



Integrate your newcomers

TN134 Training Notes series: Management

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Plenty has been written on welcoming people to church services. But there is relatively little on offer on the next stage on: integrating newcomers into membership of the church. Here are guidelines on how to tackle this important process.

Many churches admit to me that they are weak in this area, even if strong on initial welcome. They leave it to the newcomers to make the running, or are too concerned that church initiative may scare the newcomer away.

Certainly, flexibility and sensitivity are vital. But I believe it is important to know what the possible pathways into full church involvement look like, and to have some idea of how to guide a newcomer along an appropriate one for them. All this requires organisation and, for churches of reasonable size, features of a church management system to provide help, such as the ChurchSuite Flows system.

Fundamentals

So, first, it's important to appreciate that this will be a process that your church needs to organise. Without a plan of how you are going to go about it, it is all going to be hit and miss. Some newcomers (perhaps parents with children) may get swooped on while others (such as a single, elderly man) may get missed out.

Much may depend on the people they sit next to or meet over coffee on their first visits. But if you are good at initial welcome, that does not necessarily mean that the visitor will move on to membership. It's worth having a process carefully planned for these next steps.

But, secondly, it is no good having a *fixed* plan. If newcomers get the impression that they are on your church's conveyor belt and the next stage will be a friendly chat with the Treasurer armed with forms, they are unlikely to warm to you. What they need is what social services would call a 'care package' specially tailored to their needs.

So this subject is not quite as straightforward as the welcome you offer at a service. Your visitors will come from a wide range of perspectives. Some will have just moved into the neighbourhood and be longing for a church home as great as the one they have just left behind. They want to know about your home groups, and the weekend away for teens.

But others will be nervously putting their toe in the water, wishing to remain anonymous, and the need to complete a detailed form on a tablet or laptop, or then receive an exuberant visit from the Minister on the Monday after the Sunday, may make them run a mile.

So the key words to focus on will be:

- Process – to be taken in stages
- Plan – so you know what to guide them to next
- People – different approaches for everyone.

This needs organising but it needs sensitivity and care. You will only manage this if you love the visitors as people rather than seeing them as pawns to move across your church chess-board.

Motives

What do you want this newcomer to move forward to? Answer: to join your church. Wrong approach! Let's start the other way round: what might their needs be?

Alastair and Anne with their children are looking for a new church. They want to find a Christian community where they can all belong. They may hope for a great church service on the Sunday, but they also want to know what it is like being members on Monday, for every one of their family: Mum, Dad, teens, young children.

But there are plenty of unknowns too. Do they want to get stuck in from Day 1 or are they desperate for a break from church responsibilities? Are you one of a list of churches they are trying or the chosen one?

Becky is a single mum who comes to the Toddler group but has never been a member of any church. She may need friendship, support, people similar to her, but she may be terrified of being judged if her young child starts screaming or as she does not appear to be part of a happy couple.

She may need all this now and open up immediately, or may reject any attempt to draw her in to say more than she is prepared to give away about herself.

Cyril is in his 70s, a widower who is unhappy in his present church where the new Minister is bringing in a raft of changes. He's trying you out but what he needs is the right church where he can feel at home. That may or may not be your church. If your aim is to pressurise him to join up with you, you could be doing quite the wrong thing.

He may be an extravert or an introvert, he may be someone well established in the gospel or someone of nominal faith. You simply do not know at this point.

Alastair and Anne and their kids need to belong. Becky needs to be accepted. Cyril needs to be respected. And, of course, lots of other things too for all of them. But the point is that the process to draw these people into membership, if that is indeed the right thing, needs to be tailored for who they are, where they are starting from and what they need. Treat each person individually.

So for every newcomer you need to consider:

- who they are, uniquely made in God's image;
- their starting point – where might they be at the moment;
- where they need to get to.

This really matters because the Bible is clear that belonging to a church is important. But then you need to think about:

- the route they might take to where they need to be;
- the speed at which they travel to get there.

So let's think about the possible route.

Stages along the way

To create a tailored process you need to define what different elements may look like, choose which of these might be appropriate for our visitors, and then put them in the right order. Yes, this is people-centred work and so takes time, prayer and lots of care.

If your church cannot be bothered with all this, does it deserve anyone new to join it?

