

## **Our Guest Experience**

*Here is a walk through our experience Sunday a week ago:*

We entered the doors next to the children's area at 9:14am. I understand that this is a little early but there was no one at the doors to greet us. Of course, we didn't use the guest parking although we did notice the sign for this. We entered to see a lady at the children's desk. As we approached, she greeted us with a smile. She was very kind. She explained the form we needed to fill out to check-in our elementary sons and she began filling out the name badges and pick-up tags. As this was happening another family approached to tell her that the computers weren't checking everyone in. When the lady finished with our tags she handed them to us and sent us with a 5th grade student (her daughter, I think) to the big room.

At this point, we had everything we needed but no explanation of what to do with the tags, of what the schedule was, etc. She led us to the room and we sent the boys inside and entered the room as well although we just stood at the door. It was around 9:20am. They didn't know where to sit, so it was interesting to watch each of them move according to their own personalities. An activity was happening at the front of the room that was engaging about a dozen kids--the rest were sitting. Jaxon wandered in and sat near an older student although he didn't realize that he was actually sitting in an aisle and not the taped off section. Titus, according to his personality, went and joined the line for the activity. Nathan wandered around at the back of the room, trying hard not to make the wrong decision. There were several adults in the room but none of them approached any of our kids or us. Two people spoke to us. One was a mother as she was leaving who said that her daughter (who is kindergarten) doesn't like the big room because she misses having things to play with--I'm assuming your classes just promoted and she just moved up from preschool. The other lady was a grandmother (a member) who asked us a question about where to pick up her granddaughter. We directed her to the other adults in the room. Nathan came back to us to ask where he should go and we told him to ask one of the leaders. He approached a leader who was in the sound booth, getting things ready. This person was also occasionally giving the kids instructions over the microphone. Nathan waited. The man saw him but never engaged him in conversation and then left the sound booth, passing him, to return to the activity at the front. Nathan eventually found a place to sit. We left shortly after.

As we were leaving the kid's area, I realized that I still didn't know the

schedule, so I approached a man that seemed like a leader. He explained that we should come and get the kids after the first hour--that they want us to take our kids to worship with us. I asked what happened if parents don't come to get their kids. He said that 75% of the parents come for them and about 25% don't (some who say their kids aren't ready to sit in service with them, he said). These 25% experience the same lesson and activities the second hour as the first. In other words, they get the same thing twice. He was very kind, not in a hurry, and answered my questions. He did a good job.

From the children's area we walked through the preschool on the way to the youth area. Jayden had already decided to sit with us in worship but we wanted him to see it. We entered the building to a mix of high school and junior high students. Most of the older students were standing off to the side. A group of younger students were horsing around with a trash can. It felt quite full. We passed through the crowd, looking around, and turned down the hallway to the left, looking in the rooms. I noticed an adult with lesson books standing nearby who saw us and watched us but did not approach us. As a parent, it would have been very hard to leave Jayden in there. We exited the youth building, having passed an adult in the hallway but nobody noticed we were guests and nobody spoke to us.

Then, on the walkway back to the main building, something significant happened. The first and only person of the day greeted us without us first approaching them--It was a high school student who made eye contact with my wife and said hello.

We re-entered the main building and moved around to the right-hand side of the worship center. The singing had already started. We did not receive a bulletin and didn't know you had bulletins until you mentioned it during the announcements. We were also not offered a children's bulletin--I later saw these at the guest center. I suppose that's where people get them but unless a guest comes through the guest center, it would be hard to know where these are. During the music, I slipped out for a few minutes and went upstairs--I wanted to see if the restrooms in the children's area were accessible for adults and how secure they were. The restrooms closest to the children's area are usually the most dangerous place in a church because that's where pedophiles tend to migrate, especially in sizable congregations like yours. The children's hallway and restrooms are open to everyone. I never asked how the children's area handles kids needing to use the restrooms but if they don't have a leader of the same gender with them at all times, then these are not secure. And, if they do, then I'm assuming it's a distraction and inconvenience. I walked to the big room in

the children's area. There was no one at the children's desk and there were five leaders in the hallway, talking in two different groups next to the doors where they would be leading. I stood in the hallway (because I wanted to be seen) outside the door to the big room, just watching. I watched for about seven minutes, just to see the conclusion of a video and the leader review the Bible story. It was curious to me that nobody approached me to ask if I needed anything, if I was looking for somebody, if they could help, etc.

