

Stirring the waters

This fourth article in a series on missional growth focuses on connecting guests to the church community and ultimately to Christ.

By Ed Stetzer

Getting people to visit your church is one thing, but getting them to stay is another. Neither is easy, but both are necessary to build God's Kingdom. In previous issues of *On Mission* we've discussed church outreach as a process that looks something like this: The church has a vision for outreach that sees evangelism as more of a journey than a destination. They generate guests with key factors such as strategic prayer, guest follow-up, helping members bring friends, creating a special ministry or service and casting a wider net through advertising and marketing.

Next, they welcome guests using greeters at multiple locations and strategies to make sure guests feel as welcome leaving as when they arrived.

The process isn't necessarily easy, but with the right vision and worship service (see *On Mission* Winter 2005), church members are more encouraged and motivated to bring and welcome guests (see *On Mission* Summer 2005). The next step is to help guests make relational connections within the church family.

Jeremy Morton, pastor of Crosspoint Baptist Church, Perry, Georgia, recalls what happened when one young nonbeliever, Willie Taybor, began attending church with his girlfriend. As Willie participated in church activities, he served alongside Christians. The day the church community worked together on a building project was the day that Willie committed his life to Christ. Today, Willie mentors teenagers at the church, leads a young adult Bible study, heads up a Tuesday night outreach gathering for young adults and is enrolled in ministry training at a Christian college.

People frequently come to faith in Christ after they've been around Christians for some time. Research shows they're more likely to consider the claims of Christ when they are in community with His followers. We help them make a journey toward Christ when we invite them into our fellowship and tell them about our relationship with Christ.

Connecting guests

The lesson we learn from Willie is that a key part of reaching guests or newcomers, especially those who aren't yet believers, is to encourage meaningful, long-term contact with active members. The question is: how?

Let's face it. Many congregations are too big to connect with people during the main service. At this point we're not talking about simply greeting guests or making them feel welcome. We're talking about meaningful connections that provide opportunity for growth. Dozens, hundreds or even thousands of people sitting face forward and looking at a stage or pulpit is not

the right environment to connect people to one another. And this is a challenge, because newcomers choose the main worship service as their first point of connection to a particular church.

The key is to move them from the worship service to the small group. Some churches use Sunday school; some use small groups that meet in homes. Whichever you use, you need a connection strategy that uses your small group leaders as an integral part.

