

A guest experience guide for your church

The First Seven Minutes.

Many guests decide if they are coming back between the parking lot and the pew. Here is how to make those minutes count.

For pastors, welcome teams, and guest experience coordinators.

Start here

You Have Seven Minutes

A first-time guest makes up their mind about your church in about seven minutes. Not during the sermon. Not during worship. Before the first song ends, they have usually decided whether they are coming back.

That means the most important journey in your church is not the one from the opening song to the closing prayer. It is the one from the car door to the seat. Most churches pour their energy into the back half of the morning, the preaching and the music, while the guest's decision is quietly forming in the front half.

Here is the good news: winning those seven minutes does not require a bigger budget, a better building, or more staff. It requires a plan, and a handful of people who understand why those minutes matter.

This guide is written for the people who own that plan: pastors, guest experience coordinators, and welcome team leaders. Each page carries one idea you can act on, short enough to read aloud in a team huddle. At the end you will find a checklist and discussion questions built for exactly that.

The insights and quotes throughout are taken from an episode of the **Build the Church podcast** featuring **Pastor Dustin Dozier**, teaching pastor and director of next steps at Upstate Church, a ten-location church in South Carolina reaching nearly 6,000 people each week, along with other Build the Church resources on guest experience and connection.

Connection Is Discipleship

Dustin's passion for connection was born in a hard season. Coming out of COVID, his campus was good at gathering people on Sunday mornings, but there was little happening after that. No small group connection. No deep, meaningful relationships. People were attending church without belonging to the body of Christ.

Sound familiar? We live in the most connected generation in human history, and yet people are more isolated, more anxious, and more skeptical than ever. Church attendance now averages about once a month for the typical attender. Guests check you out online before they ever give you a Sunday, and when they finally show up, they are deciding fast whether your church is an event to attend or a community to join.

"Most growth problems are not outreach problems. They are connection problems."

PASTOR DUSTIN DOZIER

That is why connection cannot be a program your church runs or a department someone else owns. Connection is discipleship. You cannot disciple a stranger, and a guest who is never known never becomes a disciple.

And it has to start the moment a guest's tires hit your parking lot. The rest of this guide is about making that happen, one touch point at a time.

Walk a Mile in Your Guests' Shoes

Before you build a system, you need a perspective shift. Most church leaders see their church through an insider's lens. You know where everything is, what every phrase means, and what happens next in the service. Your guests know none of it.

What makes sense to you may not be clear to everyone else. The traditions, the lingo, the song everyone else seems to know: these land completely differently on someone walking in for the first time. Acknowledging that gap is the first step toward a church experience that reaches beyond the people you already have.

So put on the outsider's lens. New guests arrive with preconceptions, misunderstandings, and real uncertainty about whether they can trust you. Answer that uncertainty by over-communicating: clear signage, a simple worship guide, and hosts whose hospitality is genuine rather than assigned.

And remember that most first-time guests do not want to be singled out. They want to stay anonymous at first, watching quietly while they decide whether your church is safe. Honor that. Give them low-pressure ways to identify themselves when they are ready, like a connection card or a next steps area, instead of a public spotlight.

This is ultimately about serving. Like love languages, effort without understanding does not land. Do not ask guests to come up to your culture. Come down to them, see the morning through their eyes, and make the adjustments that help them take their next step toward Jesus.

Map the Journey: Five Touch Points

If a guest decides in seven minutes, then walk their actual path this Sunday: out of the car, across the lot, through the doors, into the room, into a seat. What do they see? Who speaks to them? Where are they alone?

Dustin builds that journey around a connections team covering five touch points:

- **People in the parking lot**
- **People at the front doors**
- **People holding the worship room doors**
- **People inside helping guests find a seat**
- **A next steps area that can answer questions**

"It's not just friendly people. Every church thinks it's a friendly church."

PASTOR DUSTIN DOZIER

The team that covers these five points is a team of quality volunteers who love your church, love the mission, and understand why the first seven minutes matter. That makes this team as strategic as your worship team, so recruit for it just as intentionally. Warmth is a gifting; find your people who have it.

The next four pages walk through each touch point and what the person standing there should actually do.

The Parking Lot and the Front Doors

1. The parking lot. Connection starts before your building does. A wave and a "good morning" in the parking lot says "we saw you coming" before a guest ever reaches a door. It is the difference between arriving at an event and being received by a community.

Make it practical: is guest parking obvious? Is someone actually outside, in the weather, when guests arrive? A first-time guest should meet a warm face within seconds of leaving their car, not minutes.

2. The front doors. This person is not just a door-holder. They are someone who loves your church, spots new faces, and makes the first hello feel easy. A held door is politeness. A warm greeting with eye contact is welcome.

Choose people with open-faced warmth and initiative for this post. The front door sets the emotional temperature for everything a guest experiences inside, and as Dustin likes to say, you do not want Eeyore at the front door.

Huddle tip: assign these posts by name every Sunday. An empty post is not a small miss. It is a guest who walked from their car to your worship room without a single person acknowledging they exist.

The Worship Room Doors and the Seats

3. The worship room doors. The moment before a guest walks into a room full of strangers is the most nervous moment of their morning, and it is part of preparing their hearts to receive. Put a warm face right there.

Equip that person with a worship guide and a connection card. A simple guide answers the questions guests will not ask out loud: how long is this, what happens next, where do my kids go. A card gives them a private, low-pressure way to say "I'm new" when they are ready.