This assumes some means of obtaining contact information from newcomers, perhaps on their second visit, which in turn assumes some form of Newcomers Team making contact with the person, or a welcome desk, or some other means of enabling such contact.

Here is a list of possible stages. See which might be appropriate, or completely inappropriate, for our visitors. Consider Alastair and Anne, Becky and Cyril in turn. ***Spoiler alert: some of these are deliberately not appropriate***, or not in the early stages anyway! And they are not in any idea of correct order.

A **Send a friendly card, SMS or email**

A low level approach might be a letter/card personally signed or, less effective, a text or email to encourage the newcomer to return.

B **Offer a welcome pack**

Offer something in print to describe your church and back-up what is on the website. You might even offer a return envelope or a website registration of some kind.

C **Visit them at home (Minister)**

The Minister books a time to drop round and meet them at home.

D **Visit them at home (congregational member)**

Someone, deliberately not the Minister, drops round to see how they are and provide information about the church.

E **Contact their previous church**

Check them out to see their background, if moving church.

- F Link them with a similar church member**
Someone to look out for them, or take them to a mid-week meeting, or invite them round for coffee. Someone at a similar life stage or living nearby.
- G Organise a 'come and meet us' event**
A coffee evening or buffet meal for newcomers over the past few months to introduce the church and help them meet key people and each other.
- H Give them a job to do**
Some churches aim to help newcomers be active in some straightforward tasks: church grounds on Saturday, coffee after church.
- I Ask them to join an activity or group**
This might be ongoing: a home group or children's group. It might be a course, such as Alpha or Christianity Explored.
- J Register them for Gift Aid.**
The Treasurer sees them after church to give them the Finance Package.
- K Get their contact details**
Ask them to fill in a form so you have the key details, GDPR-checked of course.
- L Interview them**
Do this for your news-sheet or in a service if they are happy for this.
- M Offer hospitality**
Church members invite them round for supper or for coffee.
- N Sign membership papers**
Get them to sign up to your membership scheme / electoral roll.
- O Involve any children**
Get the kids integrated well into your young people's work, so they make friends quickly.
- P Suggest a personal interview**
Meet two of your church leaders to assess what they would like the church to offer them.

So take any one of the case studies above and think which of these options might be suitable for them and in what kind of order. You might also like to note which in the list would be totally *inappropriate!* Then you can create your care package. But make sure you can adjust it as you go along and find out more about them.

But you also need to consider the pace at which you carry out this process. Some people need to integrate quickly. Perhaps they will not be with you for long as their job moves them on, whereas others might be putting roots down locally for many years to come. Some want to get stuck in to church membership this week, others want time to consider and not be rushed. Judge the speed with care.

Finally, some overall principles to follow.

Principles to follow

- 1 **Ensure your church services are visitor-friendly**
This is the stage before the process this article has been addressing. Remember that the only people who can assess this accurately are visitors, not yourselves.
- 2 **Encourage your members to be newcomer-sensitive**
What the newcomer remembers is the person they sat next to, rather than the official welcomer.
- 3 **Adjust your follow-up route to fit the person**
That's the whole point: there is no one process that fits everyone.
- 4 **Judge the speed along the route with care**
This again will need to vary person to person.
- 5 **Run newcomer events or groups**
It pays to have something to offer newcomers that enables them to meet others.
- 6 **Have an aim centred on discipleship**
It is not church you want them to grow towards but Jesus Christ.
- 7 **Have a policy for church-crawling Christians**
Be aware that some people move from church to church in your locality, never satisfied. Be ready.
- 8 **Have the process well organised but people-centred**
This all needs meticulous organisation but never lose the pastoral aspect.
- 9 **The process should move people on to involvement**
Move from asking, 'What can we do for you?', to 'What can you do with us for Christ?'
- 10 **It's more important that they join the Church rather than your church**
Are you willing to recommend a more appropriate church if yours does not fit them?

How you might organise all this

If you are a small church with few newcomers joining, you can do it all by hand with some outline notes. If you are a larger church, your church management system software may be a useful tool to help you. For example, churches using ChurchSuite will find the Flows system can help them keep track on people moving through appropriate stages in a process.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN134. See also Training Notes TN14, *Setting up a Newcomers Team*, TN83, *The service isn't over yet*, TN109, *A test for your church's welcome*, and TN146, *Be hospitable!*

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of advice or training on welcome or integration.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN134 under Management with a link to Planning.

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