

Following-up: *Helping Our Guests Find a Church Home*



A Study of the
With Great Boldness Task Force
Subcommittee on "Follow-up"

Lutheran Church-Canada, East District
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"To not follow-up
is like leaving a baby
out in a blizzard."

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Some Understandings and Principles

Initial contact with the unbelieving, non-churched or inactive comes in a variety of ways, most often through personal relationships with congregation members or pastor in the course of their day-to-day callings.

The creation of faith in the heart of these contacts happens as the Holy Spirit plants the “seed” of God’s Word, often as mediated through the words of God’s people and reflected in their actions of faithfulness and love.

However, there are steps that can be taken—with the help of the Holy Spirit—to prepare for when a new contact is made, to seek to remove obstacles to outreach, and to create a nurturing environment in the planting and cultivation of that “seed.”

- ❖ Relationships are key. The Church is a community and family. Research has shown that without a number of significant relationships newcomers very likely will not stay for long.
- ❖ Hospitality, and genuine care and concern for people are spontaneous fruit of faith, however, because of our sinful nature, we tend to be timid and hope that someone else will reach out to the visitor.

While our churches have been very faithful in proclaiming God’s Word of Law and Gospel, we have found more difficulty in the area of “follow-up.”

Some Additional Resources

- “*From Guest to Disciple*,” by Joel Heck (2001) traces the theme of friendship evangelism in the Bible, and details its practice among caring congregations today. It describes the effect of Christian hospitality, and explains its blessings for your congregation. CPH 20-3234. 112 pages. \$9.25 Cdn.
- ““*Welcome to Our Church*,” by Annette Schroeder. This booklet is ideal for training new and current ushers and greeters. It addresses questions like “When is the best time to seat latecomers? How can I be friendly toward visitors without appearing overzealous? CPH 14-2111. 48 pages. \$5.25 Cdn.
- “*Welcoming Church as Home: An Assimilation Manual*,” by Jerry Kosberg. The manual (with video) is to help churches plan and implement, step-by-step-, an assimilation ministry. CPH, item S0-1715. \$25.95 Cdn.

Some additional resources which are out-of-print, but may be in your church or pastor’s libraries, or purchased on amazon.com:

- “*New Member Assimilation*” (CPH) by Joel Heck. Published in 1988. He also owns the copyright and can authorize photocopies. Contact him at heckyes@aol.com
- The LC-MS’s “*Evangelism Resource Book*” which contains individual booklets addressing outreach issues. Booklet 17: “*Greeting Guests: How to welcome and register guests at worship services*” by David Mahsman. Booklet 18: “*Sponsoring New Members*” by Joel Heck.

Another possible resource, although produced by Augsburg-Fortress, is “*Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*” (Fortress) by Patrick Keifert. Item 0800624920 \$22.00 Cdn.

- Can you come up with some additional ways to develop relationships with your guests and to include them in the life of the congregation?
12. What do you think about the possibility of developing a use of “mentor/sponsors”?
- Discuss the suggested responsibilities.
 - What kind of people would be especially suited for this role?
 - Can you think of some in your congregation who would be good for this task?
 - How about yourself and/or your family?
13. What do the following Bible passages say to you and your congregation about making your guest feel at home in your church?
- Colossians 4:1-6
 - Hebrews 13:1-2
 - John 13:34-35
 - Romans 12:9-16
 - Can you think of some other passages or Biblical examples that might pertain?

Questions to be addressed in the following sections include:

- What can we do when an opportunity for witnessing has been given and taken in the course of our daily vocations?
- When this person comes to my church (or someone walks through the doors of our church some Sunday morning) what are some things I and my congregation can do to further develop this contact?
- If these new contacts continue to come, what might we do to provide a nurturing environment for their growth in faith?
- What might we do during and after a new contact enters formal instruction?



Some Practical Suggestions for: When I've had an opportunity to witness to my Lord Jesus Christ



- Pray – as you probably prayed prior to and during this opportunity. Keep on praying for them and perhaps ask some others to do the same (especially if they know this person). *“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective”* (James 5:16).
- When in touch again, pray and look for opportunities for further conversation. For example, share what you have heard and learned in sermons and Bible study (an excellent reason for memorizing passages of Scripture and the Small Catechism!) *“Let your conversation be seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone”* (Colossians 4:6).
- Speak positively about the ministry of your church and pastor. *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful in building up others”* (Ephesians 5:29; also Philippians 4:8)
- Invite them to join you for a church activity or Bible study, maybe even before you invite them to a Sunday Service. *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find”* (Matthew 7:7, also James 4:2).
- Share with them appropriate literature and consider gifting them with a portion or full-copy of the Scriptures (especially one that is marked with key passages). *“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the message of Christ”* (Romans 10:17).



