

WHERE COMMUNITY STARTS NOW

Embracing the New Digital Frontier

A practical guide to digital hospitality, one-to-one connection, frictionless next steps, and the new roads people travel toward faith and community.

"Technology is not the ministry. Technology is the road that can carry ministry to a person before they ever enter the room."

MARC ESTES

MARC ESTES

President / CEO / Co-Founder, VisitorReach

Community moved before the church did.

The opportunity in front of us is not primarily technological. It is pastoral.

I have spent most of my life inside the local church. I love the Church, and I still believe the local church is God's great hope-filled community in a fractured world. But love for the Church requires enough honesty to admit when the world around us has changed faster than our ministry systems have.

People now search, compare, ask, watch, read, and decide from a device in their hand. Many will encounter our church online before they ever encounter a greeter, a worship team, or a sermon. That does not make the screen sacred. It makes the road important.

My prayer is that this guide helps you see the moment clearly, remove unnecessary barriers, and build a pathway that is easier to find, safer to approach, faster to respond, and more personal long before the parking lot.



"Understand the times... and know what to do."

1 CHRONICLES 12:32

THE CONVICTION

The gospel has not changed. The mission has not changed. The road people travel to find us has.

This eBook follows the workshop in sequence: understand the cultural shift, recognize the five digital doors, respond with speed and soul, remove friction, and build a 30-day reset your team can actually execute.

Contents

Built to follow the workshop - from cultural shift to practical action.

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"The problem is not always spiritual hunger. Sometimes the problem is the distance between spiritual hunger and a church door."

MARC ESTES

UNDERSTAND THE SHIFT

Before we build strategy, we have to understand how people now search, trust, decide, and approach community.

"Hospitality starts where curiosity starts. And today, curiosity usually starts on a phone."

UNDERSTAND

Spiritually curious. Institutionally cautious.

The tension is not evidence of a closed mission field. It is evidence that the pathway into community has changed.

74%

of U.S. adults said they want to grow spiritually.¹

44%

said they are more open to God than before the pandemic.¹

91%

of U.S. adults owned a smartphone in Pew's 2025 survey.²

A spiritually curious person can still be cautious about institutions, unfamiliar rooms, or the social risk of walking into a church alone. That is why the first leadership question is no longer only, "How do we get them to come?" It is also, "How do we meet them while they are still deciding whether they can trust us?"

"The problem is not always spiritual hunger. Sometimes the problem is the distance between spiritual hunger and a church door."

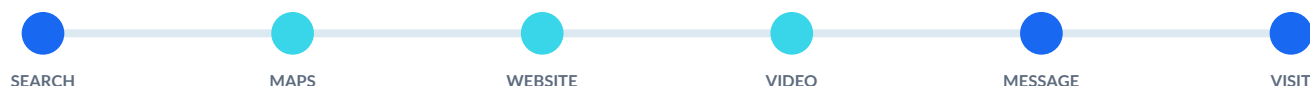
MARC ESTES

SOURCE INTEGRITY NOTE

The workshop deck includes several widely circulated church-marketing figures about online research and service previewing. Public methodology is not consistently disclosed, so this publication does not present those figures as nationally representative benchmarks. The ministry implication is preserved: people increasingly preview before they participate.

Trust is taking longer to build.

People often revisit before they risk a visit.



VISITORREACH FIELD OBSERVATION

Before the pandemic, church leaders often spoke of 3-5 meaningful connection points before attendance. In VisitorReach field experience, that path can now look more like 12-15 touches for many people. This is not a universal formula; it is a leadership signal that courage can form across repeated digital and human interactions.³

STORY FROM THE ROAD

SHE HAD BEEN ATTENDING FOR A YEAR

Sophia was battling terminal cancer and had not physically attended church for more than a year. Late one night, a local church social post offered hope and prayer. A team began sending Scripture, encouragement, and simple reminders that God had not forgotten her. She never replied - but she read every message and watched services from bed. When she became strong enough to leave home, the first place she wanted to go was the church that had already become family. The physical front door mattered. It simply was not the first door.⁴

"Craig was standing at the physical front door, but Sophia had already walked through the real front door dozens of times."

MARC ESTES

The mission has not changed. The roads have.

Infrastructure is never the gospel. But God has always used roads to move people, ideas, and mission.

A TIMELESS MISSIONARY PRINCIPLE

Paul did not sit in one room and wait for everyone to find him. He moved through synagogues, marketplaces, lecture halls, homes, and public squares. Rome built roads for empire and commerce; Paul saw a road and recognized gospel.

