
Engaging Visitors for Lifelong Service and Membership

Paper No. OCCGI-025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Historically, visitors to churches sit back, observe a church for a short time, and then decide to “place membership.” That appears to have changed in a couple of ways. First, visitors take much longer to make a decision about membership than in the past. Some take upwards of six months to decide. Second, they don’t want to observe; they want to participate. Churches must develop a way to get visitors involved more quickly if they want to grow.

KEY WORDS:

Assimilation, Involvement, Service, Membership, Visitors, Guests, Connection

GLOSSARY:

Assimilation: Getting new people to become an active, contributing part of the congregation.

Transfer Growth: Church growth through Christians moving into the area or changing congregations

REPORT:

Most churches, struggling or not, face the same two problems. They are losing members at an alarming rate and never have enough volunteers. Of course, our first instinct is to say that the second problem stems from the first (not enough volunteers because people are leaving), but some argue the causal relationship goes the opposite direction, people are leaving because they aren’t volunteering!

Nelson Searcy (Lead Pastor at The

Journey Church based in New York City) has written numerous books based on the assumption that the second causal relationship is true. In his books, such as *Ignite*, *Connect*, and *Fusion* (see References below), Searcy argues that one reason people leave a congregation after a short time is they never get involved. Of course, we know that to be true, so we have small groups, Bible classes, fellowship meals, welcome classes, etc. What these strategies lack is an opportunity to serve. Apparently, people like to contribute to the work of the Kingdom, or as he puts it, “to be a part of something greater.”

This approach challenges many of the churches with which Searcy consults and would do so for many churches of Christ. Few would argue that giving people a chance to serve is a great idea. It gets them plugged in and it solves the volunteer problem. But for most churches, this strategy would only work for “transfer growth.” After all, non-Christians can’t serve in the church, right? It is this very premise that Searcy challenges.

While there are certainly some tasks that need to be limited to Christians and a few that should be limited to “members” of the congregation, Searcy argues that some tasks can be used as avenues through which visitors, *especially non-Christians*, get a chance to connect with the church in a meaningful way. What better way for a non-Christian to see Christ in our church than allowing him or her to work alongside members setting up tables for a luncheon

or directing parking lot traffic for a special event?

SERVANT CARD

Available to All:

The church is a community of servants. Even if you are just “trying us on,” we want you to get involved. Below are a few ways to serve while you check us out!

- Communications, Marquis
- Hospitality, Set-up or Prepare Meals
- Outreach Events, Set-up & Clean-up
- Benevolence, Bread for Life Pantry
- Building Maintenance
- Small Groups
- Sound System Operations
- Welcome Ministry, greeters, ushers

Available to Members

Many additional opportunities are reserved for our members. If you are interested in any of these, please speak with one of our ministers or leaders.

- Leadership Training for Christ
- Kids For Christ
- Bible Hour, Teacher or Aide
- Bible Class, Teacher or Aide
- Youth Ministry, Host or Driver
- Youth Ministry, Teacher or Aide
- Small Group Leader or Teacher
- Worship Leader, Prayer or Table Service
- Worship Leader, Song Leading
- Lead a Devotional

: _____

Phone: _____

Of course, members need to understand their role in the “connection” process for this strategy to work. Every member must

be willing to mentor, encourage, and even teach visitors about Christ and His church.

The next question, after wrestling with the theological issues, is a logistical one. How do visitors know about service opportunities available to them? One solution is a **Servant Card**.

A Servant Card is made available in a rack, in the pews, or at a Welcome Center. It doesn’t list every service opportunity in the church, but it does identify “entry level” service opportunities that anyone, member or non-member, may choose to participate in. The goal of the card is to get people involved who haven’t been involved in the past. These tasks should be easy to begin doing with very little preparation or vetting. The key is to identify the availability of these service opportunities *to everyone*, even to those who are visiting.

On the card to the left, a visitor can clearly see that they are welcome to go to work, even while checking out the congregation. It has the added advantage of letting them know that, once a member, numerous other opportunities will become available to them as well. On this card, visitors who are interested in doing more are invited to speak with a minister or elder, opening the door to sharing with them about being a Christian if they are not already so.

This card is an example of one congregation’s decisions about what is open to visitors. The leadership must decide which service opportunities are limited to Christians and/or members. Most congregations restrict involvement in Children’s Ministries to well-established, active members for obvious safety reasons.

As with all “cards,” distribution and

collection is always difficult. However, the effort to engage visitors in acts of service

early may keep them from ever looking for a “back door.”

References:

Searcy, Nelson and Jennifer Henson. *Connect: How to Double your Number of Volunteers*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012).

Searcy, Nelson and Jennifer Henson. *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008).

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Reviewers: