

Seeing With New Eyes: Creating an Anonymous Visitors Program Companion Guide

We usually associate hospitality with a culture, a social practice, a more personal quality to be admired. In western culture, where individualism and security seem to be priorities, we need to be more thoughtful about how to bring the welcoming of strangers into our daily way of being together.

Peter Block
Community: The Structure of Belonging

The Process

Who do you recruit to be anonymous visitors?

1. A member of another UU congregation
2. A member of another religious organization
3. A person unaffiliated with any religious denomination

You can ask individuals to participate or get a team together (say a group of people from another UU congregation) and have them enter separately or come on different days. But the idea of a team is that they then get together afterwards and compare their experiences. It helps to give a better overall picture of how welcoming the congregation was.

However you group the anonymous visitors, it's important to get together with them subsequently to review their checklist and get their verbal as well as written comments.

Additional Items for the Checklist

For assessment of children's' Religious Education program:

- RE teachers were prepared and ready to greet new children and their parents when they entered the classroom.
- RE teachers were warmly welcoming to both children and parents
- Classrooms were well marked
- Classrooms felt cheerful and safe
- The nursery and child care rooms were well staffed, clean, safe and fun
- Children were welcome to stay with their parents in the worship service

For other aspects of congregational life:

- The website easily guided me to all the information I need, including the time of the worship service and driving directions.
- The recorded phone greeting is warm and helpful.
- The church has adequate parking, or an effective method to compensate for that (e.g., reserved visitor places, valet parking).
- Music reflects theme of service.

- Performance music pieces are well-done.
- Hymns are played once through before singing, so melody becomes familiar.
- Information is offered to all visitors about our adult, youth, and children's programming.
- All visitors are invited to sign up to receive the Newsletter.
- Visitor Information Sessions are held after services at least twice a month.
- Visitors later receive a follow-up phone call or letter, inviting them to return.

Some Commonly Asked Questions About the Anonymous Visitors Process

Am I a bad person for not being truthful about my visit?

No. You're looking for the same things as any visitor would be looking for. You're just more conscious of it and more intentional in noting pluses and minuses.

What do I say if someone asks them why I came to visit?

Don't lie. Tell them you're a spy from Peter Morales's office and that the future status of your congregation as a member of the UUA depends on your evaluation. Just kidding. Why are you there? Because you're interested in learning more about the church or fellowship? Right? There's your answer.

Should I take notes while I'm there?

Sure, if you want. I wouldn't bring the assessment form. But a notepad and pen to jot down quick notes to yourself will help you remember the little things. If someone asks why you're taking notes, tell them you've been diagnosed with compulsive note taking behavior. We Unitarian Universalists are accepting of everyone, remember? By the way, it is strongly recommended that you complete the assessment form as soon as you leave the building, like in your car in the parking lot if you can.

Should I name names in my assessment report?

Only if its positive feedback and you want to complement a particular person who impressed you in some way. Singling out people by name who may not have contributed to a welcoming environment is unfair and also not productive. The intent of this procedure is to get a general sense of how welcoming the congregation is to visitors, not to identify specific individuals. Besides, they may have just been having a bad day.