

Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 8

How to Attract First-Time Worship Visitors

Why are we gifting you this volume? Because the mission statement of our primary publication—*The Parish Paper: New Ideas for Active Congregations*—is to help the largest possible number of congregations achieve maximum effectiveness in their various ministries. *The Parish Paper* is a monthly newsletter whose subscribers receive copyright permission to distribute to their constituents—more than two million readers in 28 denominations. Go to www.TheParishPaper.com for subscription information.

Purpose of this Volume: Provides in-depth answers to questions that readers of *The Parish Paper* ask regarding principles and procedures by which churches of every size in a variety of community settings can find, invite, and experience larger numbers of first-time worship guests.

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I. Superglue and WD-40

The members of some groups *bond* well. Examples include members of country clubs, ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based prayer groups, adult Sunday school classes, and churches chartered before 1980 that average fewer than forty people in worship. Members of such groups experience feelings of warmth and rapport that tend to exclude anyone who has not shared their group experiences.

Members of some groups *bridge* well. Examples include civil-rights movement groups, ecumenical religious organizations, Greenpeace environmental groups, many youth service groups, and most civic clubs. Because members of such groups want to enlarge their numbers, they enthusiastically include new people and readily provide information to everyone willing to consider participation in their group.

Some groups both *bond* well and *bridge* well. Examples:

- African-American churches that bond people of the same race and bridge to new people of that race.
- New-church starts of any racial type less than five years old (the core group of “pioneers” bond with one another, yet eagerly welcome newcomers).

Some groups neither bond well nor bridge well. Example: The thirty-year-old church formed when dissidents split off from the mother church. Born in conflict, the group retains a Hatfield and McCoy syndrome. Many members dislike one another but do not want to switch churches. Like a fighting ship in days of yore, their leaders repel boarders with a bristling rank of swords that reject new ideas.

The healthiest churches of every size both bond well and bridge well. Their emotional attitude combines sociological superglue with sociological WD-40. (Metaphors by Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000], p. 43) Their members bond with one another, yet just as eagerly invite and welcome newcomers. Examples:

- We observe that behavior in New Testament reports such as, “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily” (Acts 16:5).
- That behavior began in earnest after the Jerusalem Council, when Paul, Timothy, Silas, and John Mark moved from town to town across Asia Minor to intentionally reach out to new people—Gentiles, not just Jews.
- That behavior continues to happen wherever churches live out their true nature.

Healthy congregations do not merely bond. They bridge.

II. Effective Churches Build Both Bonds and Bridges

Unfortunately, congregations more often acclaim than achieve this sociological blend of superglue and WD-40. 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).
- On their mission statements, they may proclaim “offering Christ” to new people as a biblical mandate.

Despite that published conviction, their members’ attitudes seem to say, “We believe in believing in evangelism, but we do not believe in practicing evangelism behaviors.”

III. 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

Summarizing bridging behaviors in theological terms, Robert Webber says that healthy, effective churches practice "the presence of a transcendent reality here on earth, the embodied community that draws others to Christ through participation in his incarnate presence, the church." (Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books], p. 83)

Other leaders describe and define bridging behaviors in a variety of ways:

- Evangelism is bringing people to Christ and bringing Christ to people.
- Evangelism is being, doing, and telling the gospel of the kingdom of God, in order that by the power of the Holy Spirit, persons and structures may be converted to the lordship of Jesus Christ. (Delos Miles)
- Evangelism is proclaiming in word and deed the good news of the kingdom of God, and calling people to repentance, to personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, to active membership in the church, and to obedient service in the world. (Richard S. Armstrong)
- Evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Savior and Lord with a view to persuade people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his church, and responsible service in the world. (Lausanne Covenant)
- Evangelism is what WE do to help make the Christian faith, life, and mission a live option to undisciplined people, both outside and inside the congregation. Evangelism is also what JESUS CHRIST does through the church's *kerygma* (message), *koinonia* (fellowship), and *diakonia* (service) to set people free. Evangelism happens when the RECEIVER (receptor, respondent) turns (1) to Christ, (2) to the Christian message and ethic, (3) to a Christian congregation, and (4) to the world, in love and mission—in any order. (George Hunter III)

The manner in which God and congregations work together in evangelization is somewhat like the way electricity works in the wires that go through the walls of our homes. We do not confuse the wires with the electricity, but they are an important element in the process. Congregations do not actually do evangelism; God does. However, 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.

