

THE INVITATIONAL CHRISTIAN

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The Invitational Christian (Part 1 of 8): Introduction

As the church becomes more and more a minority activity in our world, the chances that someone not in the church will become connected continue to decrease as well. With less social orientation toward encouraging church attendance, people aren't thinking it up as a priority to add to their busy lives. As less and less people attend, fewer people are spending time with people who do attend – it is simple arithmetic.

That's why congregations who believe that faith in Christ changes lives and that participation in Christian community matters will do well to begin to train people to invite. Most people participate in congregations wish more people attended and were involved. Many older people especially grieve that less young families and children are part of their fellowship of faith. But rarely do people who have not been part of church life previously consider visiting a congregation to see what it is about. In some cases, young adults have been raised by parents who had already stopped attending. These people literally have no idea why the church exists and what we do in those buildings they drive by so often.

Pastors often wish parishioners would invite more people to attend with them. People report liking their church and finding life, meaning and hope there. Yet the average mainline person rarely invites someone to attend. Why?

First, mainline people generally don't want to risk being seen as a nuisance or fanatical. It is safer to stay quiet and hope the silence works magically than to risk saying something. What if they think I'm weird?

Second, mainline Christians often do a poor job of inviting. Not wanting to be pushy, they say something like, "I bet you would like my church. You should try it sometime." This is a bit like the platitude, "Great to see you. We should do lunch soon." Soon never comes. Everyone stays polite. The lunch appointment never happens.

Third, once a poorly given invitation is given, the speaker often internalizes, "I invited them but they didn't come. They must not be interested." Not wanting to be pushy, we mentally put them in the "They said 'no'" column and remind ourselves that we are not ask them again for fear of being a nuisance.

While all of these practices are routinely leading to poor results, there are things that people can do to offer a good and more effective invitation and in that practice, invite people in to a life-changing encounter with God in the midst of a practicing faith community.

Over the next few blog posts, we'll explore what kinds of tools make a difference and share how leaders can reorient their members to be more effective at inviting people to join in and share life together in a practicing congregation.

The Invitational Christian (Part 2 of 8): Why Should Anyone Come?

The first part of helping people become more invitational is helping them have a "why" behind it. The mere desire to help one's congregation is not usually enough and biblically speaking, it lacks merit anyway. There is little in scripture that points to simply growing the church's size as a goal in and of itself. Additionally, as the culture has become less "churchy" and therefore the role of church has changed, it has also changed for the people who do attend church. They see it less and less as normal and more and more as unusual. They know that less people are going and in 85% of American congregations they can observe decline happening in the congregation they attend.

So why should someone invite someone else to attend a congregation? More specifically, why should they invite someone to attend *your* congregation?

Here are two major reasons that need to be in place in order for people to know why they would invite someone else to come.

First, the congregation itself matters and is up to stuff that God cares about. This is where a clear identity (usually some sense of mission, clear values or guiding principles, articulated missional priorities, etc.) is essential. And then the connection between what is said about who you are and what you do is real. People feel like the congregation they are part of is actually a place that truly matters to God. *Lacking this, you should stop wishing for people to start inviting people in and refocus on what it means to be the church.*

Second, people sense that being a part of the congregation is life changing. The teaching they receive, the spiritual support and guidance that happens, and the personal sense that being a part of this congregation actually deepens their spiritual life. When they participate in congregational life, they feel more connected to the God who calls them.

Every congregation that is concerned that people seem to lack enthusiasm for inviting others should do a gut check on these two things. If the congregation lacks missional

clarity or if it does not help people grow spiritually, it lacks the central things that congregations are to be about. You may want to put concern about invitations on the back burner for a while and refocus on the foundational issues first.

The Invitational Christian (Part 3 of 8): Quality Matters

A recent study shows that people value meaningful sermons more than any other single aspect of congregational life. In addition, worship also ranked high. People are unlikely to invite someone to the church they love if the quality is not consistent and something that they want to show to others. Many people love their congregation, and even love their pastor, but they are not sure that the love they have translates to something others will love. Part of that is related to sharing that worship and preaching are "so-so" where they attend.

