

The Welcoming Church: Usher/Greeter



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Usher/Greeter" in your team meetings.

At BuildingChurchLeaders.com, we recognize that there is no "one size fits all" approach to church leadership training. Every church—and every team—is unique, with its own set of strengths and challenges that stand between where you are and where you want to be. That is why we have created Training Tracks—to help each church get from where you are today to where you want to be tomorrow.

This resource, "Usher/Greeter," is part of *The Growing Church* Training Track—Level One. This basic level includes assessments, theoretical and biblical foundations, practical skills training, case studies, and a retreat plan for an extended training time. When you have completed "Usher/Greeter," move on through the other downloads in level one, and then on to levels two and three, which also incorporate multiple types of training content to dig deeper into the specific opportunities and challenges of *The Growing Church*.

- 1. Select a learning tool.** This specific guide is designed to help you provide orientation and basic training to church ushers and greeters. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.
- 2. Select a handout.** Examine a sample job description (p. 13) and modify it for your church. To consider the welcome greeters and ushers should provide visitors and guests, and challenge your team to strive for the best welcomes possible, have your greeters and ushers read "My First Sunday in Your Church" (pp. 8–10). In "Understanding the Offering" (pp. 16–17), they can reflect on how your church's offering is an act of worship rooted in history. Have them review the important safety and protection they provide by reading "Urgent Ushering" and "Preventing Violence at Church" (pp. 18–22).
- 3. Photocopy the handout.** Let's say you selected "My First Sunday in Your Church." Photocopy as many copies as you need—you do not need to ask for permission to photocopy any material from Building Church Leaders (as long as you are using the material in a church, ministry, or educational setting and are not charging for it).
- 4. Prepare for the discussion.** We recommend you read the Scripture passages and identify key discussion questions. Think about how you will apply the principles found in the handout.
- 5. Lead the discussion.** Each handout can be read within 5 minutes. After you have allowed time for reading, begin the discussion by asking one of the provided questions or by discussing the interactive exercise given. Be ready to move the discussion to specific issues your church is facing.

Each Building Church Leaders handout can be discussed in 15 or 20 minutes. Your usher/greeter team will still have plenty of time to discuss its agenda.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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A High, Humble Calling

Helping others worship is an ancient form of God-honoring service.

1 Chronicles 9:17–32

For several years, a middle-aged couple stood post at one of the main entrances to my church. Sue and Hank (not their real names) were willing volunteers who arrived early every week and immediately took their places. Sue was warm and outgoing, and she exuded a helpful attitude. Hank, a businessman, applied the same skills to greeting as (I imagine) he did to business: calculating, impersonal efficiency. While Sue greeted only a handful of people each Sunday, spending most of her time pointing parents toward Sunday school rooms, Hank got to everybody and nobody all at once: he shook dozens of hands, but he reached out to almost no one.

Sue and Hank stood at opposite ends of the gifted greeter (or usher) skill set. Warm, genuine greetings are a must, but thinking one step ahead and trying to get to everybody is important, too. Learning these skills takes time and self-awareness. The most important aspect of serving as an usher or a greeter is not a matter of possessing the right skills, however. It is a matter of having a servant's heart.

Ushers and greeters are a catchall for Sunday morning needs. They serve on the front line: welcoming the congregation, orienting them to the church facility and the specifics of the worship service, and responding to any unexpected needs that arise during a service. Often, their work is rather humble—passing out bulletins, seating latecomers, picking up loose papers, and pointing the way to the washroom—but that is not the full extent of their service.

Worship Leaders in the Temple

Biblically speaking, the function of an usher parallels the work of a group the Old Testament refers to as doorkeepers. From the tribe of Levi and the family of Korah, doorkeepers “were responsible for guarding the thresholds of the Tent” (1 Chron. 9:19). They helped lead the people of Israel in worship by ensuring the purity of the people coming to worship. Before the temple was built, they stood at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, where sacrifices and purification took place.

According to 2 Kings 22, doorkeepers had a hand in collecting money from the people and then turning it over to the priests. They are considered in the same lists as the singers and scribes who were essential to Hebrew worship. These doorkeepers—sons of Korah—knew the beauty of Israel's worship from firsthand experience. They authored some of the most memorable words in the Bible: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God” (Ps. 42:1); “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1); and of course, “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked” (Ps. 84:10).

Worship Leaders in the Church

A lot has changed since the Old Testament world of these psalms and the people who first spoke them. Today, we cannot walk through a door and into the dwelling place of God; the Holy Spirit dwells within each Christian (1 Cor. 6:19). When we come together to worship, we can't inspect people for purity in the church foyer. We can, however, take the roles we play in worship seriously, and ushers and greeters can learn something from their ancient counterparts.

First, standing at the door when people meet to worship is more than a job, it's a calling. In Israel, generation after generation of Korahites stood at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (and later the temple). From what we know in the Bible, these doorkeepers did not spend their time zoning out, far from the action. They helped

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prepare for the services by caring for the furnishings of the temple and preparing the oil and incense used in worship. They saw themselves as worship leaders, together with their cousins—other Levites—the priests, singers, and scribes.

Ushers and greeters serve God today by standing at their doors, directing visitors, helping take up the offering, lending a hand to pastors, and stepping in when urgent needs arise. (The first priority of a doorkeeper is, after all, the safety of those who are worshiping.) When they do this, they are not simply mirroring the skills of the well-trained staff at symphony hall or the downtown convention center. They are joining with centuries of people who have loved God and have valued the event that takes place when his people gather together in worship.

