



*The Gospel is offensive.
(Nothing else should be.)*

5 Plumb Lines for Guest Services

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Everybody needs a standard.

Whether you're building a house or getting a degree or formulating a theology, you need a standard that serves as your center. Without a standard, corners get cut and foundations get wonky and beliefs go off the rails. Without a standard, we tend to focus more on the way we think things should look than the way they actually should look. We develop tunnel vision and blind spots, and we forget what we originally set out to do.

Over the last few years our church has been experimenting with how we communicate our standards. As we've grown larger - both as a staff and a congregation - we know that it's far too easy to assume everyone knows what's what. We are quick to acquire what the Heath brothers call "The Curse of Knowledge" - once we know something, it's hard for us to imagine that someone else doesn't know that same thing.¹ And when that happens, vision begins to leak and mission begins to fail.

So in order to combat The Curse of Knowledge, we set out to get everyone on the same page. We wanted our North Star to be crystal-clear, and we wanted to help people have talking points on how to get there.

The talking points we developed are called "plumb lines" - short, sticky phrases that capture the essence of who we are and where we're headed. They're an imperfect way to capture the things a perfect God has called us to, and they're a method to easily reproduce those things to the entire church.

Our church-wide plumb lines range from the biggies (The Church is God's "Plan A") to the things not quite as consequential (Preach the announcements²). And though the agreed-upon number of plumb lines can vary depending on who's talking about them, what we know is that these statements have carried us farther than we would have gone otherwise.

¹ Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007).

² Not exactly "three points and a poem" but also not "no point and painful."

Plumb lines make their way into sermons and onto t-shirts. They show up in blog posts and annual reports. They adorn our wall art and our email signatures. They weave the fabric of our identity as a church and our mission as a congregation. In addition to our church-wide plumb lines, nearly all ministries have their own set of plumb lines. These statements don't compete with the church-wide guideposts; rather they complement them and carry them down to the ground level of each ministry area. From kids to worship to generosity to...yes, even the ministry of announcements...we want to clearly communicate what we believe and what we hold dear.

The standard of our plumb lines should always point back to the standard and the beauty of the gospel. They don't replace the gospel. They don't usurp doctrine. They don't undermine the teaching of scripture. Instead, they take the mission of the gospel and imperfectly cobble together a strategy for how to make that mission known.

The beauty of plumb lines is that they're not one size fits all.³ You might have a different interpretation for your ministry or for your church. We don't have the market cornered on how the local church should do anything, from preaching to parking. Different cultures and contexts will necessitate different approaches. As a matter of fact, you would be foolish to take another church's plumb lines and cut-and-paste them to your local setting.

But in our culture and context, these plumb lines represent our particular approach. And every time they're spoken, written, shouted, or whispered, they remind us to look back to the standard. Yes, initially to the standard of a plumb line, but beyond that, to the beautiful standard of the gospel.

For the next few pages, I want to pull back the curtain and share the plumb lines of one of the largest ministries at the Summit: our First Impressions team. Every weekend, hundreds of volunteers gather in order to welcome guests to our church. From parking to seating to sign ups to clean up, we make a big deal out of the way we prepare for and respond to our guests.

Perhaps a little terminology is in order: we refer to "guests" as anyone who shows up on the weekend. If it's your first time or your five hundredth, you're our guest. If you're a pastor or a pagan, you're our guest. First time guests are those who are showing up for...well, you get the picture.⁴

³ You're not gonna believe this, but "One size rarely fits all" is one of our plumb lines. Boom.

⁴ ...showing up for the first time. Really: try to keep up.

Our plumb lines flow from a passage of scripture that serves as the ultimate standard for all that we do in the area of guest services:

Be wise in the way you act with people who are not believers, making the most of every opportunity. When you talk, you should always be kind and pleasant so you will be able to answer everyone in the way that you should. (Colossians 4:5-6, NCV)

If you're familiar with this letter, you know that Paul was writing this to the local group of believers in Colossae, giving them a framework for how they should interact with nonbelievers outside of the church. What Paul knew – and what we know – is that we're going to meet and interact with nonbelievers in the marketplace, our neighborhoods, and our schools. And eventually the nonbelievers in the marketplace, our neighborhoods, and our schools might just accept an invitation to come to church.