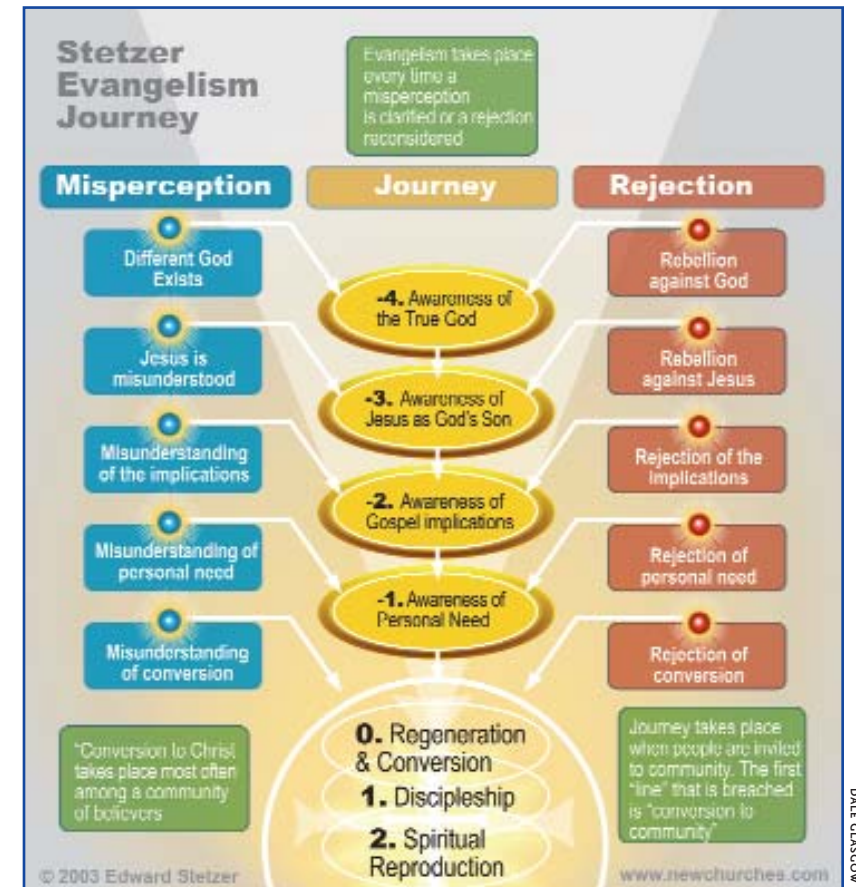


First, let's talk about finding out how to contact guests—especially the ones who have potential for becoming regular attenders, believers and members.

Remember that guests in most churches are, in effect, giving permission for follow-up when they provide their name and contact information—they realize someone from the church will contact them. Nobody is fooled by the “Free Drawing for a Health Club Membership if you fill out this card!”

By the way, don't become frustrated when your guests don't fill out a card. Recognize that they simply aren't ready. Tricking them into giving their info (by taking it from the nursery sign-in sheet or having all the regular attendees stand) does nothing to build the guests' confidence in the church to go at their own speed and not be pushy.

After a guest fills out a card, the first follow-up should include a letter and call from the pastor or outreach leader. But I recommend another step, and here's where the follow-up really has a chance to be effective in drawing a newcomer into fellowship. Because providing info implies the guest's permission to be contacted—and because the most effective place for connecting with the church is in the small group setting—let a small group leader make the next contact. This can be accomplished with a phone call or visit from a leader or even a strategy like F.A.I.T.H. which uses evangelistic visitation to also talk



about the benefits of Sunday school classes or small groups.

The evangelism journey

The main reason people need to connect in community is to consider in a safe, intimate environment the truth claims of the gospel. I've illustrated this as an evangelism journey (see diagram above). With few exceptions, people come to Christ in steps, and those steps usually involve being in conversation and community with believers. There really are two conversions—

the first to community (“I like and trust these people and want to learn with them”) and then to Christ (“I make a dangerous decision for Christ in a safe community of friends”). One is earthly and one eternal.

The first type of conversion is to community. This means that guests connect relationally with a community of believers, because they feel “safe” in that environment. The funnel-shaped lines (representing community) stretch all the way to the top of the diagram to illustrate that, at any point along their jour-

ney with the small group, a person can decide to begin a spiritual journey toward Christ because of his or her experience with community.

The circle in the diagram represents the church. Experiencing Christian community and becoming part of the church are not the same thing. Nonbelievers can and should be encouraged to connect relationally with a community of believers, but that doesn't make them part of the church. A local church is one expression of the body of Jesus Christ.

When a person experiences the second type of conversion, a conversion to Christ, that individual becomes part of the church in an eternal way, not just an earthly way.

Each curved arrow represents different kinds of evangelistic encounters. For example, a person who has rejected Jesus as God's one and only Son and who is living in rebellion regarding Jesus can be challenged in a small group setting by committed believers to consider the claims of Christ. In this context—in conversation with Christian friends—the lost person can decide to consider the validity of Jesus' identity. He or she may begin to believe that Jesus is God's unique Son and then consider accepting the claims of Christ. Through conversion to community, guests can begin to consider truth claims within a safe community of believers and then experience conversion to Christ.