"Paul did not worship the road. He used the road. We should do the same."

MARC ESTES

01

SEARCH

find

02

MAPS

locate

03

SOCIAL

preview

04

TEXT

talk

05

AI

ask

The question is not whether these roads are spiritual. Roads are roads. The question is what we are willing to carry on them.

LEADERSHIP LENS

Do not confuse what worked with what is sacred. The gospel is sacred. Your communication plan is not. The church remains embodied; digital ministry simply helps people find the courage to move toward embodied community.

FIVE DOORS OPEN 24/7

Stop thinking about one digital front door. Think about five: search, maps, social, messaging, and voice + AI.

"If the doors are clear, accurate, warm, and connected to a real person, the rest of your digital strategy gets much easier."

FIVE DOORS

Door One: Search

Private curiosity becomes visible behavior.

SEARCH

MAPS

SOCIAL

MESSAGE

VOICE + AI

People type questions they may not be ready to ask another human being yet: "How do I forgive?" "Is God mad at me?" "Church near me." "Prayer for anxiety." "How do I start over?" Search is not a theological library for most people. It is often a private place to survive Tuesday night.

"Findability is a form of hospitality."

MARC ESTES

THE 10-SECOND WEBSITE TEST

A newcomer should be able to answer four things almost immediately: Who are you? Where are you? When do you meet? What should I do next? Put service times high. Make Plan Your Visit obvious. Remove insider language. Use real faces.

ASK THIS

Can I find you?

Is your church information consistent across search, maps, directories, social profiles, and your own website? Discoverability is the first layer of hospitality.

ASK THIS

Can I understand you?

Can a newcomer quickly understand service times, location, kids environments, beliefs, accessibility, and what a first visit will feel like?

Doors Two + Three: Maps, reviews, social + video

People evaluate location and tone before they trust the room.

2

DOOR TWO

Maps + Reviews

Google Maps can function like an usher while your office is closed. Verify the pin at the actual entrance, service times, phone number, photos, parking instructions, and kids information. Treat reviews like conversations in the foyer: thank people, respond with humility, and never argue with criticism.

3

DOOR THREE

Social + Video

Social is where people listen for your tone. They are asking: Are these people kind? Is this church real? Is Scripture central? Do they seem to like people? A real testimony filmed on a phone can sometimes do more trust work than a cinematic campaign because people are looking for emotional truth.

"A gracious response to a negative review can teach a prospective guest more about your culture than ten perfect reviews."

MARC ESTES

THE MINISTRY POINT

The best digital presence is not the one that looks the most expensive. It is the one that makes a hesitant person feel they can understand you, trust your tone, and imagine walking in.

Doors Four + Five: Messaging, voice + AI

Curiosity becomes conversation - and accuracy must travel everywhere.

DOOR FOUR

Messaging

Text lowers the social cost of first contact. It lets someone ask the next question without walking into a lobby full of strangers. A message is not a metric; it is a person tapping on the glass of the front door.

260,000+

people connected to local churches through VisitorReach strategy - company reported.⁵

DOOR FIVE

Voice + AI

People now ask Siri, Google, and AI tools to find, compare, and summarize churches. That makes accurate public information more important, not less. VisitorReach materials describe church visibility across 70+ online directories and platforms.⁶

"AI does not replace pastoral ministry. It increases the importance of clear pastoral ministry."

MARC ESTES

ASK THIS

Can I talk to you?

Do your digital channels offer a path to a real conversation, or do they only broadcast information?

ASK THIS

Will you remember me?

Once someone gives you a name, prayer request, or question, is there a system to follow up personally and consistently?

THE NEW COMMUNITY LANGUAGE

Texting is ordinary behavior. That is precisely why it can become a powerful bridge from private curiosity to personal ministry.

"Text is not the destination. Text can be the bridge. Meet people where they are willing to begin."

TEXT



We do not have to teach people a new channel.

Ordinary is often where ministry begins.

2.1T+

SMS and MMS messages were exchanged in the U.S. in 2023.⁷

67,000+

messages every second in CTIA's 2024 annual survey.⁷

A phone call from an unknown number can feel intrusive. Walking into a church lobby can feel risky. A text gives somebody a few seconds to breathe, think, edit, respond - or not respond. That can matter to a person who is ashamed, anxious, skeptical, grieving, or simply socially nervous.

