

## Welcoming International Visitors to Your Church

by Ellen Livingood

**As travel becomes easier and cheaper, more and more churches receive international visitors—either guests connected to a global partnership endeavor or visitors introduced by one of their field missionaries or agency partners.**

**For maximum benefit of both hosts and visitors, hospitality in these situations must consist of more than providing a room and meals. You will want to prepare your congregation to understand their role in making this a spiritual highlight for both sides.**

**For all guests  
you are welcoming**



### **Hello!**

Teach the congregation a word of greeting in your guests' language and coach them in how to properly greet an individual in the culture of your visitors. Encourage them to welcome your guests warmly.

### **Cultural clues**

Educate your people to those things that are considered essential to gracious hospitality in your visitors' culture and what is offensive in their setting. If possible, do this with skits or other fun learning methods.

### **Two by two**

Guests usually feel most comfortable if two can stay together rather than being housed individually in host homes.

### **Food**

Ask what types of foods are frequently served in your visitors' country and what would not be palatable for your guests. Provide written guidelines to host families about food preferences and other ways to make their guests comfortable.

### **Reciprocal learners**

Encourage the congregation to exhibit an attitude of learning. Their purpose is not just to introduce all of their own culture and history, but also to be learners about the background of their guests. You could create a list of appropriate questions if your people are new to hosting internationals.

### **Accepting criticisms**

It is important not to be offended when guests respond negatively to something they see or experience on their visit. Remember, it is natural to prefer your own ways of doing things! Another approach may be better, at least in their culture, so learn from your visitors' criticisms.

### **Translation**

It's amazing how much can be communicated without words, and your guests and hosts will get along quite well even if they don't speak the same language. But the trip will be far more valuable for everyone if you have several translators. Plan ahead. If translators need to take time off work to serve in this capacity, you will want to consider remunerating them.

### **Church services**

If guests are a part of your worship service, you will want to have the message and key service elements translated for them. Proficient translators can listen and translate simultaneously, but others need the message written out ahead of time. If your pastor is not accustomed to writing out sermons, ask for this well in advance.



Unless you have specialized equipment, you will want to plan for where the group can sit so that translation does not interfere with the worship of others. If your service will include baptism or communion, explain ahead of time the symbolism and who can participate.

## Activities

Find out in advance or at the beginning of their visit what types of sightseeing, shopping, and recreation your guests might enjoy. Don't assume that they are interested in the same things that tourists from your country would choose.

For example: Historical museums are often of limited interest. One church took guests to visit an Amish community and discovered their international visitors were rather confused and preferred more typical American sites. Attractions that can be enjoyed without extensive translation (such as botanical gardens, zoos, and amusement parks) may be more appreciated than those requiring lots of explanation (such as a city tour). Many are more interested in shopping for clothing items such as athletic shoes, jeans, etc., than for souvenirs.

## Culture exchange

Your guests are proud of their heritage and culture. Invite them to share something with you—a native dance, national song, artist expression, special ceremony, the national dress of their people, etc.

## Financial guidelines

International visitors, especially from the Majority World, can come to Western countries assuming that the “rich” Christians they visit will give them large financial gifts or other coveted advantages (such as sponsoring a son or daughter as a student in your country). Clarify expectations in advance for both hosts and visitors. Help hosts understand how well-intentioned generosity could be highly detrimental in some circumstances. Especially if you are entertaining a group, agree in advance on a price ceiling for gifts.

## If you are welcoming guests who are believers



## Mutual encouragement

Challenge your congregation to listen to and learn from your guests' life stories. Help them understand that the trip is designed for reciprocal benefit.

## Offer, don't pressure

In advance, explain to your staff and ministry leaders that you want them to share their ideas and resources but with

sensitivity so as not to communicate the impression that what your church does is “right” and “better” than what your guests do.



## Model

Depending on your guests' background, remind your congregation that these fellow Christians may not have had much opportunity to learn from role models about Christian marriage and family life, church ministry, or what it means to be a believer in the workplace. Sharing your everyday life with them will make a lasting impression.

