

9. The celebrating congregation for guests

Low threshold church services and a feeling of welcome

Of course not all services are suitable for newcomers. There will be much that they find strange and incomprehensible. But there are also moments on which the church service could be suitable for guests. What are these in your congregation?

Think first of all of the services on the important Holy Days, in particular Christmas. Many people who would usually not go to church pluck up enough courage to go to church around Christmas.

At Christmas Eve midnight services the churches are usually very full.

What about these opportunities? Do you take your guest into account? Or do you think to yourself 'this is the only time you see him', or even 'he is sitting in my pew'?

Then there are the services at life's crossroads: baptism, marriage and funeral. These are often occasions when friends and relatives come into contact with the church for the first time.

If this is what the church can be like, I would like to come more often, somebody said after the end of a funeral service.

At hospitable celebrations we often use the expression 'low threshold'. This does not need to mean that there is a ban on long and difficult words or that everything has to be kept very simple. Low threshold does refer to a hospitable atmosphere in which the guests are helped on their way. Do they feel they are visible, are they welcome without immediately feeling overwhelmed?

When we got to the church we were given a letter with information. That is very handy and also I did not feel such an exception.

A kind lady with a badge with the word 'Hostess' showed me where the cloakroom was and helped me with the hymnbook.

A number of suggestions

- It appears that people who join the church find the sermon very important. When the celebrant shows that he understands their world, they are amazed. When he tries to make connections and in doing so explains the text people will become curious. The language of Canaan and a preachy voice do not help and build unnecessary thresholds.
- There are many church services that are open to guests, such as youth services and welcome services. And the normal Sunday service? If hospitality is an exception and not the rule, then something is wrong. People do not usually come of their own accord. Ask your neighbours, friends and acquaintances to come to church with you. People who have never seen the inside of a church. A nice written invitation would help. There are all sorts of material for this.

In some congregations they hold paired services: on two succeeding Sundays exactly the same low threshold service is organised. After the first service are given a folder and then they can invite friends or relatives to come to the service on the following Sunday. They know exactly what they can expect and to what sort of service they invite someone.

- It is also important that the 'special service' does not remain an isolated incident. Think about the follow-up. What happens if people want to know more? Whom can they mail or ring or possibly speak to after the end of the service.
- When church services are broadcast on television there is always 'aftercare'. That can also be done in the local congregation. You can mention this on the information letter or the order of service (which you might call the 'programme' on this occasion), together with the offer of a group or an orientation course.

Possible approach for the church council

- As church council reflect on the church services in your congregation. Which services in your congregation would be suitable for guests? How do you invite them?
- Could you set up new celebrations or services that would be attractive to guests? Involve people who have dropped out and those on the periphery of the church. What do they miss in the service now they no longer attend.
- Do not forget the young people in all this. What do they have problems with in the regular services? Can this be changed?
- How can you improve the hospitality around the church services? Make a list with possibilities and ask congregation members to help in the execution (hosts and hostesses and an information letter that is also suitable for people who attend for the first time).