Bridging Behavior Begins with Attitude. Increasing the bridging behavior in a congregation that bonds well but bridges poorly requires several changes in thinking:

A. *The leaders must wholeheartedly resolve to expand their church's self-concept and behavior to include outreach.*

- Approximately 20 percent of America's 350,000 congregations of all denominations are outreach-oriented in both self-concept and behavior (these congregations are growing in membership).
- Approximately 40 percent of America's 350,000 congregations of all denominations express interest in gaining new members but have neither an outreach-oriented self-

image nor specific outreach methods that translate their interest into action (the membership in these congregations is either on a plateau or declining).

- Approximately 40 percent of America's 350,000 congregations of all denominations focus *only* on caring for their present members (these congregations are declining in membership).

Ironically, the numerically growing 20 percent of churches that focus outward in both community service and outreach-inviting have the fullest internal life, as measured by the richness and variety of programs and ministries.

The 80 percent of static and declining membership congregations in the other two groups tend to experience (1) less variety and richness in their internal life, (2) more financial problems, (3) few previously unchurched members, and/or (4) a "poor me" self-concept.

B. *The leaders must recognize that their church does not need to adopt a fundamentalist theology in order to strengthen its bridging effectiveness.* From a theological labeling perspective, America's 350,000 congregations of all denominations fit into five categories with approximately the following percentages of congregations in each theological category:

- 10 percent classify as liberal in theology.
- 32 percent are moderate in theology.
- 24 percent are fundamentalist.
- 21 percent are evangelical.
- 12 percent are charismatic.

Membership growth is happening in approximately one in five of the congregations in each of those theological categories. In other words, *a few congregations of every theological stripe are growing in membership.*

However, the growing churches within each of those theological categories possess different self-concepts and behavior patterns than do their declining sister churches in the same camp. Saying it in psychological language, growing congregations of every theological persuasion are *extroverted* in self-concept and behavior; declining-membership congregations are *introverted* in self-concept and behavior.

C. *The leaders of congregations that wish to grow in membership must expand their biblical thinking to include all three of the behaviors Jesus said are important.* We can summarize the teachings of Jesus recorded in the New Testament in three imperatives—Love God. Love people. Reach out. Biblical scholars call these six words The Great Commandment and The Great Commission:

- Christ's Great Commandment says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10).
- Christ's Great Commission says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28).

Bridging congregations do not engage in the faulty logic of believing that emphasizing *only one* of Christ's three imperatives substitutes for strength in the other two. Nor do bridging congregations think that strength in one of the three is a byproduct of emphasizing *only one* or *both* of the others. Bridging churches do each of Christ's three imperatives intentionally and specifically.

Leaders who do not believe that their church is in business for all three of those reasons fail to take advantage of the dozens of effective methods available to make a church magnetic through bridging activities. As Edwin H. Freedman said, "The unmotivated are notoriously invulnerable to insight."

Barricades to Bridging-Thinking. The roadblocks to bridging behavior are numerous. Surveys indicate at least fifty reasons why church members apply passive neglect or overt resistance to their bridging opportunities. Two examples:

A. *Church members often unconsciously resist reaching out to new people because they fear losing the blessings of long-term bonding with familiar people.* By nature, most people prefer organizational superglue to WD-40. In their heads they know about Christ's Great Commission. In their hearts they have autopilots that decommission Christ's commission to go make disciples. When they utter the familiar sentence, "Our church is about the right size," fear of losing warm, friendly bonds with other church members often lies behind the words.

B. *Church leaders often fail to recognize that 80 percent of age twenty-five to forty-four young adults want to attend a large church rather than a small church.* Americans memorialize the small, white-frame church as ideal. Yet when selecting a church to attend, a relatively small number of people make that choice:

- Approximately 20 percent of U.S. churchgoers of every age group are psychologically uncomfortable in a group of more than 100 people.
- Thus, they select and attend a small church.