—CHRIS BLUMHOFER is a freelance writer and a doctoral student in New Testament at Duke University and a candidate for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); © 2007, updated 2012 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

Discuss

1. What are the essential skills and traits for potential ushers and greeters?
2. How might different personality types approach the roles differently? What might these qualities add to the role?
3. What can we learn from the Korahites about an usher and greeters unique and important role and calling? How can we apply this role and calling to our modern church setting?

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Greeting as Ministry

How the usher/greeter's role fits into the ministry of the church.

Romans 12:13

Phillip Johnson, one of the more widely-acclaimed American architects, designed several noteworthy buildings in the country, including the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. According to Johnson, the most important part of any structure is the “goes-into.” The “goes-into” is that part or place where a person “goes-into” the experience or the building.

The “goes-into” in a building is what:

- the tee shot is to golf ...
- the opening is to a speech ...
- the overture is to a symphony ...
- the first impression is to a new relationship.

The “goes-into” is what greeters and ushers are for the local church, and, in some cases, for Jesus Christ.

The communication that occurs in the first four minutes of human contact is so crucial that it almost always determines whether strangers will remain strangers or become acquaintances and perhaps friends. If this is true, and it applies to all who walk through our church doors, what an opportunity and challenge it provides to greeters! Those church members who welcome the people God has brought to church have the chance to positively influence these important visitors in those first crucial minutes. In the process, it is the greeters who often hold the key to whether guests return.

As Christians, and especially as greeters, we are representing Christ. Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of Jesus Christ.” We’re reminded in 2 Corinthians 5:20 that “We are Christ’s ambassadors.” What is an ambassador? The dictionary definition is: “A diplomatic official of the highest rank, appointed and accredited as a representative.” Wow! We are representative officials of the highest rank! That’s what being a greeter is all about—representing Jesus Christ in that first important connection.

In the first greeter’s class I organized, the participants were asked the questions: “As a greeter, how do we want our guests to feel?” “What is our primary responsibility?” “We are the first contact—why are we here?” “What are we trying to achieve?” Here were some of their answers ...

- to meet people’s needs
- to put people at ease
- to make people feel our genuine interest
- to make people feel at home
- to make people feel comfortable
- to meet new friends
- to make people feel needed
- to make people want to come back
- to make people feel loved
- to make people feel sincerity
- to keep the ones we have happy
- to make people feel important
- to do pre-evangelism

You might add or delete a few; but it’s not a bad list. Their comments reminded me that William James, Father of American psychology, once said: “The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.” John Dewey put it this way: “The deepest urge in human nature is the desire to be important.” Do you know

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the first thing convicts ask for when put into jail? If you said the newspaper, you are right. They want to read about themselves. They need to feel important.

If we agree that making people feel loved, appreciated, and important is a primary objective as a greeter, the next question would be, how do we go about doing that? I asked a similar question to my first greeter's class: "How can we show people we are genuinely interested in them?" "How can we show people that we care?" Here were some of their responses:

- a warm handshake
- a smile
- to listen
- talk in terms of their interests
- remember their names
- maintain eye contact
- touch appropriately

Good responses. Perhaps you can add some more.

Someone once said, "The world is divided into guests and hosts." You probably know people who are perpetual guests. They never take the responsibility of a host for people's needs, feelings, concerns, comfort, or hospitality. They seem to exist to be served not to serve—others are always responsible to take care of them. When walking into a room, they seem to say, "Well, here I am. What are you going to do about it?" instead of saying, "Well, look who's here. It's great to see you! How have you been?"

When we become a Christian, we are no longer a guest in this world. We become partners with God in hosting life for others. And what do hosts do? They welcome people into their lives. Their first concern is that their guests enjoy themselves and feel acceptance and love. They make their guests feel welcome. They make their guests feel important. Can you recall when someone was an outstanding host for you? A good host is not a position or a task. It is a self-image ... a mindset ... a lifestyle; especially in God's house.

This is what greeting is really all about. It is a ministry for every Christian. And, frankly, while our focus here is on what happens around the church doors, it doesn't stop there. Greeting—being an ambassador, a representative—should carry into every phase of our lives, as Christ-imitators. If our conversation involves patient listening, empathy, understanding, willingness to be vulnerable, sharing our experiences, and being sensitive to areas of need and interest with our guests, we will become people that others truly cannot resist. Without a doubt, they will want to be in our company and, more importantly, in the company of Jesus.

—CHARLES ARN is president of Church Growth, Inc. (Monrovia, California); © 2012 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

Discuss

1. In what specific ways do ushers and greeters represent Christ in their roles?
2. Do you agree with the list of how you want your guests to feel? What would you add or delete?
3. What does it mean to be a host in the church setting?

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When Everyone Is a Greeter

Train your entire church in the art and importance of greeting.

Romans 16:16

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Greeters help guests feel comfortable and secure in an unfamiliar setting. Often churches mark official greeters with nametags, which can be helpful when a visitor is looking for someone to help them find their way. But might a warm welcome mean less to a new guest when it is coming from someone clearly designated as an official greeter? Daniel Brown addresses this question:

Besides the usual reminders to be warm and helpful—“May I escort you to the third grade classroom so you can see where your son will be having fun this morning?”—we train greeters at our church in how to use camouflage. By that, I mean we don’t really have identifiable greeters. Instead, our ushers—the ones who politely insist on filling in all empty seats and arrange people so that everyone, even newcomers, can sit next to someone else—have name badges, but not our greeters.