But when they show up, will we be ready? Will we make the most of every opportunity, or will we squander their visit? Will we be kind and pleasant, or will we assume that someone else is going to talk to the new guy standing awkwardly in the lobby?

“Being ready” is the challenge the gospel gives us, and it's that challenge that inspired the framework of our plumb lines.

Let's get started.



Plumb Line 1:

The gospel is

offensive.

Nothing else

should be.



Let's face it: if – like me – you've been in church any amount of time,¹ you'll admit that Church People tend to live in a Christian bubble. We only listen to K-Love, we only watch reality TV that features Christian-ish people (being careful to fast forward through the icky TLC commercials), we only eat at Chick-fil-A on Tuesdays from 10:00-11:30 AM, because that's when we've determined that most sinners aren't there and thereby risk infecting our kids with sinner cooties.

That's why it's important to step back from time to time and think about what we're saying when guests arrive at our church. Churches who preach the full gospel do not present an "I'm okay, you're okay" message. No, churches who hold fast to the gospel are presenting an "I'm a wicked sinner who was rescued by Jesus, and unless he rescues you you'll split hell wide open" message.

That's not very touchy-feely. As a matter of fact, it's downright offensive. Paul noted that offense in 1 Corinthians 1:18: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is God's power to us who are being saved." (HCSB)

¹ All my life plus nine months.
True statement.

Not “nonsensical.” Foolishness. Not “unclear.” Foolishness. Not “foggy” or “fuzzy” or “freaky,” but foolishness.

The gospel doesn't make sense to people who haven't yet received it.

You haven't forgotten the foolish nature of the gospel, have you? Have you forgotten the mystery and the seeming insanity that an invisible God made his son visible, wrapped him in flesh, placed him in a virgin's womb, and sent him on mission to earth for 33 years?

Have you forgotten that Jesus lived a perfect life, remained 100% obedient to his Father, fulfilled his purpose, and went to a cross meant for a criminal?

Have you forgotten that Jesus died? He died. He remained cold in the ground until the third day, when God raised himself back to life.

Have you forgotten that he died for you? And he died for you because you desperately needed him to. Without his death, without his sacrifice, you would remain an enemy of God and would eventually be separated from him for all eternity.

You see? Foolishness.

I don't know about the community where you live, but in my community, this message gets weirder with each passing year. Gospel-centered people often find themselves on the receiving end of hateful taunts or harmless eye rolls, all because we believe a message that is increasingly counter-cultural and offensive.²

Some churches have chosen to soften that offense by watering down the message. Rather than talk about indwelling sin, they talk about shortcomings and character flaws. Rather than hand over Jesus as the truer and better anything, they hand over 12 keys to a better you.³ The seeker-driven movement has produced quite a few good conversation points and outreach strategies that I would agree with, but one of the common shortfalls is that it's robbed the gospel of its power.

Flashy programs and sparkly Sundays will only last so long. As Mark Dever says, “What you win them with is what you win them to.”⁴ There's a balance between seeker-friendly, attractional services and a more reformed, fundamental style of weekend planning. But as that balance is pursued, I don't believe that you have to choose between “I'm okay, you're okay” and checking the length of sinners' hemlines as they come through the door.⁵

² Can anyone say “Christian blogger comment section”? I knew that you could!

³ Key #4 is teeth whitening strips, I'm sure of it.

⁴ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005).

⁵ Too short = you cause others to stumble. Too long = you cause yourself to stumble.

That's why we say that though the gospel offends, nothing else should. By the time a guest gets to the seat and listens to the message being preached, we should have done everything possible to pave the way with rose petals and puppy fur. In other words, **we should take the biblical virtue of hospitality and put it together at an institutional level.**

For us, that means a parking team that attempts to place people in the same zip code as the service they're attending. It means a first time guest tent that's staffed with our very best greeters to act as advocates on behalf of the guest. It means a team that is trained to anticipate, design, and respond to every part of the guest experience. In some venues it may mean a hot cup of coffee and a muffin.⁶ It means an eye-catching, warm and friendly kids area so that parents don't feel like they're dropping their kids off to gray cinderblock walls and 1960s era flannelgraphs.