That may seem harsh, but by definition, half of all congregations have below average preaching. Likewise, half of all congregations have below average worship. Add to that the reality that 85% of congregations are in decline and then we realize that it is possible that the average may not appear to be all that good, since the congregation with average preaching and average worship is also almost always shrinking.

This matters because if someone loves their congregation, feels God is using it, and feels like they are growing spiritually by being involved, they still may be reluctant to share it with others. What we see in our long-term involvement may satisfy us, keep us motivated to participate, and encourage us to give our resources to keeping it going. But it may still be hard for us to feel like things are clear enough and done well enough so that a friend or family member attending for the first time could see what we see and be able to overlook inconsistent preaching, mediocre music, or awkward gaps when things go astray. We may love our church but be ashamed of the clutter in the halls, peeling paint in the sanctuary, or the musty smell emanating from the church basement. What I am glad to live with myself, I may not want company to see.

So, if you are clear about your sense of mission and can honestly discern that people are spiritually vibrant and growing, do an inventory of how well you actually carry out congregational life. If the preaching is so-so, encourage the pastor to get some continuing education in that area. If the music is weak, make the changes needed to make it the best it can be. If the building is dirty and cluttered, clean it up. Because no one will bring people into a mess – no matter how much they love the congregation.

The Invitational Christian (Part 4 of 8): Knowing Our Story

I once started to discuss faith stories with members of the congregation where I serve and afterward a woman came up to me and said, "You know pastor, I don't think I have a faith story."

Of course, she did have one. But she had been raised within the life of the church in ways that encouraged her to think of her church life as the focus. Her sense that she was on a spiritual journey or her awareness of how she understood God to shape or accompany her in her life had never been cultivated.

This is not unusual in many mainline congregations. As a result, many people who have spent their lives committed to the church and its work, have done very little work connecting that involvement to the wider involvement of God in their lives. That makes it hard for people to share with or connect to other people's stories in ways that illuminate or share how they see God at work.

This is increasingly important because more and more people report that they don't come to church out of a religious impulse, but would consider coming to church if it nurtured their spiritual hungers. In general, this is true across all ages but notably more so in younger generations. Data shows about one in three young adults have no connection to religious institutions. But the same studies show that these same people are not disinterested in God. They simply want to understand how God connects to their lives and don't see the church as a place to cultivate that desire. That means, in order to take the church seriously, they need your congregation to be a place where our spiritual journeys are acknowledged and our spiritual stories are explored.

In order to help make this happen, congregations need to do three things well:

- *First, preaching needs to attend to the notion of how God is active in our world and in our lives. This is less about biblical information and much more about how the biblical story helps introduce us to the God of Jesus in ways that help people encounter the risen Christ in their lives today.*
- *Next, conversations need to be shaped and the congregational environment needs to be a safe place for people to discuss this. Because it is often as much a question as it is a clear answer, how God is at work in people's lives needs to be something that is encouraged to be talked about, listened to with respect, and nurtured with intentionality and care. At the same time, people's stories need to be shared and celebrated in the life of the church.*
- *Finally, spiritual practice needs to be strengthened. There is much evidence to show that where people experience an active and loving God in their lives, their practices of connecting to the God we know in Christ are lived out. This means people are more likely to pray, reflect on scripture, and spend time in contemplation and reflection. If God is not active and real, why spend time connecting? But if God is active and real, time connecting is a priority and fulfilling.*

To produce an invitational culture, leaders need to attend to these things in ways that help people discern, understand, and share their faith stories. When this is happening, invitations will be likely to be more natural and frequent.

The Invitational Christian (Part 5 of 8): Address Their Fears

One of the main reasons that mainline Christians say they won't invite people to church is that they are afraid. "Don't be afraid," is said 365 times in the Bible. People still need to be urged to not be afraid. And our research shows that this fear is not just a copout. It is real. People are afraid.

So, what are they afraid of? Inviting someone to church doesn't seem life threatening and if you are a leader, you may be baffled by this. People seem happy enough with the church, but still they are afraid to invite people in. What's that about?

Well, fears come in many forms. Some people know that less and less people attend church – they fear rejection. Some people know that less and less people are religious – they fear being seen as weird. Some people know that they know less about the faith than they wish they did – they fear seeming stupid.

