

**Alice Drive’s Welcome Ministry Shifts from “What” to “Why”**

Alice Drive Baptist Church members have welcomed visitors to Sunday worship and at key locations around the church for years. There have been sanctuary “hosts” and a coffee station, too. First Impressions Director Sarah Jones says that over the last year some key changes to the way visitors are welcomed has made a huge difference in how her church sees and understands the ministry.

“Before I was doing the ‘what’ for greeting visitors, but now I have the ‘why.’ A first-time guest coming onto campus may be nervous, skeptical or scared. Genuinely welcoming someone to church is what Jesus would do,” she says.

Located near a military base in Sumter, Alice Drive is a church with roots in the community for 65 years and its current pastor, Clay Smith, has been there for 25 years. It opened a second location in a local elementary school out of its vision to reach unchurched people living in underserved areas. Today Alice Drive averages about 1,500 people on Sundays and sees a regular flow of visitors, which is why First Impressions is a vital ministry to its members and staff.

“It’s good to have someone whose sole focus is to keep an eye on the front of the house. Churches assume they are welcoming and that members will naturally greet people. Unless you’re intentional about it, that’s not going to happen,” says Alice Drive Creative Pastor Mandy Easton.

“We know that within the first 10 minutes, before the music has started or the pastor has said the first word in a service, that new guests have formed an opinion about our church,” Sarah adds.

Sarah says Thom Rainer’s book “Becoming a Welcoming Church” kick started her church’s transition to having an intentional welcome ministry. Since starting her position in 2018, Sarah has gathered new resources, ideas and connections through a welcome ministry social media page. There she was introduced to Mary Ann Sibley’s training for First Impressions, which provided a light bulb moment of understanding.

“Mary Ann says a church knows the ‘what’ and hopefully the ‘why’ of welcome ministry, but she asks ‘who’ are you doing it for? This struck me because I have an unchurched family member – he’s my ‘who.’ Even though he’s not coming to my church, someone’s brother is. I want to be there to welcome them and make sure they’re seen and loved. That’s why I do First Impressions,” Sarah shares.

The team holds Sunday morning “huddles” which remind volunteers of their important role on the team and as a key component of a visitor’s overall experience in worship that day. Sarah connects weekly through a social media page to communicate encouragement, announcements and updates. The team also gathers over a meal ahead of Christmas and Easter Sundays, when extra visitors are expected. Potential First Impressions volunteers can try it out by serving one Sunday then meet with Sarah to gauge their interest.

About 100 people currently serve on the Alice Drive First Impressions team in the parking lots, at the doors, coffee station, key locations around the church campus and as section hosts in the worship center. It has become a cross-generational ministry, something Sarah encourages so that younger people can learn that serving is fun.

“Folks say they’re encouraged to see our youth as door greeters. It’s a cool thing to watch families get excited about being a part of an inviting church,” Mandy says.

First Impressions spurred some new ideas for the Sunday morning experience, too. Sarah noticed that a long counter in the welcome area reminded her of a hotel lobby, making the experience seem transactional. To be more welcoming they updated the counter and volunteers were positioned out front. The sanctuary pews are physically grouped in sections, so members who regularly sit in each area were identified to become hosts who welcome all new people sitting in those sections. They also changed the coffee station.

“We used to have a self-serve location off to the side. We created two coffee counters, moved it to a larger space and changed the type of cups we used to make it feel special. Now people can talk and interact with the coffee hosts. A few simple changes have made a big difference,” Sarah explains.

For her part, Mandy says Alice Drive staff members have embraced First Impressions and will participate in vision training soon.

“I’m seeing a revival of people wanting to serve and take ownership in their church, not just be fed from church. I’ve noticed this in our worship and with families serving through First Impressions. Our church treats this as a ministry, not a task to check off each Sunday.”