Some would argue that this caters to (or worse – creates!) consumers. But move it from a corporate to a personal level, and you'll see that this argument doesn't wash. God is not glorified in your personal hospitality when you invite someone to your home but give them poor directions, a cold fast-food meal, and a half-hearted conversation while your mangy dog sniffs them from head to toe. You would never treat a guest in your home that way. Why on earth would you treat a guest at your church that way?⁷

The hospitality of a church can adorn the gospel and encourage faith. And on the flip side, a cold, unfriendly church contradicts the gospel message.

We don't have to choose between dumbing down the gospel or being self-righteous, sanctimonious jerks. Pastors should continue to preach the unfiltered gospel, running the risk of offending people with their sin and shocking them with the unending love of Jesus. But we should also set the table in such a way that nothing else offends them. Seek to create the kind of environment where your guests will say, "I don't necessarily agree with what I heard, but I'll never forget how graciously I was treated." That hospitality-soaked environment can eventually turn cold hearts warm and lead people to the gospel.

⁶ Not just the muffin stumps. (See also "Seinfeld, Jerry.")

⁷ For an excellent defense of why we *should* cater to consumers, pick up a copy of *First Impressions: Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church* by, my friend, Mark Waltz (Loveland, CO: Group, 2013).

Plumb Line 2:

The why is
more important
than the
what





People are not projects. People are the mission that the gospel calls us to. We respond to people, not policy, because touch is greater than task.

When you work with guest services teams, you tend to attract a lot of Type A people. They want to know the bottom line, the main objective, the 42 point checklist with full color graphs and an appendix that will make them the most effective at their job.

That's one thing I love about our volunteers: they want to know what it takes to get the job done. The Parking Team wants to understand the ingress plan, lot by lot, in order of priority. The Seating Team wants to know exactly when they're supposed to drop the barriers in the rear of the auditorium and the nicest phrases to use to move people front and center. The Set Up Team wants to know what goes up in what order to maximize the morning: signage first, then traffic cones, then tents, then the auditorium and lobby walk through.

And we *do* provide a procedures plan for most of these teams, and we work with team leaders to revise these plans often. Our goal is a standard baseline of service so that we're not reinventing the wheel every week when it comes to basic tasks.

But the greater goal goes beyond something that we can record on paper or measure with any set of metrics. All of the things listed above are *whats*: those items that help people accomplish their jobs. But the *why* is the focal point of our team. The *why* is the reason they're showing up every week.

We can spend weeks, months, and years training a guest services team member to be prepared for the "what" of any situation: crying baby, irritated person who doesn't want to sit where we ask 'em to, Methodist terror cells,¹ etc. You can have checklists a half a mile long and a notebook full of case studies and contingency plans. But until they understand why they're doing the job (to lay the foundation for the gospel), they'll simply never get it.

Job descriptions are a great idea and task lists are a great start, but they'll never replace the art of touch. If a volunteer knows exactly what to do but they have no idea why they're doing it, then they've failed as a volunteer and I've failed as a leader.

Seth Godin says it best: "*The minute you follow instructions, you're no longer an artist.*"

There's an art to interacting with people, isn't there? Starting conversations and reading body language isn't necessarily a linear approach. Every person has a unique personality (some people have more than one), and every personality requires a different touch point in order to make the person feel loved, secure, and cared for.

Task lists don't prepare volunteers for people, they prepare volunteers for policy. Policy tells you which paperwork should be filled out, which supplies should be in the storage closet, and which chairs should be roped off for the early service. But policy will never tell you how to encourage a skeptical first timer to trust you with their email address or calm the nerves of a new mother who is leaving her child with a room full of strangers.

People are not projects, but sometimes we forget that. All of us can picture a volunteer that has long since forgotten why she's serving. She shows up faithfully every week, militantly follows her team's procedures, and never questions authority as she trudges towards checking every box off of her Sunday list. But all the while, she seems miserable. She seems to have lost the joy of her calling. She's moved away from the purpose that can be found in serving people well.

Maybe that volunteer was never trained well to begin with. Perhaps no one ever took the time to explain the why. Or maybe someone explained it, but that vision leaked out somewhere along the way. And now her service has become static, her

¹They're probably a real thing. I'll do some research.

smile has become sterile, and her stamina has become stagnant.² I think you'd agree that **the best volunteers are the ones who don't just stick to policy, but they stick up for people.** They not only know the *what*, but they remember the *why*.