This means that leaders who want people to invite people need to address these fears directly. In preaching and teaching, these subjects should be raised and hope and vision for something other than the feared outcome lifted up. For example, in spite of peoples' fears of rejection, evidence is that over half of all people who are not involved in a congregation would attend if invited to attend with someone they knew and trusted. The evidence counters the fear directly.

In your setting, find out what prevents people from inviting people. What are they afraid of? Then lift those things up and address them. It is an important step in helping people to be freed up to be more invitational.

The Invitational Christian (Part 6 of 8): Give Them Tools

Another key to invitation is the presence of... invitations. That may seem obvious but almost no congregations actually have them.

It is a clear fact that people who have tangible reminders and cues are more likely to do something. In addition, the presence of a concrete invitation can help someone feel grounded and more in control. This is important, especially when we recognize that many members of congregations are genuinely afraid of what will transpire when inviting someone into share in their religious and faith life.

Congregations need to provide actual invitations for their members to carry. These can be simple things like business cards. Get a thousand cards made up with your congregation's purpose and principles printed on one side and the contact data (name, address, phone, web site, etc.) on the other. Give everyone five and tell them to use them. When opportunities come up to mention how your faith and life intersect, say a little something and give your friend or colleague the church's card.

Likewise, one congregation that does this well prints an actual invitation to worship on card stock, quarter-sheet sized. These invitations are printed in color and new invitations are given out every three months throughout the year. New invitations, with new designs keep them fresh. Passing them out to all members every three months is a constant reminder that invitation is part of the Christian life.

If you want people to invite, you need to provide them with tools for invitation. These aren't magic bullets – but they do make a big difference.

The Invitational Christian (Part 7 of 8): The Importance of “With”

One Sunday, there was a woman visiting during worship. She sat alone and after worship I went to talk to her. She asked me about a member and seemed a bit puzzled. It turned out that a member of the congregation had mentioned the church to her and she had decided to come. But she had attended the first service and her friend usually came to second. While the lady did attend church, she was obviously disappointed to not find her friend there to sit with her.

People who don't attend church, often don't know what happens inside the church's walls. They may have grown up in another tradition, not attended church for a long time, or perhaps haven't ever attended worship. They find churches to be as much a mystery to them – a place for the unknown. As a result, there is naturally some anxiety about going for the first time. People aren't sure what to expect or what will be expected of them.

In order for invitations to be received and accepted, teaching members to invite people to come to worship with them is a helpful step. Have them offer to pick them up and bring them with them or offer to meet them at the entrance and you can walk in together. This lowers their anxiety and also ensures that they will not sit alone – instead they'll be seated with a friend.

A random invitation to attend church is a bit like saying, “We should get together for lunch sometime.” We all know that “sometime” almost never comes. But a concrete invitation to attend worship “with you” can result in a new person encountering the community of faith. So help people invite people to attend worship by not just inviting them to come, but to come with you.

Leaders will do well to share examples of ways that people can invite people to attend worship or get involved in a church activity with them. Offer to pick them up. Agree to meet them in the parking lot. Ask them out for breakfast together before you go. These and many other ways can help people exploring church life to feel accompanied rather than alone.

The Invitational Christian (Part 8 of 8): Following Up

One of reasons that we invite people into the life of the church is that they will discover that within their involvement in church can come new life. But someone attending something once does not accomplish that. It is a long term process that helps people find new connections to God, new expressions of community, and new commitments.

This means that the church needs to provide an intentional way for people who come to something once are not simply taken for granted, but given care and attention afterward. What this looks like can vary, but the following elements seem essential:

- *A thank you letter from the pastor should be sent early in the week.*
- *A thank you note from the person who invited the guest should also be sent.*
- *A phone call or visit should also happen. In many settings, a phone call is better than a visit as it is less intrusive and still personal. A visit can follow the call to deepen the connections. This can be from a well-trained layperson or the pastor.*
- *A clear path to involvement and membership should be available and written out in clear and inviting form. This should include both clear elements of discipleship and spiritual growth and learning as well as concrete pathways to help people connect and belong.*
- *Regular classes to introduce theology and practices and ministries should be available. These are chances to invite concrete involvement into the life of the congregation.*

Inviting is the first step in a longer-term process to engage new people in a relationship with Christ. Following up with people is essential to helping Christ connect with people in life changing and significant ways.