

# First Time Visitor

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I've often been a guest speaker at a new church. It can be a little awkward at first, until someone realizes who you are. Then they bring you to the host or pastor, put a label mic on your collar, and the dynamic changes in the room; now you are a special guest, a person of influence. But visiting a congregation as a stranger, a regular guy, is altogether different. It's terrible. In fact, if you want to make your congregation more inviting, try visiting a different church and be reminded how difficult it is to be the stranger. A while ago I did just that, and the experience helped me fully understand why most people don't even attempt it, and admiring of any who try.

It was Sunday morning a few years ago and my wife and I were determined to try out a church in the new little town we had moved to. The Yellow Pages (like I said, a few years ago!) are a terrible way to select a church, but when first entering a town, it is the ready alternative. Only one of the churches that sounded "like us" gave the time of their worship service, so we decided to give it a try. We looked at the map in front of the phone book, located the street, and launched out, driving through a light rain shower. Wouldn't you know it, when we arrived at the address, the church was nowhere to be found. Another church closure? Wrong address?

Fortunately I had the phone book in the car, so we looked up another church we had circled as a possibility, Northwest Community Church. We found the building easily,

but honestly it looked very unwelcoming. There was no way to look through glass doors to see what it was like inside; no way to step inside and change your mind if you didn't like the feel or smell—just a cold, hard door beyond which we did not have any idea what awaited us. In our insecurity, it seemed as if there might be tigers inside, waiting to devour us.

Because this was our second attempt to find a church that morning, we were now late. We opened the door and saw the tigers, all 16 of them, craning their heads to look at us as we opened the creaky door. We slipped into the back row, feeling we had made a huge mistake. The man sitting at the piano had one of those hairstyles where a bald spot is covered by a swooping comb-over, glued down with Brylcreem. Turns out he was the pastor, a veritable one-man show, who led the hymns, read the Scripture, and preached the sermon—everything but passing the offering plate.

Speaking of hymns, it was “Favorites Sunday,” the day when anyone could suggest a favorite song they wanted the group to sing. Some of the ancient selections were known by no one, including the person suggesting it.

The sanctuary would have seated 100 people, so the 18 of us rattled around, conspicuously few. There were tie rods across the whole ceiling, holding together a frail building that might have cracked if the nearby train rumbled past too heavily. There were large oak doors that could be folded back to expose overflow seating. It reminded me so much of my first pastorate in Coalinga—a few people unable to use the full potential of their facility.

I wondered to myself, *Why does such a church exist? What is it accomplishing in the grand scheme of the kingdom?*

I mean, when pastor Al opened up the service for prayer requests, there was silence. Finally, a portly lady stood in the front, not to share a prayer need but to announce an upcoming baby shower.

I could tell during the sermon that the pastor was frequently scanning the congregants, making sure to make a quick visual check of how we, the only visitors, were taking the experience. I know we were the only visitors because when the usher passed the plate for the offering he put it in front of everyone but us.

Being a church consultant I had privately reached the judgment that such a church should close its doors and give the real estate over for some useful purpose.

## Except for one thing.

She was maybe in her teens, and socially awkward. Everyone knew her. She was uninhibited about adding an “amen” after a prayer, not shy about reading the Lord’s Prayer with a little extra volume. But no one seemed to mind. When it was time to suggest favorite hymns, Naomi chimed in with number 254 or something; it turned out to be “Silent Night” despite the fact that Christmas was months away.

I thought of the thousands of such churches across the landscape of America. Struggling to keep open the doors, many without a pastor to call their own.

It was started 100 years ago or so, with great vision. Twenty-five years ago it was in its prime. The pews were then full on Sunday mornings. It was known as one of the going

churches in town. The place to be. Now, it is silent. Still. One of the prayer requests spoke volumes about the church; it was about the people who wrote graffiti on the outside of the building during the week. Thank God the vandals only used pencil. What had happened in 25 years? What would the founders think of their dream now?

I don't know. Part of me suggests it was time to shut the doors. What is the particular calling of that church? What purpose does God yet have for it in His grand scheme? I stab at answers but find none.

Or maybe one. If there are a thousand such churches across America, or a hundred thousand, I'll bet there is at least one Naomi in each one of them. One person who has found a place to be herself, to find acceptance, to have a place, a safe place. In a larger "going" church, she might survive, but only if she were someone's project. Her peers would secretly mock her. But here at Northwest Community, she was part of the group. She was one of the 16.

The final hymn was laboriously sung, but my ears picked out the exultant voice of a young girl who sang with the confidence of one who belonged:

*God be with you til we meet again, by his counsels guide, uphold you.  
With his sheep securely fold you, God be with you til we meet again.  
Till we meet, Til we meet, Til we meet at Jesus' feet.  
Til we meet, Til we meet, God be with you til we meet again.*

I don't know the future of the scores of Northwest Community Churches. Maybe they'll be bought out and turned into Bahai cultural centers or Muslim community clubs. Maybe a young pastor will come along and fuel the fire of the saints, swelling the numbers for a while until he gets a call to a bigger church. But for now, Northwest is there, hanging

on, providing a place for a few who don't prefer a snazzy church with a program for every age and stage.

As for my wife and I, we did not return to that congregation. We found a church in town that was a little less taxing and fellowshiped for the few months we lived there. But our visit taught me a lesson that helps me to this day. Wherever you find a caring fellowship with a Naomi, there you will find the loving presence of Jesus.