

Systemic Evangelism

Preparing Church Members for Evangelism

A Travel Free Learning Article

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Some Basic Observations

Possibility you, the reader, do not know me. I feel that you need to know that I am not writing on this subject in a vacuum. I have been involved in pastoral ministry for almost 40 years. Every church I have served has grown significantly. (I have the suitable-for-framing certificates to prove it.) I have been involved in evangelism in my denomination within the local, regional and national manifestations of the church. Evangelism has been my passion, and I have studied and pursued it for all of my life. Through my studies and pursuits I have concluded that the key to church growth is found, not in church growth programs, but in church transformation.

Some Foundational Observations About the Church in North America:

1. A majority of mainline Protestant churches in North America have suffered a decline in membership and ministry for several decades.
2. Many programs, processes, plans and ministries having to do with evangelism and/or church growth have been introduced over the past several decades and, generally speaking, have not been productive. We have tried revivals, rallies, Bring-A-Friend Day, door-to-door canvassing, mass telephone campaigns, newspaper ads, mass mailings, training classes in personal evangelism and much more.
3. Continuing to do church 1950's style does not work in our present culture even though we insist on attempting to do so.
4. Research has helped us understand that about 70 percent of the people in our culture are unchurched or underchurched.
5. Over my years of ministry it has become clear that not everyone has a passion for evangelism and church growth. When I say, not everyone, I mean just about nobody. Every three years or so I have a church leader suggest that since people are so uncomfortable with the concept and the word, we should find a word to replace evangelism. We have tried several times. The reality is that evangelism by any other name is still evangelism.
6. The generally accepted view of the church has changed dramatically over the past few decades. In the middle of the past century, people generally saw church attendance as a good thing. If they did not go, they felt they should and encouraged church attendance for others. Church was a good, positive and safe place. That perception has changed. Churches have a remarkable public relations problem and are now seen by many of the unchurched as a negative and bad place or group that wants to do them harm.

What is Good About All of This Change?

As the Church attempts to live and grow and impact a culture that is very different than the culture of the 1950's and 60's we are forced to reassess how we do church and how we do evangelism. As we come to terms with the reality that our culture is no longer church-centered, the Church has become marginalized, and that our culture has become generally hostile toward the Church; when we realize that it is not

unusual in some sectors of our society for a believer to keep his or her church attendance a secret; it becomes clearer that what we are doing in the area of evangelism is not working. In such an atmosphere, it seems obvious the Church must become much more aggressive in being the Church.

Likely the word aggressive sounds a bit strong. I mean it in the best sense. I am not suggesting we preach on street corners or corner coworkers at the lunch counter and beat them with a 20 pound Bible or pass out "Are You Going to Hell?" tracts to every waitress or waiter who serves us. By aggressive I am simply suggesting we realize evangelism is not someone else's job, and we—Joe and Jane Churchgoer—must get out of the pew and out into the world to share the Good News about Jesus.

In our new and different culture we are literally forced to rethink what evangelism is and how we must do it. Evangelism is less about learning and delivering a particular canned message or about convincing others to agree with your religious tenets, and much more about being Christian in a not particularly Christian culture. We must be more aggressive in connecting with people who seem to not yet know God; serving them, loving them and sharing the good news of God's love with them through our lives and life stories.

Preparing Your Church Members for the Task of Evangelism

In the past preparing to do evangelism was accomplished by attending classes that taught you to memorize a prepackaged "get saved" message, and prepared you to answer problematic questions seekers might have about God and life and the Church. It was about gathering information and memorizing answers. Now we realize that evangelism is about living a life under the Lordship of Christ, living a Christian lifestyle, humbly and lovingly, in the midst of those who are not and then waiting to see what happens.

Evangelism is not something we do. It is a part of who we are. Doing evangelism is no longer based on the idea of having evangelistic events or witnessing conversations. Evangelism must be based on developing intentional relationships with people who do not yet know God. Someone will certainly voice the concern, "Are you developing relationships with the ulterior motive of attempting to lead someone to Christ?" My response is "Absolutely!" It is not a bad thing. It is the best, the kindest and most meaningful thing I could ever do for a friend.

Henrietta Mears said in some of her classic Christian writings, "A Christian should be like the lifeguard at the beach. Everyone on the beach knows who the lifeguard is, but by and large, they go about their activities paying little attention to the lifeguard -- until someone gets in trouble. Then everyone knows where to go for help." People don't care until there is an emergency and suddenly they turn to the lifeguard for help. The lifeguard becomes very important to them. Connecting with the lifeguard becomes a matter of life or death. The lifeguard's task is to be ready and watchful.

We must learn to be at the right place at the right time to do evangelism. We must cultivate relationships and friendships with pre-Christians. We must wait for them to express their need for their lives to be more than a life without Christ can be; for them to express a desire for life to have meaning and purpose; for them to share the need to be loved unconditionally; to share the need to feed their spiritual nature; to share the need to know God. Our agenda must be their agenda. It takes some careful and intense listening to hear someone express that need for God. But when that need is expressed, faith sharing begins.

To impact our culture, we must do some things different. It could be argued that we need to do everything different. For evangelism to become something your church does, it must move from being a ministry, program, or activity, to become a part of the Christian lifestyle that the members live. It must become systemic evangelism.

The Heart of Systemic Evangelism

At the heart of systemic evangelism is the spiritual life of the believer; the church member. It is a truth we tend to talk about and share with others the things that we care about and are excited about. We do that by sharing in very natural and non-threatening ways. We are pleased with something in or about our lives and can hardly contain ourselves. We tell the people we care about the things we care about.

At the heart of effective, systemic evangelism is not classes that disseminate information and prepare people to “close the deal”. People are not motivated to do evangelism by guilt inducing sermons. The result of such sermons is that they still do not do evangelism, and now they also feel bad about not doing it. Effective systemic evangelism happens when believers have a healthy, viable, and growing relationship with the Living God. Evangelism happens when we experience the reality of God’s leading and presence in our everyday lives. It happens when God is alive and real to us and we just naturally tell others what God is doing in our lives. It happens when we pray for God to lead us and give us “divine appointments” and we watchfully expect those prayers to be answered.

A key in making this process work is helping church members develop a growing relationship with God. I often tell my congregation that nobody is interested in their religion. Even I am not interested in their religion. But I am dying to hear from someone who has a living relationship with the living God, and that relationship is making a difference in his or her life. Such a growing relationship is encouraged and sustained by maintaining a consistent time of prayer and study, consistent whole hearted participation in worship, active participation (not just attendance) in a small group and actively pursuing a ministry. If the average person will do those four things and I can just about guarantee that God will be a meaningful and exciting life partnership with God.

We must move beyond our discomfort of talking openly and candidly with our church members about spiritual things. What better place to have spiritually challenging and enriching conversations than in the context of the family of God? As church leaders we must model spiritual growth through active participation in spiritual disciplines. And we must challenge our church members to join us in the joy of using spiritual disciplines to allow us to be in the presence of God and grow in that relationship.

It is my firm belief and experience that if an individual will pursue a vital and growing relationship with God, one will have some God stories to share with the people around them. Those God stories and you telling them, is what is called systemic evangelism.

Important Things to Know

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The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. **Travel Free Learning** is a leadership development emphasis of The Columbia Partnership. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.