



## **Write Before Christmas**

A Year-End Invitation for Connecting Church Guests  
*A Travel Free Learning Article*

By

**Gary Straub**

Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership

Voice: 502.320.4336 Email: [GStraub@TheColumbiaPartnership.org](mailto:GStraub@TheColumbiaPartnership.org)

Web Site: [www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org](http://www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org)

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As Thanksgiving approaches, your congregation may have a lot for which thanksgiving is due. It doesn't take long to assess all the good reasons that imaginative ministries were launched on a shoestring, hurting families quietly helped, and audacious mission project finished in the black because generous volunteers gave even more than time and talent. Most all of the ministry numbers that measure affectivity are showing up on the hallelujah side of the ledger, except one: additions.

While there is a steady flow of first time guests and an astonishing percentage of returning guests, year-end approaches with no appropriate tools or strategy for gathering up these potential commitments in a simple, personal, and meaningful way. Many congregations have an identifiable group of folks who continue to attend worship, participate in activities, and to all appearances seem quite interested in the congregation but haven't yet joined. Here is a simple, straight-forward approach to the matter: ask!

For the past decade, I have been writing a Christmas letter to all second time or returning guests who continue to indicate interest. I prepare the list in conversation and prayer with those active in our Connect ministry. Each year this letter is mailed out the week after Thanksgiving and basically revolves around a coming home for Christmas theme. In a positive and appreciative spirit, I simply invite them to consider making their obvious interest into a commitment and provide a response card with a sealed envelope addressed to me.

I take the time to hand write everything: address, return information, greeting, date, and signature. While this is labor intensive, and I have to write slow because my handwriting is nearly illegible, I have taken this on as a personal spiritual practice because it allows me time to pray for the person, their family and circumstances and then scrawl a thoughtful and personal P.S. across the bottom of the letter.

I try to keep the tone warm and with a touch of humor, make a simple ask and offer a very specific way for them to respond. I have sent these Advent letters out in six different interim settings for a decade and have yet to encounter a negative response. Part of that may be that folks are still generally reluctant to tell a minister to buzz off! I get a lot of wisecracks about my handwriting skills, but the best part is how the letter creates an occasion that builds a bridge for deeper conversation.

I have been stopped on the street, emailed, hailed in grocery stores, cornered at coffee time, invited to lunch, asked to drop by the house, and called to be told "Yes, and thank you for asking! People appreciate the fact that you noticed, took the time to reach out and were willing to offer them a friendly nudge.

Please understand: I am not saying this is some kind of loaves and fishes miracle method. But as I recall the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus still had to assign someone clean-up duty. This letter is simply a

lesson in how to use a basket to gather up leftovers. After all, the remainders are still just as much a miracle as the first feeding!

By the way, I also have a similar letter for members who are now attending infrequently. I gladly share this letter with you.

### **Important Things to Know**



Gary Straub is a Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership. He is a Church Leadership Coach and Church Transformation Consultant as a member of the Transforming Congregations Team. He is available for speaking, consultation and coaching with church leaders and congregations.

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