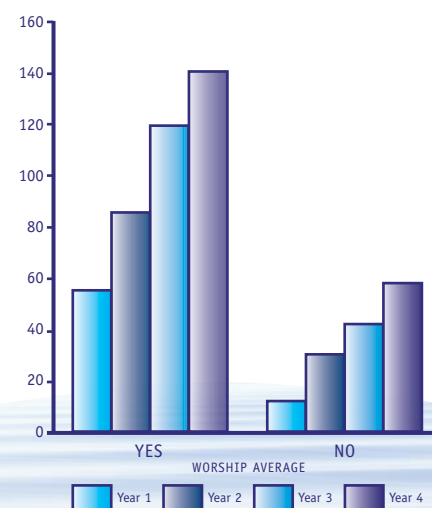
The journey will not be the same for any individual, people group, worldview or culture. For each individual, the misconceptions and reasons for rejecting the gospel may change, but each person must make the journey along the center column. By connecting people in community where they can hear and consider truths about Christ, they are more likely to make

the journey of connecting with Christ.

Assimilating members

Moving from being a guest to becoming a member involves two issues: a person makes a commitment to Christ first, and second, to Christ's church. Every person who moves from attendance to membership will need to be challenged to turn away from his or her sinful lifestyle and trust Jesus Christ. In addition, people need to be presented with the challenge of living out the privileges and responsibilities of church membership. Both of these can be done effectively through a membership class led by the pastor, and every newcomer should receive a personal invitation to attend.

Plus, the discipline of membership classes works to make more active, loyal members, according to a study conducted of 601 new Southern Baptist churches. We found that those requiring membership classes experienced a much higher average attendance than churches not requiring a class:



Thom Rainer, in his book *High*

Expectation Churches, describes in detail how churches with high membership requirements and expectations grow faster and are more evangelistically effective than those without high expectations.

A membership class includes several elements—a clear presentation of what it means to be saved, issues regarding the church's organizational structure, church ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper), the church's vision and mission, the church's significant historical events, etc.

However, teaching about salvation is indispensable. Studies show that most non-Christians seeking to be church members do not understand the fundamentals of the gospel itself. They want to be "good," and church membership seems to be a helpful part of being good. They want to be "right," and membership seems like a step in that direction. However, each person needs to be taught that no one is "good" and no one is "right" and that only the gospel can make someone truly good and righteous. I take about one hour in every membership class to teach the truth of the gospel which I find is about 25 to 30 percent of the total time necessary to complete an effective membership class.

Many of our churches have an unscriptural view of membership. Any church which has twice as many members as attenders is not and can not be living up to its responsibility to care for, nurture, watch over and disciple its church members. Membership is meaningless when our church roles are filled with names and no accountability. Moving guests from being attenders to members means leading them to Christ and then into a covenant relationship with the body of Jesus Christ, called the Church. This

process of assimilation can be greatly enhanced through the introduction and use of a church membership class.

Discipling members

Effective evangelistic churches are not just about leading people to make decisions to accept Christ; they're also interested in discipleship. If we've connected them to Christ, involved them in a small group and helped them commit to membership, they have made real and significant relationship connections. Discipleship should occur organically, meaning naturally and as a result of the process of members influencing one another as iron sharpens iron.

However, churches need to be sure that each member has encountered biblical teaching on the key habits of discipleship: reading scripture, prayer, small group connection, tithing, witnessing, etc. Often, there are many things that people *want* to learn (end times, spiritual warfare, etc.), but there are some things they *need* to learn—basic doctrines and basic habits of the Christian life. These are best done when a church has an intentional post-membership strategy to lead people to maturity. The most important thing is that our people are intentionally and systematically led to deeper maturity in Christ.

By now, it's pretty obvious that it takes a lot of hard work to do outreach well. Outreach involves much more than just getting people to visit your church. Many churches will expend more energy planning annual homecoming events than they do planning outreach—helping more people get to their heavenly home.

If we're going to see the waters of baptism being stirred more often,

we will need to be more intentional with church evangelism and discipleship. That process involves having a vision to reach people, planning and working hard to generate and welcome guests, intentionally and systematically connecting and assimilating guests, then

completing the process with effective discipleship. @

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