

Ready for Hospitality Team

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one : introduction

When we read about the early church in Acts¹, we see that the sense of welcome, belonging, unity, togetherness and family vibe was clearly evident. Being part of this community involved serving, caring and attentive consideration of others, resulting in great joy and life. As River of Life Church, we aspire to this same excellence in hospitality, both in our homes and in our Sunday meetings.

Every Sunday, God brings new people to our church, people who may never have set foot in a church before, people who are seeking and on a journey. As the Hospitality Team, our interaction with them can lead to eternally changed lives for the Kingdom. Our objective is to assimilate these people into the church, which often leads to life transformation - we are giving people the means and opportunity to become mature followers of Christ.

Assimilation can be defined as the process used to encourage guests to continue coming back until they see and understand God's power, accept Jesus as their Saviour and commit themselves to the local church. Paul's heart cry for the Galatians² was that Christ would be fully formed in their lives, and everything that he did for them was with that one purpose in mind.

If we recognise that not one person who comes through our doors comes haphazardly, then we need to have a clear plan in place to help our guests feel welcome, encourage them to return and see that person accept Jesus. As part of the Hospitality Team, you play a key role in this process, as well as to rejoice when a person says yes to God's will for their life.

Andy Stanley describes this very tangibly in this excerpt from his book called *Deep & Wide : Creating Churches that Unchurched People Love to Attend (2012)* :

The church is a family expecting guests.

The Church – your church – truly is expecting guests. And you should be ready to show them intentional hospitality when they arrive. While they are in your company they need to feel comfortable and valued, no matter where they are in their spiritual development. When they leave, be proactive in giving them a return invitation they'll be hard-pressed to refuse. God is honoured when you show true biblical hospitality.

¹ Acts 2:42-47

² Galatians 4:19

two: intentional hospitality

Just as a family expecting guests for a meal does, so we also need to make careful preparation for this time with our guests. This preparation takes focused organization and co-ordination. Some preparation may seem mundane and tedious, however it enables the meal to be ready and the home to be neat and tidy for when the visitors arrive. This will not happen by accident, by chance or without careful forethought and planning.

Nelson Searcy in his book called *Fusion* (2014), writes this

Unfortunately, we live in a culture in which the business world understands more about true expressions of hospitality than the church does. While hotels, stores and restaurants all serve their guests with intentional hospitality, we often let ours wander in and out of our weekly services with no specific plan of showing them how important they are to us. We focus less time and energy on engaging our guests than the people who provide little more than a comfortable bed and a hot shower. The new people who walk through our doors have the opportunity to come into relationship with their Creator, a chance to discover His will for their lives and the ability to step into their place in His family...and we take our part in that opportunity for granted. We have not internalized the gravity of our burden to reflect God's character in the way we treat them. We do not have a plan in place to encourage them to return. We are not prepared.'

Intentional preparation, prayer and purpose for hospitality is vital. Intentional hospitality involves simple things like approaching people rather than waiting for them to approach us, greeting people warmly and welcomingly, putting your guests at ease and helping them to 'feel at home' in the environment. The early church in Acts was characterized by an atmosphere of 'glad and sincere hearts'³, which has to be one of their most attractive qualities.

Being part of the Hospitality Team is an act of service. As we read in Mark, '*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others*'⁴. Hospitality Team members are expected to be committed, to arrive early, know the plan, be prepared, pray together before people arrive – and to work as a team. God uses individuals, but individualism disqualifies ministry in the body of Christ.

³ Acts 2:46

⁴ Mark 10:45

three: first impressions matter

'Impressions are based upon instinct and emotion, not on rational thought or in-depth investigation' Gill Bremer.

The human subconscious is a complex and powerful entity. While most of us float through life unaware of its influence, our subconscious is constantly shaping our thoughts, experiences, reactions and opinions. In his book *In Strangers to Ourselves: discovering the adaptive unconscious* Timothy D Wilson observes

'the mind operates most efficiently by relegating a good deal of high level, sophisticated thinking to the unconscious, just as a modern jet liner is able to fly on automatic pilot with little or no input from the human 'conscious' pilot. The adaptive unconscious does an excellent job of sizing up the world in a sophisticated and efficient manner.'

This God-given 'autopilot' mechanism revs into action when we face unfamiliar territory and tells us how to respond to our surroundings based on any manner of outside clues. The feelings we get when we are introduced to new people or new places, whether positive or negative, are not the result of logical evaluation they are based on instinct rather than reasoning. If we want to successfully assimilate first time guests into our congregations we do need to at least recognise and embrace the power of the subconscious mind and the role that it plays in forming that all important first impression.

Studies show that a first impression is usually formed within the first **seven minutes** of arriving at a church. *Seven minutes* is all that you will get to make a positive first impression. In the first seven minutes of contact with our church, first-time guests will usually know whether or not they are coming back. That's before a single worship song is sung and before a single word of the message is preached.

Obviously our guests aren't making a logical decision based on the integrity of the preaching, the character of the church staff or the clarity of our doctrine. They are not weighing the pros and cons of worship styles and theological viewpoints. In all likelihood, they wouldn't have a theological clue about where to begin such an evaluation! Instead, they are taking in clues about our church's atmosphere and the people's friendliness on a much more rudimentary level. Their subconscious minds are working overtime to evaluate their compatibility with this new environment. The question for us then becomes, what's actually being judged? What factors and/or feelings play into their impression? And how much control can you have over doing things in a way that will make their experience ring positive?

four: so what do we do?