For us, the *why* is that we serve our guests as a reflection of the generosity of Christ. As our pastor says in his book *Gospel*, "As Jesus has been to me, so I will be to others."³

We serve well because we've been served well. **We love well because we've been loved well.** And we do both of those things in order to move people towards a relationship with Christ.

If we understand this, then the checklist fades into the background. The *what* helps us prepare for guests; the *why* helps us respond to guests. When we get the *why*, we will understand the right thing to do in just about any situation. When we know the *why*, we don't need a leader to hold our hands through a morning of service. When the *why* moves to a heart level, we'll foster an environment that will make every person feel like a valued guest.

Beyond the weekend experience, the *why* can serve a volunteer on their personal journey. Rather than burnout, they're invigorated by knowing why they're showing up. Instead of half-hearted devotion, they'll give their very best to the guest in front of them.

The *why* will give you the big idea...the win for your team. Memorize the *why*, guard the *why*, make the *why* part of your DNA, and you'll always have the right answer or course of action.

Parking a car, opening a door, seating a rear, and pouring a cup of coffee are means to an end. Sure, they're an important means, but they're just a means. The end is that a good guest services team will not only do those tasks, but in doing so they will be putting the gospel on display. It expresses an "others first" mentality that helps people see the selflessness of Jesus.

Why do we serve? Why do we wake up early and stay late on the weekends? Why do we go through so much trouble to craft an experience for people we're not even sure will show up? Because Jesus first served us, and we want our generous service to point people to him.

²Alliteration is always awesome.

³J.D. Greear, *Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011). You should get a copy. Tell him I sent you.

Plumb Line 3:

*Everything
speaks.*

Bible Reading Plan
APRIL
1: James 1
2: James 2
3: James 3
4: James 4
5: James 5
6: James 1
7: James 2
8: James 3
9: James 4
10: James 5
11: Matthew 7
12: Matthew 8
13: Matthew 9
14: Matthew 10
15: Matthew 11
16: Matthew 12
17: Matthew 13
18: Matthew 14
19: Matthew 15
20: Matthew 16
21: Matthew 17
22: Matthew 18
23: Matthew 19
24: Matthew 20
25: Matthew 21
26: Matthew 22
27: Matthew 23
28: Matthew 24
29: Matthew 25
30: Matthew 26
31: Matthew 27



We no longer live in a world where people expect (and even embrace!) mediocrity in the local church. Gone are the days when a soloist could stumble her way through a song in the name of “making a joyful noise.” Overhead projectors no longer have the pizzazz that they used to. We’re past the point where our hallways can still sport posters of VBS ’01.¹

No, we are now in a society where details really do matter, and where our guests notice more inconsistencies and quality lag than ever before. That *doesn't* mean that every church building in America needs to look like the Crystal Cathedral² or that we have to run a slickly-produced show week in and week out. As a matter of fact, plenty of churches with little to no facilities or production budget could teach megachurches a thing or three about authenticity in worship and hospitality on the weekend.

But we should strive to be the best we can with what we have. Lots of budget or none, plenty of volunteers or a servanthood drought, fantastic facility or decrepit storefront, we should make the weekend the best it can be.

¹ Truth Trackers and the Secret of the Stone Tablets. I still wake up at 3 AM with flashbacks of that theme song.

² Little known fact: the second choice was Teflon Tabernacle.

It's not always the big things that throw off a good first experience. A more lavish facility doesn't make it better. A multi-million dollar budget can still be thrown away on the wrong things. Often, the distractions come from the tiny, unnoticed-by-us details. That's why plumb line #3 is derived from one of my favorite Walt Disney quotes: Everything speaks.

Walt knew that details mattered when it came to the design of his parks. Contradictions in style and substance devalued the experience. When he started the planning process for Disneyland, his wife asked, "But why do you want to build an amusement park? They're so dirty." To which Walt replied "That's just the point – mine won't be."³

SKREEEEEEK.

That's probably the sound of you hitting the brakes or the record skipping at the party when the dude walks in dressed like a gorilla.⁴ "Hold on," you say, "are you saying that the church should imitate *Disney*? Don't you realize they are an *entertainment* company?"

