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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Attracting New People: Are We Building the Bridges?

A pastor reported that at a civic club luncheon, the president asked each member to stand up and tell how many new members he or she had recruited for the club. Every person had recruited at least one new member. One man, during his forty-year membership, had influenced more than 100 people to join.

The pastor asked, "What would happen if next Sunday morning in worship we asked each person to stand and answer a similar question? Would everyone be able to say that he or she had influenced at least one person toward Christ and this congregation?"

Some observations that explain that behavior paradox:

Some groups bond well. Examples include prayer groups, adult Sunday school classes, and churches chartered before 1980 that average fewer than forty people in worship. Their warm emotional connections knit them together in positive ways.

Some groups bridge well. Examples include civic clubs and some multi-congregation, community-service organizations. Because their members want to enlarge their numbers, they enthusiastically invite and include new people.

Approximately 85 percent of congregations bond better than they bridge. In their hearts, the leaders know that healthy, effective churches involve their members in faith-sharing, inviting others to church, and hospitality that accomplishes Christ's Great Commission to "Go...make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).

Despite that conviction, their members' attitudes seem to say, "We believe in 'believing in' influencing people toward Christ, but we do not believe in practicing influential behaviors. We remember that Jesus said, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people' (Mark 1:17). But we prefer to delegate all the fishing to clergy."

What Causes Church Bridging Skill? Congregations help new people connect with Christ, develop worship attendance habits, and become church members through a complex mixture of numerous factors from within two major influence elements:

- What God does by the Spirit's interaction with the flow

of an unchurched individual's life, circumstances, and needs

- What the congregation does to help meet the spiritual, psychological, emotional, and relational needs of that unchurched individual

The manner in which God and congregations work together is somewhat like the way electricity works in the wires that go through the walls of our homes. We must not confuse the wires with the electricity, but the size of and the manner in which the wires are installed influences how much electricity gets through. Methods play a role in how many people connect with Christ through a congregation.

Primary types of bridging behavior. Churches use four primary types of activities as a first step toward people who have not yet visited their worship services (George Barna, *Church Growth: New Attitudes for a New Era*):

- Personal communications: invitations to friends, relatives, and acquaintances we know
- Mass communications: invitations to people that your members do not know personally
- Event marketing: drawing the attention and eventually



the involvement of outsiders through invitations to specific worship services or other church functions

- Community service activities that both minister to hurting people and attract worship visitors

Churches accomplish these four activities in a wide variety of ways. But research reveals that more than 75 percent of new members in any congregation visited worship *the first time* due to a personal invitation from someone who attends that church.*

Personal inviting builds bridges. The most effective inviting-bridges happen between people who already know one another, not between church members and strangers. The best bridge-building material is some sort of personal relationship or acquaintance.

Are you skeptical about this statistic? Conduct a survey. Ask the last twenty people who joined your church one question: “Through whom, or by what means, did you first visit our church? What got you on the property the first time?” In the average church, 75 to 90 percent of new members say they came because someone invited them.

Yet, research indicates that, on the average, only 46 percent of church members say they have invited at least one person to a worship service during the last twelve months.

Enlarging the number of members (a) who adopt the habit of inviting and (b) who increase the number of invitations they extend each month significantly increases the number of first-time worship visitors.

The volume of inviting increases when a church’s leaders motivate members to invite. All things being equal (meaning that the members are satisfied with the worship service music and preaching), inviting increases in churches whose leaders (a) exhibit an extroverted Great Commission attitude and (b) encourage members to invite by providing how-to methods for inviting. Examples:

Spontaneous inviting: In almost any conversation, you can ask someone, “Do you folks regularly attend a local church?” If they do, that question leads to an interesting interchange. If not, you can invite them to worship: “I’d like to invite you to visit our church’s worship services.”

A few such conversations present the opportunity for a personal witness to your faith. If that happens, avoid preaching, lecturing, judging, ordering, shaming, or probing indiscreetly. But do express concern. We don’t argue people into the church. We love them into it. Caring concern enables you to listen and to share appropriate insights and knowledge about how God has worked in your life and can work in theirs.

The foundation for all effective Christian influence is the simple process of acting like a genuine friend to unchurched friends, acquaintances, and relatives. When we treat the people around us like genuine friends, God’s Spirit empowers us to “fish” in effective ways.

Consciousness raising: The following paragraphs raise consciousness concerning people the worshippers could invite to worship. Use this method twice a year—three weeks before Christmas Sunday and three weeks before Easter Sunday.

Read the paragraphs slowly at an appropriate time in the worship service, accompanied by meditative background music.

- Think of family members: spouse, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, nephews, and nieces.

- Think of neighbors: next-door neighbors, elderly persons in the neighborhood, and new families on your block.

- Think of people at work: supervisors, employees you supervise, secretaries, clerical staff, students you teach, clients, new staff members, and colleagues you see occasionally.

- Think of friends with whom you dine out: single friends, parents of your child’s friends, old friends from school, and friends of your spouse.

- Think of casual associates: your dentist, doctor, real estate or life insurance agent, your child’s teacher, merchants, service or luncheon club members, people who belong to clubs or associations or professional groups that you attend, babysitters, sales representatives who call on you, people who graduated from the same university.

- Think especially of people undergoing personal life stresses of some kind. These individuals are often ready to hear answers to their problems from within the Christian faith: people who recently divorced, couples with new babies, families that have experienced a recent death, households where someone has lost their job or suffered business reverses.

The following week, several worshippers will notice the “invisible people” in their circle of acquaintances who do not attend church. Noticing is the first step toward inviting.

The bottom line. The New Testament Church served in three ways: (a) as a memorial center that remembered, not just the past, but Christ; (b) as a service center, reaching out to a pagan world with the Good News, better news than it had ever heard; (c) as a recruiting center for the kingdom of God, into which they invited people to step by spiritually connecting with Christ.

Is our congregation effective in *all three* of those ways?

* See Herb Miller’s Nuggets, Volume #8, “How to Attract First-Time Worship Visitors,” for two dozen additional inviting methods and detailed how-to-do-it suggestions. E-mail HrbMiller@aol.com for a free contents-descriptions and an order form (sent only in electronic form, in response to E-mail requests, NOT in response to requests by U.S. Mail, FAX, or telephone.)

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