

EIGHT TERRIBLE CHURCH VISITS

By Thom Rainer

When I led a church consultation company, one of the more common facets of my consultation was an on-site visit to a worship service. The person I hired to conduct the visit could know nothing about the church. Ideally this “mystery guest” would be an unchurched person, so that he or she could give an honest assessment from the perspective of someone who knows little about churches.

I requested that the mystery guest evaluate different areas of the visit, but I was always most interested in the overall score. They submitted a score of one to seven. The lowest score meant that the visit was terrible, and they would not return under any circumstances. I recently retrieved some of these “one” reports. Inevitably there was one event that took place that made the visit so bad. Let me share eight of those events in eight different terrible church visits.

1. **“I was asked to introduce myself in the worship service.** There were probably 150 or so present, so all the members knew I was a guest. I had no choice but to speak up and tell them something about me. I felt so uncomfortable standing up and speaking to everyone present.”
2. **“I had to walk fifty yards in the rain.** There was no guest parking. No one offered me an umbrella. Apparently, the members got there early so they could get the best parking spaces in the inclement weather.”
3. **“The preschool area was dirty and not secure.** I took my two-year old with me, but I would not leave her in the church’s preschool area. You could tell they didn’t care about the cleanliness and the safety needs of little children. So I took my child to the worship service. That proved to be another headache.”
4. **“Everyone talked in code.** I had no idea what the preacher and the members were talking about. What in the heck is a WMU? What is a time of intercessory prayer? I figured out the responsive reading thing when I saw people reading from their hymnals.”
5. **“Someone told me I was sitting where their family sits.** That really ticked me off. I didn’t see a reserved sign there. If I was not getting paid to do this, I would have said a few words to them and walked out of the service before it ever began.”

6. **“No one spoke to me.** They certainly spoke to people they apparently knew, but I was not a part of their cliques. I felt badly just being there. I wanted to get up and leave on the spot.”
7. **“The preacher screamed the whole time.** He had one tone and one volume: loud! Why do these preachers think their voices and their decibels have to change when they begin preaching? It seems so inauthentic. To top it off, I had a terrible headache after enduring 45 minutes of his screaming.”
8. **“They had a business meeting during the worship service.** Now that was awkward. I really got uncomfortable when some of the members began disagreeing. It was tense. I will never, ever, ever go back there again.”

In each of these cases, the mystery church guests assured me that the visit was so bad and so uncomfortable that they would never return. Could some of these experiences happen at your church? Do you know of other terrible church visits?