

KATE BOWSMAN

A toothy precious moment at special-needs carnival

Luke Flanders grins as he holds a bunny at the 12th annual carnival for children with special needs organized by the Brooks Avenue Church of Christ in Raleigh, N.C. More than 800 guests, 170 volunteers and dozens of vendors and costumed characters — including “Wolfpack” mascots from nearby North Carolina State University — made the recent carnival a huge success, said Melinda Oldham, who coordinates the church’s special-needs ministry. “The rain held off until 15 minutes after the carnival was over,” Oldham said. “The Lord was all around.”

Is your church visitor-friendly?

MOST EVERY CONGREGATION characterizes itself as welcoming. Guests don’t always see it that way.

BY **BOBBY ROSS JR.** | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

When Sarah Stirman and her family moved to the Dallas area last summer, they visited half a dozen congregations.

At each, their experience was basically the same.

“Our family sat alone and was ignored before service started.

If we were lucky, we were greeted during ‘shake and bake,’” she said, referring to the forced greeting period when the worship leader asks everyone to stand and welcome those around them.

Undoubtedly, no Church of Christ would describe itself as unfriendly.

Too often, though, congregations fail to show Christ’s love to strangers, said many members and leaders interviewed by *The Christian Chronicle*.



TERRY RUSH

A sign at the Memorial Drive church in Tulsa, Okla.

“Most congregations are filled with very pleasant Christians who are so enjoying each other’s company that they often don’t notice those who visit their assemblies,” said Mark Blackwelder, a Bible professor at Freed-Hardeman

University in Henderson, Tenn. See **VISITORS**, Page 14

MORE COVERAGE

INSIDE STORY: A DISAPPOINTING VISIT 3
'MYSTERY GUESTS' ASSESS CHURCHES..... 15
MEMBERS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES 30



Man on a Mission

Dan Bouchelle on changing roles for global churches. **21**



After the honeymoon

How can busy, distracted couples rekindle affection? **31**



A day at the dump

Ministry serves Honduras’ hardworking poor. **18**

INSIDE

CALENDAR.....	27
CURRENTS.....	17
INSIGHT.....	34
INTERNATIONAL.....	8
LETTERS.....	31
NATIONAL.....	5
OPINION.....	29
PARTNERS.....	23
PEOPLE.....	25
REVIEWS.....	32
VIEWS.....	31

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VISITORS: The average Joe Schmo is 'usually only minimally engaged'

FROM PAGE 1

Michael Ray, minister for the Laurel Church of Christ in Maryland, said churches like to talk about how friendly they are. "What they really mean is that they're friendly to each other. But guests? Not so much," said Ray, who urges members to observe a "two-minute rule" after the closing prayer and talk only to people they don't know before seeking out friends.

John Scott spent 19 years as minister for the Saturn Road Church of Christ in Garland, Texas, before going to work for Christian Care Centers last year. Scott and his wife, Teresa, have visited about 30 congregations in the past 15 months — often with him as the guest preacher.

"We have been dismayed by the rampant self-delusion of local congregations about their perceptions of themselves," he said. "Sure, folks are friendly and gregarious — to the people they know.

"But the poor Joe Schmo that wanders in not knowing anyone is usually only minimally engaged by the congregation despite our fancy 'welcome centers' or coffee bars."

ALL ALONE ON A PEW

It happened years ago.

Still, Laura Tokosh remembers being a young mother with an infant and visiting a church where no one spoke to her.

"It left such an impression on me that I always try to reach out to others, whether I'm a visitor or not," said Tokosh, an Ohio resident who worships with the Ravenna Church of Christ on Sundays and teaches a Wednesday night class at the Kent Church of Christ.

Two decades ago, Laura Leach was the "new girl" at church who came in late, sat in the back and left early.

Now, her husband, Rick Leach, preaches for the Central Church of Christ in Bedford, Ind., and she makes greeting visitors a priority.

"The first 10 minutes someone steps in your building will determine if they ever return," Laura Leach said.

"Too often, churches are stuck in cliques and cannot get past their few friends to say hello to any new folks,"

she added, stressing that she was speaking in general terms and not about her home congregation.