A greeting by an official greeter doesn’t register as a genuine greeting to most guests. Greeting is what greeters are supposed to do; it’s their job. Research tells us that unless a newcomer has several meaningful interactions with people in the church in the first few weeks that they attend, they won’t continue to come. An interchange with someone wearing a badge doesn’t figure in that count. If, on the other hand, the greeter knows that she is a greeter, but the guest does not, that chatty welcome offered when the family first arrives really means something.

When I served as pastor of The Coastlands, I focused my training on the entire congregation. We were blessed with a healthy emphasis on cell groups, and each cell group leader/apprentice was a guerilla greeter. Though I can’t claim 100 percent success, we strove to live by a simple rule: if you walk in a room and spot someone whose name you do not know, head straight for that person and introduce yourself.

—DANIEL BROWN served as pastor of The Coastlands in Santa Cruz, California for 22 years; © 2008 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

Discuss

1. What are the benefits of having “camouflaged” greeters? What are the disadvantages?
2. In what ways might your church benefit from camouflaged greeters?
3. How are you communicating the importance of greeting ministry to the entire congregation?

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My First Sunday in Your Church

Ushers and greeters can learn a lot when they see themselves from the outside.

Deuteronomy 10:19

In this article, the author challenges church leaders to put on new lenses when they consider the work of those who make first contact with visitors. Read through the article. When you're finished, review the four recommendations the author makes. Then, ask yourself how that recommendation applies to your role.

Today I visited your church. I looked up the address, called the church office for service times, and got myself and my three children ready on time.

My family and I are new in town, and this is the fourth church we've visited. We step inside, hopeful. Perhaps here we'll find help teaching the Word to our children. Perhaps here we'll grow spiritually. Or maybe we'll receive the same welcome we got at the other churches.

"Good morning! And isn't it a fantastic day!" says the greeter, handing us programs.

"Yes. I'm so glad it's cooling off."

"Are you visiting?" he asks.

"Yes. We just moved here."

"Isn't that wonderful!" he says, stepping back and looking over our shoulders. "Mr. Charlie! And how are you today?"

Evidently everyone has taken the same greeter class. Again and again someone offers a limp hand saying, "I'm so glad you came," without smiling at all, quickly moving on, job finished. I am itching to ask about the women's Bible study, choir practice, and Sunday school. But then they're gone, chatting with a good friend in the next pew.

After wandering around between Sunday school and church, trying to find a door to the sanctuary that doesn't open into the choir pit, we're late. The sanctuary is nearly full, but there's one empty row—at the very front. So we walk past hundreds of eyes, "new people" on parade.

As we settle the kids, a lady on the end whispers to someone behind her, "I just don't know where John and Steve are going to sit now." I chose the deacons' row. I cringe and turn, searching for another pew to move my family to, but the place is packed and the music is starting.

After the service, I buckle my children into the car, pile the take-home papers and Bibles on the dash, and I start to cry.

This is a too-true story. I have visited four churches over the last three months, and I am frustrated and disheartened enough to quit church altogether. Why has it been so difficult to find a church home?

I have been an active church member, someone people called for counsel and prayer, someone my pastor called if he needed help with a project. We're in a new town, and I don't mind starting over. And the new church doesn't have to be just like the one back home. But, I think, we should be made to feel welcome.

The Importance of Feeling Displaced

Those who have belonged to the same church for several years may not remember what being a visitor is like. A simple exercise can re-sensitize you: visit a church where no one knows you.

Go outside your community, outside the denomination. Go without knowing what to wear or what ministries are available. Pay attention to how you're received. Ask yourself how you'd feel if you were longing for a church home right then. Note what this church does well, and what it doesn't.

Some churches intentionally do this once per year. Cancelling all services, they declare it a "visitation Sunday" for members to attend other churches. To maximize effectiveness, urge members to go where they are a

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stranger to everyone there, and to be prepared to return with a report of what they've learned. The discussion of those reports can lead to important insights about your church.

I'm ready to get to work, ready to make your church "our" church, if I'm welcome. Welcome, however, does not happen automatically. It involves intentionally setting aside natural habits to show genuine care. It involves welcoming your visitors in the same way that Christ would: with open hearts.

How to Not Lose Sight of Visitors

After our experience, I've come up with four things leaders can do to help visitors feel at home.

1. Don't worry about your own needs, but the needs of the visitor.

I can implement this into my role by _____

2. Choose hospitality over a quick greeting.

I can implement this into my role by _____

3. Recognize Sunday school as an initial contact point.

I can implement this into my role by _____

4. Become a visitor for a day at a church in my community.

One thing I learned from this experience that I can implement is _____

— JENNIFER SMITH-MORRIS is a writer and active member of New Covenant Church in Valdosta, Georgia; adapted from our sister publication, *Leadership Journal*, © 2001, updated 2012 Christianity Today/*Leadership Journal*. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net.

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The Art of Hosting

The importance of hosting guests, rather than greeting visitors.

Hebrews 13:2

No one joins a church without first visiting.

While this may not seem to be a startling new insight, my experience is that churches do not put much thought into the first impressions they give newcomers. But if they were to do so, the benefit would be a significant increase in membership growth. Here are some suggestions on how to extend a more cordial welcome to the new people God has brought into your sphere of influence.

First, I'd recommend that you don't call them "visitors." A *visitor* is defined as "a person who resides temporarily; one who goes or comes to inspect; one who makes a short stay at a place for a particular purpose."

Rather, refer to your newcomers as "guests." Introduce this term into the vocabulary of your church leaders as they discuss and describe those who are attending for the first (and second and third) time. A *guest* is defined as "a person welcomed into one's house; a person to whom hospitality is extended; a person held in honor who is due special courtesies."

It is surprising how our language affects our perceptions of others; which, in turn, affects our behavior toward them. Seeing newcomers as guests, rather than visitors, is a first step toward extending to them the honor and importance they deserve.

