

## 7 things to remember when hosting a guest preacher

November 13, 2014

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You know when someone invites you for dinner and, from the moment you arrive, you feel thoroughly welcomed and properly hosted? I don't mean stiff-but-proper Martha Stewart style hosting. I mean the kind of hosting that seems both effortless and personal, as if they've been waiting all along for you to show up.

Preaching at someone else's church should be more like this.

It's often overlooked, but the difference between a pastor and church who take their hosting seriously and those who don't is stark. Our churches have been focusing more and more on how to invite and receive visitors, pushing ourselves to see properties, procedures, and liturgies through the eyes of strangers. As someone who is often invited to preach at other churches, it occurs to me we might spend a little time considering how to invite and host guest preachers, too.

**Be specific when you extend the invitation to preach.** Don't assume the guest preacher will know you have three services or that since it's the fifth Sunday worship will be in a different location. Ask her to preach on a certain date and name all times and locations at the time you make the invitation.

**Know what you're asking — and ask for it.** Take a thorough look at your order of worship and decide whether you will have the guest preacher do everything you normally do or whether you will ask congregation members to take on some parts of the service. If you want the guest preacher to choose hymns, tell her this and tell her when you'll need to know these in order to produce the bulletin. If you expect the guest preacher to also preach a children's sermon, ask her. You forgetting to ask the guest preacher about the children's sermon does not mean she should have to create one during the introit.

**If you as the church pastor won't be there, designate someone from the congregation to host that day.** If you are arranging this so you can be out of town, be sure you ask a congregation member to be on hand throughout the morning to meet the guest preacher when she arrives. Give the parishioner and the guest preacher each other's contact info in advance, in case of emergency or trouble along the route.

**If your church does not have a bathroom, make this abundantly clear.** I'm not kidding. I was once invited to preach at a charge more than an hour away from my home in a rural part of our district. When I arrived at the first church, having enjoyed a full cup of coffee along the way, I was met with the sad truth that there was no bathroom — not even an outhouse — at this church. This was unwelcome news and that moment was the first I'd heard of it.

**Have a secure location for the guest preacher to stash things during the worship service.** The carrying bag her robe comes in, extra notes, Bible, car keys, purse, etc. I happen to think this is a hosting courtesy to all guest preachers but it's especially needed for female guests, many of whom carry purses and don't want to leave them down the hall in the unlocked children's classroom (or carry them into worship). Be sure to make time for the guest preacher to access her belongings between services. Whomever is hosting that day should have a key or access code.

**Give the guest preacher a few moments alone.** She may not take you up on it, but offer this. Take her to the place she can store her belongings and let her know when she needs to be ready to process into worship. Then let her know you'll be back a few minutes before then to collect her. If yours is a busy church with multiple services or if yours is one church on a charge and she's been traveling all morning, these solitary moments can help center her before the next thing.

**Have a cup of water ready at the pulpit.** Your guest preacher may want water before this, but at the very least prepare this cup and let her know it's there for her. Don't make her guess how long that cup's been sitting there and who else has been sipping from it.

We Christians like to talk about hospitality and its extravagance but sometimes we overlook the ordinary, thoughtful, basic elements of hosting. Look over this list and you won't see deep theological arguments. I'm talking about bathrooms and a cup of cold water — because this is where it starts, always. We welcome the stranger as a brother or sister who's been traveling a dusty road and might need a pit stop or a place to gather her thoughts before she joins you for worship.