

When does a church (building) first feel strange?

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The question is one my first boss liked to ask at staff meetings. It's important to say he was asking through the perspective of visitors. First-timers or travelers. Equally for people who would come to make the church their home and those who would never visit town again. For all of these, on a Sunday, when does a church first feel strange?

"When you go up to communion," one of us offered one time. "Our ushers are great, but that's a cumbersome moment. Sometimes even I forget which way to go up ... and equally which way to go back to my pew."

Someone else chimed in: "*Before* communion! In the narthex. You walk through a door into another room, dimly lit, and there are people to greet you, but they kind of surprise you. And usually there's a turn to make, once you've got your bearings. Come to think of it, our narthex has grown just a little untidy."

"You know, we ask a lot of anyone *anytime* we ask them to walk into a space they can't see beforehand," another one agreed.

"What about before *that*?" he asked.

"What? *Parking*? Finding the door?"

"There are some churches that label the parking spots," he offered. "Communicating that certain spots are for the existing members."

"Sure, just like pews. You try to find a free spot, then you're left to wonder if the spot wasn't free because it was being saved for (or belonged to) someone else."

My boss never said it in these meetings, but he made a habit of parking a block and a half away on Sunday mornings.

"And doors," one of us continued. "Unlocked is a given, glass would be good, and opened is best!" At this, I remembered the clergy lunches I'd attended in my convocation, at various churches. Many times I'd felt like Joshua circling the walls of a strong city, searching unsuccessfully for an unlocked door through which to enter.

"And signs," the boss added. "Not *just* signs, but signs to things that are important to a person visiting for the first time. What are those things?"

We started thinking. The signs would come, though admittedly not quickly. The signs were already important, however; clear to all of us around the table that day was the reality that the signs had already begun their main work—daily inviting us to look through the eyes of the others; daily reminding *us*, the regulars, that we didn't exist for ourselves.

Over time, we would realize that it would be hard to implement the physical changes our conversation had raised without becoming, ourselves, reoriented—relationally and personally—to the neighbors, strangers, and friends around us. In other words, imagining our church for others was to simultaneously imagine a space of conversion for ourselves with respect to the gospel's call to serve, proclaim, and love.

One of us attempted a summary: "It's about honesty and seeing the truth about ourselves—learning to see yourself first as a neighbor, through the eyes of your neighbor. Understanding and reevaluating your place in your neighborhood, being present to our neighbors in intentional ways.

"And inviting them into a shared future, with us, imagined from their perspective."

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