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Roger J. Blackmore, pastor of Grace Church in Long Island, N.Y.

Creative welcomes for first-time guests keep visitors coming back
by Lauri Arnold

LONG ISLAND, N.Y. (PD) — Before the Long Island, N.Y. theater turns into Grace Church each week, many things must be done--but high on the list of priorities is the welcome given to visitors of the church.

"Our parking lot is organized with a substantial amount of visitor parking spaces," said Grace Church pastor Roger J. Blackmore. "Our greeters at the main doors are encouraged to look for people who park in them and be sure to greet them especially warmly."

The non-denominational church is 7 years old, with an average Sunday attendance of 350 people, but Blackmore said discussions on a Pastors.com forum helped his church to think outside the box and welcome visitors in a new way – and a way that ties in with the environment of the church. Visitors are welcomed and guided to the church's guest services table where they are given a gift-wrapped popcorn bucket containing a bag of popcorn, a pen, cookies, church information, and a tape of a recent sermon message.

"The general consensus seems to be to give them something useful and don't weigh them down with church junk," Blackmore said.

Blackmore said the church formerly had guests complete a communication card, but as a church, they acknowledged that most visitors are apprehensive to varying degrees when they walk in the church.

"We want them to know they are welcome and wanted," he said. "We hope that if they feel at home, they will return and ultimately begin or continue their Christian walk with us."

Brian Stevens, the lead and founding pastor of The Journey at Rush Creek in Maple Grove, Minn., said his nearly 3-year-old church began by being intentional about welcoming visitors, but new ideas and a greater focus on visitors have made a difference at the church.

Visitors and members alike are weekly asked to fill out a registration card, which provides information such as their address, e-mail address, age, and whether they are a first-time guest, second-time guest, regular attendee, or member. Within the next 24 hours, those who provided an e-mail address are sent a welcome letter along with a link to a four-question survey about the church. The church also produces an e-mail letter of upcoming events, called an e-blast.

"If somebody is a guest on Sunday, they'll get an e-blast that afternoon or the next day," Stevens said.

Pastors.com forum thread on guest gifts

Discuss what's appropriate and what's not appropriate for guest gifts on this Pastors.com forum thread. It's the same forum thread that helped Grace Church work through what they wanted to give to new guests. Click [here](#) to sign in and then click [here](#) to join the discussion!

A welcome letter is also sent through the postal system within the next 24 hours, Stevens said, along with a \$5 gas gift card and a handwritten note from Stevens stating, "Your next journey to The Journey is on us."

A similar pattern is followed to welcome those who return for a second visit, but Stevens noted that the church tries hard to be intentional about assimilating visitors on their third visit by inviting them to be involved in the church in some way, such as through serving on the setup crew.

"Once they come three times, then we try to plug them in somewhere," he said, noting that this also helps more church members to be involved in welcoming visitors.

The church also has a welcome dessert fellowship every three months for everyone who is new to the church.

"We've always been a friendly church," Stevens said, "but I think becoming more intentional about that has brought a lot more people into that process."

North Valley Church, now 6 years old, is located in Antelope, Calif., and has an average weekend attendance between 650 and 800 people. The first [40 Days of Purpose](#) campaign was an instigator for the church to not only welcome visitors, but to give them a tool that could strengthen their relationship with Christ, or introduce them to him for the first time. Each first-time visitor is given a copy of [The Purpose Driven Life](#).

"We had several people tell us that *The Purpose Driven Life* led them to the Lord," said Tony Nole, purpose driven coordinator for North Valley Church.

In addition to the book, guests are given communication cards which, if filled out, are good for a free drink at the church's coffee cart. The church has also sent mailers to the community with coupons for a free coffee drink, especially during special services such as Easter and Christmas.

"This is a great place for guests to come to get to know new people," Nole said.

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