That's my point exactly. Disney relentlessly pursues the details, day in and day out, all for an oversized rat in a tuxedo. As church and ministry leaders, do we put nearly as much detail into a process that's far more important? Do we recognize that our guests are seeing details that we've long since forgotten? Do we really believe that everything speaks?

- The cluttered entryway and the overgrown flowerbeds? That's already spoken to them.
- The leftover tape on the wall that used to be attached to a women's conference flyer? Maybe you meant to remove it. They saw it.
- The restroom stall that's been out of order for the last few weeks? Your regulars might overlook that. Your guests won't.
- The surly usher who hasn't smiled since the Reagan administration and who growls out a "good morning" to everyone entering? You know that's just his salty personality and that underneath all the gruff, he has a good heart. But to a guest, he speaks for your entire church.

Whether we want to admit it or not, the evangelical church cares less about our guests than *The Happiest Place on Earth*. That should sting a little.

³ Quoted by Theodore Kinni, *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service* (New York: Disney Editions, 2011).

⁴ And it's not a costume party. Oops.

Would you like to see a few classic examples of Walt's (and his Imagineers') fastidious attention to detail? Of course you would!

- At Disney Parks, you won't find one trash can any farther than 27 feet away from another trash can. That's because their research team determined that the average person walks 27 feet before getting tired of carrying their Mousketeer Bar wrapper and ultimately tossing it on the ground.
- At Magic Kingdom, the texture of the pavement changes from one environment to the next. In Frontierland, the ground is gritty, almost gravelly. Tomorrowland boasts smooth concrete and clean lines. Disney believed that your feet would pick up the subtle cues of a new "scene" faster than the rest of your body.
- Park streets are cleaned every day, restrooms are cleaned every half-hour, and from the CEO down, you'll never see a Disney cast member pass by a piece of trash without stooping to pick it up.⁵

I'll repeat my earlier question: do we put nearly as much detail into a process that's far more important? Flickering lights, peeling paint, unclear systems, confusing announcements, unexplained theological terms...left by themselves, any one of these things is a minor issue. But **every minor issue serves as a distraction.** And enough distractions – enough "speaking points" – can derail the experience of your guest.

I'll bet you might have a second objection, and that is the emphasis on *experience*. You might ask, "Shouldn't we just focus on pointing people to Jesus?"

In short, yes. But often, that's not where people begin. Think about your friend four cubicles over who's an agnostic and going through a divorce. You've been inviting her to church for months, but she's skeptical of church people and organized religion.

Or think about your neighbor who respects you, but respectfully disagrees with your brand of spirituality. At best, you're the friendly-but-misguided neighborhood Bible thumper.⁶ At worst, you're the guy who will trick his kids into joining your cult.

What if your coworker or neighbor suddenly accepted an invitation to church?

⁵ For more behind-the-scenes Disney secrets, see Kinni, *Be Our Guest*, or Susan Veness, *The Hidden Magic of Walt Disney World: Over 600 Secrets of the Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney's Hollywood Studios, and Animal Kingdom* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2009).

⁶ Unless you read your Bible on your electronic device, which makes you an App Tapper.

And what if they showed up on an average weekend where average things happen? If they're skeptical or agnostic, they need one excuse – only one – to turn away from your church. What if that one excuse was that they perceive your church as messy, disorganized, and a waste of their time?

Peeling paint and a weedy flower bed shouldn't matter, but they do. **One rude greeter shouldn't offset the 99 kind ones, but he does.** One inattentive kids' worker, one misspelled lyric on a slide, one over-eager membership sales pitch...all of those things speak. And any one of them could be the thing that turns your friend away from your church and away from the gospel.

To be clear: I believe in the sovereignty of God. I believe that the Holy Spirit can and does work around our ecclesiastical shortcomings and the skepticism of our friends. I believe that people can get saved even if there are smudges on the front door. But **why make the journey to the gospel any bumpier than it needs to be?** Why not pay attention to the details, recognize that everything speaks, and create simple designs that will move people towards a relationship with Jesus?

Take a look around your facility, your volunteer team, your stage announcements, and your systems and processes. What are those things saying that you don't necessarily intend for them to say?