Nonetheless, such stories abound.

Steven Hunter, minister for the Tompkinsville Church of Christ in Kentucky, won't ever forget one church where he spoke.

The preacher who invited Hunter greeted him but excused himself to take care of a class situation.

"When left to myself, not one person acknowledged me," Hunter said. "I often wonder what they thought after I was introduced and got up to speak. I told my wife that if I had been a visitor looking for a church home, they would have been ruled out."

STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTING

Besides teaching at Freed-Hardeman, Blackwelder serves as a minister for the



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Estes Church of Christ. He described moving to a rural community years ago.

The community had two mid-sized churches. Blackwelder and his wife, Dana, decided to visit both.

The first church had a nice building and an appearance of prosperity and progress, he said. But only one person besides the preacher greeted the couple.

The second church met in an older facility in a less-affluent part of town.

"We were warmly greeted by many, and one of the families invited us to their house for lunch," Blackwelder said. "You can guess which church we chose."

Blackwelder, who presents seminars on church growth, recommends three specific strategies to reach out to visitors:

• **First, the church's** culture must be shaped to focus on *others*. "An outreach mentality should be developed so that Christians see their primary function not

as maintenance but growth."

• **Second, leaders must** overtly exhort members to approach others. "This is a function of communication. The members need to hear from the leadership that we can do better and why it is important."

• **Third, specific actions** must be enacted to ensure contact. "This can include the usual greeters and 'goodbyes,' but it needs to extend beyond that. Inviting guests to sit with you, expressing genuine interest in the visitor through more extended personal conversations and invitations to lunch, pizza, coffee, etc., are examples of specific actions."

Blackwelder stressed that such strategies primarily affect transfer growth.

"Most people who are not already members of Churches of Christ are unlikely to be comfortable visiting church services anyway," he said. "Growth among the unchurched or denominational sectors generally comes through personal contact away from the building. However, that important transition from non-Christian to new Christian ... can be heavily influenced by the church's friendliness and a growing number of meaningful relationships with members."

After their Dallas-area visits, Stirman, her husband, Troy, and their two teenage children chose the Greenville Oaks Church of Christ in Allen, Texas. "We landed at a church where we knew a few folks and were greeted warmly," she said.

Hebrews 13:2 says: "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing."

The experience of Stirman's family has heightened her awareness of potential angels.

"When we wear the name of Christ, it is our responsibility to be hospitable to those who walk into the building where we worship," she said. "Granted, some Sundays we need the love and comfort of our church family to surround us more than we can be the hands and feet of Christ to others. But if each of us took this simple action seriously, each visitor would be welcomed every time they walked into the building."

'Mystery guests' help assess friendliness at Tenn. church

BY BOBBY ROSS JR. | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

At his favorite coffee shop, Dale Jenkins identifies his target: the stranger he'll invite to be a "mystery guest."

The preacher will offer the person two \$10 gift cards to visit his church that Sunday — one card now and the other when the guest reports back Monday.

"I tell them we are needing some help determining if we are a friendly church," said Jenkins, minister for the Spring Meadows Church of Christ in Spring Hill, Tenn., which started with 40 to 45 people seven years ago and has grown to 450 to 500.



Jenkins

He gives limited instructions: Keep up with how you're welcomed. Count how many speak to you. Track where you're greeted, be it the parking lot or foyer.

"I have used a form but have found a conversation is more revealing if they will keep notes during their visit," Jenkins said. "Some may think this is too gimmicky, and it may be, but it is so hard for us to get an honest read on how we make guests feel."

'SECRET CHURCH SHOPPER'

Thomas Harrison provides "secret church shopper" services on a professional basis.

Presbyterians, Southern Baptists, United Methodists and others across the nation hire Harrison.

"I evaluate every portion of the (visitor) experience from entering the parking lot to exit from the church," Harrison said.

Common weaknesses that he finds:

- **Clutter:** "Welcome areas, offices, foyer, Sunday school rooms often are magnets for clutter. Guests will visit restrooms and Sunday school classes before they visit your worship space."

- **Lack of signs:** "Signage is neither informational or directional. Guests may not know where to park, which door to enter or how to navigate the halls."

