

Conversations on Closing the Congregation's Back Door

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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First-Timers

Transformation may knock on the congregation's front door, but exasperation knocks on the back door whenever new folks fade away. The complexity of closing the back door resists simple solution. One of the first places I look is examining the correlation between member loss and the way we say "hello". Let's pay attention to the process, to make sure we are not unintentionally setting up a path that slides too easily from front door to back.

So what's it look like from first-time guest to first anniversary of discipleship? The Psalmist helps us picture this process as a path we walk from initially spectating in the back pew to gradual participation, to eventually a full partnership in mutual ministry as we pray: "make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths." (Ps 25:4)

What are the key elements along this spiritual path? How are initial events sequenced to flow in a rhythm of grace that sincerely reflects the congregation's core DNA, embodies its deepest values, touches into its Spirit life and elicits devotion to Christ?

Maybe this is good place to reflect on how a congregation's institutional need to orient, educate and enroll new folks intersects with the spiritual curiosity, hunger for God, and a desire to serve a higher purpose. While these concerns are not mutually exclusive, it sometimes seems church shoppers bring a slightly different agenda than the new generations of unchurched folks; many of whom are particularly drawn to Jesus, desire to fill a heart-felt spiritual need in their life, and get some questions answered.

Welcome

But whatever the initial impetus to darken the door, all need a gracious welcome, which is why hospitality is always number one. If we do not keep tweaking our initial "hello" till we get the mix right, it skews the whole process, including the result. We want our welcome to be warm, comfortable, easy, not uncomfortably inquisitive, genuinely interested and inclusive while encouraging their path toward next steps.

Next Steps

Having said "hello" effectively, the next inevitable question is: what do we say after we say "hello"? Here's where the path most often meanders and we lose folks. You can almost hear the springs on the back door start creaking when we don't have a next invite in place. This next step translates into a rhythm of every two to three weeks some invitation needs to be offered to keep moving the momentum of positive encouragement and anticipation forward and help folks walk their path toward discipleship.

It might be something as simple as an informal gathering after worship called *Pizza with the Pastor*, but the critical point is offering a specific next step regularly that connects with the need and offers the possibility for both a casual, fun, brief, informative event while also offering more God-connection. We need to be sensitive to the deeper—often unspoken--dimensions of the key question: "so what brings you to church?"

Group Learning

The next step on the path often takes the shape of short-term—three week—learning gatherings that offer, in various sequences, conversations like: *Jesus 101*, *Our Church A to Z*, *Critical Questions*, *Concerns and Curiosities*, *Basic Beliefs and Practices*, *Bible 101*, and *Exploring Ways to Give Back*.

In addition to learning-focused gatherings, the next steps on the path need to include a time to explore and discover spiritual gifts, which leads to the ministry of equipping for service. People want to give back.

People Connectors

This process is most effective when accompanied by personal conversation with a trained lay Navigator, a Shepherd; a sort of Sherpa Guide. This person needs to be a good listener, encourager, ministry recruiter, and someone who can engage others in depth spiritual conversation. This person plays a Holy Spirit role in coming alongside to guide, encourage, and open doors. A positive spiritual connection that can be sustained in friendship and mutual ministry partnership is absolutely essential in moving from first-time guest to first anniversary of discipleship. Without this spiritual connection that matures into friendship and ministry partnership, folks may join, but the back door beckons.

While many smaller congregational settings expect the solo pastor to do this, the fact is, without several persons who can recognize, initiate and develop God-relationships there just won't be that very many first anniversaries! In transforming congregations, we need to channel continual energy to intentionally cultivating the path first-timers are invited to walk. In my opinion, these congregations are already beginning to close the back door!

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