**HOW TO MAKE OUR GUESTS FEEL A SENSE OF BELONGING**

**WHEN THEY VISIT OUR CHURCHES**

by

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Many of our church members repel people when they should be embracing them. Our church membership is not growing because the members are not caring and friendly, and when people visit they vow that they would never visit that church again. Some of our members who go to live in a community choose to attend a church miles away from the one in their community because they did not feel welcome and at home the first time they visited that church. Many non-SDA people visit our churches every week and leave without any member saying anything to them during the hours they would have spent in our churches.

People are not looking for God, they are looking to be associated with a group of people where they can feel loved, wanted, and appreciated. They want to feel a sense of belonging. Let me share an experience that I had in one of the churches I pastored: a young man visited the church one Communion Sabbath morning, dressed in a shirt and pants made from rice bag, and a long knife in a shield around his waist. He went and sat in one of the Sabbath School classes and at the beginning of the session the teacher welcomed everyone, but ignored him. The Superintendent who welcomed the church acknowledged all other guests except that young man. During the midday service the Elder welcomed all guests again except the young man.

After the preaching service the men then separated to the back for the feet washing; the young man followed us but was left standing all by himself because no one reached out to him. I could not handle what I had observed anymore, so I reached out and welcomed him to church. I told him how happy I was that he came and engaged him in a conversation, only to find out that he was one of us who had backslidden. He told me that he was using drugs, drinking alcohol, living a life of fornication and practicing other sins; but God spoke to him and he decided to return to church. He came to his own but his own received him not. When church was over he immediately left and I never saw him again.

One Sabbath day at another church, a girl who was known as a prostitute in the community visited our church. All of the women sat away from her and not one of the members had anything to say or do with her. After service she left and never visited the church again.

We should not relate to people based on how they look, the position they hold in the church or society, how rich or famous they are or how good they are. We must treat everyone well because we are all God’s children.

A woman who grew up in Sabbath School went through a divorce and was planning to commit suicide. She would drive from home to work and don’t know how she got there. One day the woman remembered what she learnt in Sabbath School as a child and decided to attend church as her only hope.

The two Sabbaths that the woman went to church no one said a word to her nor welcomed her. But she went back a third Sabbath and sat next to a senior sister who was very caring. The sister welcomed the woman and kept holding her hand as she noticed how sad she looked. The caring attitude of the sister couldn’t prevent the woman’s tears from flowing. She felt God reaching out to her through that sister. At the end of the service the sister took the woman to the pastor who counselled her; and this prevented her from ending her life.

When people visit our churches it might be their last attempt to find hope and help, let us not be indifferent to our guests.

**I want to suggest some ways in which we can help people to feel a sense of belonging when they visit our churches:-**

1. Use only persons who are warm, friendly and outgoing as your greeters and ushers.
2. Take their name, phone numbers, inform them where to find the washrooms; and if they have children ask an usher to take them to the children’s division.
3. Ask all members to welcome everyone who came into church and to sit next to them. Just say: “Welcome, it is nice to have you at church today”.
4. Let the person doing the Welcome at Sabbath School, Midday Service, AY and other services ask the members to stand and greet all guests who are sitting.
5. Ask all members to use the first five minutes after the church service to reach out to only the guests. Tell them it was nice to have them. Find out their names, where they are from, if they are a member, introduce them to other members, offer them a drop or to take them home for lunch, only if you are in a position to do so, or you can put them on to someone else.
6. Let the Interest Coordinator call the guests the next day and let them know that their visit was appreciated, and invite them to come again.
7. Educate the church about the importance of helping our guests to feel at home and the role each one needs to play.
8. Leaders must model the change they want to see.
9. Have a Hospitality Committee.
10. Pastors should be early at church to greet members and guests.
11. Let caring become part of the church’s culture.
12. Provide training for members, greeters and ushers.