However, 50 percent of American church attendees worship in a large congregation. They say it provides (a) high quality program opportunities for their children and (b) numerous options in times and styles of worship service and spiritual growth experiences.

Many church leaders forget that fact when they wonder whether making their congregation larger is the right thing to do. Other church leaders forget that fact when they say, "Let's start a new church in our area rather than let our membership get bigger!" While new church starts are a necessity for serving new neighborhoods, a small, new congregation does not meet the spiritual needs of the young-adult population in the same way it did during the suburban explosion of new churches that took place prior to 1960.

Ethnic Groups Bridge Differently. For example, the factors that make African-American congregations effective in bridging are at some points identical to the factors that build effective bridges into Anglo congregations. However, evangelistically effective African-American congregations emphasize a slightly different "mix" in their ministries.

The following list includes major characteristics of evangelistically effective African-American congregations:

- Stirring and dynamic worship services are enthusiastic and emotional; the Black spirituals communicate messages of the gospel story in music (in contrast to other ethnic groups, which communicate more of their theology through the spoken word).
- Prophetic and relevant preaching that speaks to the personal needs of members and to community residents
- Strong emphasis on individual, personal outreach-witnessing, without much reliance on written training material
- Service through innovative programs designed to meet a variety of people's needs in the community around the congregation
- Great willingness to extend a helping hand to the poor
- An interesting and multifaceted youth program that offers young people a positive set of peer relationships in a Christian setting
- A strong emphasis on family-centered activities and relationships; growing African-American churches focus more heavily on kinship ties than do congregations of other ethnic groups, whose growth methods relate more to friendship ties than to kinship ties.

IV. Focus Your Bridge Energies

Build your congregation's bridging behavior on what works with the particular ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic group you are targeting. To gain a more precise understanding of the people you are trying to reach, obtain a free demographic analysis of your community at the following Web site: <http://www.pcusa.org/research/demographics.htm>

Anthropologist Darrell Whiteman put it this way with an ancient Chinese poem: "Go to the people. Live among them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build on what they have." (George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* [Nashville: Abingdon Press])

V. Primary Types of Bridging Behavior

Church sociologist George Barna writes in *Church Growth: New Attitudes for a New Era* that churches use four primary types of activities as a first step toward reaching people who have not yet visited their worship services:

- Personal communications: invitations to friends, relatives, and acquaintances we know (more than 75 percent of new members visit worship the first time due to an invitation from someone who worships in your congregation)
- 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 variety of ways. The following sections illustrate several of them.

VI. Personal Inviting Builds Bridges

The most effective inviting-bridges happen between people who already know one another, not between church members and strangers. Three out of four people who visit any congregation's worship service for the first time do so because someone they know personally invites them. The best bridge-building material is some sort of personal relationship or acquaintance.

If you are skeptical about this statistic, conduct an opinion poll. Ask the last twenty people who joined your church this 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, more than 75 percent of new members say they came because someone invited them.

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 systematically teaching how-to methods for inviting.

Methods similar to the following work best. *Avoid using such methods more than two times per year.* Church members disregard them when they happen more often than that. The pre-Christmas and pre-Easter seasons are the best times to use them.

The “3x5” Card Method. Three weeks before Christmas Sunday or Easter Sunday, the pastor distributes a blank card to each person in morning worship. He or she invites worshipers to write on their cards the names of people they know in this area who do not regularly attend church. “Try to think of five names,” the pastor says. “If you can’t think of five, list as many as you can.”

After five minutes of meditative background music, the pastor says,

- “Don’t put the card in the offering plate. Take it home with you. Put it where it will catch your attention every day—above your kitchen sink, on your shaving mirror, your refrigerator door, or perhaps in your car if you commute to work.
- “I’m asking you to covenant with me to pray for each of the people on your card, by name, every day for the next fourteen days.”

