



DEVELOPING MISSIONAL LEADERS IN CONGREGATIONS AND SCHOOLS

14301 Grand Avenue South, Burnsville, MN 55306 (952) 435-2550 information@mnsdistrict.org

Holy Week Alert 2011

"Are You Ready?"

We've all heard of or perhaps used the term "C & E Christians"-- Christmas and Easter Christians". Sometimes these "C & E" folks are our own members or family members of our members. Sometimes these C & E folks aren't associated with a church and don't know Jesus at all. While we might bemoan what we perceive as "C & E" visitor's low commitment levels, or lack of understanding of the church, we must also recognize and be prepared to the fact that there are two times of the year when congregations should be optimally prepared for visitors: Christmas Eve and Palm Sunday to Easter.

It is not just Easter Sunday that people visit our churches. Some may come to a midweek Holy Week service because we are close to them or because the other church they have been visiting doesn't have a Maundy Thursday, or convenient Good Friday service. Maybe they're just coming for the soup and sandwiches, but we must be prepared. We should always be prepared, but this week we are entering is prime time.

1. BE READY WITH A FRIENDLY WEBSITE.

It used to be said that a person's visit to a church started in the parking lot when they drove in. Though the parking lot is important, it's not the starting point anymore. The starting point for a visit to your church happens online for almost everyone. (Website searches exceed the use of the Yellow Pages). Even if persons have driven by your building for years, even if they have been invited by their best friends, even if you are the most well-known church in town, people will visit you on the web before they visit you in person. **THE WELCOME NEEDS TO START HERE!** What's your web presence? Do you have a website? If not, why not? Who might you be missing? Is your website easily navigated? Are there pictures depicting real people, real life in your congregation? Are there encouraging stories of life and changed lives? How current is your information? An out-of-date website, like an out-of-date message on a sign sends the message that you are not attending to business. Don't just set it and forget it. (I once observed a sign in front of a church located on a rather busy thoroughfare. It was Holy Week. The electronic message scrolled. "Welcome to _____. A Savior has been born. Attend our Christmas services, _____, _____." I have observed this lack of attention frequently at church websites)

Google your church's name and city and see what happens. Chris Anderson, editor of WIRED says, "Your brand is not what you say it is. Your brand is what Google says it is." "What's the first thing people will read about you if they Google your church's name?"

2. BE READY WITH OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA

If on Facebook, Twitter, or if you have a blog site, are these pages, or feeds updated regularly? Does your website have a "Find us" button with Facebook and Twitter symbols? Are your church's electronic web addresses or Facebook/Twitter information included in your bulletin? Did you know that a pastor's blog is more often read by visitors than by church members? Are Facebook and Twitter followers alerted to new blog posts? If you don't know what a "Tweet" or a "Blog spot" is, please focus your attention to item #1 and those that now follow.

3. BE READY WITH AN INVITING PHYSICAL PRESENCE OUTDOORS

Have someone who is not a member tell you what it's like to view your church from the outside. Here are some things to have them evaluate.

-Is the entrance visible? I mean the real entrance. If the door all the insiders use is different from the visible front door of the church, you better have great signage so people know where to enter. Don't make assumptions!

-How are we cosmetically? It's what's inside that is most important, but we want all people to want to get inside. Landscaping, fresh paint, well-tended walkways all contribute to the welcome you are extending. (I have actually visited churches where glass is missing from windows. This winter I observed several churches where the entrance steps were not shoveled, drifts covered them)

-Is there adequate parking? If the parking lot is more than 75% full at the beginning of a church service, you are telling people there is no room for them here. Time to add another service?

-Are there portions of the parking lot from which the church is not visible? If you have a large and confusing parking lot, you need parking lot greeters to welcome and direct people.

-Do your parking lots and walks pass the "High heels" test? Are the surfaces, safe and manageable for ladies in high heels? Do you want to have some fun with this test? Ask your pastor or head trustee to put on the shoes!!

4. BE READY WITH WELCOMING SOULS AT ALL THE DOORS.

Hospitality training is essential. Greeters should wear name tags, stand near the entrances, extend an inviting welcome, and be knowledgeable enough to direct visitors with children to the appropriate classroom, guide visitors to the welcome center, restrooms, the worship space, etc.

