



Ways To Be a Church that Visitors Will WANT TO CALL HOME

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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Ty Ragan and family.

Ty Ragan and his family searched for a church home for a long time before they decided to stay at Centennial Presbyterian Church in Calgary. It was not the big things that inspired them to stay at Centennial, but the small things: the minister inviting Ty out for coffee, a volunteer figuring out how his son, with his wheelchair, could fully and comfortably be a part of the end-of-week VBS celebration, and the church welcoming his daughter as a lay reader.

Centennial became the Ragan family's church home because the people there lived out their faith in simple, authentic and loving ways. "Welcoming is about seeing every human being as being made in the image of God," Ty explained, "and genuinely treating them with the care that Jesus showed to those he encountered." Being a church that visitors will want to return to is about *being like Jesus*. The tips below, modeled on Jesus' way of welcoming others, will help your church be the kind of place that people will want to call home.

REMEMBER THE BASICS: In Luke 8, Jesus is busy travelling from town to town healing and preaching about God's kingdom. From the crowds pressing in on him, a woman touches his cloak and is instantly healed. While Jesus could have easily ignored the woman's touch (he was, after all, on his way to heal a sick child), he stopped and invited her to make herself known. He took the time to hear her story and then commended her trust in him in front of the whole crowd.

Amid programs, committee meetings, preparing for worship and all the other things we get busy doing, it is easy to "keep the church running" and forget how important human relationships are. Take the time to stop and look around you on Sunday mornings. Is there anyone who you could reach out to? Smiling, introducing yourself, showing interest in the other person, ensuring they are comfortable and inviting them to join you for coffee hour or other church fellowship gatherings are all good ways to start developing a connection.

IT'S ALL ABOUT BELONGING: As human beings, we are wired for community. One of the first things visitors to your church will think is, "Do I belong here?" Most church communities think of themselves as places of belonging for everyone, but can sometimes slip into functioning as members-only clubs, or at least appear to be so to those trying to connect.

Ephesians 2 reminds us that, through Jesus' sacrifice, we have all been made equals. There are no "insiders" and "outsiders" in the body of Christ because everyone shares the "same Spirit" and has



“equal access to God” (2:17). We all belong in God’s kingdom and each of us has a unique and important role to play.

Most people will decide within the first ten minutes of being in your church whether or not they will return. Once the initial welcome has been said, this is your chance to draw people in. Take the time to orient and accompany newcomers as they find seats and become familiar with the surroundings. Make sure families with children are given information about the Sunday School and how children can participate.

Visitors to your church will notice the atmosphere. It’s easier for people to connect in environments that are kept clean with clear pathways and where there is a sense of warmth and belonging coming from the people who are already there.

INCLUSION MATTERS: When a woman interrupts Jesus’ dinner at Simon’s house and begins to anoint his feet with oil, Jesus lets her honour him in this way. Simon questions Jesus for letting an unclean woman touch him, and Jesus praises her actions, saying she has been more genuinely hospitable than Simon (Luke 7:36–50).

Jesus not only includes the woman in the men-only space at the dinner table, but he declares that she belongs there perhaps even more than the owner of the house. Inclusion is not just about “making space,” but rather is about genuinely welcoming the presence, gifts, ideas and challenges brought by people coming from all different kinds of backgrounds.

It is important to take the time to get to know each worshipper and how they see their gifts fitting into the congregation. When people from a variety of backgrounds and experience are welcome to fully participate in worship and church initiatives, it is a gift to all of those gathered. Not only does inclusion help the congregation grow in faith and understanding of God, but visitors to churches where diversity is celebrated are more likely to feel welcome and see themselves as belonging in the community. Whose gifts in your church are going unrecognized? What music, style of prayer, leadership gifts, ministry directions and culinary delights have you yet to experience in your context?

BE WILLING TO BE FLEXIBLE: Many people visiting churches have had the experience of going to sit in a specific spot only to be told that you are “taking so-and-so’s seat” or being glared at in an unfriendly way. In a passage that is difficult to understand, Jesus initially has a similar reaction when a Canaanite woman asks him to heal her child who is afflicted with an evil spirit (Matthew 15). He tells her that he has come to help the people of Israel and questions why her child should receive his healing power. The woman persists and Jesus heals her child and praises her persistent faith.

