

VISITING NEW CHURCH MEMBERS

YOUR VITAL JOB

Most of us reveal very quickly what really matters to us. People notice our hobbies and interests. We show by our eagerness and commitment what is important in our lives.

When you are asked to visit someone seeking to join your local church you have a vital job. When they meet you they will notice how much this church really matters to you.

How you prepare for your visit and introduce yourself should reveal that you are eager and committed!

After all, to belong to Christ's church is the highest privilege any person can have. Church Membership is seen in the Bible as the greatest honour this side of heaven. The church is Jesus' big idea: 'I will build my church' (Matt 16:18). He is described as its head (Eph 4:15). 'From him the whole body, joined and held together... grows and builds itself up in love' (Eph 4:16). Joining the church means joining Christ's body to share in his cosmic work. It is the highest calling for the most demanding commitment under his authority.

Are you excited about belonging to the church? Let's show that it really matters to us.

So you visit for the sake of:

Jesus – Because he is head of the Church he is the one who convicts and calls people to belong to him. When you speak to applicants it's not like joining some club or society where they need to prove they have passed some membership test. Rather it is meeting people who have heard his call as Saviour and want to obey him as Lord. You represent him as a fellow disciple.

Your local church – You go to represent your own church family as a brother or sister.

Your local church meeting – You have a particular job to do having been chosen by others in the church to make links with the applicant and to bring back a report to the church members' meeting. You represent them as a visitor,

BEWARE!

There are some false ideas some people have about visitors.

You are NOT going as an 'examiner' to test or judge someone. Unfortunately, some people have the idea that the visitor goes to "check up" on people in the sense of judging them. I remember a deacon saying once, "How dare anyone think that they can set themselves up to judge other people." This is definitely not what visitors do.

You are NOT going as a salesperson, to make a sales pitch for your church and your particular interests. Though you should be eager your job is not to press for a response and overwhelm the applicant.

You are NOT going as a casual worker who can take this task lightly. That's why reading this leaflet matters.

QUALITIES NEEDED

To have a personal spiritual experience. It hardly needs to be said but the church visitor must be in a living relationship with Jesus Christ. You should have an experience which you can share with discernment. When you meet someone in Jesus' name you need His spirit of prayer and love so that you can be a real brother or sister. Your own convictions should ring true.

To be a good listener. The visitor will need to listen more than speak. When you meet someone new it is essential to listen carefully to everything that they say. There are no short cuts to getting to know someone apart from listening hard. You must learn not only some of the details about their story, but perhaps there will be one or two problems about which the other leaders in the church are not aware. Or the applicant may have a special gift no one else has heard about.

To be a gentle enthusiast. Nothing is more deadly than the dull, tired person who does not seem to believe in what they are doing.

To be an honest friend. Above all, the visitor goes to offer friendship and support. The applicant should sense that you are completely trustworthy. You should be able to tell the truth about the church when they ask leading questions. And you should keep total confidentiality when you are told things in private.

Because all these qualities are important it is a good idea for two visitors to share responsibility, as is the custom in many churches. Often they may make their visit at the same time. This means that there are two sets of experiences, of listening ears and of welcoming hands in friendship.

ARRANGING THE MEETING

It is most important that this should be as happy and as encouraging as possible.

Once you have been appointed you (or the two of you if you are visiting jointly) should sound out the applicant about the most convenient time and place for meeting. If an invitation to the applicant's home arises naturally this is probably the best option. It means familiar surroundings and greater ease. Otherwise you might like to invite the applicant to your own home, to share a cup of coffee and talk together. Show sensitivity and thoughtfulness.

You want the occasion to be one of two-way friendship so allow enough time. Don't rush it.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF JOINING THE CHURCH

In many Baptist churches there are three different ways a person might join the church:

Baptism and Church Membership. The clear New Testament way for new Christians to show both their faith in Jesus Christ and their entry into membership is through believers' baptism. Some churches practice the laying on of hands as well as baptism to emphasise the new beginnings in Christ.

Transfer from another church. If the applicant is already a member of a Baptist church then they will be requesting a transfer of membership. Often this will mean a request goes from the church meeting after your report, though sometimes people have a letter of transfer already. Transfers should not be seen as automatic, but rather the act of two churches caring together. If the applicant belonged to a church in a different denomination it may still prove possible to receive a letter of commendation back from their church,

Profession of Faith. Some churches only receive into membership those who have been baptised as believers. Other Baptist churches, what we call an 'open membership church', accept people who may have been baptised as infants and come into full faith in Jesus Christ without believers' baptism.

