

Stirring the waters

This third article in a series on missional growth focuses on intentional and strategic church evangelism.

By Ed Stetzer

We've all seen outreach done badly. Maybe a lame newspaper ad with a picture of the pastor holding a big leather Bible with light shining down from above, or a church sign announcing "Turn or Burn." I've seen them both—and you probably have, too. They produce few results. And, besides repelling the unchurched, this ineffective evangelism can sometimes discourage Christians who have invested themselves in what turns out to be a pretty half-baked plan.

Developing an effective evangelistic strategy requires a series of components or stages that help people move from the ranks of the inactive and unreached toward being active followers of Jesus Christ.

In the Winter issue of *On Mission*, we looked at how to develop a God-centered and culturally relevant worship service—a magnetic church that retains or draws back the people who visit. In this issue, we'll talk about generating and welcoming guests. In the next issue, we'll discuss ways to connect guests to Christ and to active membership with the church family.

The entire process looks something like the chart to the right.

Church vision

As a pastor or on mission Christian

concerned with getting your church into a growth pattern, you're asking yourself: *How do we get started?* Consider this model of evangelism as a journey in community.

Research shows that unreached people are more likely to connect with the truth of the gospel after engaging in meaningful relationships with believers. In other words, evangelism occurs best when non-believers are already connecting with a church family that's demonstrating genuine biblical love and fellowship.

Generating guests

If evangelism best takes place in Christian community, we have to discover a way for people to find their way to that community. Effective evangelistic churches find diverse ways to encourage people to visit and then stay. Methods we recommend:

- **Pray intentionally.** The book of Acts is filled with examples of early believers coming together to pray for boldness (Acts 1:14-2:41, 2:42-47, 4:23-31, 6:3-7). After praying, they were empowered by the Spirit, and people were saved. We can follow that same pattern today. Praying for boldness and the movement of God's Spirit within the community and in the lives of the

people we want to reach can play a crucial role in any effective outreach strategy.

One way to approach this would be to canvass your surrounding community for prayer requests. Each person who requests prayer could be assigned one or more prayer partners. After praying for the request, prayer partners can make another visit for an update on the initial prayer request and receive any new requests.

This process builds relationships, provides opportunities to share the gospel and taps into the power of prayer.

- **Help people bring friends.**

This is more than a clichéd "y'all bring someone." Connecting-churches teach their members to "invest and invite." Members invest time, energy and resources in building relationships with their unchurched friends and then invite them to consider the church and the Christ of the church. Many churches find that having people bring friends to specific events helps them be more intentional about their outreach.

Mike Dodson and members of

New Hope Community Church planned a Friend Day around their "Church at the Park Sunday." On that day, they had their worship celebration at a local amusement park, an ideal setting for including visitors who might not be comfortable coming into church—at least not yet. The event required weeks of preparation. Members were encouraged to follow a prayer strategy for inviting F.R.A.N.s (Friends, Relatives, Associates and Neighbors). The prayer strategy helped members be more intentional about the guests they invited. They also used a public display on Sundays leading up to the event to track the number of people being invited. This resulted in the highest attendance day of the year and the discovery of several prospects for church growth.

- **Know your community.**

Another key component of generating guests is to make sure you un-

derstand who lives in your community. What are the values and characteristics of the people or people groups in your community? Which particular group of people is your church best equipped to reach? Who are you currently reaching and who would you like to reach in the future?

- **Create a special ministry or service.**

As you survey your community, you're likely to discover some community needs that aren't being met. By starting a particular ministry you'll not only help your community, but you'll build relationships with unreached people who have those particular needs. Some churches have found that DivorceCare, Celebrate Recovery,

parenting classes and other programs become important points of connection for their outreach strategy.

Some churches find they need multiple services to make this happen. Ron Sylvia at Church at the Springs in Ocala, Florida, is leading a Purpose Driven Church that he planted 10 years ago. Today, 2,000 people attend his church each week. However, he also found a special need as he looked around his community. Many in his area were a bit more "country" than his contemporary church. To meet the need and expand their outreach, Church at the Springs now has a growing country gospel service.

with one goal—to get them to visit the community of believers. Once in that safe place, they can consider the dangerous claims of the gospel. Of course, the most effective long-term strategy, which provides the best results, is personal invitation. Still, advertising and mass media can be an effective supplement to this or generate an initial boost of prospects. Word-of-mouth advertising is usually limited to an existing relational network. Mass advertising helps expand the horizons of communication. It creates new relational networks through which the gospel can naturally flow.