A VISITORREACH-CITED SURVEY FIGURE

93% said they would share deep hurts by text

13% said face to face

This figure is publicly cited in a ChurchTechToday interview with Marc Estes and Kenny Jahng; the underlying survey methodology is not publicly available, so treat it as a directional ministry observation rather than a national benchmark.⁸

"People will sometimes type what they cannot yet say out loud. That is not an argument for keeping them behind a screen forever. It is an argument for meeting them where they are willing to begin."

MARC ESTES

When people reach out, the moment matters.

Fast care communicates: You mattered enough for us to notice.

~7x

more likely to qualify an online inquiry when contact was attempted within one hour versus one hour later.⁹

60x+

more likely than when the first contact attempt waited 24 hours or more.⁹

Those numbers come from historical business lead-response research, not church conversion research. The ministry principle is simpler: attention decays, anxiety grows, and a timely human response communicates care.

THE THREE-SENTENCE RESPONSE

1

Mirror with care

"I am so glad you asked. Safety matters to us, too."

2

Answer clearly

Give one useful answer or link. No essay.

3

Give a human name

"I am Alex. I will watch for you Sunday. Anything else I can answer tonight?"

"A warm response will always beat a polished response. Presence beats automation every time."

MARC ESTES

REMOVE THE FRICTION

Most churches do not have a heart problem here. They have a systems problem. Warm churches can accidentally feel cold online.

"Every digital touch is a person, not a metric."

FRICTION



Four ways a warm church can feel cold online.

Invisibility. Friction. Delay. Impersonality.

1

MISTAKE ONE

Invisible or inaccurate

A website can exist and still be invisible. Service times can conflict across platforms. The map pin can be wrong. Somebody must own the truth of your public information. A wrong service time online is the digital equivalent of locking the front door while the sign says, "Come on in."

2

MISTAKE TWO

Too much friction

We ask too much too soon. The guest did not wake up wanting to complete your CRM. Ask only for what you actually need to begin a relationship. Name. Mobile. Email if necessary. Make the next step easier than the hesitation.

3

MISTAKE THREE

Slow or no response

We celebrate the click and neglect the conversation. A prayer request sits in an inbox because nobody knew whose job it was. From the seeker side, silence does not feel like a workflow issue. It feels like, "They did not care."

4

MISTAKE FOUR

Sounding like a machine

AI and automation can help without surrendering your voice. People do not need religious robots with better punctuation. They need warmth, clarity, kindness, truth, and the sense that somebody is actually there.

Measure movement toward relationship and discipleship.

Likes can encourage. Movement changes lives.

01

CONVERSATIONS

02

PRAYER

03

PLANNED VISITS

04

FIRST-TIME GUESTS

05

SALVATIONS

06

BAPTISMS

07

GROUPS

08

NEXT STEPS

THE LIVESTREAM REALITY

91%

of churches surveyed by Pushpay in 2024 said they were livestreaming worship services.¹⁰

Adoption is no longer the primary question. The better question is whether your online presence has a pastoral pathway - a next step from watching to asking, from asking to talking, and from talking to belonging.

"Accurate enough to trust. Easy enough to use. Fast enough to feel present. Human enough to feel like church."

MARC ESTES

THE 30-DAY DIGITAL FRONT DOOR RESET

You do not need a million-dollar rebrand. You need ownership, clarity, disciplined moves, and a willingness to experience your church like a guest.

"Turn the porch light on. Clean the digital lobby. Train the greeters for the new road."

30 DAYS



Steps 1-3: See what a guest sees.

Before adding anything, remove confusion.

Walk the digital path like a guest

Search your church name. Search "church near me." Ask Siri. Check Maps. Visit the website on your phone. Watch a sermon clip with the sound off. Try every form. Write down every moment of friction - without defending it.

1

Fix the six public facts

Church name. Physical address. Phone. Service times. Primary website. Plan Your Visit. Start with your website, Google Business Profile, Apple Maps, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

2

Pass the ten-second homepage test

A first-time visitor should know where you are, when you meet, what the church feels like, and what to do next. Use real people. Put service times high. Make one next step obvious.

3

DO NOT DEFEND THE FRICTION

Feel the experience the way a newcomer feels it. The audit becomes useful when leaders stop explaining why the system works and start noticing where a stranger gets lost.

Steps 4-7: Build care, reduce friction, tell stories, measure movement.

Make the important doors bright, clear, and staffed.

Build fast care

4

Assign owners for messages, forms, and prayer requests. Decide what fast means. Use templates as a starting point, never as a substitute for listening. The first response needs warmth, an answer, a name, and one next step.

