

stuff you wish they taught in seminary

A photograph of a church roof with a cross on top, set against a clear blue sky. The roof is made of dark, corrugated metal. The cross is a simple wooden cross.

5 Training Experiences

TO HELP YOUR TEAM FEEL LIKE FIRST-TIME GUESTS

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Have you ever felt like the training for your guest service team is lacking something?

Are you ready to take your team to the next level, but you're not sure where to begin?

Are you tired of seeing another list of "tips" to help your team improve their service?

Do you want to add a training element that actually gets to the heart of what it's like to be a first-time guest?

Oftentimes when we train our leaders it all focuses on tactics (or tips, or tools) and doesn't get to the heart level. **I wonder if your team might be missing something to connect with emotionally in their serving.**

A first-time guest at your church, on the other hand, usually has an experience filled with thoughts and feelings. Your guests feel such a wide variety of emotions when they arrive at your church, so you need to help your team identify and empathize with those feelings.

Rather than offering another list of ways to hand out programs or tips on what to do when someone on your team has bad breath, **I'm offering you five practical and different training experiences that can help your team understand first-time guests on an emotive level.**

Take Your Team to Play Bingo

I know this sounds strange but stay with me. A number of years ago, I volunteered to help out at a fundraiser for my kid's school, and it happened to be a bingo night. It was an amazing experience.

Bingo has its own subculture, **and this bingo night had all the trappings of a religious experience.** People brought special lucky charms that they arranged in a particular order on the table in front of them. They all had their own reserved seats in the room. They wore certain jackets. They used a vernacular unique to the bingo hall. The way people picked their cards was a ritualized experience. Money was involved.

The experience of going to that bingo hall all those years ago is still fresh in my mind every time I think about it. So much of it reminded me of what it must be like to come to church for the first time. There's so much about what we do in churches that is foreign and abstract to those who have yet to come through our doors.

"Secret Shop" Another Church

Whether it's the church down the street or a sanctuary across the country, there's something about visiting another church that can help you see your own church more clearly.

When you arrive, pay attention to how you're feeling as you enter the building. Examine the lighting and ask yourself what the room tells you about the church. How does the signage communicate what it must be like to visit for the first time?



There are two polar opposite ideas that we need to resist when we go to a different church:

- **What is happening at this church is exactly what's happening at your church.** // While you may feel this way, the reality is that it's not true. Every church has its own unique flair. Look for those distinctions. Understand what that may look like from church to church.

- **What is happening at this church could never happen at your church.** // If you visit a church that's much larger or more effective than your church, it can be tempting to think that there's no way that could be replicated at your church. However, you need to remember that God wants to use your church in a special way too.

Scout out the church ahead of time and develop a small list of items that you want your team to notice. Grab lunch after the service and talk about your reflections on the visit. You'd be amazed how much clarity an experience like that can bring to your team!

Share Their First Time Experiences

Learning each other's origin stories is not only a great way to build community, but it's also a valuable technique to gain insight about what it's like to arrive at church for the first time. Simply gather your team in a circle and start a conversation about what it was like when each one of them first came to church. I find it fascinating to understand what it must have been like in those early days; **gaining that kind of clarity helps me understand what it must be**

like for people who are arriving now. Here are a few conversation starters you can try:

- Tell us about the morning before you first came to church. What did you experience/feel before you arrived?
- Who invited you to come to church for the first time, and what was that interaction like?
- Do you remember when you first entered the property at our church? Tell us about that experience.
- Can you recall the very first Sunday service you attended at our church? What are the prevailing memories or feelings that have stuck with you since then?
- What was your first negative experience at the church? How did that make you feel?

Go to a Theme Park Together

Theme parks provide a great training ground for teams that are discovering what it's like to have guests come to their church. Like church, theme parks:

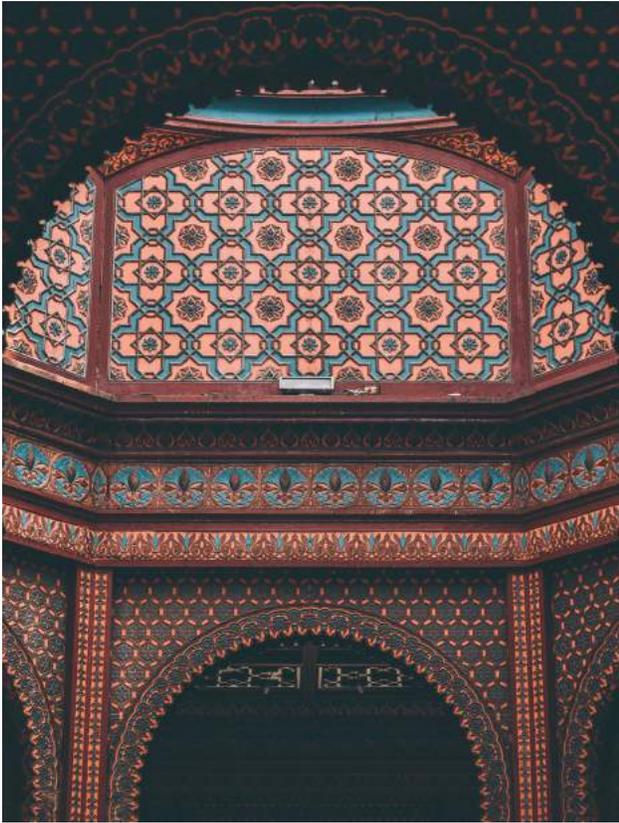
- Offer physical, tangible experiences
- Regularly host a large population of visitors who have never been there before
- Try to generate emotions in people
- Deal with parking issues

Imagine taking your core leaders to a local theme park on a Saturday with the sole purpose of trying to learn what you can do to help first-time guests at your church. Consider how the park manages parking, their arrival process, and how they handle guests with strollers and/or special needs. What does the theme park do to keep things clean and tidy? Spending a day at a theme park will provide your team with insights that are possibly greater than any other location that you could visit as a team.

Visit a Synagogue or a Mosque

Are you looking for a training experience that might step it up a bit? If you take your team to visit a synagogue or a mosque in your town, I guarantee you'll have conversations for years about that experience. **Not only is it fascinating to understand how other people worship, but it**

will also give you clarity about what it's like to be a first-time visitor to your church. Those who attend synagogues or mosques are insiders to their religion while we are outsiders. These experiences are filled with great reverence and a mix of humanity.



These religious organizations have their own code of conduct and approach to worship services, and this may be largely unfamiliar to people who usually aren't part of that experience. How your team responds emotionally to the mere thought of visiting a synagogue or mosque will give them a sense of what people think when coming to your church:

What are you supposed to do, take your shoes off or leave them on?

Will someone give a message?

Is there music?

Do we raise our hands?

Do I sit?

Do I stand?

I am not sure what this experience is supposed to be like.

All of these responses are exactly the kind of things your visitors likely wonder about and feel as they prepare to visit your church.

Maybe your team is missing an opportunity to wrestle with the complex emotions of showing up somewhere for the first time and then relate those feelings to the experience of visiting your church. **I believe if you try one or two of the above training opportunities, your team will be more effective as you go into this next season of serving.**

Do you have any other ideas about how your team could train at the emotive level to help first-time guests? I'd love to hear from you. Feel free to leave a comment online.

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