Plumb Line 4:

Make it

Personal





I don't care what size your church is. You can be a mega church, a micro church, a rural church, a city church, or A Little Church With A Big Heart.¹ Every single weekend, someone is going to walk in the doors for the first time, and that someone will feel like an outsider.

It's natural. We're all outsiders the first time we show up somewhere. Whether it's the hot new restaurant or the coveted new job, there's a learning curve to master. We have to get to know the menu or learn what to order or figure out which hallway leads you out of the conference room and towards the restrooms.

One of the roles of a great guest services team is to do everything we can to take outsiders and make them feel like family from the very first visit. We have to make it personal. There's a catch to that: you have to do it in an appropriate, non-creepy fashion. Think of it as a first date. On the first date, you ask questions, you get to know the person, you reveal appropriate things about yourself. You do not name your future children together or pick out china patterns. That's creepy.²

¹ Feel free to use that on your business card. I'm sure you'd be the first.

² Hey young, single, over-eager seminary guys, let me repeat myself for emphasis: it's creepy. You might want to memorize that paragraph. You can thank me later.

If your church is on the smaller side, you might think that this plumb line would come naturally. After all, it's easy to make it personal when you can spot a first timer and know they're new, right?

Not necessarily. Small churches can err on the side of smothering. A guest can easily feel overwhelmed with the amount of attention they receive. **Good intentions can sometimes lead to bad impressions.**

Making it personal doesn't always mean singling someone out. It doesn't mean that they feel put on display and all eyes are on them. No, "make it personal" means that you've thought through their experience from the time they drive onto your campus until the time they leave. And you do that in two ways:

Make it personal for the masses.

Hang on. What? That's an oxymoronic statement if one ever existed. But think about "personal for the masses" like a public transit system: the developers of the bus line or the subway map or the interstate grid knew that not everyone was going to the *same* place, but everyone was going *some* place. And so they help you get there easier.

An overview map tells you which train lines go to which areas of the city. A commercial airline website explains ticketing, baggage policies,³ and extra fees.⁴ Road signs tell you how many miles to the next town or how many exits until the next rest stop.

Not everyone is going to the same place, but everyone is going some place. And the best organizations give the user wayfinding methods to determine exactly what information they need and how they can use that information to take a next step.

For churches, that may look like an easy-to-navigate website. Maybe it's a "What to expect" page that helps your potential guest check you out before you check them in. On the weekend, that can be clear directional signage and visible, helpful volunteers that are present within the first few feet of a guest's arrival. It can be a pastor who addresses first time guests from the stage and the sermon every single week, whether they're there or not.⁵

Making it personal for the masses simply means that you have a plan in place. It communicates that you expected a guest to show up and you wanted their

³ It's gonna cost you.

⁴ See previous footnote.

⁵ Eventually, they will be. Might as well get some practice.

experience to be as trouble-free as possible. It shows that you've considered the opportunities there might be to fall through the cracks and you've taken steps to avoid those at all costs.

Make it personal for the person.

All of the signage and volunteers in the world won't matter if a guest makes it through a weekend without a personal greeting or appropriate touch. You can have a campus full of volunteers or a notebook full of strategies and still miss an opportunity for interaction.

Pastors, staff, leaders, and volunteers should be on the lookout for people who are new, and seek to engage them. Keep in mind that not everyone wants to engage, but that shouldn't keep you from making an effort. Make eye contact. Speak. Ask appropriate questions. Make a few introductions. Remember their name.⁶ Instead of pointing them somewhere, walk with them to their destination.

In a larger church, playing a round of "Spot the New Guy" can be tricky. One method we've used to help with that is a simple gift bag. People love free stuff, so we designed a bag with a couple of informational pieces and a gift that's actually desirable, not dumpable. The bag is clearly branded with our church logo, it's bulky enough that a guest can't slip it in their purse or pocket, and it's a sure-fire way to know we're talking to someone new without them feeling like a target.

Once you've identified a guest, give them a practical, appropriate, immediate, next step. Notice I said *a* next step, not *unlimited* next steps. Don't overwhelm a guest with a menu of options. Perhaps you have a regularly-scheduled newcomers event.⁷ That's the best option. Maybe you can introduce them to a couple of new friends or invite them to try out a small group.

The next step should be *practical*: you'll have to answer the "How does this benefit me?" question on their behalf.