Create one-tap next steps

5

Put tap points where newcomers hesitate: lobby, kids check-in, seats, next steps, prayer, giving, and events. One context. One clear action. Technology should disappear so the next step becomes obvious.

Tell two short, true stories

6

Post one testimony and one "what to expect" video. Real face. Clear audio. Captions. Sixty seconds. One gentle invitation. Stories reduce uncertainty because they put a human face on the church.

Measure movement, not vanity

7

Track searches, map clicks, messages, prayer requests, planned visits, first replies, actual visits, and next steps. Invest more attention where digital doors are opening real conversations.

Appoint a weekly steward: 20 minutes every Monday to check hours, reviews, messages, links, and one current photo.

The 20-minute digital front door check.

A healthy digital lobby does not require a new department. It requires a name next to the responsibility.

01

ACCURACY

Are address, service times, phone, and key links correct?

02

DISCOVERABILITY

Can someone find us from search, maps, voice, and social?

03

CLARITY

Can a newcomer understand what Sunday feels like in seconds?

04

RESPONSE

Were messages and prayer requests answered with warmth?

05

FRICTION

Did any form, link, tap, or handoff create unnecessary steps?

06

STORY

Is there a current human story that shows what God is doing?

07

MOVEMENT

What moved from attention to conversation to community?

"The digital front door becomes healthy when someone owns it the same way someone owns the physical lobby."

MARC ESTES

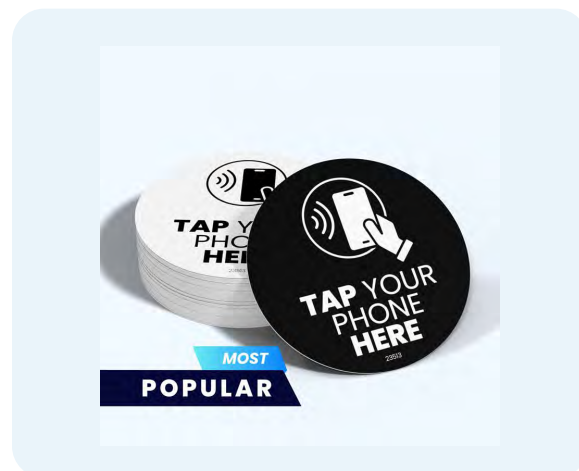
Make the next step easier than the hesitation.

Technology works best when context makes the action obvious.

Every extra step creates a decision: open the camera, find the code, aim correctly, wait for focus, click, re-enter information. None of those steps is impossible. But friction compounds. NFC allows a church to place the next step where the moment happens: a seat, kids check-in, a welcome space, a prayer station, giving, or an event.

"The miracle is not the tag. The miracle is the people. The tap simply made the introduction."

MARC ESTES



DESIGN THE TAP AROUND THE MOMENT

NEW HERE?

Tap to tell us how we can help.

PRAYER

Tap to share a prayer need.

GIVING

Tap to give - directly to the right destination.

EVENTS

Tap to register without hunting for the page.



RESOURCE

Explore VisitorTap

NFC connection tools, TapTree experiences, guest cards, giving, events, and ministry use cases.

Technology should serve a human pathway.

VisitorReach was built by pastors for pastors to help churches reach, connect, and assimilate people without losing the human touch.



01

DISCOVER

Be findable

Search, social, maps, voice, accurate listings.

02

ENGAGE

Invite a response

Create a reason to ask, pray, learn, or connect.

03

CONVERSE

Make it personal

Move quickly into two-way human conversation.

04

CONTINUE

Nurture the journey

Help people visit, return, belong, and take next steps.

"We are not trying to help churches become better advertisers. We are trying to help churches become more available to people already searching for hope."

MARC ESTES



RESOURCE

Explore VisitorReach

Digital outreach, local visibility, 1:1 SMS conversation, journeys, assimilation, coaching, and next-step tools.

RESOURCES TO KEEP BUILDING

Take the next step. Diagnose the gap. Equip your team. Reduce friction. Go deeper in the theology and practice of reaching people on the new road.

"The goal is not to win the internet. The goal is to help a neighbor find Jesus and find family."

RESOURCES



Measure what matters before you move.

Three practical starting points for leaders and teams.

RESOURCE

Church Reach Assessment

How effective is your church at reaching people? Scores six areas of outreach health and gives your team a focused place to improve. Free personalized report.



RESOURCE

Personal Reach Assessment

How are you engaging others with the Gospel? Evaluates five personal outreach areas so you can strengthen the habits behind a life of evangelism. Free personalized report.