Not all people who visit your church are going to be as persistent as the Canaanite woman was with Jesus. However you read this passage, what is clear is that Jesus ultimately welcomes the woman. Genuine hospitality means flexibility. Someone is sitting in your seat? Sit somewhere else. Someone has special dietary restrictions? Be sure you have food they can eat at fellowship hour. The space for the program you are using isn’t accessible? Change the space where you are meeting. Do not let small things become big barriers to other people experiencing Jesus. Let yourself be uncomfortable for the sake of helping others become more comfortable at church.

BE PROACTIVE: In Luke 5, a group of men lower their paralyzed friend down through the roof of a house where Jesus is teaching. Jesus heals the man in front of the crowd and tells him to roll up his bed and walk home, which he does. This transformative encounter would not have happened for the man if his friends had not gone the extra mile to ensure that he met Jesus.

Be sure to be proactive when it comes to welcoming newcomers at your church. You want them to meet Jesus, so you need to remove any barriers that may exist for them. Have flyers available that clearly outline the different groups and ministries that newcomers can join. Have a website that clearly states who to contact for each ministry.

The importance of following up with people who visit the church cannot be stressed enough. Be sure that there is a way for people to leave their contact information and be sure to contact them a week or two after their visit with a note or a phone call that lets them know how happy you were that they came to the church. This is also a great time to offer an invitation for them to come again.

CELEBRATE AND PRIORITIZE JOY: For those who love a good celebration, Jesus' turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana is a favorite Bible verse—it was his first miracle, after all (John 2)! While we don't necessarily need wine to celebrate, it is important to note that celebration was a regular part of Jesus' life. How much celebrating does your congregation do?

When visitors see that there is joy in a congregation, they are more likely to want to be a part of it. There are easy ways to celebrate during services:

- Invite people with news to share (new jobs, grandkids, anniversaries) to share it and let the congregation celebrate with them;
- Acknowledge milestones. Take the time to name and pray over people who have accomplished something (new job, graduation, marriage) or about to embark on a new adventure (mission trip, moving, promotion);
- Celebrate birthdays by offering cake once a month to celebrate the birthdays of the gathered community.

ESTABLISH DISCIPLESHIP PATHWAYS: In the great commission found in Matthew 28, Jesus tells his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations.” Many congregational leaders struggle with how to “make disciples” of both newcomers and regulars in church. Just because you attend Sunday service doesn't mean you are growing as a disciple of Jesus.



Summer school participants at Vancouver School of Theology.

The best thing to do is to have a clear pathway to discipleship in your congregation. You can do this by running a regular program, such as Alpha, that will help people become acquainted with Christianity. Or, it can be a less formal process where a leader in the church regularly hosts a discipleship small group for new people in the congregation. Do not assume that new people to the church will automatically feel comfortable coming to these groups. Make a personal invitation, ensuring that you are willing to be flexible in order to accommodate schedules, needs and comfort levels.

Take very seriously the need for people to deepen their discipleship over time. Along with introductory programs, create small groups or host book studies that challenge people to grow in their faith.

SHARE LIFE TOGETHER: After Jesus was raised from the dead, he appeared to his disciples along the shores of Lake Tiberias where they were fishing. He miraculously filled their nets with fish and then invited them to come ashore to eat with him (John 21). The normalcy of this event, after the drama of the empty tomb, seems incongruous. But Jesus had always prioritized eating and drinking together, and he was reaffirming the pattern of his followers sharing life together in his presence.

We continue to be called to share life together as Christians. People are attracted to churches where people have genuine and authentic relationship with each other. Engagement in each other lives and the life of the community is more important to most seekers than whether or not there are lots of people in church or fancy programming. Sharing life together happens in simple ways:



Members of Two Rivers Church in Guelph, Ont.

- Are people visiting one another? If not, organize a dinner so that people can spend time in each other's homes.
- Set out a ministry challenge for congregational leaders to meet at least one person a month for coffee.
- Is there an after-service brunch club? Start having those in your church informally invite others to go to local coffee shops and restaurants for brunch together after worship.

Canadian Ministries is grateful to Ty Ragan for his input into this resource.

For more ideas on how your congregation can become a place that people call home, contact Canadian Ministries: canadianministries@presbyterian.ca or call 1-800-619-7301.