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# ACCELERATE CHURCH GROWTH

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7 STEPS TO ENGAGE FIRST-TIME GUESTS

by Nelson Searcy & Steve Caton

Part of the Church Leader Resource Series



Seven minutes. It's not much time, but plenty can happen in that stretch. You can get a coffee at the corner bistro. You can complete a drive-through transaction at your bank. You can formulate a first impression—of a person, business, facility, or church.

Although they don't take long to acquire, first impressions matter.

Business leaders know great first impressions will produce repeat customers. Churches can learn much from the hotel and entertainment industries, which place importance upon making a positive impression to attract and retain their guests. Some of these same strategies can be used to bring people back to your church and to connect them to others within your community.

This is vital for churches because, when people stick, they engage in the ministries of the church, they serve their community through the church, they give to support the mission of the church, and they share the message of hope and redemption to the world.

This is assimilation: In broad terms, assimilation can be defined as the process used to encourage your first-time guests to continue coming back until they see and understand God's power, accept Jesus as their Savior, and commit themselves to the local church through membership. Without assimilation, the church becomes spectator-friendly at best.

First impressions shape the perception of a visitor's experience from that point forward. It's hard to change the impressions people adopt of your church and ministry. Great first impressions set the stage for future involvement and affiliation. Likewise, negative first impressions shut those doors of opportunity.

Many church leaders unintentionally overlook the significance of the first seven minutes because they view the worship service as the first encounter. In most situations, that's not the way it works. In the first seven minutes, guests are likely to deal with traffic and parking, enter the building, drop off kids, enter the worship center, etc. All this happens before the worship service begins. The first seven minutes have a major influence on the overall experience. Long before the first song begins, guests have started making up their minds about the future. They will overanalyze everything that happens and will lean toward returning or not returning without having heard a word from the pastor.

Do everything you can to make a great first impression, but be careful not to make it about you; make it about God and His love for each person coming through the doors each week.

Here are seven steps to engage first-time guests, from your initial hello to their return and—hopefully—active involvement:



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“I was amazed by the realization that our little congregation could more than double in a year if we were able to keep every first-time guest **God was sending us.**”

p. 21



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## #1 - DEFINE YOUR CHURCH'S FIRST-TIME GUEST PROCESS

It's easy to overlook the first impression guests get of your church. The case has already been made for making the first seven minutes positive ones. What will guests encounter in those first moments? What does the first-time guest experience look like at your church?

First, think about the importance of curb appeal. What feeling does your church building give to your guests? When people consider a potential house for purchase, the exterior creates an expectation of the interior. Curb appeal is important. The same is true about churches. The first impression sets the stage for the remainder of the experience. Does your church's exterior exude warmth and friendliness? Make sure it invites people to enter the doors to check it out firsthand.

Second, think about the importance of seeing friendly people. If guests aren't greeted and engaged early in their visits, they will be less likely to come back a second time.

Are the right people with the right information and attitudes in the right places at the right time? Can your welcome team be easily spotted? Is your signage adequate for first-time guests? These are important questions because they keep you on your toes. Continually evaluate your welcome team from the perspective of the guests and make adjustments as needed.



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“God has set up the perfect win-win scenario. He is giving us the new faces. Our responsibility is to show our gratitude and commitment by doing our part to turn those new faces into fully developing members.”

p. 27



## #2 - TRAIN YOUR WELCOME TEAM

If you want to improve the first-time experience guests have at your church, be sure to communicate clear expectations to your welcome team. Don't be afraid to raise the bar on staff and volunteer responsibilities. Although some leaders resist this strategy because they fear volunteers will choose to stop serving, history proves that leaders—paid or volunteer—tend to rise to the level of expectations. When little is expected, little is achieved. When much is expected, much is achieved.

What are some of the things you should expect of volunteers? Expect them to take their responsibilities seriously, be on time, arrange their own substitutes, maintain an awareness of what's happening at the church, notify leaders of any discrepancies, participate in training, pursue their own spiritual development and growth, and so on.

When guests enter your facility, they should encounter friendly, well-trained, informational volunteers who can direct them to any part of the facility or provide information about any ministry taking place. The welcome team members should know schedules, room locations, special events, and answers to any other question guests might pose.

So, what do you expect of your volunteers? What are the requirements they must meet to serve in their chosen ministry? If you will communicate these expectations early and often, you'll see your welcome team rise to the occasion and make your first-impression ministry sparkle.



