

THOM S. RAINER

Becoming a

WELCOMING

CHURCH

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
CHAPTER 1 Are We as Welcoming as We Think We Are?	1
CHAPTER 2 Confidential Report (for your eyes only)	17
CHAPTER 3 Signs and Sites	35
CHAPTER 4 Safe Church/Clean Church	51
CHAPTER 5 Greeters, Welcome Centers, and the Welcoming Church	69
CHAPTER 6 The Path to Becoming a Welcoming Church	87
Other Resources	101
Appendix 1 Church Facility Audit	103
Appendix 2 Secret Guest Survey	107

CHAPTER 1



Do you have one of those moments in your life when you realized you were not as cool, good-looking, friendly, or smart as you thought you were? I do.

I was a college freshman, dealing with two strong emotions. On the one hand, I loved my new state of independence. On the other hand, I hated my new state of independence. And those aren't contradictory statements.

I thought it was so cool to determine my own schedule, to go where I wanted to go, and do what I wanted to do. Mom and Dad were out of my daily life.

But I missed the relationships, the security, and comfort of home. I was in a new place trying to be independent, trying to figure out what to do next, and trying to make new friends.

BECOMING A WELCOMING CHURCH

It was that latter category where I had a wake-up call: making new friends. You see, I thought Mark and I hit it off well. We seemed to enjoy each other's company. We laughed at one another, and even helped each other with our freshman classes.

So I was particularly pleased when I overheard Mark talking to his parents on the phone. He talked about how much he liked me, how we had become great friends right away, and how I was such a cool guy.

I know. I should not have been eavesdropping. But I enjoyed hearing what a great guy I was so much.

Then he said something that did not make sense. He told his parents where my home was. But it was not my home. It was not even the same state.

It hit me. Mark was talking about someone else with my same first name. His new best friend was Tom, not Thom. I was not the funny and fun guy. I was not the cool guy. I was not his new best friend.

I was devastated.

Wake-up calls can stink. Reality can hurt.

Many churches need wake-up calls. I know. I have worked with hundreds of them on site, and thousands via phone, e-mail, and videoconferences. Many church leaders and members think their churches are healthier than they really are.

ARE WE AS WELCOMING AS WE THINK WE ARE?

Many leaders and members think their churches have better ministries than they really do. And many leaders think their churches are friendlier than they really are.

Before you read further, may I ask you a few questions? Are you willing to set aside your preconceived notions about your church? Are you willing to look at your church more honestly and more clearly? Are you willing to do what it takes to be a welcoming, gospel-centered church?

If not, please close this book, and move onto something else. Don't waste your time here. This book is for those who are willing "to look in the mirror." This book is for those who are willing to face reality. This book is for those who are tired of the same, tame, and lame church life represented by too many congregations.

The Bible has many verses on hospitality. For example, Paul wrote to the church at Rome and to Timothy and Titus about the matter. To the church at Rome, he simply said, ". . . pursue hospitality" (Rom. 12:13). And Paul told Timothy that leaders in the church must be hospitable: "An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, *hospitable*, able to teach, not an excessive drinker, not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy" (1 Tim. 3:2–3, emphasis added).

BECOMING A WELCOMING CHURCH

And Paul would say similar words in Titus 1:7–8: “As an overseer of God’s household, he must be blameless: not arrogant, not hot-tempered, not an excessive drinker, not a bully, not greedy for money, but *hospitable*, loving what is good, sensible, righteous, holy, self-controlled” (emphasis added).

This book is for those church members who really want to see their churches make a difference.

A TALE OF TWO GUESTS

The stories are true. Only the names have been changed. Here are two doses of reality, and the first one is positive.

Jane is a stylist. She cuts hair. On this particular day, she cut my hair. I often say I get my hairs cut rather than getting a haircut. I don’t know why people use the latter term. After all, who gets just one hair cut?

I am an introvert. If introversion were a spiritual gift, it would be my dominant spiritual gift. I would rather work in a room alone than work in a room with people I hardly know.

But I can’t let my introversion be an excuse to be a silent witness. So I make myself come out of my shell. It’s not just the right thing to do; it’s Great Commission obedience.

ARE WE AS WELCOMING AS WE THINK WE ARE?

As Jane was cutting my hairs, I began a conversation about her life and her world. Once I found out where she lived, I was able to shift the conversation to Jesus and church. Indeed, I found out she lived near my church where my son pastors.

So I talked to Jane about her life. I talked a bit about Jesus. And I invited her to church.