Two Sundays later is either seven days before Christmas Sunday or Palm Sunday (a week before Easter Sunday). That morning, the pastor says,

- “Many of us have been praying for the past two weeks for people we know who do not regularly attend church.
- “This week, I am asking each of you to find an opportunity to invite to next Sunday’s service each of the people for whom you have been praying.”

The Personal Delivery Invitation. Two Sundays before a Christmas Eve candlelight service, print on church stationery a bulk of invitations to this special service. Three times the number of morning worship attendees is usually a sufficient number of cards. Place each invitation in a business-sized envelope. Print in large letters on the front “Personal Delivery Invitation.”

At an appropriate time in the morning worship service, the pastor asks worshippers to invite to the Christmas Eve candlelight service people they know who do not regularly attend church. The pastor says,

“Tell them that our church is having a special Christmas Eve Service. Then say, ‘I thought you folks might enjoy it. Here is a Personal Delivery Invitation. I hope you can attend.’”

Following or during that explanation, the pastor asks the ushers to come forward and distribute the invitation bundles to each pew. Invite each worshipper to take three of the envelopes and hand them to people during the next few days.

Christmas-Card Reach-Out. Some churches prefer this variation of the Personal Delivery Invitation method for inviting people to a Christmas Eve Service.

The pastor urges worshippers to take two or three special Christmas cards and either (a) hand-carry them to people or (b) address and stamp the cards and put them in the mail.

One church designed its own card, with a picture of the wise men journeying on camels and a star in the background. The caption read, “The light still shines.” Some members prefer to hand-carry them to friends’ front doors. When no one is home, they slip the cards into a plastic doorknob hanger that pictures the three kings with these words above them: “Peace be with you always!”

Bring-A-Friend Sunday. Many churches use variants of this method—available from denominational or commercial sources—to encourage worship invitations. *The more attention leaders give to precisely executing the strategy, the better the results.* This procedure works in all sizes of congregations and communities, but it produces better results in small churches than in large ones.

The congregation designates a specific Sunday as “Bring-A-Friend Sunday.” On that day members bring friends to share in a special morning worship service and luncheon. (Churches that have multiple morning worship services add one or more brunches to the luncheon so that they do not exclude early-service attendees from this opportunity.)

An expensive meal is not necessary. The key element is making it a catered lunch that requires advance reservations. Without advance reservations for the luncheon, people feel inclined to attend when invited, yet back out at the last minute. With advance reservations, most of the guests who make reservations attend. *A potluck meal does not work*, because the guests know that advance reservations are not necessary.

Warning: This procedure works best in (a) new churches chartered within the last five to ten years, (b) churches in small towns of fewer than 10,000 in population, and (c) churches whose pastor and people have an evangelical theology that motivates them toward outreach. The procedure usually works less well in older congregations of mainline denominations that lack both the growth-motivation of a new-church start and evangelical-theology motivation.

Open-House Sunday. Open House Sunday is a possibility during any season of the year.

It is especially valuable at the completion of a new building or renovation project. Use a variation of the “Personal Delivery Invitation” method outlined above to motivate members to invite friends and acquaintances.

The key to success: schedule the special service as the *morning worship* experience instead of during the afternoon or evening.

Special Recognition Sunday. Some congregations in small towns with only one high school sponsor an “Athletes Recognition Sunday” three times a year, one for each major sports season. They honor the team members and the coach in morning worship, followed by a complimentary luncheon.

“Teacher Recognition Sunday” for public school teachers is another possibility in some communities. Other examples include “Law Enforcement Recognition Sunday” and “Fire Fighters Recognition Sunday.”

In each instance, people who are not attending church anywhere attend on those special Sundays. Some of them return and eventually become church members.

Motivational Consciousness-Raising. Either in printed form or oral form, or both, the following paragraphs raise consciousness concerning people the worshippers could invite to worship. 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.

Use this procedure in morning worship two times a year, either in tandem with one of the methods illustrated above or as a stand-alone part of the worship experience.

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.

VII. Mass Communication Builds Bridges

The billboards in metropolitan areas have attracted much attention. Examples: “Will the road you’re on get you to my place? – God.” “Need directions? – God.” “C’mon over and bring the kids. – God.” These signs have consciousness-raising value, but something more specific is required to move the mind and body to visit a particular congregation for the first time. The following examples have achieved that goal for many churches.