Who Greets Your Guests?

Most churches that welcome new attendees station "greeters" near the front door of the church or the sanctuary entrance. A nice gesture, but it won't make much of a difference as to whether or not guests return.

The dictionary defines a *greeter* as: "one who meets or extends welcome in a specified manner; one who gives a formal salutation at a meeting."

Let me suggest you begin using a new term, which implies an entirely different role and relationship: "Hosts." The term is defined as "ones who receive or entertain socially; ones who open their homes for a special event; ones who take particular care and concern that guests are well accommodated."

What Do Hosts Do?

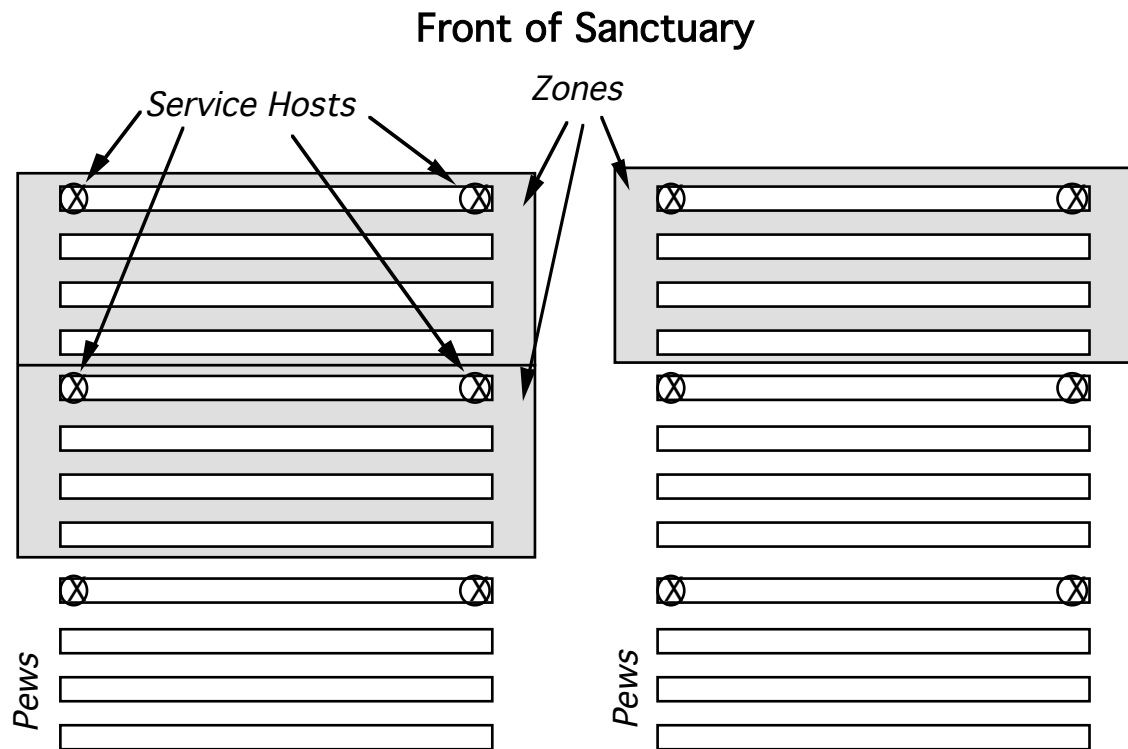
Our research indicates the most important question guests are asking during their first visit is, "Is this a friendly church?" And the primary way they determine the answer is through the number of people who *initiate* a conversation with them.

First impressions begin the moment your guests drive into your parking lot. It's an important moment because you'll never have a second chance for a good first impression. As a result, I encourage churches to deploy *parking hosts* in areas where people will be getting out of their cars to attend your service. This includes porticos where passengers are dropped off, street parking areas, public parking, church parking lots with a particularly keen eye focused on the visitor parking. On rainy days parking hosts should have umbrellas to distribute and escort those who need help. Parking hosts should be well acquainted with the Sunday school classrooms, nursery, restrooms, and general directions. A printed map of the church campus should be given to any newcomer who seems to need one.

Once your guests are inside the building another group should be ready to extend the welcome mat—*lobby hosts*. These people take overcoats or umbrellas and hang them up for guests. They may escort a child to a classroom or a mother to the nursery. They may even sit with guests during the service if it seems appropriate. Obviously more than just several lobby hosts will be necessary to effectively welcome all guests.

Service Hosts

Some years ago Faith Community Church (Covina, CA) developed a creative way to help guests feel welcomed. They appointed *service hosts* who took up their positions in the sanctuary 10-15 minutes prior to the service. Teams of two service hosts are responsible for one designated zone. Service hosts are stationed every fifth row at the end of each row. It looks something like this:



The task of the service hosts/hostesses is to greet newcomers who sit in their block of seats. They welcome newcomers/guests, engage them in conversation and introduce them to others sitting near them. Immediately following the service they are the first ones to go to the visitors, thank them for coming, and encourage them to come back.

After the Service

The most common reason newcomers return to a church is, “the friendliness of the people.” Interviews with visitors indicate there is a ten-minute window in their visit when newcomers are most (or least) impressed with the church’s “friendliness.” That moment is the ten minutes immediately following the conclusion of the service. During this relatively brief moment, more than any other, newcomers are assessing whether the people at this church are genuinely friendly, or if it is just an act. Up until the service concludes it is easy for newcomers to follow the “rules” and get lost in the crowd. But once the final prayer is said, all rules are off. If people in the church seem friendly and caring in this after-service moment, research tells us that it makes a significant impression on newcomers—particularly if they have come alone. Therefore, even if you don’t have service hosts, consider deploying *after-service hosts*. These are people who look for newcomers and engage them in conversation right after the service. Other churches station after-service hosts near the pastor as he/she is shaking hands with worshipers on the way out. When the pastor encounters a newcomer, the after-service hosts are introduced to the newcomers and take over from there.