4. Helping guests find a seat. New people pause and look around. Have someone inside ready to catch that pause and say, "Come sit over here." Nobody should stand alone in an aisle wondering where they are allowed to sit.

Train your ushers as part of your connection team, not just as logistics. Moving people efficiently is a task. Helping a nervous family land softly is a ministry.

Both of these touch points do the same job: they lower the temperature. A guest who arrives calm and cared for walks into worship ready to actually receive it.

Touch point 5

A Next Steps Area

After the service, your guests have questions. Where do the kids check in next week? How do I get into a group? Who do I talk to about serving? If there is no obvious place to ask, most guests will not ask. They will just leave.

You do not need to be a mega-church to have a next steps area. A table, a clear sign, and one informed person is enough. A clear spot where guests can get information and find out about next steps is vital for every church, at every size.

The key word is informed. Staff it with people who actually know the answers: kids ministry, groups, serving teams, baptism, what happens next. A next steps area that cannot answer questions is just furniture.

Volunteers can absolutely carry this. At Upstate Church, the lead connections role on every campus is filled by a volunteer, not a staff member, and 408 connections volunteers now serve across their ten campuses. Start with one.

The next steps area also solves the anonymity problem from page four. It lets guests identify themselves on their own terms, when they are ready, instead of being called out from the stage.

Two Phrases That Change Everything

Guest experience systems succeed or fail at the sentence level. You can have every touch point covered and still lose a family to one shrug. So train your whole team, greeters and ushers and volunteers alike, on two phrases.

1. Never say "I don't know." When a guest asks a question your volunteer cannot answer, teach them to say instead:

"That's a great question. Let me find out."

PASTOR DUSTIN DOZIER

It is softer, it is proactive, and it takes ownership. "I don't know" ends a conversation. "Let me find out" starts a relationship.

2. Walk instead of point. When a family asks where kids check-in is, do not gesture at a building across the street. Walk them there. Along the way, learn their names, their kids' ages, and how they found you.

That short walk tells a nervous family, "they actually care." It costs your volunteer ninety seconds. It may be the single warmest thing that happens to that family all week.

Find Your Blind Spot

Here is an uncomfortable truth: you cannot evaluate your own guest experience. As a pastor or leader, you come in the back door and walk onto the platform. Everyone greets you warmly. You never experience your church the way a stranger does.

So bring in a secret shopper. Have someone with an unbiased opinion visit your church, park where guests park, walk through everything a first-timer would, and give you honest feedback.

An outsider will spot in one visit what you have missed for years: the greeter leaning against the wall, the welcome team huddled up talking only to each other, the sign that assumes you already know where you are going. These are not character flaws. They are things insiders stopped seeing a long time ago.

Receive the feedback as a gift, not a criticism. Fix what you can quickly. Small fixes compound: one clearer sign, one repositioned greeter, one covered post, and the whole journey warms up.

Then repeat it every season. Every church drifts back toward the insider lens over time. Walking a mile in your guests' shoes is not a one-time event. It is a habit.

Start with Three People

If all of this feels overwhelming, start with a number any church can manage: three volunteers. One in the parking lot. One at the main doors. One at the worship room doors.

That is exactly how Dustin's campus started. Today, Upstate Church has 408 connections volunteers across ten campuses. Nobody builds that in a weekend. Everybody can find three people by Sunday.

The results are hard to argue with. Before these systems, only 21 percent of Upstate's first-time guests ever returned. Today that number is over 64 percent. Guest retention roughly tripled.

Same gospel. Same preaching. The difference was a church that decided guests would be seen, known, and led to a clear next step, starting in the parking lot.

People can watch a show anywhere. What they cannot find anywhere is a community that notices them in the first seven minutes and refuses to let them stay a stranger. Be that community. Start with three.

For your team

The Huddle Guide

Bring this page to your next welcome team huddle. Run the checklist for this Sunday, then work through one or two questions together.

This Sunday's checklist

- ☐ Someone is in the parking lot when guests arrive
- ☐ Front doors are staffed with warm, watchful greeters
- ☐ Worship room doors have a host with guides and connection cards
- ☐ Someone inside is ready to help guests find a seat
- ☐ The next steps area is staffed by people who know the answers
- ☐ Everyone is trained: "That's a great question. Let me find out."
- ☐ Everyone walks with guests instead of pointing

Questions for the team

- 1. Walk a first-time guest's path in your mind, car door to seat. Where is the first gap?
- 2. Which of the five touch points is our strongest today? Which is our weakest?
- 3. Who could be our secret shopper this month, and who will invite them?
- 4. What insider language or signage would confuse someone here for the first time?
- 5. Who are the next three people we should invite onto this team?

Credits

Thank You

This guide is taken from the **Build the Church podcast** episode "Building Connection Systems That Grow Your Church" with **Pastor Dustin Dozier**, teaching pastor and director of next steps at Upstate Church and founder of The Connected Church Co. Dustin is the author of **The Connected Church**, and offers a free connection audit for churches at **theconnectedchurch.com**. We are grateful for his generosity in sharing what his team has learned.

Additional material is drawn from Build the Church resources on guest experience, including the companion article at buildthe.church, and "Walk a Mile in Your Guests' Shoes," adapted from an article Josh Roberie wrote for the Association of Related Churches (ARC).

You are free to print this guide and share it with your team. For more free resources for pastors and church leaders, visit **buildthe.church**.

Help every guest find their place on a team.

This resource is powered by YourTeam.church, a digital assessment platform that helps people in your church discover their design and find their place on a team. It is a simple next step for the guests your team just connected with.

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