

September 'Open House' Month



We often hear "God is in the details," but, you know, "Jesus is in the welcoming." September, declared by our bishops as United Methodist Open House Month, is an opportunity to emulate Jesus' truly welcoming spirit. To do so, each church member must intentionally recognize Christ in everyone—and remember that guests may well be looking for Christ in us. Those are great expectations to fulfill!

United Methodist Open House Month reinforces the promise of open hearts, open minds and doors made by the national television spots airing each September. These television invitations call on us to create a welcoming lifestyle in our churches—not hit-or-miss or come-and-go. A welcoming lifestyle is what we do, what we value and how we act all the time. Like a smile, it can be passed on—so let's get started!

These event and hospitality tips, some from United Methodist churches, can help your congregation make welcoming a lifestyle to be shared:

Community Worship Services—Plan worship services during the month to reach out to others in the community. In addition to a Sept. 11 memorial, services might be structured around the families and friends of HIV/AIDS patients, children's Sabbath, camp Sunday and a Heritage Day. Send out fliers, invitations and a pastoral letter to the community and advertise the events on the church sign.

--Four Towns Church
Mich.

Serve the Community Servants—Invite the community to an after-church luncheon to honor people that impact the community positively. A meal after a Sept. 11 memorial service could recognize the contributions of police officers and firefighters.

--Bell Buckle Church
Tenn.

End with a greeting—Move the greeting time to the end or near the end of the worship service to facilitate longer conversations with newcomers after the service.

Labor Day Services—Ask lay members to share information about their professions or how they came to the church and/or offer personal faith stories to acquaint newcomers with members more quickly.

A “Chili” Reception—Invite the whole town and anyone else interested in food and fellowship to an “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” chili supper (or get in a stew and make it a stew-and-cornbread meal) to let people know your church welcomes all.

--North Birdwell Lane Church
Texas

Comfort station—Seat families with children near the front, so the children can see what’s going on. Replace a few back rows of pews with rocking chairs for parents with children or older people who cannot sit in pews.

A “New Bread” Ministry—Follow up on first-time guests with gifts of fresh-baked bread. Place each loaf in a decorative bag with the tag: “Bread is known as a symbol of life. The _____ Church family gives this loaf as a gesture of hospitality, along with an invitation to share in the life of our congregation as we serve our Lord, The Bread of Life.” Include an information brochure. Deliver the bread and offer assistance, answer questions and invite the guests back.

--First Church
Texas

Hospitality Teams—Form hospitality teams and encourage team members to choose captains and names (for example, Awesome Accommodators, Blue Angels, Holy Helpers, Purple People Greeters). Suggest that they dress in an appropriate color (blue shirts for the “Blue Angels”). Provide multiple places for people to ask questions.

--Church of the Shepherd
St. Charles, Mo.

Diversity—Reflect your congregation’s ethnic and national diversity. Invite members to dress in their native attire and ask them to pray in their own languages, introduce songs or hymns from their native countries, or educate the congregation about religious traditions from their homelands.

--Belmont Church
Tenn.

Projection: Success—Use a projection screen inside the lobby to rotate a welcome message; locations of bathrooms, nursery and Sunday school rooms; adult Sunday school lesson titles and teachers’ names. If a screen is not possible, use a directional pole with information attached.

--Good Shepherd Church
Fla.

Front-porch Hospitality—Build an inside “front porch” to use as your welcome area. Add rocking chairs and a sign that says the “Way Inn” and offer refreshments while welcoming guests.

--Hillcrest Church
Tenn.

Eight Out for Four (small-group activity)—Have the church welcoming team organize nights out for groups of eight people, at least two of whom are newcomers. Designate individuals or couples as hosts to choose the first activity (dinner, sporting event, concert, etc.), to invite people to sign up and to ensure that each group includes new members or guests. Each group plans to go out together four times, with hosting duties and choice of activities rotating among the group members.