Coffee and Refreshments

The hallowed moment in the Sunday morning schedule where people congregate after the service for coffee and refreshments can be one of the most constructive—or destructive—moments in extending a welcome to newcomers. While the ten minutes following the service is the most important moment of friendship, the coffee time is the second most important.

If a guest comes to the service alone the chances are good that he/she will not even make it to the coffee table without a personal invitation; it’s simply too socially threatening. A couple who visits may go together, but they will not stay long unless someone engages them in conversation.

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Consequently, another set of hosts should be *coffee hosts*. Coffee hosts stay in the coffee and cookies area (you should have no trouble finding volunteers) looking for newcomers who are alone. Their task is to engage these people in conversation and not leave them alone until they have introduced the guests to someone else in the coffee area.

A coffee area where guests are ignored is worse than no coffee area at all. If a guest visits your coffee area but no one seems to notice their presence, you may as well hand them a 3x5 card with the words: “Do you want into this church? Well, plan on working very hard to get in. Because it won’t be easy.” Most will read your “card,” leave, and not return.

Conclusion

An intentional plan for welcoming guests does not mean your welcome is artificial. It means you care enough about extending a welcome to newcomers that you have a plan to see it happen. An effective welcome is one of your best assurances for making a good first impression on guests who visit your new service. It also allows for a larger number of members to be involved in welcoming newcomers. And as these members perform their duty on the days they are assigned as hosts, they will be increasingly friendly with guests even when they are “off duty.” And, most importantly, your newcomers will feel welcomed and be far more likely to return.

—CHARLES ARN is president of Church Growth, Inc. (Monrovia, CA); © 2012 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

Discuss

1. What are the strategic areas where you might employ hosts in your church?
2. How might your church benefit from additional greetings and time for connection to leadership?
3. How would we define an “effective welcome”?

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Sample Job Description

Community Church

123 Main Street
Anywhere, State 00001 (111) 123-4567

Usher/Greeter

JOB SUMMARY

Ushers and greeters are an essential part of Community Church's services. Their work requires skills in both anticipating and reacting to diverse situations. These men and women facilitate worship by welcoming attendees, administering the offering, minimizing distractions, and helping the congregation understand the flow of Community Church's services.

TERM OF SERVICE

Ushers and greeters are volunteers. They serve annual appointments at the request of the head usher and with the approval of the pastoral staff.

REPORTING

Ushers and greeters report to the head usher.

EXPECTATIONS

Ushers and greeters are highly visible members of Community Church. They must be dependable, hospitable, and gracious. As with other leaders, they must commit to the highest standards of Christian living. In accordance with Community Church guidelines for leaders, it is recommended that all ushers and greeters join a small group or an accountability group.

ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

- Arrive at least 30 minutes before services (dressed appropriately) and begin to ensure the cleanliness and safety of the sanctuary and foyer.
- Welcome church attendees as they arrive, especially people who appear to be unfamiliar with Community Church's layout and service style.
- Distribute bulletins as people enter the sanctuary.
- Guide people with special needs to appropriate seating.
- Discreetly guide latecomers to seats at appropriate points in the service.
- Take the offering and immediately bring the collection to the head usher.
- Organize the flow of the congregation as they come forward for Communion or other events.
- Monitor the congregation during the service to see if any church members have a special need that requires assistance.
- Collect bulletins and any trash after the congregation leaves.
- Posses a thorough knowledge of Community Church's policies for handling medical emergencies, service disruptions, or church evacuations.

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10 Questions Every Usher Should Ask

Are you attending to all of the aspects of your role?

Romans 12:4–8

Some tasks that fall on an usher or greeter are obvious: collecting the offering, for example, or handing out bulletins. Use this checklist to track the responsibilities that can too easily be overlooked. Place a checkmark in the box for any action that you currently take. If you come across a step that is not part of your role, or that would be beyond your ability to take on, find out who is responsible for that area, and make a note in the space provided.

Before anyone arrives:

- Has the parking area been inspected for hazards (such as cracks, debris, ice/snow)?

- Have entry areas been inspected for hazards (such as steps in disrepair, loose railings, wetness, loose or torn entry pads, inadequate lighting)?

- Have the halls and worship areas been inspected for hazards (loose or wrinkled carpet, wet floors, debris, electrical concerns)?

As people arrive:

- Am I alert for people who may be there to do harm rather than to worship?

- Do I have a way to communicate, in case of emergency, with other ushers or people in other places in the church?

- Do I know where to find fire extinguishers, first-aid kits, and defibrillators, and do I have access to a phone?

- Have I been trained to administer CPR and use a defibrillator?

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Once the service starts:

- Is someone walking the entire building looking for security issues?

- In case of an emergency, do I know how to respond and assist others to safety?

When the service is over:

- Have I made sure everyone has exited safely, and have I inspected the facility for hazards?

—adapted from the *Your Church Safety Alert* newsletter; © 2007 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.ChurchSafety.com.

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Understanding the Offering

What's really happening at the usher's most visible moment.

1 Corinthians 16:2

This article explains the offering and why it is structured the way that it is. As you read it, consider how the manner in which your church takes a collection reflects the values and emphases of your church.

