

OUTREACH TAKEAWAY # 1

A WARM AND CARING ATMOSPHERE

Christian love may be the motive for reaching out to the unchurched, but in and of itself, Christian love does not win souls for Christ. Only the gospel can accomplish that miracle. On the other hand, Christian love is the vessel in which the gospel is carried. A warm and caring atmosphere, which accompanies worship, is vital in any evangelism effort.

Perhaps it is beneficial to view the worship experience as a visitor might see it: when we drove up to the church, I was impressed immediately by the appearance of the property. The lawn was mowed, the shrubbery was trimmed, and the paint job was new. I figured that the members of the congregation must take pride in their building because the place obviously had received a lot of tender loving care.

I knew we were going to get to the church without a whole lot of time to spare and I was hoping I wouldn't have to park so far away that I'd be late. When I drove into the parking lot to drop off Cara and Ben (my wife and three-year-old), I was delighted to see some empty parking spaces marked "Visitors." They were located near the main entrance, right next to several spaces reserved for the handicapped. I was impressed again when I saw a ramp leading to a side entrance. My thought was, "This church thinks of everyone."

The three of us entered the main lobby and several people greeted us with handshakes and smiles. Cara asked about a nursery. One of the people who greeted us volunteered to show us the room where the nursery was already in session. It was neat, clean room staffed by an adult and a couple of teenage girls. They were nice to us and very nice to Ben. He was actually happy to stay when we left.

An usher stood at the door of the main part of the church. He offered us a program (the pastor kept calling it a service folder) and escorted us to our seats. I was relieved the usher hadn't dragged us way up to the front, and I was impressed that the people sitting at the end of the pew didn't make us crawl over them. They moved and gave Cara and me plenty of room to sit. I noticed immediately an in-bench speaker system for the hearing impaired.

The service folder was neat, sharp, and friendly-not like some of the folders I had seen in other churches we had visited. I grabbed a hymnal out of the book rack in front of me; it looked pretty intimidating. When I took a closer look at the folder, I noticed that it gave an outline of the service and directions for using the book. It was just 10:30 when the organ stopped playing and the pastor walked into the altar area. He welcomed everyone and announced the theme for the day's service. What he said was short and sweet and just enough to make it clear what was going to be happening.

I found some things in Lutheran worship to be pretty different from what I had experienced in my own church. Three of the hymns were brand new to me (Cara knew one of them), but the congregation did quite well and appeared to enjoy singing. In fact, I must say, the singing really reverberated throughout the church building.

I definitely was not used to all the standing and sitting these Lutherans did.

The hymnal was helpful, however, and pretty easy to follow. There were a couple of times when I wasn't at all sure where we were, but the people sitting next to us noticed that we were a little confused and quietly pointed out the right page in the book. The thing about

the service that impressed me the most was the sermon. I knew Cara was impressed, too, because she never opened her purse for a piece of gum! What I really liked was that the pastor based everything he said on the Bible; he didn't give all sorts of personal opinions. He was easy to follow and - spoke in a down-to-earth way. I didn't understand everything he said, but he said a lot that made me think. In fact, I'm still thinking about it.

After the service the pastor welcomed everybody again, especially the visitors, and invited everyone to stay for a cup of coffee and some refreshments. He was very friendly when we saw him at the door. He introduced us to a young couple about our age who talked with us a little and asked us to sign a guest register. When we told them we had to pick up Ben at the nursery, they offered to walk along. They invited us for a cup of coffee and introduced us to some people who were friends of theirs. They also invited us for coffee (Lutherans are really into food!).

A few days later, we received a handwritten note from the pastor and a little card from the couple we met. Neither was anything big, just a few sentences saying they were glad we could come and inviting us to come again. The pastor volunteered to stop over and answer any questions we might have. On Wednesday another couple from the congregation stopped at our house. They didn't insist on coming in (we invited them in anyway) but just wanted us to know how pleased they were that we had worshipped in their church.

A warm and caring worship atmosphere as illustrated above obviously is not the most important part of a congregation's outreach strategy... It is true, however, that congregations demonstrate concern and love for visitors not only in the way the message they offer, but in the way they offer the message. First impressions count. Negative impressions discourage visitors from returning.

Positive impressions do not guarantee that a visitor will be won for Christ, of course, but they may bring a person back to hear the gospel a second time. Who knows on which visit the Holy Spirit will work his great work of conversion?

Work through the "visitor impressions" and determine which things impressed him. Compare what he noticed with what your church is doing. The effort may be well worth your time and may encourage a visitor to return to your church a second time to hear the glorious message of Christ.

*This excerpt is taken from **We Believe - Therefore We Speak** written by David J. Valleskey*