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Stephen Vantassel

Trinity Bible College and Seminary (Newburgh, IN), stephenvantassel@hotmail.com

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Beyond Seeker Friendly

Stephen Vantassel

Many books and articles have been written to help churches become more “seeker friendly”. However, you don’t see many articles or books on making one’s church more inviting to experienced or veteran believers. We’d like to take you “Beyond Seeker Friendly” and address the issue of how accepting churches are of Christians who are mature in their faith. We aren’t referring to particular age groups. This isn’t an article about reaching out to Christians who church hop or who come to your church’s doorstep because they were disgruntled at their former church. Rather, we want to provide some tips on identifying, welcoming, and integrating believers who were faithful to their old church but, due to various life circumstances, have had to relocate to your area. This article would also call attention to utilizing retired ministers who happen to attend your church. If there was ever a group of underutilized people, it’s retired ministers.

Perhaps like many of you, my wife and I never really gave this topic much thought. Both of us were preacher’s kids and have a long record of volunteer church ministry. I was chairman of the Elder Board and my wife led the Quilting Ministry along with being a singer/pianist for the Worship Team. Suffice it to say, we were involved in our local church as lay-leaders. That all changed, when a job opportunity required us to relocate 1500 miles from our home.

Initially, our spiritual expectations for the move were pretty high. We thought that moving from the spiritually hostile New England area to the more Christian friendly American Midwest would be a wonderful change. However, as we searched for a new spiritual home, we discovered that it wasn’t going to be as smooth of a transition as we anticipated. We hope that this arti-

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cle, borne from our experience, will help churches improve the way they integrate experienced believers into their fellowships and perhaps help any who may be in similar circumstances.

Principle #1 Seeker Friendly with a Twist.

If your congregation targets spiritual seekers, then by all means keep doing it. For what makes a church attractive to seekers will make it feel warm and friendly to spiritually mature believers too. Seeker friendly churches won't commit the error of one church I attended. It had about 100 people in attendance that Sunday, yet visitors were still publicly identified from the pulpit. I thought it strange that such a small church didn't know who was new and who wasn't. Whatever you do, don't embarrass visitors by identifying them publicly no matter how spiritually mature he/she is. Another church presented us with a welcome bag and gift. This provided a subtle, yet effective way for the congregation and pastor to identify us as visitors without the risk of any embarrassment.

The good news is, you don't have to change the fundamental nature of your church to reach out to spiritually mature believers. Spiritually mature believers don't need a special program to get them involved. They will either be interested in your church's style and atmosphere or they'll move on.

The twist is to recognize that the way you treat spiritually mature visitors is different than how you treat spiritual seekers. First, mature believers desire to attend a church that mirrors their convictions. Make sure that your church's statement of faith is readily available. Mature believers may ask for it, especially if their initial experience of the congregation was positive. The Statement will help them decide if they are theologically aligned with the church before making a commitment. Train your ushers and other out-front people to be sensitive to anyone asking for the Statement of Faith. As this information will help provide some important background information to whomever is assigned to follow-up with visitors.

Second, spiritually mature believers want to attend a church that offers them opportunities for ministry. For many, ministry constituted a major part of their identity and sense of belonging. They were important in their former church as they had connections with church leadership and had influence over decisions. Mature believers feel a sense of loss both spiritually and emotionally by having to become just another person in the pew. You can assist them with this transition by putting forth an effort to get to know them better and let them know what ministry opportunities are available and how to become involved. If your

church offers a Church Orientation session to help visitors to learn more about the church, make sure the orientation staff learns how to identify mature believers and appropriately modify the presentation. Principle #3 will give some tips on how you should modify your presentation. (See "Tips for identifying the spiritually mature believer" at the end of the article.)

Principle #2 Make Contact

Seeker Friendly Churches will have some sort of follow up program for visitors. The same should be done for spiritually mature believers, except that the contact should be done by a church leader. As we said earlier, spiritually mature believers had contacts with church leadership in their former church. Having someone in leadership contact them helps them feel reconnected. Phone calls are nice but it is better to make the contact more personal. Meeting at a neutral location for coffee is an excellent way to have a relaxed visit. My wife and I were very impressed with one church where a pastor offered to take us out for dinner after Sunday Service. He rightly said, that it is impossible to really learn about a church from just attending a service. We were honored by the offer it demonstrated the church's interest in us as individuals. Some of you may be thinking, "Isn't this special treatment unfair?" We don't think so. Instead, it shows your willingness to reach out to the needs of spiritually mature believers. It shows respect for their time and commitment to the faith and your willingness to connect with them on a personal level.

