



# A test for your church's welcome

**TN109** Training Notes series: Planning

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**Plenty of churches describe themselves as 'welcoming' or 'friendly'. They may think they are – but what would a visitor say?**

**The trouble is that a church may be ever so welcoming and friendly – once you are in and part of the crowd. But that's not the point.**

So here is a test paper to check out your welcome for a Sunday service. Have a go at scoring yourselves, but then give this out to some newcomers (it needs to be more than one) because it is *their* scoring you need to take notice of. For online visitors you may need to adapt some of the questions – but much still applies.

The *Ship of fools* website continues to send out Mystery Worshippers to churches throughout the world. It can be embarrassingly painful to read all about your church in the public arena, especially if the MW arrived on what was clearly not a good day for you.

If you would like to see what their reports look like and the areas they assess, go to <https://shipoffools.com/mystery-worshipper/>.

Take this test and you can then prepare yourselves for any such eventuality. Score\* each test out of 5 where 0 means hopeless and 5 means brilliant. Max for each section: 25.

Congregation	Tests 1-5	Total .....	Surroundings	Tests 11-15	Total .....
Service	Tests 6-10	Total .....	Systems	Tests 16-20	Total .....
Grand total (out of a possible 100)		.....	(see page 4)		

\* Note that the 20 questions are in 'closed' format to make them sharper, but that the scoring system prevents a YES/NO answer and so effectively makes them 'open'. Also that newcomers may not be in a position to answer all the Systems section questions.

## Five test questions about the congregation

First, here are questions to check out the congregation's welcome and friendship. This is where it needs to start. It's your people who will be the real welcomers.

Score out of 5

**1: Do the congregation clearly love God and each other?**

A strange place to start? Not at all. This may make more impact on a visitor than any formal welcome or people chatting over coffee. It will show in the way people worship God, in how they listen and react to the sermon, and in whether they clearly do not want to go home at the end.

**2: Is there a smile and practical help from those on the door?**

Crossing the threshold is quite an achievement and the visitor needs to be relaxed at this point with a genuinely welcoming face and appropriate help (such as where to sit or questions answered) – rather than being either ignored or pounced on.

**3: Are those sitting nearby appropriately welcoming?**

First, there need to be people sitting nearby! Secondly, do they come across as normal and human, introduce themselves and make a point of saying more than just a quick 'Hello'? Do singles get welcomed just as much as couples or families?

**4: Are there people to get to know at the close of the service?**

Are newcomers spoken to, taken along to coffee, introduced to others, made to feel part of the family and even, if appropriate, invited back to someone's home?

**5: Are there people-groups your members fail to welcome well?**

How would a single mum with a noisy baby find you all? Might some visitors feel unwelcome if there are clear differences in age, dress, culture or ethnicity with those around them? Could and should you do more for people with various disabilities?

## Five test questions about the service

The service may be strange to a visitor, but can they follow what is going on without embarrassment? If they feel out of place they are not going to be able to participate in a genuine way, nor worship and learn.

**6: Will any visitor feel awkward for any reason at any point?**

This is a different question from No. 5. They may feel awkward if the singing is poor, if there is a financial collection, if everyone apart from them knows what to do next, if the leader makes certain assumptions about background, race, sexuality or gender.

**7: Do you need inside knowledge to know what's going on?**

Are you using terms that they have little chance of understanding (eg. what do 'Eucharist', 'Collect', 'prayer ministry', 'prophecy' mean)? If following a book, is it clear? If on screens are they easily visible? Are Communion arrangements straightforward?

**8: Does the worship come across as genuine?**

Styles of worship differ hugely (from robed choir formality to charismatic exuberance) but that is not the point. Whatever style, does it seem real and Christ-centred rather than either dull/lifeless or lacking in any depth?

 **9: Is any teaching both Bible-based and relevant to life?**

The sermon needs to be in an understandable language and with an engaging style that connects with people and relates Bible teaching to normal, daily life.

 **10: Is there provision or at least recognition for children and teens?**

When a mixed-age family arrives there needs to be a welcome for every member and encouragement to join any appropriate groups if they exist, or at least provision for each member in some appropriate way. Children's and teens groups need to be run in a way that puts any young visitors at ease.

### **Five test questions about the surroundings**

These may not be in the same league as the last two areas but are still important. Get any one of these wrong and that may be what the visitor remembers, rather than meeting with God and his people.