5. BE READY WITH AN INVITING PHYSICAL PRESENCE INDOORS

What's it like to walk into your church's space? Is it dank and dark, or light and inviting? (I have actually heard from a member of a younger generation that a church "smelled like old people".

OPEN THE WINDOWS AND AIR OUT YOUR FACILITIES BEFORE THIS CAN BE SAID OF YOUR CHURCH!

Welcome Centers should have up to date information, brochures, newsletters, calendars, and other pertinent information. Bulletin boards, message centers, etc. should be fresh and up-to-date. (If a bulletin board has a faded or yellowed background, it needs updating. Check the dates of information. I have actually seen church bulletin boards with materials which were over 6 years out of date.) Interior signage needs to be visible and easily understood.

6. BE READY WITH A CLEAN AND PROFESSIONAL-LOOKING NURSERY

Visitors need to be assured that their children will be safe in their absence. There needs to be adults present; not just teenagers ditching worship.

Have a couple of your member Moms go through the toys/equipment, asking the question "Would I like my child playing with or chewing on this?" Are there any broken toys? Broken equipment? Are things clean? Has the carpet been vacuumed? When was the last time the stuffed animals were laundered? The plastic toys cleaned? Any chipped and peeling paint? Are there some diapers and diaper wipes available just in case they might be needed? Is there a place to dispose of the formerly fresh and clean diapers?

When making announcements about the nursery, provide directions to the nursery, and use user-friendly language.

7. BE READY WITH WELL-EQUIPPED, AGE-APPROPRIATE CHILDREN'S CLASSES

Visit elementary schools to get a feel for age-appropriate décor and resources if you haven't visited one lately. If there are congregations nearby that are well-known for excellent children's ministries, take a few of your education volunteers over for a tour. The MNS District has many fine educators who could make themselves available to assist you.

8. BE READY BY ELIMINATING JARGON AND INITIALS FROM ALL WRITTEN AND SPOKEN COMMUNICATIONS.

You might have an LWML, LLL, LYE, KFC or another cryptic acrostic organization, but do not use just these initials in your announcements and communications. Not everyone knows what these groups are. Are they "secret societies"? Have someone who is not a part of your church or the

LCMS, review materials, bulletins and communications regularly to make sure that they are understandable to everyone.

When you refer to church space by name without indicating where those spaces are you might be projecting an exclusionary meaning, *“Everyone is welcome to coffee in the Common Room”* actually means, *“Only those who know where the Common Room is located are welcome.”* A better way is to say, *“Everyone is welcome for coffee in the Common Room, which is just to the right as you exit the sanctuary through the double doors at the back. The coffee is free and the fellowship is priceless.”*

9. BE READY BY FOCUSING ON THE VISITORS’ NEEDS RATHER THAN THE CHURCH’S NEEDS.

Sure, you need more voices in the choir, more volunteers for the nursery, more help for the upcoming bizarre, and of course, there is always a need for more money in the checkbook to meet the budget, but focus on welcoming visitors and learning about ways the church can be helpful to them, and there will be opportunities in the future to discuss some of these things.

10. BE READY WITH PROMPT FOLLOW UP.

Have a regular follow-up plan that automatically goes into effect after someone visits. A form letter from the senior pastor might be a part of this follow up, or a phone call from him, but it is generally more effective if a phone call from a church member who met the visitor takes place on the day of the church visit. The other items might come later. Have a plan, work the plan each week.

11. BE READY WITH PRAYER AND A CARING PRESENCE.

You don’t know what has brought someone to church. You don’t know if there is a deep spiritual need, a family crisis, or just a feeling that it is time. Include visitors in the prayers of the church. Announce and offer that persons will be available at certain locations to pray with and for others. **HAVE PEOPLE AT THOSE LOCATIONS THAT ARE WILLING TO PROVIDE A WELCOME, SAFE ENVIRONMENT AND PRAY WITH PEOPLE.** Demonstrate that your church believes in prayer.

12. CELEBRATE

“This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

WHEN WELCOMING MEMBERS WHO HAVE BEEN ABSENT FOR AWHILE USE WORDS OF WELCOME, AVOID WORDS OF JUDGMENT. Perhaps it is harsh judging words that have kept them away.

(A recent article by Ann Updegraff Spleth, ministry partner of The Columbia Partnership.org contained 12 tips to make sure you are ready for company. These have been condensed and some adjusted to more directly fit our context.)