## Use their ministry skills

How can your church or nearby ministries benefit from the expertise your guests bring? One church connected visiting Latino partners with a local ministry to Hispanic immigrants. The connection benefitted both sides. Other churches have discovered that their guests are welcome speakers at Rotary Club luncheons and in local schools, providing opportunities for witness.

## If you are welcoming guests who are not believers



## Remove anything potentially offensive

Before your guests arrive, you will need to “tour” your church and evaluate all literature, bulletin boards, etc., from their perspective, particularly references to work in their country. Remove anything that could be offensive. (It is good to develop materials with the assumption that

copies will be read/viewed by unbelievers.)



## Careful what you say

Before your guests arrive, educate your congregation about

important terminology. For example, missionaries are often referred to as “workers,” since the term “missionary” has extremely negative connotations in many places. It might be best to permanently change your congregation's vocabulary rather than try to do so just when guests visit. If your ministry in your guests' home area includes evangelism and church-planting, guide your congregation in how they should describe the work to your guests to avoid needless offense.

## Explain in advance

Work at making your guests as comfortable as possible. It might be helpful well before you bring them to a service to take them around your church, explaining what you do and why. Don't assume anything; remember, you are crossing both cultural and religious barriers.

**You're being watched**

Share with your congregation that their biggest impact for the gospel likely will not be what they say (although they can be free to share their faith appropriately) but how Jesus shines through their everyday lives and relationships. Guests will watch to see how Christians relate to their family, friends, neighbors, and business associates. No language barrier will prevent them from sensing friendship and acceptance.

**Make it optional**

Invite your guests to participate in your Christian activities but do not push them to do something uncomfortable. Remember that your primary goal is to create a positive relationship which will open opportunities for more Christian influence in the future.

## Applying these ideas

**CUSTOMIZE THESE GUIDELINES**

Write [info@catalystservices.org](mailto:info@catalystservices.org) for a Word document of this material to customize for your own use.

**CHURCHES****Expand your hospitality team**

Hosting visitors from abroad this summer? In addition to recruiting an individual or team to plan housing and meals, put together a cultural awareness team to prepare your congregation. Who should be on the team? Former missionaries, persons not native-born to your country whose immigration experiences give them empathy, foreign language teachers, or others who have lived abroad. This issue of *Postings* can be a starting point for their work.

**Be proactive in inviting national partners to visit**

Could your partnership benefit from a reverse missions trip? Why not invite partners to send a leader or bring a group to visit your church? As with any missions trip, you will want to work together to establish goals. Your congregation might contribute toward travel costs, but also challenge your partners to trust God to provide them with some of the trip funds.

**Encourage your missionaries to bring international coworkers with them on home assignment**

Meeting key nationals with whom your missionaries serve can significantly strengthen your understanding of, and commitment to, their ministry. It can also minister in diverse ways to the national coworkers. Dialog with your missionary to determine the length of the visit that would be most practical and how it can be a win/win/win for national, missionary, and your church.

**AGENCIES****Resource churches to make visits reciprocal**

As more congregations welcome international visitors, your missionaries and staff can offer expertise in how to bridge cultural divides and make visits reciprocal.

**Facilitate "reverse" missions trips**

Encourage fields to organize visits by nationals to key congregations that have both much to give and much to learn from reciprocal relationships.

## More resources for welcomers

**Foreign to Familiar**

Sarah A. Lanier / McDougal Publishing  
A short, easy introduction to cultural differences.

**Serving with Eyes Wide Open**

David A. Livermore / Baker Books  
An insightful study of cultural intelligence and how to apply it on short-term trips; also applicable for hosting internationals.

**Why Are Americans Like That?**

Stan Nussbaum / Enculturation Books  
A fun orientation to American culture for visitors to the US; this little book will also sensitize hosts to some of the cultural differences that will surprise their guests.

**American Cultural Baggage**

Stan Nussbaum / Orbis Books  
A primer on American culture written for Americans; this book helps make receiving churches aware of their own beliefs and attitudes.

**Interchange Postings**

Catalyst's *Postings* e-newsletter is a monthly publication designed for mission agency personnel and local church leaders involved in collaborative global efforts. The practical articles highlight what churches and agencies are doing to mobilize believers, especially those of younger generations, to expand the Kingdom.

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