I returned to the worship center and we enjoyed the rest of the service. Afterwards we returned to the children's area to pick up our kids. Jaxon's pick-up was smooth. The leader spoke kindly about Jaxon and engaged my wife in conversation--this was very good. She did a great job.

Titus wasn't in his classroom and the leader told my wife more than once that not everyone had transitioned yet. Eventually he arrived with a leader (She thinks he might have been in the bathroom since he didn't come in with other kids). I waited in line and then picked up Nathan. I decided not to show my pick-up tag. I simply asked for Nathan. The leader called "Nathan" and he came to me--no parent tag shown, no questions asked, no driver's license asked for, not even any conversation with the leader--he just sent him over to me.

All our elementary boys could tell us the Bible lesson they learned and they all said that they had fun.

Now let me give you some thoughts and suggestions based on our experience with you:

The strength on Sunday morning is the worship service but there are a lot of details missing throughout the age-group sections in connecting with guests, security, communication, etc. Ideally, you want the same excellence you strive for in the worship service to be reflected in every area of the church. (Now, it is true that we didn't come through the guest services area, which might have changed our experience.):

- Have a registration team that will keep at least two people at the children's desk to always have one on hand to walk guests through an explanation of what happens in the children's area. This person should also offer to walk people to the other areas instead of sending them. For example, from the time we began at the children's desk a person should have walked us to the big room, introduced us to leaders there, introduced our kids, helped them know where to sit,

cast vision for the children's area and then offered to take us to the youth area where they would introduce us to a registration/greeter at the door in the youth building who would do the same there. This would also be an appropriate time to give children's bulletins for later in the day or even a welcome packets of some sort to help parents know what the church offers for children's of that age.

- This registration team becomes your "first-face" and also does more than explain the schedule--they cast the vision for the discipleship process. Basically, "this is what our children's ministry is going to do for your family," etc.
- Another registration person should be at the check-in computers in case someone has trouble checking in or in case, like we saw, the computers are working correctly. I saw kids pulling their own tags off the registration printers which will eventually lead to printer issues and it's good to already have someone on hand to help. This person also becomes a greeter and there are a host of other small roles that this person can have to impact a student's initial entry into the area.
- Leaders need name tags that have their names on them. This helps guests and even members who don't know them connect better.
- At some point you will need to decide if you want elementary kids in the worship services. This is a whole separate matter that includes considerations such as: Are there topics the pastor needs to address that are more than just G-rated. Do you want to provide special children's activities on days when you deal with certain topics (pornography, etc)? Do you want to provide activities for children both hours up to a certain age? All year or seasonally? What should the children's ministry do with the kids whose parents don't want them in worship with them? 25%, if this is accurate, is a high number to be repeating a lesson with. At this point, you are babysitting instead of using your time with these kids. What options do your parents want/need? What options will help the church best engage unchurched families in the community? If the kids do have a worship option, when will they worship with their families, and so forth.
- All leaders need to be trained to identify and look for guests. In the same way that you need training and a well-defined process for reaching the community, you need training and a well-defined process for engaging guests and moving them through the areas where they will receive the information and relational connections that they need.
- The name tags used for guests children are very different than for regular attenders. The advantage here is that these kids will be easily identifiable (although nobody really seemed to notice)--the bad part is that the system they are currently using makes a kid stick

out like a sore thumb. There are better ways to accomplish the same without having a kid wearing something that to them says, "I'm not like everybody else."

- When a guest comes, you want them to experience the same kind of excellence in every area that you strive for in your worship services.
- As far as security, the children's bathrooms need to be secured. Also, is there a trained security team or presence on campus? I would suggest this for every church of your size. On any given Sunday in our current church, there is both marked and unmarked security walking the grounds. They are trained in emergency situations and most have a police or military background. Over my time here there have been several incidents with sex offenders on our campus without the legal permission they are supposed to receive, an angry youth, an incident where two individuals with the Russian mafia were waiting at our church to find the family of an out-of-state relative who owed them money. Our city also sends us alerts and pictures of suspect people in our community who are a threat or are being looked for. Our security, first impressions team and children's registration team have access to this information as needed.