Principle#3 Be Open

Don't expect all mature believers to offer their services or volunteer. Sometimes they don't offer themselves for fear of appearing pushy. Instead, ask them directly on how your church can help them with the transition and what goals they might have. In your communication with mature believers, explain the church's standards for ministry participation, if the subject arises. These sorts of questions may seem very much out of the ordinary for many of you. However, remember, we are talking about how your ministry reaches out to battle hardened believers. They aren't just someone off the street coming to the Lord. So your handling of them needs to be different. In so many ways, it is easier. They are already part of the body and trained to serve. The challenge is to be patient with them but not so reticent that they feel like there is no chance for them to be involved in ministry. Your efforts may be quickly rewarded with experienced workers ready to help in low risk positions.

Principle #4 Be Wise

Some of you may be thinking, we can't just offer ministry positions until we know who they really are!! We agree. We are not recommending that you make teaching ministries or even children's ministries available to people who haven't been properly reviewed. That would not only be contrary to Scripture but foolish as well. But that is our point. Make sure you do your homework. If after your initial follow up call, the visitors continue to attend, put them in contact with a strong member of the church. Preferably, you want women reaching out to women, couples to couples etc. Mature believers will be grateful for your interest. Certainly churches need to be cautious about using people they don't know but they shouldn't allow their fear to paralyze them from acting. We believe that churches need to rethink their membership policies. Look at yours. Could Billy Graham become a member of your church without having to attend classes in Biblical Truths or Membership 101? In N.T. times Christians could show up with letters of introduction. Nowadays it seems that churches don't even bother to ask if they can contact a person's former church. Check the offering plate. Are the people givers? Now some churches have policies against doing this. We are not suggesting that this policy be changed. We are just suggesting that if you are investigating the relative commitment of someone, checking the offering plate like Jesus did (remember the Widow's mite?) could be a good way to find out. Churches could also consider doing soft background checks. Put the person's name into Google.com and see what comes up. The key is to have a plan to integrate these believers into the life of your church.

Principle #5 The Risk

Finally, be aware that whenever there are new workers for the kingdom, some of your regular workers may get jealous. Sometimes churches don't have enough workers because their ministries are hostile to new faces. Believers sometimes see their ministries as a small kingdom, their domain. While that attitude builds commitment and loyalty, it can also stifle growth and flexibility. How you prepare and train your people will go a long way to determining how friendly your church is to the relocated spiritually mature believer. Remember, Christ commanded us to not only reach the lost but to feed the sheep already in the fold as well. Make sure your fold is open to Christ's other sheep who happens to move to your pasture from another fold.

Special Circumstances for Retired Ministers

If you know, ahead of time, that retired minister is visiting your church, you may ask him to pray for the offering, dismissal etc. This simple act of goodwill goes a long way in establishing respect with giving you a glimpse of his/her theology.

Pastors should meet with them and their wives to discern the reason for retirement, relocation, their anticipated level of ministry, their interests etc. Here you have the bonus of the pastor's spouse as well. Be sure to include his/her gifts as well. These wonderful gems often need to continue in ministry but at a less intense level. Clergy do themselves great harm when they don't utilize the retired minister in their midst as a mentor and resource. Chances are he/she has faced the very problem(s) you are struggling with. Their counsel could save you a great deal of heartache.

Side Bar: Tips for Identifying the Spiritually Mature Believer

1. Brings his/her own Bible/Prayer Book. Bible/Prayer Book may be in a protective cover or inside a shoulder bag as mature believers often "pack for church".
2. Navigates the Bible and/or Prayer Book with confidence.
3. Seem comfortable and relaxed with church related activities, such as singing, prayer etc. as compared to the unchurched. May even know songs and/or liturgy by heart.
4. Will fill out the visitor card completely and hand it in.
5. Will not be uncomfortable when church leadership offer to meet with them and will embrace the opportunity.
6. Will ask questions related to the church's theology, eg. "Do you have a statement of Faith?" or "What denomination do you belong to?"
7. Will ask questions related to the church's ministries. eg. "What outreach programs do you offer?", "Do you have youth programs?" or "How many ministers do you have on staff?" etc.
8. Will be forth coming about their previous church experience. They will also speak of their church in positive, or at worst, neutral terms.
9. Will place money in the offering, especially if they attend for a few weeks.
10. May ask about the credentials/education of senior staff.

Writer

Vantassel, Stephen: Address: 701 S. 55th St. Lincoln, NE

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68510. 402-489-1042. *stephenvantassel@hotmail.com* Stephen Vantassel is an adjunct faculty member for Trinity Bible College and Seminary in Newburgh, Indiana and lecturer at Midlands Bible College, Wolverhampton, England. His wife, Donna, is an R.N. in Critical Care. Both are preacher's kids and have a passion for helping the church fulfill its mission.