The offering is, perhaps, the most fundamental act of Christian worship. It's certainly one of the oldest, having been part of Israel's worship from earliest times. Upon entering Canaan, the people were told to offer the firstborn of their livestock as a thanksgiving (Ex. 13:11–12), and, according to Justin Martyr, the collection of money was a part of early Christian worship.

The offering is that part of the service where people formally dedicate themselves—"offer" themselves—to God anew. Since how we spend money is close to who we are, the giving of money has become the key symbol of "offering ourselves as a living sacrifice."

A Variety of Offerings

There are three principle ways in which churches give the opportunity for people to offer their gifts:

- **Offering box.** Some churches place boxes at the back of the church so that people can simply deposit their offerings as they enter or leave. This answers the objections of those who think the passing of plates merely a way to collect money from a captive audience. The offering box also emphasizes the individual offering his or her gifts to God.
- **Passing the plate.** Most churches pass offering plates or bags among people in the pews. Since the passing of the plates is preceded or concluded with a public prayer of dedication, this method emphasizes public thanksgiving and dedication, and more consciously ties the spiritual and physical aspects of faith
- **Placing on the table.** Occasionally (perhaps on a stewardship Sunday or soon after), members of congregation can individually walk forward and place their offerings in offering plates placed at the front the sanctuary. This takes a greater step of faithfulness, requiring people to walk forward.

Attention to Details

If the church decides to pass plates—the usual procedure—a number of decisions must be made.

- **What to do with guests.** Some churches announce that visitors, as guests, needn't feel obliged to give. Others think that since the offering is founded in thanksgiving and aimed toward God, no one is a guest, so all should be invited to express thanks and dedication.
- **What to do before and after.** Leaders are wise to craft how they announce the offering, making sure to highlight not the duty of "having to give" but the privilege of giving thanks in this way. Some make use of Paul's encouragement: "Each one of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves the cheerful giver." Since this form of offering emphasizes the public and corporate nature of the act, a prayer of thanksgiving and dedication usually accompanies it.
- **What the people do.** While the ushers collect the offering, the congregation can simply sit in silence, using the time to pray and reflect on ways they can dedicate themselves anew to God. Sometimes the choir or a soloist will sing, not as a way to entertain people during a lull in the service but as a song-offering to God. Often the organist plays quietly, concluding the piece soon after the ushers are ready to come forward, but not stopping abruptly (which would signal that, in fact, the organ was mere filler).
- **Where to put the plates.** After the plates are passed, they can simply be taken out of the sanctuary. Many churches think it better, however, to bring them forward as an act of public thanksgiving and commitment, with the congregation joining in a hymn of praise, usually some form of the doxology. Often the plates are placed on the Communion table, showing publicly the tie between the spiritual and physical, and reminding the worshipers of the Incarnation of our Lord.

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—MARK GALLI is senior managing editor of *Christianity Today* magazine; adapted from *Leadership Handbooks of Practical Theology, Vol. 1: Word & Worship* (Baker, 1992); a division of Baker Book House Company. Used by permission.

Discuss

1. How does our church conduct offerings? What do ushers need to know and/or do in order to assist in the collection?
2. What does our offering routine communicate about our church, and how we feel about giving and its role in worship?
3. What do we communicate to guests about giving?

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Urgent Ushering

What to do when serious situations occur during a service.

1 Peter 4:8–11

Ushers and greeters are the first contact many people make when they enter a church. They show people to open pews or chairs. They find special seating for the hearing-impaired, the wheelchair-bound, and for parents with children in the nursery. Ushers assist with taking up the collection, guiding people to restrooms or classrooms, making an attendance count, and doing an initial sanctuary clean-up at the end of a service.

Ushers and greeters, however, should be trained and prepared as first responders when problems develop or emergencies occur. They have the best access both to the sanctuary once a service is in progress and to emergency communications to summon help when it is needed.

Clarity at the Top

For every service, a qualified person needs to be designated the head or “lead” usher or greeter (at least for the day). This person should demonstrate wisdom and the ability to be decisive when necessary.

Inclement Weather

Most weather emergencies can be anticipated more than any other problem. In cases of potential blizzard conditions or flooding, services can be cancelled and people notified ahead of time. But in the case of severe storms or tornados, advance notice is usually impossible. Ushers need a plan for weather evacuation to a safe place—if there is time.

Ushers need to:

- Have access to a weather radio at the church to hear any warnings.
- Practice rapid evacuation to a designated safe place or building shelter.
- Determine quickly if there were any injuries.
- Maintain calm in the midst of a terrifying situation.

Threats to the Congregation

Fires and bomb threats are rare, but they do occur and can create critical situations. Fires can start spontaneously or because of a malicious arsonist. Bomb threats can occur when a mentally unstable person wants to harm a spouse or cause harm to a church and its members. Ushers need to have a plan in place for rapid evacuation in a fire, and their plan needs to take into account that smoke inhalation poses the greatest threat to people in the building. Also, since members often do not know where emergency exits are located and marked, ushers need to be able to guide people to the appropriate exits during an evacuation.

Ushers need to:

- Understand who will initiate fire department contact and use fire alarms.
- Be familiar with emergency exits.
- Practice emergency evacuation methods.
- Know how to use fire extinguishers.
- Know how to deal with dangerous smoke and fire situations.

Medical Emergencies

Ushers generally are first responders to medical emergencies that happen in the church building during worship services. These emergencies can range from a man losing his balance and falling to a woman suffering a stroke or a heart attack.

In such a situation, ushers need to:

- Learn how to check vital signs and provide basic CPR—this may include the use of a defibrillator.