- **Embarrassment:** "Some churches embarrass a guest by making them stand up to identify themselves."

- **Inadequate follow-up:** "If

churches do not have a system of gathering a name and address of the guest, how can follow-up occur? Once you have a name and contact information from a guest, follow up."

Wayne Kilpatrick preaches for the Heritage Place Church of Christ in Irondale, Ala., which in eight years has grown from 60 members to 210.

First impressions are crucial, he said, and extend beyond friendliness and "Wow!" worship experiences. "It is very important that the church grounds are mowed and edged, shrubbery trimmed and classrooms neat, clean and attractive," Kilpatrick said.



Harrison

Moreover, sermons require a "So what?" aspect.

"Preaching must be biblical and personal," he said. "Those who preach need to remember that we preach to instruct, convert and convict, not to impress."

'THE ELECTRONIC VESTIBULE'

Before ever turning into a church's parking lot, most guests will check the congregation's website, Jenkins said.

"It has become the electronic vestibule," he said.

That means that churches should make sure their website is visitor-friendly, Jenkins said.

For example, are driving directions and worship times easy to find? Does the site highlight activities such as Vacation Bible School and Children's Bible Hour that might appeal to a family new to town?

On Mondays, the Tennessee church follows up with "no guilt visitation" — taking guests homemade banana nut bread and a keepsake such as a keychain or pen featuring the church logo.

"We don't go in unless they insist," Jenkins said.

Along with old-fashioned home visits, the church uses cutting-edge technology to connect. To each guest for whom he can find an e-mail address, the minister sends a personalized, video "thank you."

READ EXPANDED INTERVIEWS with Jenkins, Harrison and Kilpatrick at www.christianchronicle.org.



ERIK TRYGGESTAD

In Nigeria, foreign visitors to a rural Church of Christ receive gifts of eggs and fruit.

In Africa, visitors receive warm greetings — in words and song — from church members

BY ERIK TRYGGESTAD | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

Visit a church in the landlocked, West African nation of Burkina Faso, and you'll likely hear this song, sung in Dagara, the local language:

Children of Christ, a visitor has come to our church. We greet you in the name of Jesus Christ!

Go to them, and let's grab them.

Don't worry. "Grab" basically means "shake hands," says missionary Andy Johnson. Visitors, especially those from nearby villages, "are treated like they belong, almost like they've always been there," Johnson says.

Often, they're given a task to help ready the church for worship.

"How do you get a visitor to stick around? Put them to work!" the missionary says.

Across Africa, where Churches of Christ have grown exponentially in the past half-century, visitors are viewed as "God-sent possible converts," says Arnold Dzah, a native of Ghana working as a missionary in the predominantly Muslim nation of Senegal.

In Senegal, visitors are introduced by name during the congregation's announcement time, "for the whole congregation to wish them welcome in unison," Dzah says.

It's almost an expected treatment, the minister says. When a member of his congregation traveled to a foreign country and wasn't greeted in such a manner, the visitor found a church elder

and expressed his disappointment.

In Gambia, a tiny West African nation completely surrounded by Senegal, visitors to the Kanifing Church of Christ also hear a special song, minister David Thoronka says.

At one point in the song, members rise, seek out guests and shake hands.

"Members always sing this song with passion and affection," Thoronka says, "to let the visitors know that we appreciate them and wish them to come back."

In the southern African nation of Malawi, visitors come to the front of the congregation, often before the Lord's Supper, said missionary Marc Veary. Church members introduce each visitor.

It's a similar procedure at the Nyamue Church of Christ in Kenya, minister David Marube says. Greeters sit in the back of the auditorium to keep guests from leaving without a welcome. After services, Marube's wife, Bassy, invites visitors to their home for lunch.

Back in Senegal, Dzah invites visitors to his office after worship for beverages and conversation. He gives them his phone number and, sometimes, walks them back home.

"This has brought many visitors back to the church, and some have become converts," he says.

One former visitor now serves as a preacher for a village congregation.

"If we open a church door for visitors to come in, let's close the other door to keep them from going out," he says.

