



Overcoming Fear

Approximately 3.2 million Americans suffer from agoraphobia. That word comes from two Greek words. The *agora* was the city gathering place, often serving as a public market. *Phobia* is the Greek word for fear. So there is a large percentage of Americans who are afraid of being in crowds.

It is a phobia probably many of us can relate to. You might not understand why someone is so afraid of a little spider, but you can understand why people might feel uncomfortable in a crowd. The thought of trying to “break into” a strange group of people perhaps makes you at least a little nervous, if not actually afraid.

Understand then that **it is an act of courage for someone to visit your church.**

A visitor drives onto your property, and he might not know anyone. He maybe isn't sure where he is supposed to go. When he gets there and sits down for worship, there is a procedure that is entirely foreign to him. Music starts playing and, without any encouragement, people start to sing. Sometimes the people stand, though no one has asked them to! This is all new to this visitor, and he is not certain he is doing things right. He wonders if it is painfully obvious to everyone that he is an outsider... wonders if he is attracting attention.

Put yourself into the mind of the worship visitor. Imagine *you* were the one walking into a new church. You know no one. What types of things might you be nervous about? What would you like to know? Trying to empathize with your worship visitors will make you much better at welcoming them.

Now, that thought might make you a bit nervous. Going up to a complete stranger and starting a conversation is not something most of us do on a regular basis. That is why on Sunday morning you will have a conversation with people you know, but those you don't know will only get a quick “hello” or “good morning.”

Visiting with people we *don't* know requires us to step outside our comfort zone. It takes effort and time. It may very well require us to overcome some fear. But if we refuse to do so, understand that the likelihood of guests being pulled into our church is greatly diminished. Some experts on outreach will tell you that many visitors decide within the first seven seconds whether they are going to attend a church again. What has to happen in those first seven seconds? Someone needs to talk to them. Otherwise, that visitor just feels unwelcome.

There is a percentage of you who might be scratching your heads and thinking, “Why would talking to a stranger make someone nervous? It is not that big a deal!” If you are thinking that, then you belong to the 11.2% of the population that are extroverts. If you are such a person — outgoing, highly social, easy-to-talk-to — do you understand what a valuable gift you have to offer your church? *You* need to be taking the lead in welcoming worship visitors, precisely because it comes naturally to you. Set the example! Show others that it really is not hard or scary to talk to strangers. Make that your unofficial “job” at church. On Sundays, your eyes are wide open, looking for visitors.

For the other 89 percent of you, how do you overcome your nervousness about talking to strangers? You believe Jesus when he says, “*Surely I am with you always*” (Matthew 28:20). As you approach that worship visitor, remember that Christ is right there with you, using you to share his love with someone who so desperately needs it.

And also remember, they are probably more nervous than you are.



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