 **11: Do the website and printed items answer the right questions?**

Your website needs to be easy to find and navigate, correct about services detail and including finish time, dress code, provision for children, loos, etc. An attractive welcome pack scores well here, or something introductory in print.

 **12: Is it easy to find the church and, if necessary, park the car?**

It may be obvious for you, but visitors need to be guided in where to go (online map, perhaps) and what to do simply to find the church building and the correct service time. For more detail on this read [Article A31](#), *Helping people back to church*.

 **13: Is it easy to find the way in and to a seat?**

Your entrance needs to be absolutely clear to a stranger, a closed wooden door is a real barrier, and knowing where to find loos or children's groups is not always straightforward. If you worship in a school or community hall, you need good signage.

 **14: Is the seating comfortable with suitable spaces for latecomers?**

People are used to comfort so hard wooden pews or plastic moulded chairs for 30 minutes at a time do not go down well. Padded chairs will score well here – and there need to be spaces for late visitors where they can be unobtrusive.

 **15: Are the refreshments, loos, grounds of an appropriate quality?**

Instant coffee and cheap biscuits at the 'end' of the service are no longer good enough these days, and the loos need to be squeaky clean with blowers or paper towels plus disability facilities. The grounds should look well cared for; the church, clean and tidy.

## Five test questions about the systems

The final set of questions relate to how well you are set up to welcome visitors and draw them into church membership if that proves to be appropriate.

16: **Are there clear next steps for visitors?**

This is an issue of planning. You score well if you have specific next steps in mind for someone who comes on two or three Sundays: booked visit from Minister or another leader, invitation to a course of some kind, joining a small group, welcome event.

17: **Is there a team responsible for all this?**

You may have a Newcomers Team or equivalent to enable your systems to work effectively and to look out for the newcomer and remember their name on a second and subsequent visits. See [Training Notes TN14](#), *Setting up a Newcomers Team*.

18: **Do you get sufficient information for appropriate follow up?**

You score here if you have systems (eg; newcomers' card) for getting personal contact details to enable a follow-up email/phone call or visit, and if there are ways in which those who welcomed the visitor pass basic information on to the Minister or staff.

19: **Is it easy for newcomers to then integrate into church life?**

You may be brilliant at initial welcome but newcomers then find it hard to become accepted as members. Low scores if membership feels like a closed shop for the first three months, or if couples and families get better treatment than singles. See [Training Notes TN134](#), *Integrate your newcomers*.

20: **Is there sufficient training for all involved?**

If you take welcome seriously it is likely that any Newcomers Team will receive regular training in talking to visitors and putting them at ease. You may also have training and biblical teaching for the congregation on being outward looking and welcoming.

## Fill in your total scores on the front page

Some of the tests may score 0 simply because not every church can be set up for everything. You may simply not have children's activities or it may depend which service the visitors come to. If the congregation are brilliant at welcoming visitors you may have no need of a Newcomers Team, and so on.

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| Under 45 | You have major work to do. Aim to do something about five of the lowest scoring tests.   |
| 45-60    | Hmm. Not too good but don't be discouraged. What five actions could you take to make a significant difference?                               |
| 61-75    | Not at all bad – but as the school report says, room for improvement. Aim to go to work on three tests where you could improve your scoring. |
| Over 75  | Assuming this was a genuine score from visitors, that's really good, but you can still do better so why not find three areas to improve.     |

It is important to remember that your own understanding of the welcome you give visitors may not be how they viewed a recent experience. This is why it is so important to get their honest views – which means taking a more thorough approach at asking them than just a quick ‘How did we do?’ question where they may feel obliged to be polite. That may then only reinforce too rosy a view of your performance.

This is an issue for the whole congregation because it only needs one person to come across as unfriendly and all your systems and training come to nothing. Our welcome and acceptance of other people needs an appreciation of our own acceptance by Christ. Once we realise what he has done for us, we should long to receive others in a similar way.

*Accept (or welcome) one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. Romans 15:7*

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN109. See also Article A31, *Helping people back to church*, and Training Notes TN14, *Setting up a Newcomers Team*, TN86, *Customer care for churches*, TN107, *A church policy on hospitality*, and TN134, *Integrate your newcomers*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN109 under Planning (with a link to Management).

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