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- Be able to identify doctors and nurses in the congregation to ask for assistance.
- If possible, quietly move the affected person out of the sanctuary and to a safe place.
- Contact the EMS responders.

Ushers will also benefit from knowing the symptoms of some serious medical conditions:

- **Seizure**—Sudden, uncontrollable twitching and jerking of the body, usually lasting two to five minutes. To respond to this situation, call EMS and take these steps: loosen the person’s clothing; do not try to restrain the person, but do remove from the area any objects that could cause harm; provide support for the head; and, if the person loses consciousness, ease breathing by shifting him onto his side.
- **Stroke**—A person having a stroke may complain of numbness or weakness in the face or on one side of the body; a sudden, severe headache; difficulty speaking; and loss of balance and coordination. To respond to this situation, call EMS.
- **Heart Attack**—An attack is initially characterized by chest pain that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back; pain in other parts of the upper body, such as the back, neck, jaw, or stomach; shortness of breath; breaking out in a cold sweat; nausea; or lightheadedness. If the church offers training in CPR or an automatic external defibrillator, ushers should be encouraged to get certification and be prepared to administer either. Before beginning either of these, however, call EMS.

Service Disruptions

Since ushers are primarily responsible for the order and safety of the congregation, they may be called upon to deal with distracting people. This may be a woman whose behavior frightens others. Or it may be a man whose personal habits are offensive or who is talking to himself or others during the service. In some cases, ushers must approach those who are unfamiliar with church behavior: perhaps a young man who is distracting others with a cell phone or music player.

The distracting person may suffer from mental illness. In the first congregation I served after seminary, a tall, disheveled young man in torn clothes came into the church as the service began and was shown a seat. In the service, he stood to comment on the sermon, and then he tried to take an unusually large amount of the communion elements. At other services he attended, he seemed totally disoriented. As it turned out, he was mentally ill and longed for help. We ultimately secured hospitalization for him.

When approaching a disruptive person, ushers need to:

- Pair up to escort the disruptive person out of the congregation.
- Understand the difference between harmless and dangerous behavior.
- Learn methods of peaceable removal to a safe place.
- Call police or EMS workers to remove the person to a mental health service center.

A potentially violent person is more menacing than a distracting person. There may be uncontrolled anger, or some event that happened at home or at church that sends a person “over the edge.” Often (but not always) the potentially violent person is an aggressive male. There may be little warning of extreme or violent behavior.

Ushers need to:

- Be aware of any specific people who could pose a threat, such as any people with restraining orders against the church or other members (oftentimes, this information is confidential; in such cases, a head usher can work with a pastor to maintain confidentiality while protecting the congregation).
- Learn and practice basic self-defense skills.
- Develop ways to help “step down” the escalation of violence.

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- Determine if there is anyone in the congregation with mental health experience who can intervene or assist.
- Call police into the situation.

Interrupting the Service

Some situations require the senior leadership of a pastor, and it is essential to stop the normal flow of the service to address a situation. For example, a medical emergency may occur in the nursery, and parents need to be notified immediately. In other cases, the pastor might need to be excused to deal with a problem personally or oversee how it is handled. When addressing this kind of a situation, ushers need to act with a sense of urgency without creating a panic in the congregation.

Ushers need to:

- Determine what the criteria are for interrupting a service and involving the pastor.
- Have a method in place for communicating with the pastor—some churches handle this by designating an usher to hand deliver a note to the pastor; other churches have developed a signal so that an usher in the back of a church can get a pastor’s attention; still other churches have developed the practice of text messaging a pastor or using a cell phone.
- Develop a plan for what to do when the pastor steps out—perhaps enter into a time of prayer led by an associate pastor or other church leader.

Ushers hope never to have to engage in these emergency activities. But as first responders, they are at work to promote hospitality and practice safety methods. People want to feel welcome and secure in their time at church. The ushers are there to meet those expectations.

—JOHN R. THROOP is priest at Trinity Episcopal Church in Portsmouth, Virginia; © 2007, updated 2012 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

Discuss

1. How can ushers prepare ahead of time for these situations? What can the church offer in terms of training and preparation?
2. In the case of a disruption or emergency, who will respond? Is this communicated among all ushers and staff members before the service?
3. What is the plan for handling service disruptions?

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Preventing Violence at Church

A police officer's advice on how to prevent, and react to, the unthinkable.

Proverbs 11:14

Churches are notorious for minimal security. And while acts of violence at church are rare, recent shootings at churches and schools beg the question: What can leaders do to protect their people? Based on experience in the pulpit and on the police force, here are some steps you can take to prevent an incident—and possibly save lives—at your church.

Before an Incident

Begin by working with local police and learning their plans and capabilities in the event of a church shooting. Most police agencies have adopted an “active shooter” philosophy. This involves forming up quickly, moving in, and removing a threat with lethal force, all before an organized evacuation, or the arrival of a SWAT team or negotiators. What does this mean for your church if an “active shooter” crisis occurs?

Every church should have policies in place for responding to a crisis. When is an evacuation appropriate? When is a lockdown appropriate? Who makes that decision?

In addition to planning by church leaders, local law enforcement should be provided with the following: copies of church blueprints, keys to the building, contact information for people in the church, and a list of any people with restraining orders against the church or church members.

Even though assaults on houses of worship are rare, every church should be prepared by appointing a crisis-response team consisting of several people with police, military, or medical training. Choose people for this group who will avoid sensationalizing or trivializing your church’s potential for attack. Together with the ushers and the pastors, this is the group that needs to know how to respond to violence at your church.