Yellow Pages Advertising. This is the most cost-effective way to spend money on evangelism, especially for new residents. One essential, even in small ads that contain only two lines, is the time(s) of morning worship. In the typical church, 5 percent to 15 percent of its members attended the first time after finding the church name and address in the *Yellow Pages* of the phone book.

Church Signs and Lighting. Approximately 10 percent of church members in all congregations visited worship the first time after they drove past and saw the building. Use appropriate exterior and in some cases interior lighting (in stained-glass areas that face the street) to keep the church visible at all times of the day.

To build and maintain visible signs, apply this formula: “The height of the letters in inches must be appropriate for the distance in feet from the street and the average speed of passing traffic.”

The J.M. Stewart Corporation is the largest church-sign provider in America, endorsed by twenty denominations: www.stewartsigns.com/church-signs.php

Direct Mail. Some churches attract first-time worship visitors with direct mail to the zip-code zones around the church. Best results come from mailings during the two weeks before Christmas and Easter. For information about companies that provide mailing labels, contact your local Chamber of Commerce.

To design direct-mail pieces, obtain the advice of a marketing expert within or outside your congregation. Avoid designing such a piece with a committee, which inevitably causes it to lose its focus. Contact the following, or other, church-advertising specialists: Outreach Marketing, Inc. (www.outreachmarketing.com/outreach) and Church Ad Project (www.churchad.com).

With direct mail to zip code zones, remember four facts:

1. Direct mail attains approximately one-tenth of 1 percent in first-time worship visitor results.
2. Send at least 10,000 pieces per mailing (six to ten families usually visit per 10,000 pieces mailed).
3. Connect the message with a special event, rather than extending a general invitation.
4. Two or three mailings per year get the best results, since repetition plays an important role in direct mail.

Focused Direct-Mail. Mail a letter such as the one below during the weeks prior to Easter Sunday and a Candlelight Christmas Eve Service. Send the letter to everyone who has visited worship within the past year, even those who only visited once during the past twelve months.

Dear Friends,

I just wanted to take a moment to let you know that I'm thrilled you have been visiting with us at First Church! I hope you have felt right "at home" with us.

As you have discovered in your visits with us, First Church is an alive, exciting, caring, and growing congregation and we'd love to have you become a part of our Church Family. I certainly do not want to pressure you in any way. However, if you have reached that point in your life where you know that First Church is where you want to make your church home, then this special season would be a great time to join.

The next two Sundays, Palm Sunday and Easter, are two of the most significant Sundays of the year for those of us within the Christian faith. This Sunday, Palm Sunday, begins Holy Week as we continue in our journey to the cross. And then, of course, the following Sunday is Easter as we celebrate the good news of the resurrection and what it means to us today. It is, indeed, a special time of the year, and it would be a wonderful time to join us as one of our newest members!

If there is any way I can be of assistance to you, don't hesitate to call on me. May you experience in your life the wonderful gift of God's saving grace offered to us on the cross, and the good news of the resurrection of Christ. I look forward to see you Sunday.

In Christ,
Dr. Jay Horton

Neighborhood Flier Ministry. This is a less expensive variation on direct mail. Several times each year, this ministry team places a one-page flier in the front door of homes in the zip code zones from which you draw new members:

- On its word-processing equipment and copy machine, the church produces a one-page flier announcing the date of a personal-enrichment or musical event. (A general invitation to "come over and worship with us sometime" does *not* work.)
- The neighborhood-flier-ministry team puts a flier in each front door on the several square blocks for which each team member is responsible.
- After distributing these fliers several times, a few first-time worship visitors usually appear.