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“A strong **First Response Team**—one capable of handling all of the details—is crucial to the development of a dynamic follow-up strategy that will resonate with your first time guests in a positive way.”

p. 102



## #3 - TREAT GUESTS AS YOU WOULD TREAT GUESTS IN YOUR OWN HOME

When it comes to churches, people have a lot of options. Of course, your church won't be a fit for everyone, but you can't allow the welcoming experience to interfere with the decision-making process. If people don't feel welcome, they will choose to go somewhere else regardless of what your church has to offer. The way your community behaves influences what guests think of your church. There are four key elements related to meeting the needs of your first-time guests: greet, direct, treat, and seat. Let's take a closer look at each of these.

**Greet.** People will respond positively to friendly faces. This is a significant—and often overlooked—fact of customer service. When guests encounter well-informed, positive hosts, they will ask questions and feel more connected right from the start.

Look again at your first-time guest process. Describe each step from the parking lot to the seat. How are guests greeted? There might be several opportunities along the way for people to be engaged—not only by members of your welcome team, but also by your church family. Are those team members prepared and in place? Is your church family ready for guests?

A welcoming environment can make a huge difference in the willingness of a person to return for future visits. That's why the first seven minutes must be the best seven minutes of their day. If you can get guests to return for a second visit, the likelihood of their continued involvement is greatly increased. This affects their openness to spiritual development and personal transformation.

**Direct.** The clearer your signage, the more user-friendly your facility will be. Make sure guests can find the age group ministries they need. Clearly mark the path to the worship center and restrooms. Place volunteers in strategic locations to make sure questions can be answered.

Over time, your familiarity with your facility will make it hard for you to identify places where guests could get confused. Tour your facility with the eyes of a guest and ask the questions they might ask. If answers to the questions aren't readily available, look for ways to make improvements.

The welcome team should be vigilant and willing to approach people who look as if they don't know where to go. Encourage the welcome team members to report the sources of confusion, and try to address those issues during the coming week.



**Treat.** People are accustomed to a certain standard of treatment when entering a place for the first time. The church should be a trendsetter in this area.

It's one thing to say hello; it's another to treat your guests as if you are glad they are joining you. Your church family should be prepped for greeting guests in a way that assures them they are welcome and wanted. Some churches offer gifts to their first-time guests. This is a great place to exercise some creativity. Coffee cups, T-shirts, books, reusable shopping bags, and the like are some of the more common gift ideas. Make sure every guest leaves with a sense of gratitude and appreciation for the church and its love for them.

The purpose of treating guests well is simple—you want to disarm any objections they might have that could prevent them from hearing the message they need. In other words, if people feel unwelcome and unnoticed, they will probably be thinking about their treatment rather than listening to the message.

Evaluating this area of ministry can be tricky, but the best way is to simply ask recent guests to fill out a survey either online or through your printed communications. People will be honest if you'll ask them a few simple questions. Use their responses to make adjustments in your ministry.

**Seat.** There are numerous schools of thought about this element of the ministry. Some churches designate the best seats for guests. There is a drawback to this approach: Those seats might remain empty if there aren't many guests on that particular day. Other churches seat guests as they arrive. This, too, can be an issue if your worship facility fills quickly or if the available seats are in the middle of rows. Many times, first-time guests arrive late, so locating accessible seating can be a problem.

There really are no universal solutions to this question. Your approach will be affected by the attendance habits of your community: Are they late arrivers? Is there limited seating? Your answers to those questions will help you determine how you should help guests find seats. Whatever you do, help your guests navigate the seating process to diminish their sense of anxiety for finding a place to sit.



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“The Church—your church—truly is a family  
expecting guests.”

p. 40



## #4 - DON'T LOSE TRACK OF YOUR GUESTS

Most guests want to slip in and out of a first visit drawing minimal attention to themselves. Guests often prefer to stay on the fringes for the first visit or two in order to observe the community and get their bearings. Your job is to find a balance between allowing guests to remain on the edge and making sure they don't get lost in the crowd—and forgotten.

Because an important part of the experience is making follow-up contact with guests after their first visit, you'll need to engage your guests in a way that prompts them to give some personal information. Some churches use tear-off stubs or loose insert cards in their worship bulletins. Others register guests upon arrival. Many churches register everyone in attendance so the guests don't feel singled out.

Whatever you do, gathering information about first-time guests is vital. There are certain pieces of information you should collect—name, address, phone, e-mail, ages of children, and so on. Once gathered, this information must be stored so it is retrievable. You need to be able to track guests from their first contact or visit. You need to know how many people have visited the church once but never returned. You also need to know how many have been attending but never pursued membership. These are helpful pieces of data for churches of all sizes.