- 8-9 out of 10 people visit a church because they have been invited personally
 - Unless newcomers develop several close relationships within a congregation the likelihood is greater that they will dropout than stay.
7. Discuss each of the bulleted paragraphs and related Scripture passages in the section “When I’ve had an opportunity to witness to my Lord Jesus Christ” (p. 5-6).
 8. How might your congregation address the issues raised in the “checklist on p. 7-8? Are there other items you would add to the list?
 9. In the suggestions to “Individual Members” on p. 8 there are a couple of points.
 - Which ones strike you as especially important or useful?
 - Try role playing a couple of these scenarios for the sake of gaining confidence in using them.
 - Do you have other suggested approaches?
 10. Discuss the distinction between “Greeters” and “Welcomers.”
 - If you were to put either/or into practice, who in your congregation might be gifted to be one or the other or both?
 - How might you develop a plan to do either/or or both?
 11. Discuss the section “After a guest comes to our church for the first or second time.”
 - Discuss some of the suggestions listed and how you might apply them in your congregation.

A Study Guide

1. Think of the last church you visited (other than your own).
 - How well were you welcomed?
 - What would you suggest to improve their welcome?
2. Imagine coming to your own congregation as a visitor.
 - What would you experience that would be welcoming and would lead you to want to come again?
 - What would you experience that might be off-putting and make you think twice about coming again?
3. Why is “following up” such a challenge? What can encourage us to take up the challenge?
4. It is sometimes said of people new to our congregations, “They have to meet us halfway,” implying that the responsibility to take initiative in developing a relationship lies as much (or even more) with the guest than with the host. What do the following passages tell us about how our Lord Jesus deals with us?
 - John 15:16
 - 1 John 4:9-10 (and 11-12)
 - Romans 5:6-8
5. As you read the opening section, “Understandings and Principles” (p. 3):
 - What is within the responsibility of the Holy Spirit?
 - What is within your responsibility as a Christian?
6. The statement is made: “Relationships are key.” How is this born out in the results of surveys that observe that:

- Above all be a Christian friend. As the saying goes, **“People won’t care what you know until they know that you care.”** *“All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another”* (John 13:35; also 1 John 4:19)

Before and when a guest comes to our church *The Congregation As A Whole*

Here’s a checklist of questions for your leadership to ask in preparation:

- How can we improve the ways we tell people how to locate our church building and find which door to enter the church?
- How can we prepare clearly marked spaces where guests may park, especially if they are elderly or infirm?
- Do we have people designated to greet and welcome our guests, and how effectively do we train them?
- How can we encourage members to sit near guests and assist them through the Service?
- How can we make worship folders easy to read to assist our guests in participation?
- What kind of materials might we make available to guests in addition to the Guest Register?
- What opportunities do we provide for developing relationships (for example: “coffee time” following the Service, shared meals perhaps on the first Sunday of each month or quarter)?
- How can we better provide for the visually or hearing impaired and for those using walkers or wheelchairs?



- How can we clearly direct guests to nurseries and washrooms?

Each Individual Member

- Stop to think what it was like when you visited a new congregation for the first time. *“Do as you want others to do to you”* (Luke 6:31).
- Instead of asking the pastor or official greeter “Who is that?” go up to the guest and ask them yourself.
- Get rid of the notion that guests should “meet me halfway.” If Jesus thought like that none of us could be saved. Take the initiative and introduce yourself.
- Once you have introduced yourself, introduce the guest to another member or two.
- When you meet a guest, be sure to invite them to return. One suggestion: “It was sure nice to meet you. I sure hope to see you again!”
- Include the guest in your prayers.

The Inviting Member or Family

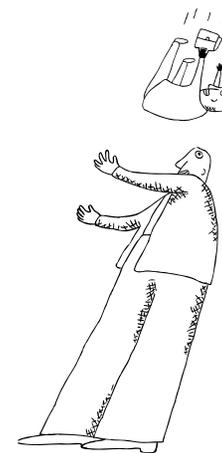
- The same as any member or family, but especially make it your main task to introduce your guest to other members and the pastor.