It should be *appropriate*: if someone is there for the first time, you shouldn't explain your auto-draft option for tithers.⁸

And it should be *immediate*: don't make them wait an unreasonable amount of time to connect.

This is where "make it personal" really comes to fruition. You have to determine,

⁶ Names work better than "First Time Guest #528b."

⁷ "Every six years or whenever we think about it, whichever comes first" doesn't count as *regularly scheduled*.

⁸ "Bring ye all the tithes into the online giving portal, and select ye a unique 4-digit PIN." (Malachi 3:10, *The Message*.)

guest-by-guest, what will help them the best. Your guests may not care how they become a covenant member if they're new to the area and simply checking out churches. They may not care that you want them to be in a small group in order to build community. For that matter, they may not know what a small group is.⁹ They simply want to keep it simple: "Where do I park?" "Where do I sit?" "What do you have for my kids?" "Is this a place I'd come back to?"

Think about the facets of your weekend experience that makes someone feel like an outsider. Break down those barriers. Make it personal. Make 'em an insider. Make 'em a part of the family.

⁹ "So far, I don't like this big group. Why would I want a smaller one?"

Plumb Line 5:

*The first visit
should set up the
Second
Visit*





My entire guest services paradigm changed when I realized this truth. When we talk about “first impressions,” we rightly define what people notice during their first few minutes on campus: cleanliness. Organization. Signage. Environment. Chocolate fondue fountain in the kids’ check in lobby.¹

But if our first plumb line (*the gospel is offensive, but nothing else should be*) is true, then somewhere down the line we have to acknowledge that we’re simply setting up for a second visit. If our end goal in first impressions is to point people towards the gospel, then we must keep in mind that in most cases, a repeat visit (sometimes, multiple repeat visits) will be necessary before the gospel stops being offensive and starts to take root.

Think about your own personal experiences in sharing the gospel. Whether you were a scaredy-cat Southern Baptist Monday night door-to-door knocker or a Holy Ghost fire-and-brimstone angry-white-dude-on-the-side-of-the-road-with-a-sandwich-board evangelist,² you know that not everyone responds to the gospel on their first hearing. Yes, the Holy

¹ What? You don’t have one of those? And you call yourself a church?!!

² “You better TURN or you’re gonna BURN.” “You better be SANCTIFIED or you’re gonna be FRENCH FRIED.” “You better quit FAKIN’ or you’re gonna be BAKIN’!”

Spirit draws, but sometimes the Spirit draws, awakens, and reveals *over time*. If we put all of our eggs into the basket of the first visit, we do so to the detriment of the guests that we are trying to serve and love towards the gospel.

That's why the first visit should always set up the second visit. That's why if you don't have a "come back next week" plan in place for your guests, you may as well hang up your first impressions track shoes.

Here are a couple of fun stats for you:

- The typical guest in a typical church will decide whether or not to return within the first ten minutes.³
- Among growing churches, there is a 16% chance that a first time guest will return for a second visit. But there is an 85% chance that a second time guest will come for third and subsequent visits.⁴

Part of welcoming a guest back for a second week involves what you do at the end of the first week. By now, you've hopefully realized the importance of a warm hello. But what about a meaningful goodbye? Are greeters positioned to greet guests as they exit? Are you specifically inviting them back for the following week?

Not only is the goodbye important, but what happens after the goodbye counts, too. Oh sure, you're exhausted from your weekend duties and want nothing more than to stretch out on your couch with a NASCAR race and a bag of Cheez Doodles.⁵ You have Monday responsibilities ahead that will move guest follow up way down your list of priorities. But remember that what was a normal weekend for you was completely abnormal to your guests. They showed up at your church for the very first time. They're processing the experience even as you're downing the last Doodle. And in most cases, they're trying to figure out if they will give you a second chance.

Remember the "practical, appropriate, immediate next step" from plumb line four? Those need to pop up beyond Sunday if you want to reinforce your intention for your guest's journey. Whatever your plan to retain guests, you need to be crystal clear both in terms of your intentionality and your invitation to return.