Handling all that information can be daunting, however. Most churches need more than a paper and pen process for tracking their guests properly. [Church management software](#) offers easy-to-use tracking. Think of it as a lens through which you can observe and measure your impact on the community you serve. It's a powerful tool that should empower the people, systems, and processes that support deeper engagement and life transformation.

Using a church management system, your church can follow individuals throughout their history with the church. You can track participation in groups, activities, worship, and serving. You can sort the list according to membership status. You can even search for any subset of people within the congregation and identifying trends throughout your community.

Church Community Builder's [web-based church management software](#) (ChMS) supports these goals by eliminating data silos and unifying core management tools and critical people-driven data into one place. It goes a step further by providing fully integrated community tools to help people connect, communicate, serve, and build relationships. Church members benefit from greater engagement and an improved sense of belonging. Your church benefits from robust insight into overall involvement, growth, and impact.



No matter which system your church chooses, one thing is clear: If you lose track of your guests, they are not likely to return. So, be sure the system you choose is adept at tracking the “faces” as well as the numbers.



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“A large part of ministry is knowing how to do our part to keep the people He sends us as we trust Him to stir their hearts.”

p. 82

## #5 - ENCOURAGE FEEDBACK VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

Guests have fresh eyes with which to assess your church—from the parking lot to the children’s classrooms, from navigating a new building to listening to the pastor for the first time. You should encourage your guests (and your whole community, for that matter) to provide feedback about their experience at your church via their social networks. Consider creating a Twitter hashtag for your church and encourage attenders to use it when commenting about the church.

The buzz generated by satisfied guests pays huge dividends. That’s why you need to create positive experiences that prompt people to remark—verbally and through social media. Encourage the public conversation about your church and its remarkable, memorable treatment of guests.

The truth is people will remark about your church. People will share their thoughts about how they were welcomed, directed, and treated. This point should be stressed with every member of the host team. You want to do everything you can to make sure those remarks are positive.

What do you think people are saying about your church? Are they talking about their great experience? Are they encouraging others to check it out? If not, you need to investigate and look for ways to get people talking, visiting, and sticking.



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“Preparation is essential to any  
successful endeavor.”

p. 39



## #6 - FOLLOW UP AND FOLLOW THROUGH WITH YOUR GUESTS

Some churches have a great team to welcome first-time guests. There is a great strategy for collecting guest information—for adding the data to the management system—but then the follow through never takes place. That's when a great first impression is wasted, because guests never receive a follow-up contact and they choose not to return.

Especially if you tell guests they will be contacted by a staff member in the coming week, make sure that happens. To keep track of the contacts to be made each week, a database management system helps. For example, the Church Community Builder allows you to assign contacts for follow-up and track activity so no one falls through the cracks. When the contact is made, the staff member can post notes to the file and transfer the contact to the next person.

It's probably not possible for every visitor to receive a personal follow-up visit and, honestly, most people no longer expect that personal touch. They do expect, however, to receive communication from the church. They want to know more about the church. They want to know about upcoming activities that are relevant to their family. They need to be made aware of special events. They want to know their visit was noticed and welcomed.



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“Sending your guests a personalized, handwritten, first-class-stamped card is well worth the time and effort it requires.”

p. 96

What happens after someone visits your church the first time? Does someone follow up with your guests? Do they merely ask a series of scripted questions or are their needs being addressed?

Here are three tips for effective follow-up:

**Follow up fast!** People want to receive communication from the church within 48 hours of their visit, whether it's contact by mail, by phone, or in person. Making this a priority will help guests feel valued and help them make the best decision regarding their church home.

**Be friendly!** Put your best foot forward. Make sure the people who make the calls are personable and knowledgeable.

**Be sensitive** Train the follow-up team to ask questions and listen. Effective follow-up meets people where they are. For example, if finances are a major stress in a guest's life and the person following up begins talking about an upcoming mission trip, the guest will conclude the church really isn't interested in anything other than its own agenda.

Guests will often point to the follow-up as being significant in the decision-making process for a return visit. And remember: Should a guest decide your church isn't a good fit, be prepared to help identify other potential churches. Churches aren't in competition; they are, ultimately, working toward the same goal.