Make sure you know what the position of your church is.

WHAT YOU SHOULD FIND OUT

As you listen and talk you should discover: Some details about their background, character and family. How long they have lived in the area and what they are doing at the moment? It is not your job to pry but most people gladly open up to genuine friendship and reveal

interesting aspects of their lives. Most normal conversations begin with general introductions and you should encourage such mutual sharing.

A sincere commitment to Jesus Christ. It is their spiritual story that you need to hear. Listen carefully to it in their own words. It may be a long process of faith or a dramatic conversion. Beware of wanting to hear traditional descriptions like. "I was born again on ...". Each story is unique.

A real understanding of church membership. The privileges and responsibilities should be explained. The give and take of God's family life should be understood. Encourage a response to the key aspects of belonging. Does the applicant show an understanding of and future commitment to:

Sunday worship - at both services?

Church government - at church meetings?

Finances - with thoughtful giving?

Evangelism - with realism and boldness?

Social action - with love in service?

It is important for the applicant to have as full a picture as possible of your particular church and how it organises its life. Some churches have produced members' packs or leaflets on their life. You must be honest and clear.

A willingness to share in fellowship and, where appropriate, in future leadership, as God gives his gifts. Depending on the sort of church you belong to there may be a rich variety of activities: house meetings, mid-week fellowship meetings, youth groups and specialist fellowship groups in the church, such as young marrieds, women, men. Hopefully there may be at least one specific group in which the applicant will share in fellowship.

A desire to grow. The church is in the business of 'growing and building itself up in love' (Eph 4:16) and we must keep humbly open to God's plans for all of us.

BE SENSITIVE

Be very sensitive to everything the applicant shares. It can be quite intimidating to be asked about your faith and how you will respond to church membership. Sense where there may be real hesitation. Is this because they do not understand? Listen for where help can be offered. Maybe they will ask advice about deep things like prayer. Possibly they may reveal loneliness or past hurts. You are responsible for ensuring that the visit ends positively in friendship which you must try to keep afterwards.

TO PRAY OR NOT TO PRAY?

You should have approached the whole visit prayerfully. But what about the time when you actually meet? Should it begin with prayer, end with prayer, or both? Again be sensitive as to what feels right. It may be fitting to begin with prayer. You may find that conversation launches naturally and it seems suitable to close with quiet and prayer. It may even be that the applicant would like to share in prayer at the end or certainly be willing to close by saying the words of the 'Grace' with you.

HOW TO REPORT

On very rare occasions visitors may be disturbed by the answers they have been given. If you have any hesitations, of any sort, you must contact the minister or other church leader IMMEDIATELY.

Though others may have spent time with the applicant, your visit may have uncovered something which should be dealt with at once. In such a case you will probably not be able to give a commendation at the next church meeting.

In most situations the visit encounters no problems and leaves you with the happy task of telling the other church members about your new friend. It is important that you prepare your report carefully, especially if there were two of you visiting. (Perhaps one will propose and the other second the proposal for the church meeting),

Give a thumbnail sketch of the person's general details but go quickly to a brief account of their spiritual story. Don't forget, how they described it! It is better to write your thoughts down so as to present a serious report which does not waffle and does justice to the person involved. It is the applicant's faith in Christ and commitment to the church that will be the core of your report, but their personality and gifts should make it positive and attractive. Particularly highlight any strengths you are aware of and, where appropriate, any past gifts exercised in previous churches.

Assure the church meeting that the applicant does understand what commitment involves and bring a firm proposal.

AND AFTERWARDS...

Be sure that the interest and friendship you offered on your visit continues as they come into membership. You have talked with this new member to a depth that few others have.

So keep them in your prayers and help to integrate them into the life of the church. If you have done your job well as a visitor you should have been an effective representative of Jesus and his local church and you should keep on being a good friend and encourager.

Like we said at the beginning – it really is a vital job!

***LOOK OUT** for other ideas: Some churches have been attempting new ways of working with applicants for membership, especially when baptism is involved. A partnership scheme called 'New Direction' has been developed by the Baptist Union of Scotland in which each person requesting baptism and membership is put into partnership with an older church member. The great advantage of such a scheme is that the course of study notes goes on before and after baptism. When it becomes appropriate to propose the new member for church membership, the partner already has a knowledge of the applicant and a continuing friendship makes the task an easy one.*

Other churches have formed 'care groups' in which new members are brought together and taught about membership in more detail.

Keep on the alert for imaginative ways of ensuring that applicants really do prepare for the highest calling of belonging to Christ's church.

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