Seeing church through eyes of an outsider

About 15 minutes before the Sunday morning worship assembly started, I pulled into the parking lot of a red-brick, tree-shaded Church of Christ in the Midwest.

Through my ministry with *The Christian Chronicle*, I am blessed to visit congregations all over the nation. Most of the time, though, somebody knows I'm coming, and



Bobby Ross Jr.

I receive a warm welcome.

In this case, I had attended an early service with a different group of Christians but decided to visit a second congregation — unannounced — before I flew home.

I had heard great things about the second church and even connected online with the preacher. He had helped me a few times when I e-mailed requests for sources and ideas to my *Chronicle* feedback list. I thought it would be neat to meet him in person and maybe even grab lunch if he happened to be free.

When I arrived, I noticed a sign for "Guest Parking."

"How sneaky," I thought with a chuckle, expecting someone to greet me quickly as I got out of my rental car.

But I made it to the main door without anyone saying anything — and without anyone noticing me, even

See **GUEST**, Page 4



PHOTOS BY ERIK TRYGGESTAD

Jerry Rushford gets a standing ovation before he delivers his final lecture as director of the Pepperdine Bible Lectures. The university honored Rushford for his 30 years of service to the lectures.

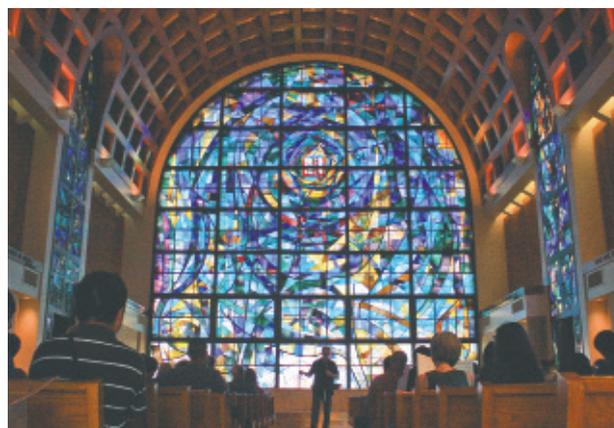
The world comes to Malibu

Overlooking the gorgeous Pacific coast in glamorous Malibu, Calif., Christians talked about ministering to the poor alongside native believers from Haiti, Uganda and Cuba.

The 69th annual Bible Lectures at Pepperdine University included speakers from more than 30 countries. More than 5,000 church members attended. On the final night, attendees received a book commemorating Jerry Rushford's 30 years as director of the lectures.



Philippe Dauner, minister in Marseilles, France, delivers a keynote address.



Attendees learn "A cappella songs for a new generation" during a class in Pepperdine's Stauffer Chapel.



University President Andrew Benton presents an award to Oji O. Oji, minister and publisher in Nigeria, and his wife, Ngozi.

Berkeley Hackett, missionary to Kenya, dies at 70

BY ERIK TRYGGESTAD | THE CHRISTIAN CHRONICLE

Berkeley North Hackett earned the nickname "Rhino" for his tenacity and tirelessness as he served souls in the East African nation of Kenya.

In 1970, the Detroit native and his wife, Charlotte, committed to two years of mission work in Kenya, said longtime friend Vincent Doan. That two years, Doan said, became "a 42-year lifetime of service."

Berkeley Hackett died of a heart attack May 21 in Kenya's capital, Nairobi. He was 70.

He attended Michigan Christian College, now Rochester College, and earned degrees from Harding University and the University of Alabama. In Kenya, he and his wife worked with the Church of Christ that meets in Nairobi's Eastleigh neighborhood. Seeking a way to train Kenyan Christians to support their ministry, he founded the Kenya Christian Industrial Training Institute, or KCITI.

In 2011, he handed the reins of the institute to Lydia Wanjiku, who grew up in the slums of Nairobi and was the first student to enroll at KCITI.

News of the missionary's death generated a flood of responses on *The Christian Chronicle's* news blog.

"What Mr. Berkeley Hackett has done for my life is unforgettable," said Martin Mulimbwa, a native of the Democratic Republic of Congo. "He helped so many Congolese refugees like me regain control of our lives after fleeing civil wars in our countries of origin."