She was non-committal. Or so I thought.

Little did I know that the Holy Spirit had already been working in her life. I will spare you the details, but she soon found the website of our church and “bravely” (her word, not mine) decided to visit.

She “fell in love with the church” (her words again). The website gave her all the information she needed. She found the guest parking spot with ease. The people were genuinely friendly. The preacher preached the Bible with conviction and love.

I will cut to the chase: Jane decided to follow Christ. She was baptized.

And now she is smiling, enthused, and an active member of the welcome team ministry of our church.

Great story, huh? Well, let me share another story, one that is not so great.

BECOMING A WELCOMING CHURCH

His name is Ryan. I met Ryan in a consultation for a church where we focused on the guest experience. We had a one-hour in-person interview with him. And he let us have it!

Ryan had almost no church background. But I could tell he was really searching. So he did something bold, if not audacious, from his perspective. He asked his wife, Bethany, if she and their two young daughters would go to church with him.

Bethany had a nominal church background, but she was not really interested in going back to a church. She found the world outside the church more pleasant than church life. She nevertheless agreed to go with Ryan “just one time.”

And there won't be a second time at the church they visited.

To begin, the church website was terrible. It had not been updated with the new time of the worship service. So the family of four was late, even though they thought they would arrive on time.

Because they arrived late, church members occupied all of the closer parking spots. Supposedly, there were guest parking spots, but Ryan could not find any directional signs to them.

When they arrived late, a couple of front door greeters spoke to them for at least two seconds. The two greeters then resumed their private conversation, oblivious to the world and people around them.

ARE WE AS WELCOMING AS WE THINK WE ARE?

And when they went to the children's area to check in their two young daughters, disaster struck. The place was dirty. Security was weak. And the person that met them complained because they were late!

Bethany gave Ryan "the look." It was not a happy moment.

I'm surprised they even went into the worship service at this point. They both realized they made a bad decision.

I won't give you all the details of their experience. We will save these types of stories for later chapters. But, to state it plainly: it was not good.

By the way, when we interviewed members of this church, they consistently proclaimed a similar message: *Our church is very friendly!* And their church is friendly—as long as you know people. As long as you are on the inside. As long as you are not a guest.

By the way, Bethany and Ryan had a big fight on the way home from church. They were not happy campers. Ryan told us he would never return to that church. In fact, he told us he would never go to church again.

Sadly, I believe him.

BECOMING A WELCOMING CHURCH

THE MYTH OF THE WELCOMING CHURCH

Therein lies the problem with most churches. Churches perceive they are a friendly church because the members are friendly to one another. But they don't think about walking in the shoes of first-time guests. They don't look at their facilities, their parking, their website, or their friendliness from a guest perspective.

We learned not to ask church members if their church is friendly to find out if their church really is friendly.

Most church members have forgotten what it's like to be a first-time guest. They now have established relationships in the church. They love their church. Their biases tell them their church is great.

But many church members and leaders are wrong. When we asked hundreds of guests about their experiences visiting churches, it was not a pretty picture. We asked specifically why they did not return to a particular church. Here were their top ten responses:

1. *The stand-and-greet time in the worship service was unfriendly and awkward.* When I first saw this response coming in by the hundreds, I was surprised. And as I dug deeper, I discovered there were two issues

ARE WE AS WELCOMING AS WE THINK WE ARE?

with the stand-and-greet time. First, some guests just felt awkward with the exercise. It seemed to be a ritual more for the members than the guests. Second, a number of guests did not mind the stand-and-greet time, but they felt left out during the welcome. Either they were totally ignored, or they were inundated with what they perceived were superficial greetings. I'll unpack this issue more in the next chapter.

2. *Unfriendly church members.* Most church members do not view themselves as unfriendly. But they do not see themselves from the perspective of church guests. They don't usually speak to guests because they don't know them. And the church members usually retreat to the comfort of the holy huddles of the people they do know.
3. *Unsafe and unclean children's areas.* This response generated the most emotional comments. If your church does not have clear safety and security procedures, and if the children's area does not appear clean and sanitary to the guests, do not expect young families to return to your church. Indeed, as word about your children's area grows, do not expect young families to visit the first time.

