome and offer assistance whenever possible. Arm them with golf umbrellas in inclement weather.
- Door greeters stand outside the doors, not inside.
- Deploy door greeters outside any door that might be used by a guest.
- Deploy lobby hosts who are stationed in the lobby to identify the lost (newcomers) and steer them to the Information Center. Lobby hosts remain in the lobby for the whole service.
- Develop a staffed Information Center (not a welcome center or guest information booth) with your sharpest, most informed folks who are walking Wikipedias about your church.
- Ushers should ush. Anyone can hand out a bulletin. It takes panache and style to ask every single person, "Do you have a seating preference?"
- Deploy worship center hosts whose task is to make sure every single person in their assigned section is well greeted.
- Train your members to get to know those around them by having real conversations. Teach them the Conversation Waltz (one, two three ...).
  1. "I don't believe we've met."
  2. "How long have you been coming to First Church?" (Not *our* church or *my* church.)
  3. "What keeps you busy during the week?"
- Rest rooms are the most important room in your church building. If they are under par, they'll be remembered. If they are average, they'll be accepted. If they're over the top well stocked, well decorated, well appointed, etc. they'll be remembered and will be the topic of guest conversations. Really.

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- The nursery, the second most important room in your church, must be safe, sanitary, secure, well staffed by friendly caring adults, and the décor should sizzle.
- And although your first impression opportunity has come and gone by this point, nonetheless ushers, greeters, parking lot attendants and greeters should return to their posts five minutes before the service ends to thank folks for coming, to invite them to return, and to assist those in need.

With only a few minutes to make a great first impression, you'll need to make the best of every opportunity. From parking lot to worship center, rest rooms to nursery, make sure you're putting your best foot forward. When you do, first-time guests will become returning guests.

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