

Who Are the Next 25 Members of Your Church?

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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[This article builds on the theme of a previous one: *Improving your Congregation's I.Q.*
In case you wonder, I.Q. stands for Invitational Quotient.]

A congregation fully engaged in the process of revitalization can get so intense on institutional survival, constitutional change, and internal governance issues to the near neglect of its mission, heartbeat, reason d'être; welcoming folks to the heart of God through Jesus Christ. This conversation seeks to provide not only a snap-back, but a place to jump-start the action.

Who are the Next 25 Members of Your Congregation, and Where Will They Come From?

Here are *six clues* about these next 25:

1. They will come mostly because they are asked.
2. They will come back only if we learn what's next after hello.
3. They will join for five top reasons.
4. They will likely start coming in certain seasons.
5. They will need to hear your clear answers on their crucial questions.
6. They will tell you what their spiritual needs are, if you listen closely.

Let's Explore These Six Clues:

1. **They come because they are asked.** While general traffic in the building or general curiosity may account for a small percentage of first-timers, over 60 percent make their first visit because they were asked. Therefore, you already know the next 25. They are your Friends, Relatives, Acquaintances/Associates, or Neighbors. Thus the acronym for the next 25 is that they are already your F.R.A.Ns.
2. **What's next after hello?** I have yet to meet a church that does not consider itself friendly. So after "hello", what do you say? Do you have a path charted that invites folks to walk with you from first time visitor to first anniversary of membership? This path need not require elaborate strategizing or be highly formalized. Yet we do need to get much more intentional about offering pathways for folks to walk deeper into discipleship with Christ and fellowship with the body of Christ.
3. **Five top reasons.** a) There's just a piece missing in my life and I think its God, so that brought me to the church door. b) I have been thinking about religious matters for some time and now the time has come to follow through. c) My kids, and the needs of my family, are bringing me through the church door. d) I have a relationship to God that I know I need to nurture. e) The classic life passages of birth, marriage, and death brings me to reevaluate my relationships.
4. **Seasons of life.** In addition to the perennial Christmas and Easter times when folks are most likely to consider church attendance, and family moments of funerals and baptisms, occasions of serious life transitions, seasons of sea-change, upheavals, and trauma may prompt a church visit.
5. **Crucial questions.** While these inquiries may seem elementary to veteran church goers, new folks bring their own elemental questions. What about sins forgiven? What's the meaning and purpose of my life? Is a real relationship with God possible? Can I really have eternal life? The clarity and charity of our responses need to resonate with them.

6. **The gift of listening.** When a guest gets their initial questions answered with some measure of satisfaction, it opens the door for their larger and deeper questions. Respectful listening is the gift that opens this door and invites deeper spiritual connection. We honor people by listening.

Where do we begin work on this goal of the next 25 members of our church?

On a personal level, it often begins with a simple daily affirmation: "I want to live my life with such radiance and resilience that people ask the reason for such joy." Practicing this affirmation may open us to a prayer that begins a process of simply noticing people who surround our daily life. We then ask, "Lord, who in my life needs a touch of your grace? Is there a conversation I need to offer and an invitation I need to make?" It may well be that this prayer opens the door to opening the door for an invitation, which is how 75% of church guests get there!

On a congregational level, there are at least three things your next 25 members will need almost immediately:

1. **A path to walk.** How does a person move from first time guest to first anniversary of membership? A flow experience needs to be identified and captured. We cannot rely on using the nominating committee to put new folks on the official board as the best plan for assimilation. Think about the sequencing of first time hospitality with a guest luncheon, a welcome class, spiritual gifts inventory, and small group connection. Let's devote energy to a regular rhythm of invitational events and sustaining this pathway through the hospitality ministry.
2. **Need-meeting ministries.** People may come the first time on the strength of your invitation. They come back on the authentic warmth of the welcome and some sense of connection with the personality and preaching/teaching of the pastoral leader. Then, a relational bridge must be built to a ministry that meets their needs as they begin to identify them.
3. **The tools to break-and-enter your church.** The burglar analogy fits because we, as insiders, quickly forget how intimidating it is to attend a church for the first time and how much of a sub-culture each congregation creates with its traditions, local customs, and patterns of doing things. We need navigators to guide, advise, encourage and bless. In addition to the God connection, new folks need a sense of belonging born of authentic friendships.

If the core leadership of your congregation has prayed toward a significant level of consensual spiritual agreement around these insights and worked through a strategic conversation that creates a grace-filled accountability for actions you are taking, then you are well on your way to being ready for your next 25!

Important Things to Know

Gary Straub is a Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership. He is part of the Transforming Congregations Team. 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 knowledge sharing emphasis. 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