

THE FIRST 11 MINUTES AT YOUR CHURCH

November 6, 2014 By [Eric Geiger](#)

If you ever check out multiple churches in a short period of time, you will likely be surprised by the differences in hospitality expressed to first-time guests. In some churches a guest knows exactly where to park, is graciously welcomed, escorted to the children's area to drop off kids, and introduced to several helpful people. In other churches, a guest has no idea where to go and is not welcomed by anyone.

While some churches have become so guest-driven that they lose focus on Christ in a hyper-attractiveness attempt to draw a crowd, others almost ignore guests as a badge of their spirituality or a sign of their apathy. Both miss the mark, as hospitality is deeply biblical. For example, hospitality is included in the necessary qualifications for an elder (1 Timothy 3:2) because hospitality is a direct and tangible link to how Christ has received us. We were all strangers to the family of God and the household of faith. We were enemies, but God in His great mercy welcomed us. He has practiced hospitality toward us and challenges us to accept others as He has accepted us (Romans 15:7).

I am honored to work alongside [Auxano](#) in consulting churches on mission, strategy, and values. When we guide a church through a process, we also help them evaluate the hospitality that is expressed to a first-time guest. We know that the first 11 minutes at your church are really important. My friend and colleague [Will Mancini](#) believes, based on consultations with hundreds of churches, that a first-time guest will decide if he/she is returning in those first 11 minutes.

To get really practical and helpful, Will encourages church leaders to think about the following "seven checkpoints" in expressing hospitality:

1. *Before Departure*: Are directions and service times immediately accessible to guests from your church website?
2. *Travel to Location*: Do guests know where to turn into your church location?
3. *Parking Lot*: Do guests know where to park?
4. *Building Entrance*: Do guests know which door to enter?
5. *Children's Ministry*: Do guests know where to take their kids?
6. *Guest Center* (or some other name): Do guests know where to go for more information?

7. *Worship*: Do guests know which door to enter?

It is helpful to look at these checkpoints through the eyes of a first-time guest. When a guest pulls into the parking lot, does he/she know where to park? Are there signs that direct where to go next? Clear and visible signs that direct people to the next point are helpful, but it takes people to express hospitality. Signs can direct a guest, but only a person can shepherd a guest.

You may find it helpful to divide the first few minutes of a guest coming to the service into waves or sections and then staff with people appropriately: parking, outside greeters, inside greeters/ushers, etc. Sometimes churches view these roles as “anyone can do them,” and thus, they merely fill slots. For strategic hospitality, the right relationally savvy people with grace-filled hearts must serve in these critical roles. These roles are more important than we often realize.

Be sure you have a plan for expressing hospitality to first-time guests. Having no plan sends the signal that “the message we preach has not impacted how we welcome you.”