BECOMING A WELCOMING CHURCH

4. *No place to get information on the church.* Guests are trained by their experiences to look for a central welcome and information center. But here is the catch. Some churches did not have any such information center. Some churches did have them, but you couldn't find them. And some churches have them in good visible locations, but they had no one manning the welcome center. Guests told us they were hesitant to go to an unmanned welcome center. The church might as well not have an information and welcome center if no one will be there to help guests.
5. *Bad church website.* Nearly all the church guests checked the church website before they attended a worship service. Even if they decided to visit the church after looking at a bad website, they visited the church with a negative disposition. The two critical items guests want to see on a church website are the physical address of the church and times of the services. It's just that basic. Keep in mind this reality. The church website is now the front door of the church. Will guests feel welcome when they come to your front door? We will look at this issue in detail in chapter 3.

ARE WE AS WELCOMING AS WE THINK WE ARE?

6. *Poor signage.* If you have been attending your church a few weeks, you don't need signage. But guests do. And they get frustrated when they don't have clear directional signage for parking, for the entrance to the worship center, for the children's area, and others. We will look at this issue more fully in chapter 3 as well.
7. *Insider church language.* Listen to the words in the worship service of your church. Listen to the announcements. Listen to the sermon. Listen to the casual conversations. Are members saying things that a first-time guest would not understand? Well, that's what church guests told us. They said they left some churches thinking that much of the language was foreign and filled with acronyms.
8. *Boring or bad church services.* My surprise was not that this factor made the top ten; it was that it was only listed as the eighth most frequent concern. In the past, church leaders of small churches would tell me they didn't have the resources for quality services. In the digital age, with so many affordable resources, no church is allowed that excuse.
9. *Members telling guests they were in the wrong pew or chair.* I thought this rude and insensitive behavior

BECOMING A WELCOMING CHURCH

disappeared years ago. The church guests told us otherwise. In fact the most common comment was, “You are sitting in *my* pew.” Unbelievable. Totally unbelievable.

10. *Dirty facilities.* Some of the comments were brutal: “Didn’t look like it had been cleaned in a week.” “No trash cans anywhere.” “Restrooms were worse than a bad truck stop.” “Pews had more stains than a Tide commercial.” You get the picture. A dirty church communicates to the guest, “We really don’t care.”

THE HAPPY GUESTS

To be fair, in our study of first-time church guests, we heard from a number of them who had really pleasant experiences, and decided to return. Let’s look at the top ten responses from the perspective of the happy guest. Some of them are just the opposite of the ten items listed above. I have included in this list direct quotes from the happy guests.

1. *Someone asked the guest to sit with her.* “You know, as a single person, I can feel pretty lonely sitting by myself. I am so glad Joanie asked me to sit with her. We plan to get together for coffee.”

ARE WE AS WELCOMING AS WE THINK WE ARE?

2. *People introduced themselves to the guests.* “Several people introduced themselves to me. I did not get the impression it was either contrived or routine.”
3. *There was clear signage.* “From the parking lot to the children’s area to the worship center, everything was clearly marked. It was easy to navigate.”
4. *There was a clearly marked welcome center.* “It made it really easy for me to ask questions and to get some information on the church.”
5. *The kids loved the children’s area.* “My kids were so happy with their experiences. We will be back for sure.”
6. *The children’s area was secure and sanitary.* “That is one of the first things I check when I go to a church. This church gets an A+!”
7. *Guest parking was clearly visible.* “From the moment we drove into the parking lot, I could find the guest parking. It was marked very well.”
8. *The church did not have a stand-and-greet time.* “My wife and I just moved to the area and are visiting churches. If we visit one with that fake stand-and-greet time, we don’t return.”

BECOMING A WELCOMING CHURCH

9. *The members were not pushy.* “They seemed to really care about us rather than just making us another number on the membership roll.”
10. *The guest card was simple to complete.* “Some of the cards in other churches ask for too much information. This one was perfect and simple.”

Which list more accurately describes your church? Be careful and honest before you respond. About eight of ten guests had an experience that would better fit the unhappy guest category.

And sadly, few church members recognized it in their own churches.

So the first step in becoming a welcoming church may be the admission that your church may not really be a welcoming church.

Are you facing reality in your church?

--- POINTS TO PONDER ---

1. Why would guests and church members have such different views about the friendliness of a church?
2. When is the last time you spoke with a guest about his or her first-time visit to your church?

ARE WE AS WELCOMING AS WE THINK WE ARE?

3. Look at your church website from a guest perspective. Be brutally honest with what you see. Is it guest friendly?
4. Do you think members in your church regularly invite guests? Why or why not?
5. How do you think a guest feels in your worship services? Explain with a bit of detail.