The missionary "gave me hope," said Mulimbwa, who now lives in Canada, "and the training I received at KCITI shaped my future. Today I have life, hope and peace because of Christ, who utilized Berkeley Hackett."

A MEMORIAL SERVICE is scheduled for 2 p.m. June 23 at the Woodson Chapel Church of Christ, 5800 Edmondson Pike, Nashville, Tenn.



Hackett

www.christianchronicle.org

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• **Visitor feedback:** See more comments and ideas from readers on how to show Christian love and hospitality to people who visit your church.

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GUEST: A disappointing experience for visitor

FROM PAGE 3

though I arrived at the same time as a handful of members.

Just inside, a nice, older lady handed me a colorful worship program. She smiled but did not introduce herself.

I walked slowly through the foyer and noticed small groups of people mingling and visiting with each other. After standing by myself for an awkward few moments, I made my way to the restroom and then led myself on a tour of the church building, hoping to run into my minister friend.

Feeling a little invisible, I headed into the auditorium and grabbed a seat at the end of an empty row. A family sat down in the pew in front of me but did not say anything — until another family arrived and joined them. The two families appeared to be wonderful friends, and they enjoyed catching up.

I searched my brain and confirmed that I *had* showered that morning and even shaved. So it couldn't be that I was turning off fellow Christians with an unsavory odor, right?

I had ironed a blue dress shirt and black pants and put on shiny black shoes. Could it be that I looked too *churchy*?

Just before the service started, a woman approached me, and I couldn't help but think that this might be my big moment. I was actually going to meet someone. My anticipation built.

"Are these seats taken?" the woman asked, referring to the rest of my empty row.

"No," I said, enjoying the longest conversation of my visit to this 200-member church 750 miles from home.

I finally saw my minister friend when he stepped to the pulpit to welcome everyone to the assembly.

He said he especially wanted the visitors to know how much everyone appreciated our attendance. In fact, he urged us to be sure to go to the welcome desk and receive a free gift.

My minister friend preached an excellent sermon. After the service, I went up to meet him.

He was talking with a member, so I stood beside the two of them, not wanting to interrupt and figuring someone would notice me standing there. But before I had a chance to say anything, another member passed in front of me,

stuck out his hand to the minister and told him how much he always enjoys his lessons.

Once or twice, I felt my minister friend glancing at me, but he never acknowledged me or said anything. He just kept talking to the other person. Maybe I really was invisible?

I finally gave up and walked to my car in the visitor parking lot. I couldn't help but feel

pretty disappointed as I drove away.

A few minutes later, I received a much more enthusiastic welcome.

As I turned into an off-airport parking lot to return my rental car, a man with a big smile spotted me immediately and waved me forward.

"How was your trip, Mr. Ross?" a second employee asked as he rushed to carry my bags to a waiting shuttle van.

"Come on in here, and we'll get you ready to go," said a third employee who poked his head outside an office door.

Sixty seconds, and three people already had made me feel at home. Next time I'm in town, you can bet I'll visit again.

The rental car place, that is.

CONTACT bobby.ross@christianchronicle.org.



PHOTO PROVIDED

A guest parking lot at a different church from the one visited.



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- Spiritual Formation Minister at Fairfax Church of Christ in Fairfax, Va. (2008-present)

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Church visitors: Members share ideas, experiences

Readers of The Christian Chronicle offer thoughts and insights on church visitors:

At the Walled Lake Church of Christ, we have tried a number of programs with varied but not long-term success.

What is working right now is the elders and deacons making sure they are reaching out to visitors and then reintroducing them to others. If leaders are not setting the example, it won't happen.

I do not meet with folks on church business between Bible class and worship so that I am in the lobby greeting and meeting. This seems to be catching on.

Roger Woods | Walled Lake, Mich.

We have several ministries aimed at helping guests and members feel welcome.

The first is a "valet parking" ministry where volunteers park cars for the elderly and those who have trouble walking. The volunteers also help everyone when the weather's bad, and they help people carry in food dishes and other items. We also have a greeters ministry.

These ministries are definitely not perfect as sometimes a guest can slip through the cracks. But when it's working, a guest will get several "touches" during his or her visit.