RESOURCE

Digital Health Assessment

Evaluate the health of your digital front door: discoverability, clarity, pathways, response, and next-step readiness. Use it as a leadership conversation starter.



"Do not add another program until you know where people are disappearing from the path."

MARC ESTES

Keep learning. Keep leading.

Practical tools for the digital mission field.

RESOURCE



VisitorReach

Explore outreach, conversations, journeys, assimilation, coaching, and aiChurchTech.

RESOURCE



VisitorTap

Explore NFC tap products, TapTree experiences, guest connection, giving, events, and more.

RESOURCE



VisitorReach Blog

Dozens of practical articles on outreach strategy, church marketing, search, AI, digital ministry, leadership, and guest experience.

RESOURCE



Start a Conversation

Talk with the VisitorReach team about your church, your current outreach pathway, and where digital friction may be getting in the way.

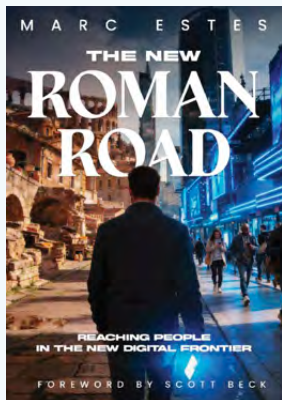
USE TECHNOLOGY. KEEP HUMANS RESPONSIBLE.

AI can assist with drafting, summarizing, FAQs, and repetitive administrative work. Humans remain responsible for doctrine, crisis escalation, confidential pastoral care, discernment, prayer, accountability, and relationship.

Human-in-the-loop is not a technical phrase. It is a ministry conviction.

Two books for leaders on the road.

Go deeper into the theology, compassion, and practice behind this workshop.



THE NEW ROMAN ROAD

Reaching People in the New Digital Frontier

A book-length exploration of one conviction: God has always used the infrastructure of an age to move the gospel, and our generation has been handed digital roads that reach people long before they enter a church building.



THE ROAD WE MUST TRAVEL AGAIN

Recovering the road of mercy, mission, and meaningful impact

A pastoral call for leaders to recover the compassionate, outward-moving road Jesus describes in the Good Samaritan - churches that do not just gather, but go; do not just speak, but serve.

RESOURCE



More from Marc Estes

Books, articles, leadership resources, and current writing from Marc.

Marc Estes

Pastor. Author. Leader. Builder of bridges between an unchanging gospel and a changing world.



MARC ESTES - VISITORREACH

Marc Estes is a seasoned pastor, leader, author, and speaker with a passion to help churches reach people more effectively. He previously served as Senior Pastor of Mannahouse in Portland, Oregon, where he led a large multi-campus church, and served as President of Portland Bible College.

Today, Marc serves as President / CEO / Co-Founder of VisitorReach, helping equip churches for exponential digital outreach assimilation.

"Hospitality now begins before the parking lot."

MARC ESTES

THE LEADERSHIP ASSIGNMENT

Do not chase every trend. Learn to tell the difference between a trend, a tool, and a genuine shift in the mission field. If all we see is decline, we become defensive. If all we see is opportunity, we become naive. The Issachar posture is different: understand the times, then know what to do.



RESOURCE

Connect with Marc / VisitorReach

Visit marcestes.com or start a conversation with the VisitorReach team.

Research notes - Part I

Publication-grade sourcing for the statistics, quoted research, and company-reported figures in this guide.

01

Barna Group, David Kinnaman, "Rising Spiritual Openness in America," Feb. 10, 2023. October 2022 survey of 2,000 U.S. adults: 74% wanted to grow spiritually; 44% said they were more open to God than before the pandemic.

<https://access.barna.com/articles/rising-spiritual-openness>

02

Pew Research Center, "Mobile Fact Sheet," Nov. 20, 2025. Survey of 5,022 U.S. adults: 91% smartphone ownership overall; 97% among ages 18-29 and 96% among ages 30-49.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>

03

VisitorReach field observation as presented in the supplied 2026 workshop manuscript and in public remarks by Marc Estes: trust journeys that were once often framed as 3-5 touches may now require 12-15 for many people. This is not presented as a nationally representative benchmark.

<https://churchtechtoday.com/navigating-the-digital-culture-shift-for-church-outreach-with-marc-estes-and->

04

Sophia story adapted from Marc Estes, The New Roman Road: Reaching People in the New Digital Frontier, and the supplied workshop manuscript.

