

The Top 10 Things We've Learned About Welcoming Newcomers to our Church

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Churches often define their success in welcoming newcomers by the number of people that become members of their church. At Redeemer we have shifted our focus to improving the quality of our welcome and it feels like maybe we're on to something. We've found our way mostly through trial and error - and listening carefully to the feedback of our visitors and newest members. **These are the top ten things we have learned about welcoming newcomers to our church over the last five years:**

1. Everyone is Different and Nothing Is Ever Straightforward

This is our mantra. There is no one pattern for the way people enter, engage and join our congregation. Every person and every situation is different. We try to honor that and not insist on uniformity. This requires flexibility and improvisation on our part, but it enriches our understanding of welcoming and the beauty and diversity of the Body of Christ.

2. Expect New Members

We used to wait until we had a critical mass of newcomers to schedule a day to welcome new members. Now, at the start of the year, we schedule two dates a year to welcome newcomers - one in the fall and spring. This has helped us move from a mindset of "if people come" to "when people come." That approach has extended into Sunday mornings as well. We confidently expect that there will be someone new and plan accordingly.

3. Maintain an Expansive Idea of Community

You don't have to be a *member of our congregation* to be *part of our community*. Thanks to the internet and social media, people are part of our community long before they arrive at church - if

they ever come. They have a sense of who we are, what we do, and how we live the Gospel through our [website](#), [Facebook Page](#) and [Sermon Blog](#).

4. No Classes

We don't have newcomers classes. Our only welcoming event is a Newcomers Brunch that we have a few weeks before welcoming new members in the spring and fall. The brunch is always a graceful event. Newcomers can meet each other and meet current members of the congregation. We find that the inculcation that congregations try to instill at newcomers classes happens more naturally and more fruitfully through conversation, visitation, involvement, and developing relationships. **People don't want to hear about it, they want to experience it.**

5. Enable People to Participate Right Away

Our congregation used to have an unspoken waiting period for participation. People would regularly be members for months or years before being asked to take a leadership role. Now, we encourage people to get involved *before* they are members. We believe that you don't need to be a "member" before you can start living out God's calling in your life.

6. Not Joining Does Not Equal Failure

The end result of welcoming is not necessarily membership. If someone only comes for one Sunday, then we have ministered to them in some way. If people are with us for a while and decide not to join, we feel we've contributed to their discernment process. **If you make welcoming about membership, it's a set up for disappointment. Not everyone will join and there will never be enough new members. Make it about ministry instead and decide how you will measure success.**

7. Understand People's Passions

Listen for the way God is calling people to live out their faith - at work, home, and/or in the church. Set people free to follow God's call.

8. The Individual Transforms the Institution, Not the Other Way Around

We have a dream that one day, when we tell the stories of our congregation, we won't tell time by when pastors came and left, but when people came to our church - not "And then Pastor Anderson was called..." but rather, "Then Karen and Katie joined the congregation..." **We expect newcomers to transform us, not for the church to make everyone the same.**

9. Everyone is a Greeter

One of the best things we did to be more welcoming was to no longer have official greeters - those people churches place near the front door to welcome people. By designating certain people, it let everyone off the hook. Now, it's a shared responsibility. Every Sunday after church, as I greet people leaving the sanctuary, there are several members engaging visitors in conversation after church. It is a beautiful scene.

10. Decide to be Assertive

There's always a fear that you will drive people away if you are too assertive. That's a risk we are willing to take. Except for one or two exceptions in five years, this has never been a problem. **Indifference and indecisiveness are far worse than assertiveness.**

What would you add or change in this list? What surprising lessons have you learned in your experience of welcoming?

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