At the Summit, we aim for three points of contact following a guest's first visit. We want to make sure that the Monday-Friday experience serves as a connector

³ *The Church Growth Ratio Book*, Win Arn & Charles Arn (Monrovia, CA: CGI, 1990; 2004)

⁴ *Beyond the First Visit: The Complete Guide to Connecting Guests to Your Church*, Gary L. McIntosh (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006)

⁵ Those things'll kill ya.

from their first weekend to their second.⁶

- A Monday email from the Campus Pastor, thanking the guest for their visit, linking them to the website and a guest survey, inviting them back for a second weekend, and inviting them to Starting Point.
- A Monday afternoon follow up phone call from one of our pastors, thanking them for their visit, asking if they have any questions, and inviting them to Starting Point.
- A next-day follow up email from that same pastor, restating the next steps that were covered in the phone call or offering additional answers for questions raised by the guest. And – you guessed it – an invitation to Starting Point.

I am continually amazed at the positive feedback we get from these phone calls. In a culture of telemarketers and email spam filling your inbox, you'd think that these efforts at reaching out would simply represent one more digital intrusion. But the vast majority of those we speak to – almost without exception – are genuinely thankful and surprised that we took the time to contact them. **Those efforts make a really big church feel quite a bit smaller.**

Our process generally helps bridge the gap between first visit and second visit. At a church of any size, a follow up phone call from a pastor communicates care. It helps a large church feel more intimate. And doggone it, it's just part of the pastor's role as shepherd.

The common denominator you've probably noticed in all of our follow up is that we specifically invite people to an event called Starting Point. That's a monthly gathering designed for new people, people who want to get further connected, and people who want to take some sort of next step. Starting Point offers a broad menu of options, but it puts all of those options into one easily-accessible package so that there's no doubt where a guest should go next.

Whatever "next step" you have for your guests, make sure they know it. Make sure that you are highlighting it on their first visit and talking about it multiple times afterward. Don't allow your guests to wander aimlessly through their journey at your church, making random guesses at what they should do next. Care enough about them that you think through the process on their behalf and know what answers they need.

⁶ Please note, this is the plan. This is the way that it's supposed to happen. If you were a first time guest here and this didn't happen, let me know. I'll take an ESV Study Bible and crack the kneecaps of the pastor that was assigned to you.

Conclusion

Rome. A quarter-century after the death of Jesus. The local church is still feeling its way around this new movement called Christianity. Some of her members had become believers at Pentecost in Jerusalem. A large portion were Jewish converts. A growing number were Gentiles who had received the gospel and come to faith. The congregation was full of discussion and debate on matters of the law. Tensions were rife in regards to the religious heritage of the Jews versus the new freedoms found in the grace of the cross.

But one topic that brought no argument was the inclusivity that Jesus offered. Gentiles, Jews, Roman, Hebrew, wealthy, poor, men, women, slave, and free: all within the church at Rome had tasted the rich mercy and inexhaustible kindness of their Savior.

It was about this mercy that Paul wrote. When he put pen to parchment in the city of Corinth, he reminded the church at Rome of the new heritage they shared and the foundation they were to lay:

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:7, ESV)

The Roman believers had received tremendous grace, and now Paul the Apostle was challenging them to freely give that grace to others. The love that had been lavished on them by Jesus compelled them to lavish that love on others. **The mercy they had been shown as outsiders left them no choice but to show mercy on those who needed to be brought inside.**

Two millennia later, we want to serve guests well because Christ has served us well. The gospel came to us when we were in our deepest need and our darkest state. Jesus didn't wait for us to be worthy of his sacrifice. Rather he joyously embraced the cross and took our place before we even knew we needed him to. At our very best, we were rebels against the Kingdom, shaking our collective fist in the face of the one who gave himself for us. Jesus' selflessness in the midst of our selfishness is staggering.

Because of Jesus' cosmic "welcome" by giving a hell-bound sinner access to the throne of grace, we are compelled to welcome others as well. **We not only have a social responsibility, we have a biblical mandate** to serve and love others in the same way that we have been served and loved. And as we do that, we demonstrate for people the grace of the gospel and the kindness of Jesus.

My prayer for you is that these plumb lines have helped you to see the eternal significance that is at stake by serving your guests well. First impressions isn't just about parking a car or pouring a cup of coffee. There are far deeper things at stake. We may never know how an opened door or an open seat can influence someone's journey to the cross.

As Christ has welcomed you, welcome one another.

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