<https://www.westbowpress.com/en/bookstore/bookdetails/871837-the-new-roman-road>

05

VisitorReach company-reported cumulative connection figure of 260,000+ as cited in the supplied 2026 workshop materials. Company-reported outcome; not independently audited.

<https://www.visitorreach.com/>

06

VisitorReach public materials describe distribution / listing reach across 70+ online directories; some VisitorReach materials cite 72. This guide uses the conservative "70+" phrasing.

<https://www.visitorreach.com/>

QUOTE SOURCING

Unless otherwise indicated, pull quotes attributed to Marc Estes are drawn from the supplied 2026 workshop manuscript and slide deck for "Where Community Starts Today / Embracing the New Digital Frontier."

Research notes - Part II

Communication, response-time, livestreaming, and product-source notes.

07 CTIA, "2024 Annual Survey Highlights." Americans exchanged more than 2.1 trillion SMS and MMS messages in 2023 - more than 67,000 messages every second.
<https://www.ctia.org/news/2024-annual-survey-highlights>

08 ChurchTechToday, "Navigating the Digital Culture Shift for Church Outreach with Marc Estes and Kenny Jahng." The interview publicly cites the 93% text / 13% face-to-face figure. The underlying survey methodology is not publicly available; the eBook therefore labels it as a VisitorReach-cited survey figure.
<https://churchtechtoday.com/navigating-the-digital-culture-shift-for-church-outreach-with-marc-estes-and-ken>

09 James B. Oldroyd, Kristina McElheran, and David Elkington, "The Short Life of Online Sales Leads," Harvard Business Review, March 2011. Historical business research found organizations attempting contact within one hour were nearly seven times as likely to qualify the lead as those waiting an hour longer, and more than 60 times as likely as those waiting 24 hours or more. Used here only as a response-time principle, not a ministry conversion promise.
<https://hbr.org/2011/03/the-short-life-of-online-sales-leads>

10 Pushpay, 2024 State of Church Technology. Pushpay reported 91% of surveyed churches were livestreaming worship services. The report surveyed more than 2,200 church leaders.
<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2024/02/06/2824402/0/en/pushpay-s-2024-state-of-church-technology>

11 VisitorTap official product pages. Product descriptions emphasize NFC connection, guest cards, giving, event sign-ups, TapTree experiences, and no special app required for the tap action.
<https://visitortap.com/>

12 VisitorReach Reach Assessments and Digital Health Assessment pages. Church Reach evaluates six outreach areas; Personal Reach evaluates five personal outreach areas; Digital Health evaluates the digital front door and provides a personalized report.
<https://www.visitorreach.com/reach-assessments>

Books, Scripture + editorial integrity

Where data is strong, it is stated. Where methodology is limited, it is labeled.

- 13** WestBow Press, *The New Roman Road: Reaching People in the New Digital Frontier* by Marc Estes. Publication date listed as May 23, 2026.
<https://www.westbowpress.com/en/bookstore/bookdetails/871837-the-new-roman-road>
- 14** WestBow Press, *The Road We Must Travel Again* by Marc Estes. Official publisher listing.
<https://www.westbowpress.com/en/bookstore/bookdetails/868476-the-road-we-must-travel-again>
- 15** Scripture reference: 1 Chronicles 12:32. Brief quotation used for teaching and commentary.
- 16** VisitorReach, VisitorTap, aiChurchTech, NurturePoint, and related product names are marks used by VisitorReach. Product descriptions are based on supplied VisitorReach materials and official public product pages.
<https://www.visitorreach.com/>

EDITORIAL INTEGRITY NOTE

The supplied workshop deck contains several search-volume and church-preview figures that are frequently repeated in marketing presentations. Because the public methodology behind those exact figures is not consistently available, this eBook intentionally preserves the ministry insight without presenting weakly documented numbers as national facts. Wherever a statistic is company-reported or the underlying survey methodology is unavailable, that limitation is stated.

EDUCATIONAL USE

This guide is educational and does not guarantee specific ministry, attendance, engagement, or conversion outcomes. VisitorReach client and operating examples are experience-based and may vary by church, market, team capacity, and implementation.

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Sources and links checked during preparation in August 2026.



ONE FINAL THOUGHT

The next person God wants your church to reach may already be looking for you.

Make it easier for them to find you. Make it safe for them to talk. Make the response personal. Then walk with them toward Jesus and toward community.



START THE CONVERSATION

visitorreach.com
connect.visitorreach.com/welcome

THE MISSION HAS NOT CHANGED. THE ROADS HAVE.