Avoid focusing evangelization efforts *only* on households within a five-to-six-block radius of our church. Truly "neighborhood churches" disappeared from the American landscape several decades ago. Effective evangelization efforts are both/and—directed at both close-by neighborhoods *and* people who live within a fifteen-minute-drive-time radius of our building. God may call us to "mission responsibilities" among people in close-by households. However, *the places to which God calls us in benevolence and mission ministries are not always synonymous with the areas from which God produces our evangelization results.*

In the typical U.S. congregation, 85 percent of attendees live in a five-to-fifteen-minute drive-time radius from the building. Leaders can accurately predict most of their church's future evangelization results with a pin map of current membership, color-coded in five-year groups, according to when one or more members of that household joined the congregation. *Since these are the zip codes from which our primary future results will come, we should direct our primary reach-out energies to those areas.*

New Housing Developments and Small Towns of Population 2,000 or Fewer. Leave “door hanger brochures” in the target area of square blocks late Sunday afternoon. Ask high school and junior high youth to deliver them.

A week later, adults visit these front doors, using the conversational approach outlined in the section below titled “New Resident Reach-Out.”

Door-hanger brochures get the best results during pre-Easter and pre-Christmas seasons.

Free Newspaper Stories. Ask the religion editor of your newspaper for press release format guidelines. E-mail one, two, or three press releases per week to all community media (identical press releases to each one):

- Appoint a volunteer or a staff member to write the releases.
- At each weekly staff meeting ask, “What is happening during the next two weeks that seems worthy of a press release?”

Systems like this multiply free newspaper coverage tenfold.

Paid Newspaper Ads. Most effective at Christmas and Easter seasons, September is a third but less valuable option. For maximum impact, make your ad at least two columns wide and four inches tall. Newspaper ads are often effective and economically feasible in small towns where a high percentage of people subscribe to weekly or county newspapers.

Run ads weekly for one month—perhaps during pre-Christmas or pre-Easter weeks—rather than once a month all year. One source of newspaper ad mats is Church Ad Project, at its www.churchad.com Internet site.

Another source for this, and church ads of every type, is the online store of The United Methodist Church’s “Igniting Ministry.” This Internet site also contains usable ideas for congregations of all denominations: www.mediawarehouse.ignitingministry.org

Radio Spots. These spots bring your church to the attention of most unchurched residents within a few weeks. The smaller the town, the more powerful the radio spots and the cheaper they are to purchase; but even in larger cities, radio spots can effectively communicate your congregation and its ministries:

- Run them at “drive times” when people are on their way to or from work.
- If possible, air them immediately prior to or during local news broadcasts to which many community residents listen each day.

In some congregations, individuals make special gifts to underwrite one month of radio spots on an experimental basis (just as some members donate flowers for the sanctuary on a rotational basis).

The following is an important factor when you begin using radio spots:

- Inform your members in advance.
- Their friends and associates usually mention the spots in conversations.

TV Ads. Sometimes financially feasible in small or midsize towns where they are less expensive, churches with more than 800 in average worship attendance in towns of any size find them valuable:

- Use thirty-second spots six or more times during the week.
- Supplement the ads by broadcasting part or all of the Sunday worship service live and with a tape one other time during the week.

Cinema Ads. An option some large congregations use: research indicates that “In terms of recall, consumers remember cinema ads better than TV ads—43 percent versus 6 percent.” (Matthew Grimm, “Lights, Camera, Commercial,” *American Demographics*, February 2003, pp. 34-35)

Miscellaneous Free Media Ads. A huge list of advertising options (TV spots, radio spots, newspaper ads, direct mail, door hangers, and outdoor billboards), many of which are usable by congregations of all denominations, is available at the online store of The United Methodist Church’s “Igniting Ministry.” You download many of the ads at no charge, or you can order items on CD at a low cost: www.mediawarehouse.ignitingministry.org

Internet Home Pages. These are of value to church members in a variety of ways. Increasingly, churches use them as billboards that communicate with people about to move to the community from another city:

- That is especially true of residents in high-tech communities with aerospace and similar industries.
- Relocating employees often check out churches of their denomination by viewing their Internet sites.

For professional assistance in developing a home page for your church, check with local professionals or local Internet service providers.