Mark Yeakley | Wichita, Kan.

In Hawaii, we're unique in that we're U.S. but also a unique culture. We give *leis* to each first time guest. *Leis* are used here to honor or celebrate, and we consider it both an honor and a celebration when guests visit with us.

Because of our location, we don't get many off-island guests (tourists). We mainly get island residents whom we call

kama'aina (of the land). We treat them all the same. We show plenty of *aloha*.

David Cady | Waipahu, Hawaii

There is a congregation that I have visited for the past five years while on vacation. Not once has anyone said anything to me — except a girl in the youth group who once ran up and gave me a hug thinking I was someone else.

I don't feel like I need any special



TAMIE ROSS

A greeter opens the door and welcomes those gathering for worship at the Dalton Gardens Church of Christ in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. The photo was taken on a fall day in the mountains.

treatment or anything. But if you can make a full-time minister — dressed like everyone else in your congregation, who knows church lingo and can guess where the auditorium is — feel out of place, imagine what people who might not know much about your congregation or the church at all might be thinking.

Paddy Flanagan | Brentwood, Tenn.

Believe me, if you are a 30-year-old, single woman with no children, you can easily visit a church, and no one will notice you.

Name withheld by request | Norman, Okla.

We are small in number but big in heart. You come here as a visitor, and you are always given the royal treatment.

Raymond Coats | Rio Vista, Calif.

My solution would be to identify a half-dozen of those gifted with warmth and gregariousness — "never met a stranger" kind of folks. Form a wolf pack and turn them loose on Sundays just to nose out visitors and engage them.

That would be their ministry, just meeting, greeting and connecting people with people. Nothing fancy.

Far too many lonely, wounded people stagger through our doors each Sunday

and flinch when they hear all our bravado about our "church family."

It's foolish to blather on about evangelism when we can't even find the energy or will to smother our guests with Christ-like warmth and interest.

Jim Bullock | Coal Hill, Ark.

Our congregation is small, so if you visit you stand out like a sore thumb. We have always done well greeting people. Our men are doing better at greeting and spending time talking to people, something we have not always done well. In the past we have spoken and returned to our friends for conversation.

Some years ago, a young man who was here in the Navy visited with us for quite some time, and one of our men spoke to him on three different occasions, greeting him as though they were meeting for the first time. The third time this happened, the young man spoke directly to him, letting him know that he had been attending for so many weeks.

We only have one opportunity to make a first impression.

Charlie Harrison | Brunswick, Maine

We have a very loving congregation at the Central Church of Christ. No visitor comes in without a friendly hello and welcome. We love visitors!

Laurie Reeves Barbee | Davenport, Iowa

We have an "official greeter" assigned in the bulletin. This person is tasked with handing out bulletins, sermon outline sheets and newcomer letters.

Second, one of the elders or deacons stays in the foyer during services. Unfortunately, this is as much a security issue due to the neighborhood in which we live and some things we've experienced, but it also ensures any latecomer gets greeted by someone.

Third, the elders and deacons meet at the foyer after the sermon in order to ensure that no one gets out without having someone greet them and talk with them. Funny story — the first time we did that, all the elders and deacons walked back to the foyer with me right after the invitation. Several people, including the elders' wives, thought they were angry with me and wanted to know what I had said or done during the sermon that was so serious!

Jay Kelley | Levelland, Texas

We attend the North Jackson Church of Christ. We have around 700 in attendance and are always growing. We are very visitor-friendly and try to make everyone feel welcome.

We moved here nine years ago and tried another congregation where we were not even spoken to by anyone. We couldn't wait to get out and leave!

Sherry Ellen Carwile | Jackson, Tenn.

When my husband moved to town, he visited a congregation that spoke about fellowship with visitors during Sunday school. When he left the Sunday school class, no one acknowledged him, and he wasn't greeted before or after the worship service. Talk about irony!

He then left and went to the current congregation where he and I now have worshiped for about four years due to how we were greeted the first time we walked in the door. I consider those people my family now just because I was so warmly greeted when I first started going to church with my husband. It *does* make a difference.

Stephanie Hart | Louisville, Ky.