- **Cast a wider net.**

Some churches find that advertising helps cast a wider net and reach people outside of existing relational networks. Many churches use direct mail, radio, newspaper, door-to-door surveys and other methods to connect to a large number of people

Welcoming guests

Getting people to attend church requires hard work. Making them feel comfortable also requires a plan. Most churches have ushers, but ushers are for movie theaters and funeral homes. Churches need greeters—volunteers who intentionally welcome and encourage guests to connect with the church family.

For most churches, welcoming guests means an usher at the door to the worship center—that's expected. But if you want to really connect with your guests, place greeters at four locations:

- 1 In the parking lot—so that they can make a great first impression (Hint: on rainy days they can help with umbrellas).
- 2 Outside the outer door—pointing people inside to a welcome center and the worship center. >>>



③ At a welcome center—greeting guests, providing more information and perhaps passing out nametags.

④ At the door to the worship center—handing out church programs and shaking hands. (Sorry we were so tough on the ushers, but this is where they enter the picture.)

Greeters provide a connection with the church that replaces older methods such as having guests wear special nametags, stand up for introductions or even remain seated while members stand in “their honor.” These methods are sometimes awkward for guests.

The last important element of welcoming guests involves what happens immediately following the service. Guests are evaluating the friendliness of their experience from the moment they arrive until the moment they leave. So, what happens after the service is just as critical as what happens when they arrive.

In many churches, as soon as the service ends, the regulars flock together and basically ignore guests. Train key leaders to employ the “3-Minute Rule”—for three minutes after the service, they should focus only on making sure that guests are properly welcomed. This could mean inviting them to have a cup of coffee and exchanging small talk for a couple of minutes. Finish the conversation by saying, “It was great to meet you. Thanks for coming. I hope I see you again.” In addition, you could have greeters posted in the coffee area to be on the lookout for guests and make sure they feel welcome.

Churches need to develop a way of keeping track of guests. Many

churches use some type of communication card to accomplish this. When people visit, they’re asked to fill in their name, address and other personal information to the degree that they’re comfortable. Within the next several days (best within 48 hours), contact guests by phone, letter or both just to say “thank you for coming” and encourage them to return. Here is a simple process to follow for contacting guests:

SUNDAY AFTERNOON:

Phone call from a layperson committed to outreach

TUESDAY: Letter from the pastor (mailed Monday)

THURSDAY: Letter from a small group leader (mailed Wednesday)

SATURDAY: Call from the pastor inviting them to return.

Once this system is established, you have a prospect database that you can utilize for special events. For example, when I founded and pastored Millcreek Community Church, we planned a special event around Easter Sunday. We rented the auditorium of a local school, sent out mailers to the entire community, called previous guests from our prospect database and invited friends and family. Our average attendance at the time was 250, but about 750 came to our Easter service—many of them from our list of past guests. And, best of all, about

100 new people stayed around each Sunday thereafter.

Ministry and outreach are about connecting with people—for God so loved the world... that’s people. He sent His Son, and His Son is sending us (John 20:21) to connect with and reach people. Developing a church-wide evangelistic strategy is about having the same vision that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have—to relate to and connect with people.

When people experience the love of God within a genuine, caring and biblical community of believers, they’re more likely to connect not only with the church family, but also with the Lord of the church.

This process requires faith, hard work and a practical plan to generate and welcome guests. But the journey doesn’t end there. In the next issue, we’ll discuss how to build an effective strategy to connect guests within the community of faith, assimilate them into active membership and build them into effective disciples of Jesus Christ. Between now and then, evaluate your current outreach strategy, develop a new plan based on some of the ideas in this article and begin implementing that plan. May God give you success in generating unchurched guests and welcoming them into the community of faith. @

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