Before It's Too Late

Even with policies, plans, and teams in place, leaders—starting with ushers and greeters—must be proactive about stopping a violent person. Situational crime expert Ronald Clarke coined these steps for avoiding an active-shooter incident:

- **Increase effort.** If a shooter plans an attack on your church, he will likely arrive after the service begins. Make it difficult for an intruder to enter your church unnoticed and take a seat wherever he wants. A simple step forward in this area involves closing sanctuary doors once a service begins and training ushers to meet latecomers and guide them to designated seating areas.
- **Increase early identification.** A person approaching your building with a gun drawn is an obvious threat. But other signs, such as a person’s appearance or body language, represent danger too. Ushers, greeters, and church staff can identify a threat by monitoring entrances via surveillance cameras, well-placed windows, or simply by extending a personal greeting to any person who looks suspicious.
- **Reduce risk.** Create visual or lighting obstructions, isolating threats from the body of believers. This is where a lockdown policy is most effective, because during a lockdown, most rooms in the building would be locked and lights turned out, separating many innocent people from the gunman.
- **Reduce provocation.** Set guidelines for denying access to people who are unstable, agitated, angry, or intoxicated. Train ushers to identify the warning signs of such a person, and coach them to deny access firmly, but respectfully. These warning signs include people who are talking to themselves, or are otherwise belligerent. If a pastor has a counselee who is particularly troubled, a head usher can be recruited to show extra attention to that person if he arrives at the church.

If a Shooter Gets In ...

It is critical for leaders to be decisive. If the gunman targets a pastor or some other leader, those most visible should draw attention away from the congregation. If the shooter targets the congregation, direct confrontation is essential. This is dangerous, but you can improve your chances by distracting the shooter. Weaken his shooting ability by throwing hymnals, yelling from multiple directions, and tackling him from behind.

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If the shooter does not penetrate deep into the sanctuary and begins shooting randomly, take cover behind a pew, pillar, or balcony. Most shooters will be well-armed and intend to inflict maximum damage. Recognizing the grave danger, church leaders and members of a crisis team can save lives by closing the gap between themselves and the shooter and overwhelming him.

Once a shooting begins, establish communication with the police as soon as possible. Minimize chaos by assigning only people on your crisis response team to call 911. Police will want to know the number of shooters, location of suspects, types of weapons, possible traps or explosives, immediacy of the threat, and location of sensitive areas such as Sunday schools or nurseries. The emergency dispatcher will instruct the caller to stay on the line in order to provide real-time information to police on the scene.

When police arrive, stay on the floor until you are told to move. People have a built-in urge to run for safety. But movement creates confusion and complicates the situation for police. When you do get up, avoid sudden movements or any object in your hand that could be construed as a threat.

—ANDREW G. MILLS is a captain in the San Diego (California) Police Department; © 2007 Christianity Today [/BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://BuildingChurchLeaders.com).

Discuss

1. How can ushers and greeters screen for potential risks as people enter for the service?
2. Does your church have a designated crisis response team? How can you ensure that everyone, including those in the congregation, are prepared to respond?
3. What does it mean to reduce risk of violence in your church? What are some tangible steps you could take to do so?

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Prayer List

Prayer is an important part of any work that involves serving the church—especially for visible leaders like greeters and ushers. Use this list to help you focus your prayers for your own needs and the needs of those in your church. Make copies and keep on using it throughout your term of service.

For The Church Staff and Volunteers Teams

Joys: _____

Concerns: _____

For the Congregation

Joys: _____

Concerns: _____

For Myself

Joys: _____

Concerns: _____

Scripture: Deuteronomy 10:19; 1 Chronicles 9:17–32; Psalm 42; Psalm 46; Psalm 84; Proverbs 5:11; Romans 12:4–8; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:8–11

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Further Exploration

Helpful resources for church greeters and ushers.

📖 [BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#): Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

The Growing Church Training Track

Level One: [Usher/Greeter](#)
[Welcoming Visitors](#)
[Connecting Newcomers](#)
[Turning Visitors into Attenders](#)
[Maximizing Church Membership](#)

Level Two: [Is Our Church Discipling?](#)
[Building a Culture of Discipleship](#)
[Turning Attenders into Committed Members](#)
[Cultivating Active Church Members](#)
[Discipling Emerging Adults](#)

Level Three: [Mentor](#)
[Mentoring](#)
[Mentoring](#)
[Training New Leaders](#)
[Mentoring New Leaders](#)

📖 [LeadershipJournal.net](#): This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

📖 [ChurchSafety.com](#): This website offers practical advice and articles keeping your church safe.

- [“Protect Your Church from Crime & Violence”](#)
- [“Creating a Safety Team”](#)
- [“Responding to Allergic Reactions”](#)

[The First Thirty Seconds: A Guide to Hospitality for Greeters and Ushers](#) by S. Joan Hershey.

Provides an overview and practical tips for making good first impressions (New Life Ministries & LifeQuest, 2000; ISBN 978-1893270039).

[Serving as a Church Greeter](#) by Leslie Parrot. Explains the importance of the role of greeters in church services and it offers advice on how to be an effective greeter (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 978-0310247647).

[Serving as a Church Usher](#) by Leslie Parrot. Offers practical tips on how to be an effective usher (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 978-0310247630).

[Ushering 101](#) by Buddy Bell. Covers both the biblical and the practical aspects of church ushering (Harrison House, 2007; ISBN 978-1577948889).

[Ushering in His Presence: A Manual for Christian Ushers](#) by Celestine S. Ikwuamaesi. Contains examples and advice for church ushers, and it is written by someone who has spent many years serving in this ministry (BookSurge, 2004; ISBN 978-1594578731).