--Los Gatos Church
Boulder Creek, Calif.

Buttering Up Guests— Make apple butter during a church bazaar (or other time). Involve all ages in making and selling the product, but be sure to set aside enough to present each first-time guest or prospective member with a jar of homemade apple butter and a loaf of bread. Have two members make a short call to these people on Monday or Tuesday, give them the goodies and invite them to visit again.

--Arcadia Valley Church
Mo.

The BEA-ATTITUDES (with a little help from the Beatles)—Feature special music during the month, using, for example, Beatles tunes including *Eleanor Rigby* (loneliness); *Yesterday* (regrets); *Long & Winding Road* (life’s journey); *All You Need Is Love* (love). Plan dramatic presentations and sermon subjects around the themes.

--Church of the Shepherd
St. Charles, Mo.

Soul Café—Who says there's no such thing as a free lunch? Invite guests to a free luncheon after a Sunday morning worship service, with the guarantee that it will take no longer than a meal at a restaurant. "Salt" the gathering with church members, who will sit at various tables and interact with guests during the meal.

--Windcrest Church
Texas

Saturday Night Live—Stage a comedy dinner show, using church talent. Include a tour of the facilities and make sure newcomers are introduced to at least five other members.

Soup Sunday—Sponsor a community event to benefit a local charity selected by your outreach committee. Recruit judges (include local celebrities, if possible) to evaluate soups donated by church members and solicit donations for the charity in exchange for bowls of soup. Publicize the event and send invitations with a "Soup's On" theme.

--Wesley Church
Tenn.

Support Group Events— Attract both members and non-members by hosting six-week sessions of a cancer-support group or a weight-loss group led by professionals donating their services. Consider including a social hour.

Welcoming Weekends—Invite guests and/or newcomers to join you in a weekend full of fellowship and fun, emphasizing that they are "honored" guests. Begin Friday night with a free dinner, contemporary musical concert and introductions (don't forget name badges.) Begin Saturday with breakfast and a mini-Bible study. Arrange for theme-specific discussion groups throughout the day. Design special sessions for children; hold a picnic lunch with a storyteller; arrange for a devotion and special music to begin the afternoon together; allow time for guests to (optional) introduce themselves. Share joys and concerns, ending with voluntary prayer. End the day with an outside vespers service. Have members agree to pick up guests and bring them to Sunday's worship service and introduce them during the service.

Use the summer to plan your events and assemble your team. Ask your welcoming coordinator to head up your Open House event. Get everyone, including children and youth, involved.

Spruce up—paint, repair, weed, plant, wash, decorate, with special attention to nursery and children's areas.

Display—use bulletin boards, kiosks and/or a welcome center to highlight children's activities, educational programs, missions, etc., and to post welcome messages.

Check signs—remember that visitors' first message of compassionate caring might be received from outdoor and indoor signs.

Make it accessible—ensure that you can accommodate people with special physical needs.

Promote—use newsletter articles, worship bulletins (remember to consider a guest's point of view) and worship service announcements, hospitality sermon themes, Web sites, advertising, banners, voice mail messages and fliers.

Invite—post a list of prospective guests and ask each member to send an invitation with a personal note to five people on this list at least two weeks in advance of the event.

Open House products are available from the Igniting Ministry Web site or by calling the Igniting Ministry product store toll-free at (877) 281-6535. Products include special Open House Month postcards and Igniting Ministry note cards to issue personal invitations, customizable door hangers to convey your congregation's welcoming spirit, welcome mats to greet newcomers at their first point of entry, indoor banners to help tell your story, bulletin covers in a variety of designs and sizes, coffee mugs to wrap your thoughts for the day, pencils for pew racks and as giveaways, and a 10-minute overview video with the look and feel of the Igniting Ministry television commercials.

The Open House Web page at www.IgnitingMinistry.org/openhouse shares hospitality ideas from across the country. Please send yours along to benefit others who visit the Web page.