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“Everything speaks to your guests, and they don't stop listening when the service ends.”

p. 103



## #7 - CONNECT GUESTS TO YOUR CHURCH COMMUNITY

Your guests may enjoy visiting, feel welcomed by your team and at home in your church, receive proper tracking, be prompted to tweet something nice about you, and receive proper follow-up—but *if they do not move from guest to committed community member, all this work is a loss.*

In its simplest form, the entire assimilation process can be boiled down to the three Rs of retention: return, relationships, and responsibility. When guests attend the first time, your goal is to get them to return for a second time. When they do return, your goal is something different. If you keep asking them only to return, they will become spectators. Rather than asking them to return, encourage them to build relationships.

It's possible the need for friends drove them to you in the first place. Make it easy for them to find and get involved with a group similar to them demographically and/or geographically. Once they have established some relationships, guide them toward taking responsibility for their own spiritual development and for a portion of one of the ministries within the church. When people begin to take responsibility, they are on their way toward becoming members, which is the final step in the assimilation process.

No matter how friendly your greeters are, how great your music is, how awesome your preaching is, or how fancy your building is, if people don't find relationships and take on responsibility, they won't be staying at your church very long.



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“If you decide to make improvements in the way you assimilate newcomers, you will see growth.”

p. 161



## CONCLUSION

Most people who visit your church won't come to know Christ immediately. Over time, as they interact with others and hear the Word of God spoken and taught, they will begin to serve and get involved—and give their lives to God. This is when people begin taking ownership of their responsibilities. Their connections to the church are solidified. This paves the way for them to know Christ and be changed by Him.

Though membership is the end of the assimilation process, it is the beginning of the engagement process. As a leader, you want people to develop in their walk with Christ and to affect their families and communities from the perspective of a transformed mind.

This is the process of discipleship that is explained so simply in the Bible. With an intentional process for welcoming and keeping people in your community, your church will become known as a haven for those who are hurting. Assimilation and engagement lead to life transformation by giving people the means and the opportunity to become maturing followers of Christ.

Assimilation and engagement don't just happen automatically. It takes time, planning, and persistence to make it work. That process begins with the first seven minutes of a visit, continues through the worship service and the follow-up, and extends through new relationships and committed responsibility. Handling the details of this process for your entire church community is easier with a tool like Church Community Builder's web-based church management software. Effective technology should align well with your assimilation processes and help you develop fully functioning followers of Christ. When that's your goal, the church management technology will become an integral part of how to meet the needs of people within your church and community.

It all comes down to treating people with love and care. People matter to God. Guests need to know they matter to your church community. Growing caring, loving relationships—even within the church community—take time, energy, and effort. Systems and processes allow us to find ways to make sure everyone who comes through our church doors will have the opportunity to find eternal life, a relationship-based support system, and a place they can call their spiritual home.



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“Memorize the next sentence and embed it into your thinking: Everything speaks to first-time guests—everything.”

p. 54



a healthyCHURCH  
requires  
**FLEXIBLE**  
technology.

*Think of management software in terms of **building** a **house**: with some solutions the plans are already in place with little ability to **change**. The walls are **already** in place and you have to make your furniture fit their rooms. What sold us on CCB is the flexibility. We can **move the walls** and create rooms to fit our furniture. It has the **flexibility to do church the way we wanted to.***

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Nelson Searcy** is the founding and lead pastor of [The Journey Church](#). Started in 2002 in New York City, this groundbreaking church sees the majority of its growth coming from new believers and currently meets in several locations in Manhattan and Queens, as well as additional locations in San Francisco and Boca Raton, FL.

He is the author of over 75 church growth resources and 10 books, including two new books, *Connect: How to Double Your Number of Volunteers* and *The Greatness Principle: Finding Significance and Joy by Serving Others*.

Before founding The Journey, he served as Director of the Purpose Driven Community at Saddleback Church. He is also the founder of [ChurchLeaderInsights.com](#), the church leader training ministry of Nelson Searcy and The Journey Church.



**Steve Caton** has an extensive background in technology, fundraising, and church leadership. In addition to serving as an elder in his local church, Steve has served in key leadership roles with organizations that help churches and ministries foster greater constituent engagement and retention.

As a member of the leadership team at [Church Community Builder](#), Steve leverages his unique experience to help local churches strengthen the systems and processes which support life transformation and growth. He is also the primary contributing author on the popular blog [Church Community Matters](#). While software is what he does, impacting and influencing the local church is what really matters to him... as well as enjoying Colorado powder with his wife and two sons! [Follow Steve on Twitter](#).

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