

## 7 Reasons Your Sunday School Class is Unfriendly

Do We Care about Guests in Sunday School?

Most of us would answer this question with a slightly indignant “of course we care about guests”! But do we really? In recent days I have been made aware of occurrences in four of our classes related to their friendliness. So I feel it is time we discuss it.

Most of our Sunday School classes would describe themselves as friendly to newcomers. But is that the reality? Perhaps the most common complaint heard from people visiting churches is that “it was not friendly”. The reality is that a church can have outstanding programs, sound theology, the best preaching, and amazing worship, but none of these will matter if they are perceived as being unfriendly. This should not surprise us. We would not be eager to return to a restaurant or business where we encountered unfriendly service. Why should we expect it to be different in church?

I don't think we plan to be unfriendly, but the reality is that it happens from time to time. The result of an unfriendly church is that newcomers decide against returning. For some this means writing off church completely. This is not an acceptable outcome. But how do we fix it? After examining this issue, I have come up with 7 attitudes and actions that keep us from being a friendly church. If we will recognize these as problems and seek to correct them, we will easily be on the road to becoming one of the friendliest places in town.

**1. It is too easy to come to church and only interact with people we know.** This is just human nature. We spend time with the people we are most familiar with. The problem is that we come to church, talk to our friends and acquaintances, and then proclaim ourselves as having been friendly. But the newcomer would not likely see it that way. You can talk to half the people in the room, but until you talk to *them* they will not perceive you as being friendly. It takes extra effort to get to know someone you have not met before. The burden of engaging people in conversation is on us. Sure, there is an element of fear involved in this. But there is even more fear on the part of the new person that does not know anyone! When we consider the feelings of the newcomer it will hopefully motivate us to engage them in meaningful conversation.

**2. Our image of being friendly to newcomers is often different from what they consider being friendly.** We count “speaking to someone” as welcoming them. Too often we talk to newcomers and never get beyond *hello, my name is...* and *nice to meet you*. People are looking for more meaningful conversation. When we give them a cursory greeting, we may feel like we have been friendly, but they will likely see it as disingenuous. Talk to people. Be genuinely interested in them. Ask questions about them but don't make them feel like they are being interrogated. Don't dominate a conversation or talk too much about yourself. Let them walk away feeling you genuinely cared about them.

**3. We do not understand that being friendly is as important as other aspects of the church.** One of the top reasons people come to church is to build relationships. As much as we would like to think it is our outstanding programs, music, or preaching, building relationships remains one of the highest priorities. Newcomers want friends that share their values and have a common interest in growing in faith. They are not going to care how correct our theology is if they think we are not friendly. They are looking for meaningful relationships. If they perceive our church or Sunday School classes as cliquish and the people

as being “hard to get to know” then they are likely to look elsewhere. Jesus built relationships with the people in which he came in contact. We should do no less with those who visit our church.

**4. We have unintentionally structured many of our classes to be unfriendly.** We do not intend to be unfriendly, but from the newcomer’s perspective some of our well meaning practices can appear cliquish or unfriendly. For example, how we handle prayer request time can appear unfriendly to a newcomer. First of all they likely don’t know anyone you are mentioning. As prayer needs are discussed it further makes them feel like they don’t know what is going on. It is easy for a newcomer to construe what you consider a tight-knit class as cliquish. The way we teach is important too. Each lesson should stand on its own. Lessons should not refer excessively to previous week’s lessons. We must look at everything we do from the critical eye of a newcomer to gauge the impression it will have on them. Seek to structure your class time so that newcomers will want to come back.

**5. We have forgotten what it feels like to be the “new person”.** We do not take into account that some people do not know how to go to church. Would many of us know how to go to a Bahai church service? Would we know what to wear, when to show up, what to do, what to expect or what would be offensive? Probably not. The same holds true for many of those that visit our church. There is a lot of fear of the unknown involved in visiting a church. There is even more fear in visiting a Sunday School class. We must be looking out for these newcomers and be ready to help them have a positive experience. If we make the assumption that every person visiting our church has never stepped foot in a church before, then we will likely treat guests differently. We must make people feel welcomed and “at home” in our church if we have any expectation that they will return.

**6. We treat new people in our class as visitors.** Are they visitors or guests? This may seem like semantics, but think about it for a second. Do you treat a guest in your home differently from a visitor? A visitor is one that is welcomed inside, offered a seat and refreshment and then made the center of your attention. The unexpected visitor may be greeted cordially, but is often treated very differently from the expected guest. We sometimes treat newcomers to our class as if we were not expecting them. This has a negative impact on the possibility of their return. Too often we follow our greeting of newcomers abruptly with paperwork (visitor information forms) and then being singled out in front of the class. This can border on terrifying for the newcomer! We must strive to treat newcomers as welcome guests in our class, showing genuine hospitality and care. Guests come back. Visitors seldom do.

**7. We seldom have a plan for welcoming guests which all but ensures failure.** Everyone’s responsibility is typically no one’s responsibility. We rationalize by thinking: “Oh, someone will go talk to them”. Often the teacher of the class or the pastor of the church will talk to them, but that is all. Newcomers expect the teacher of a class or the pastor of the church to be friendly. That is part of their job. What they are looking for is the genuine interest the average person will take in them. Each class must have a plan in place for greeting guests. Critics of having a plan for making people feel welcome will argue that it makes welcoming guests appear manufactured. This is not necessarily true. Even at its worst, a planned out greeting communicates that we cared enough about you to make an effort. This is far better than just *winging it* and hoping for the best. Plan for someone in your class to take the lead in welcoming people. Utilize people that are naturally friendly and have a gift of hospitality.

Give them training in how to welcome people properly. Make people feel at home as best you can without singling them out. This is the best practice for getting guests to hopefully return.

Hopefully you will find these suggestions thought provoking. I recommend you forward them on to some of the key leaders in your class. You may want to sit down with them and critically evaluate how your class does in this area. If you would like an outside person to visit your class and then provide feedback, let me know. I will arrange it for you. Whatever you do, make sure you have a plan in place to make people feel welcome in your class. It would be a shame if someone missed out on eternity because we were not friendly.

### Other Great Resources on the Subject:

*How friendly is your church?*

<http://resource.saltlight.org/evangelism/friendlychurch>

*10 Sunday School Ideas for Welcoming Guests*

<http://www1.kybaptist.org/kbc/blogs/ssrb.nsf/dx/ten-ideas-for-welcoming-guests>

*Helping Sunday School Guests FEEL Welcome.*

<http://www1.kybaptist.org/kbc/blogs/ssrb.nsf/dx/01302007113214AMWEBME9.htm>

*What to Say to a Sunday School Guest*

<http://www1.kybaptist.org/kbc/blogs/ssrb.nsf/dx/12042008100311AMWEBKNJ.htm>

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