

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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### Uninvited Guests

*Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.*

Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.

Have you ever found yourself in a place where you knew you did not belong? I'm not referring to places where no Christ-follower should ever be. I'm also not referring to sitting in the field level seats at a baseball game when you are ticketed two levels higher – a recent experience of mine that the rule-following gene in me didn't like. What I'm referencing is finding yourself in a place where you can be, but you know and feel that you don't belong there.

Perhaps an example will help. In my previous job, I used to find myself at receptions and social gatherings from time to time where, upon arrival, it quickly became obvious that I knew no one there and that no one knew me. Yet, I "needed" to be there because of some kind of work requirement. These were awkward and unpleasant evenings.

I want to suggest that there are two types of guests at churches – invited guests and uninvited guests, and that uninvited guests deserve special attention. Here's how I define these terms. An invited guest is someone who has been invited to come by someone who attends the church and that person generally accompanies the guest during their visit. An uninvited guest is someone who just shows up or who may have been invited by someone, but no one accompanies them during their visit. They are not unwanted, but they are uninvited. And what we do with them is something to talk about.

I have had the "uninvited guest" experience in many churches during the past five years of my work with EFCA. Typically, I do not just drop in – someone knows I'm coming or has invited me, oftentimes to meet with their leaders after the service. I don't show up carrying a Bible, notebook or other display of church familiarity (I use my phone's Bible app when I travel). I usually walk in and sit alone near the back. Typically, the churches I

visit are “normal” sized churches, between 60 and 150 people in attendance. They have never seen me before – I’m sure people know I am a stranger. Yet, people hardly ever speak to me or engage me in conversation beyond a perfunctory “good morning” at the door while they hand me whatever paperwork they distribute there.

I have heard horror stories involving uninvited guests clearly being deliberately un-invited by some gross and socially inept behaviors, but this has not been my experience in churches. Rather, what I experience and hear about are well-meaning church folk being inept, not mean, in demonstrating hospitality and welcome.

These experiences have changed the way I engage with uninvited guests at the church I attend. To my shame, I began doing this only in recent years, so I do not boast. Here are two of the changes – I have adopted the principles that *no guest should be ignored*, and *no one should sit alone at church*.

In groups, and the church is a group, the things we want to happen won’t happen unless we talk about them and create strategies to do them. If we want to be appropriately welcoming to uninvited guests, we need to talk about it. Here are some ideas to help start your conversation.

- What is our strategy for identifying uninvited guests and making them feel welcome? What do we leaders do when we see someone we do not recognize?
- It is often said that people who drop into a church for the first time may want to hide and be anonymous. Why do we believe this? When you drop into a group, do you want to be ignored, or do you want someone to be kind to you?
- In your ministry context, what might be some ice-breaking conversation starters that church attenders could use to welcome guests?
- Are we prepared to welcome guests? What could we do to help guests feel welcome among us? What would likely scare them away?
- As leaders, how can we encourage our church family to choose to sit next to an uninvited guest? Certainly, we are called to be examples, but how can we influence the rest of the family to do the ministry of hospitality to uninvited guests?
- When we see someone sitting alone (guest or regular attender), do we assume that they want to be alone or think that, perhaps, they might be feeling lonely and need someone to be with them? How might we figure this out and act accordingly?
- Have I ever asked an uninvited guest who comes back a second time what their first visit and impressions were like?
- Do we leaders ever go to a church where we don’t know anyone and were not invited just to experience what it is like to be an uninvited guest? If you have not, why not? If you have, what did you learn from that experience?

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- What expectations do we have for those who greet people at the door or elsewhere before our services? How we have communicated those expectations, and what are we doing to ensure that they are being met?

Why might an uninvited guest come to your church? They could be spiritually dead, in need of a savior and looking for answers. They might be new residents looking for a church home. They could be broken and disheartened Christians leaving a toxic church environment. They could be consumer Christians looking for a new “happy place” in which to hang out for a while.

We won't know until we intentionally ask. We won't intentionally ask unless we plan to ask. We won't plan to ask if we don't first talk about it. If we want to be a warm, friendly, welcoming congregation, uninvited guests are something to talk about. Let's have the conversation.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.  
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