Pre-service – from the street to the seat

Every aspect of the early stages of arrival, from ‘The Street to the Seat’, is significantly important in good hospitality and setting the atmosphere for a person coming in. This is our first opportunity for interaction with everyone who comes to River of Life, and the Hospitality team’s mission is to make every effort to take our guest’s guard down before the service begins and create an environment that makes our first-time guests feel welcomed and respected. There are three aspects to this – greeted, treated & directed, and seated.

Greeted

As River of Life Church we strive for excellence – we paint and maintain our buildings (yes, they’re colourful!), we cut the grass, plant flower beds and pick up litter – because these all impact a person’s first impression of the church. We are conscious that everything speaks to a first-time guest! BUT, the most critical part of initial contact is who our guests meet when they make it to the front door of the church. A friendly face offering a warm welcome speaks volumes! Greeters should practically radiate the underlying message we want to send - *“we are nice people, and we are glad you are here!”*

According to Paul Ekman, a professor of Psychiatry at the University of California Medical School, *“We can pick up a smile from 30 meters away. A smile lets us know that we are going to get a positive reaction and it’s hard not to reciprocate”.*

A smile lightens the load of opposition and defences that an unchurched person may be carrying through the door. But not just any smile – a genuine smile. If a smile does not engage the eyes, it is automatically interpreted as false. Great greeters are truly friendly people who make eye contact and offer sincere smiles.

Application : Hospitality team members should be at the door, greeting people when they arrive, engaging them with a genuine smile and eye contact. If you don’t know them, find out their name (and remember it!). If they have not been to River of Life Church before, give them a welcome pack or a ROL Life book, and ask them to fill out the Get Connected card and explain where they should take the completed card.

What not to do : be chatting to your friends, be on your phone, look disinterested or ignore our visitors.

Treated and Directed

A first-time guest who has never been to River of Life will not be familiar with the building and facilities. For those of us who are familiar with our surroundings, we have a tendency to think that our guests will figure it out and that the building is pretty easy to navigate. This is not true for guests who have never set foot in River of Life, and who are probably registering high anxiety levels. They may have taken a big step by simply coming to church – so we need make them feel respected and welcomed, and to make sure that they know exactly where to go.

Application : Introduce them to a member of ROL so that they don't feel ignored. If they have children explain to them what happens with the children and where they go, - speak to the children as well. Show them where the infoHUB is so that they can find out more about River of Life or direct them to any of the other facilities such as the Mum's room or toilets.

Examples of this are:-

'Let me introduce you to Joe ... Joe, this is Kumbi and Chipo who are new to River of Life. Can they sit with you?'

'Children normally stay in the service for the first two songs, and then go out to The Rock, where they can meet new friends and learn about Jesus. Let me show you where they meet and introduce you to one of the Rock teachers.'

What not to do : Don't use 'Christian Jargon' especially when talking to first-time guests. Many of the people who come to River of Life for the first time are unbelievers who are seeking or on a journey. Christian Jargon can be confusing or off-putting to them. We want them to feel respected and welcomed, not alienated.

Seated

Once our guests have been sincerely greeted, helpfully directed and well treated, we want them to be well seated. If left to fend for themselves to find a seat, they will often nervously wander down the aisle unsure of where to sit, feeling quite awkward, or they will reluctantly have to squeeze past people to fill empty seats in the middle of the row.

Application : Hospitality team members should be ready and eager to escort new people to available seats. If necessary, you can also ask those already seated to slide towards the middle of the row, to allow the new people to sit. This is a great opportunity to introduce the guest to the people sitting.

We want people to truly engage in the worship service, so try and seat people as close to the front as possible, without making them feel uncomfortable.

After the service

Hospitality extends beyond just the welcome and early stages of the meeting, spanning every part of the meeting and including the vibrancy of atmosphere at the end of the meeting.

Providing places and opportunities for people to connect with one another and link-up with the church as a whole will help people feel welcomed in the community and motivated to be part of it.

Application : Hospitality team members should be intentional about connecting with new people after the service ends. Remembering their name plays a huge part in them feeling welcome and at home.

- Ask them about themselves and what they do. (Make sure you listen to them).
- Introduce them to other people from ROL.
- Take them to the tea & coffee table, and pour them a cup of coffee.
- Help them pick up their children from the Rock.
- Take them to the infoHUB to get more information about ROL.
- Serve behind the coffee table – pouring a cup of tea or coffee for someone gives you an opportunity to introduce yourself to people.

Examples of this are:

'Hi Kumbi, we met at the door when you arrived. We didn't have time to chat then – what brings you to River of Life ...'

'Hello, my name is Kate, we haven't met before ...'

Next week

Our objective is for first-time guests to become second-time guests and ultimately fully engaged members of the church. If you met a new person the previous week, be intentional about speaking to them again this week (remember their name!)

- Tell them that it is great to see them again (be sincere).
- Ask them how their week has been.
- Ask them if they filled out a Get Connected card – if not, ask them to fill one out this week.
- Did anyone contact them during the week? If so, try to introduce them to that person, or to someone on the Host Team or Eldership Team.