“Greeters” and/or “Welcomers”



- Think about going beyond someone to smile and shake hands at the door and/or distribute bulletins.

- Stands with them at their Baptism or Confirmation
- Is asked by the congregation to continue to “walk with” the new member and to be the “first line of defense” should the new member begin to head out “the back door.”



- Offering to study the Scriptures with them and/or inviting them to attend Bible study with them

NOTE: It would be expected that Mentor/Sponsors would serve under the supervision of the pastor and elders, and be members in good-standing, that is faithful in Word and Sacrament and of “good report” in the congregation and community.

As the person prepares to enter formal instruction

The Congregation As A Whole

- Look to involve them in meaningful ways in the life of the congregation
- Widen the circle of relationships by introducing them to members, groups and ministries
- Don’t hesitate to request their help or involvement in appropriate tasks in the congregation (for example: does one need to be a confirmed member to assist the Trustees, or to take up the Offering, or to put to use some skill they have?)

The Mentor/Sponsor

- Is given an official role as the prospective member’s sponsor (perhaps using the rite of the “Enrolment of Sponsors” in the Agenda of the proposed *Lutheran Service Book*.)
- Is asked to take part in instruction along with the one being mentored.
- Is encouraged to work, pray and perhaps study with them.

- Consider separating the function of “Greeters” (who do the former) and “Welcomers” whose prime objective is to introduce visitors to other members. What might a “Welcomer” do?
 - Circulate in the entry area looking for those believed to be visiting. Strike up conversation and introduce them to others in the congregation.
 - If the guest comes alone, suggest they sit with them so that they can explain what is new to guest.
- One concern often raised is, “*What if I welcome someone and find out that they are already a member of our church? Won’t they [and I!] be embarrassed?*” Not everybody in a congregation necessarily knows everyone else (especially if the “visitor” turns out to be an inactive member). So, turn a potential embarrassment into a Body-building opportunity by replying something like, “I’m sorry I haven’t had the chance to meet you before. I’m _____. It’s really good to talk with you!” . . . and then do talk with them. All our congregations also can benefit from members actively seeking to get to know those who are already members.

The Pastor

- Encourage and support the members in putting into practice the suggestions above.
- Help to identify and enlist those who could serve as “Greeters” and “Welcomers”
- Include a handwritten note in the official letter sent to guests.

- Seek opportunity for a brief “get to know you” visit in the home of the guest. Be aware that some people may be wary of an immediate visit. If they hesitate, give them some space and then ask again. When asking suggest a specific date rather than an indefinite “sometime.”
- Be friendly; be yourself. Consider being present in the narthex or gathering area to meet guests prior to the Service.

After a guest comes to our church for the first or second time

The Congregation As A Whole

- Do you have some kind of “Guest Packet” that can be given to the visitor before they leave?
- Do you have some kind of letter or card that can be sent to them within 24 hours of the visit? It might be good to include “I [or we] hope to visit with you sometime soon.” This can help prepare the way for a return visit to their home.
- Might some kind of personal visit be scheduled, either by a lay visitor (perhaps bringing some kind of small gift such as a baked good), and/or by an elder or pastor?

NOTE: Of course, sensitivity is needed in that some visitors will want to “check out” the congregation before agreeing to a “return visit.”

Each Individual Member or Family

- Look for opportunities to talk and get to know the guest not only in subsequent visits to the church but out in your community where the Lord provides contact.

- Don’t be shy (or overbearing) in inviting the guest to come again. Use a variety of activities in addition to Sunday Services to include the guest.
- Consider whether you might serve as a Mentor/Sponsor (see below, “Using a Mentor/Sponsor”).

After a guest comes a number of times

In General

- Offer to send them your newsletter and/or place them on a special events mailing list.

Using a “Mentor/Sponsor” Model

- In the early church adult catechumens were presented by “sponsors,” who vouched for their sincerity and served as their mentor through the process. Some congregations have revived this practice.
- The “Inviting member or family” could serve in this role, or the pastor/elders could assign someone more suitable.
- At this stage the Mentor’s role would be unofficial.
- They could be asked to continue pursuing the suggestions listed above for interacting with a guest in an intentional and ongoing way, for example:
 - Praying for and with the guest
 - Being in contact sometime through the week
 - Being available to answer their questions (if they don’t know, promising to get back to them with an answer or requesting another to do the same)

