Toward 2035: STRENGTHEN INVITATION

A Follow-Up Plan

ENGAGING WITH SOMEONE AFTER THEIR FIRST VISIT

People come to church looking for relationships, belonging, and opportunities to grow in their spirituality and faith. A good follow-up plan helps ensure newcomers don't fall through the cracks while respecting their privacy and comfort.

Good follow-up helps people move from being visitors to becoming known, connected, and valued members of the community of faith.

Step 1: Gather Contact Information

Make it easy for guests to connect with your congregation. Possible tools you can use include:

> Printed Connection Cards: This is a tried-and-true method. Place cards in pew racks or elsewhere in the worship area, and invite guests to fill them in. Regular members can also use them to update contact information. You can find plenty of examples online. You can order these customised for your congregation, or make your own. They are easy to design and get printed.
>
> Your Website: Have a connection form on your website. It's easy to set up and will send you the information that people enter. How you set this up depends on the web platform you use. Keep the form layout and the information you collect simple, like a printed card.
>
> Use a QR Code: You can use online tools to generate a QR code. Guests can take a photo of it with their phone, and it will direct them to an online contact form on your congregation's website.

What information should you gather? I suggest keeping the card/form simple and only asking for information that will help your congregation follow up with them in a meaningful way. This could include name, mailing address, phone number, email address, how they found out about your congregation, plus any specific needs or questions they have.

Make it clear that they only need to share whatever information they wish to.

Privacy and Permission: Personal information is a gift of trust. Congregations have a responsibility to collect, store, and use guest information carefully and transparently.

Good privacy practices include:

- Always respecting their communication preferences and level of interest.
- Offering guests a choice about how they would like to be contacted: email, phone, text message, postal mail, or if they don't want to receive a follow-up.
- Explaining why information is being collected.
- Gathering only the information that is needed.

- Obtaining consent before adding someone to a newsletter or mailing list.
- Storing information securely.
- Limiting access to those responsible for follow-up.
- Respecting requests to unsubscribe or stop receiving communications.
- Periodically reviewing and deleting outdated information.
- Consider including a statement such as: "We use this information only to welcome you, answer your questions, and keep you informed about the ministries and activities you choose to hear about."

Someone in your congregation (paid or volunteer) needs to be responsible for gathering the information collected and entering it into your information database. Follow the appropriate security measures to keep this information secure and private. This person will get new information to the people who need it in Step 2.

Step 2: During the Week

Timely follow-up shows the guest that their presence mattered.

On Monday or Tuesday, send a welcome email (if they gave you their email address). This could come from a congregational leader, a member of the welcoming team, or the minister. The email:

- Thanks them for attending.
- Invites them to return the following Sunday.
- Includes links to your website or social media.
- Shares information about upcoming events.
- (optional) Includes a short feedback survey.

You can also mail a handwritten note (if you have their address). Ideally, it should come from someone other than the person who sent the email. This could be the minister, a greeter who met them, or a church leader. Keep it short and personal. It simply acknowledges their visit and expresses appreciation for their presence.

If you only have their mailing address (i.e., no email address), you can mail the contents of the email as a typewritten letter on your congregation’s letterhead and include the handwritten note.

Step 3: Welcome Returning Guests

When guests return:

- Recognise them personally, but don't draw public attention to them.
- Introduce them to additional members of the congregation.
- Learn and use their name.
- Continue building relationships.

If they express interest, invite them to receive your newsletter or other communications. Find out if they’d like to meet the minister (if they haven’t already).

Remember that every engagement should respect the communication and privacy preferences they've expressed.

Step 4: Connect People to Community

Congratulations! A newcomer returns for a second visit. Remember, belonging happens through relationships. You need to help a newcomer connect with people in your congregation and begin forming meaningful relationships.

As you learn about newcomers, you will discover their interests and needs. Your congregation might already have groups and activities happening that speak to these. This could include small groups, ways of serving, ministries for people at different stages of life (such as children, youth, seniors), learning opportunities, and faith formation programs. Introduce the newcomer to the group or activity's leader.

Don't overlook others in the congregation who might have similar interests or whose experiences can help you connect with a newcomer. These could include interests that are not happening in the church. For example, you might learn that a newcomer likes playing board games. So does someone in your congregation who you know is part of a board game group that meets at the local library. Connect them.

The goal is for at least one person to intentionally build a relationship with each newcomer.

Step 5: Help Them Find Out More

Guests are curious about your congregation. As they become more connected, they might want to learn more about who your congregation is, what matters to it, and how they can become more involved in its life and work.

One congregation started offering regular Newcomers Events.

- These were in November and May, usually on a Sunday evening, but other days/times could work too.
- Anyone new to the congregation was personally invited.
- Good snacks and refreshments were served!
- A board member and the minister led the events.
- Newcomers were given a couple of low-risk questions to talk about with a partner. Partners were then invited to introduce each other to the group.
- The leaders:
    - talked about the congregation's story and mission/purpose;
    - told a bit of their own story;
    - highlighted a few activities, groups, and/or events that were coming up
    - mentioned how decisions were made in the congregation, including what membership means (without going deeply into the minutia of church governance!)

    - introduced the importance of stewardship as part of a disciple's journey with Christ, and talked about how people can share their time, abilities, passions, and money toward the congregation's common work.
- Do not overwhelm visitors with information. Instead, clearly communicate one or two meaningful steps they can take next.

Newcomers who took part consistently said they felt much more connected to the congregation afterwards. Most became noticeably more involved.

By doing effective follow-up, you are expressing your Christian hospitality rooted in relationships, attentiveness, and care. By following up thoughtfully, consistently, and respectfully, newcomers will be more likely to experience your congregation as a community where they are genuinely welcomed and valued.

For more - contact Rev. Rob Shearer (he/him)
Growth & Stewardship Animator for FSLDW and FDEE
The United Church of Canada
rshearer@united-church.ca

Developed by Rev. Greg Smith-Young (he/him)
This resource is printed on tree-free paper.