New-Resident Reach-Out. New-resident contacts are most *effective in small towns whose population is less than 10,000*. If you use this method, test it for three to six months. If you have zero or very few first-time worship attendees, either (a) revise your method or (b) drop it and focus on “inviting procedures” outlined in “Section VI.” above and/or other methods in this section that have proven themselves in cities and metropolitan areas.

The following steps have proven effective in small communities in several parts of the United States. *Warning:* Using only one or two of these steps gets sparse results. But used in a systematic, organized mix, they are sometimes quite productive.

Step 1: The pastor sends a “welcome to the community” letter that invites new residents to worship. Enclose with the letter a two-fold or three-fold, multicolor brochure that overviews the congregation’s focus and ministries. (For detailed guidance on how to prepare a brochure, see the section on how to develop a church brochure at the end of this section.)

Many commercial companies provide names and addresses of new residents. Usually, the Chamber of Commerce knows of a reliable local vender.

Step 2: Within seven days after mailing the pastor’s letter, a layperson makes a “front door” visit in which something like the following conversation occurs. *Warning:* Do not telephone in advance. Just stop by. Try to avoid going inside. Stay no longer than five minutes.

- After an introduction, the lay visitor says, “You may remember receiving a welcome letter from our pastor. We are glad to have you in the community.”
- “Are you folks getting settled?” Virtually everyone who has moved recently will make some comments about that experience.
- “Have you folks found a church home here in the community?” The way people respond to that question defines the remainder of the conversation.
- With people who have already started attending a church, the front-door visitor says, “We are delighted to have you in the community. We do not want to take anyone away from a church they are attending. But if we can ever be of service to you in any

way—perhaps through our Preschool or Parents’ Day Out program or in some other way—please let us know. Here, let me give you one of our church brochures, so you’ll know where we are located.”

- With newcomers whose response indicates that they have not found a church home, the visitor says, “I want to invite you to visit our worship services. Here is a brochure that gives you the times and our location. We are over at (describe the location). Come and see us some Sunday.”

Step 3: Add to your church-newsletter list the names and addresses of new residents whose conversational response indicates that they have not yet settled on a church home. Leave them on that list for a long time—until they (a) indicate that they are not going to attend your church, (b) indicate that they have started attending another church, or (c) say they prefer not to receive your church newsletter.

Warning: Do not remove their names from your newsletter mailing list prematurely. Some people remain on the list for several years before visiting your church. Then, because they have become “mental members” by receiving the newsletter, they start attending during a time of life stress or spiritual need.

Step 4: In homes that seem applicable, based on your *Step 2* experiences above, in two or three weeks, a layperson makes a fifteen-minute living room visit whose purpose is to begin building a friendly relationship. The pattern of that conversation involves subjects such as (a) welcoming them to the community, (b) getting acquainted, (c) discussing their spiritual interests, (d) talking about your congregation’s activities, and (e) inviting them to visit your worship service.

Step 5: Develop a calendar file that prompts another living room visit by a layperson at least annually or until the newcomers tell you that (a) they are not interested in your church or (b) they start attending another church.

Step 6: Be responsive to stress points in the lives of these new residents, such as hospitalizations, grief, etc. Many unchurched new residents take the first step of a spiritual journey toward your church by receiving the newsletter and by repeated, friendly contacts from church members. Thus, at a point in their lives when they experience a heightened receptivity to God due to stress, need, or life changes, some of them begin attending your church. They are more familiar with your church than with other churches, so they naturally move in your direction.

Small-Town Reach-Out. The young pastor of a tiny church in a fewer-than-1,000-population town organized his leaders into teams that over a two-year period visited and interviewed every household in town. They asked four questions:

1. Are you active in a local church?
2. What keeps people from attending church?
3. What is the greatest need in this community?
4. What advice would you like to give our pastor?

The congregation put all of the unchurched households on its newsletter list and left them on it unless the people requested removal.

Does it surprise you to learn that in two years that church grew from an average attendance of 20 to an average attendance of more than 100?

Developing a Church Brochure. Begin by understanding that this type of communication is a science. Distribute these guidelines to the outreach committee, the communication committee, the staff, and whoever is responsible for publishing a church brochure.

- Studies show that two or more colors draw far greater attention and readership than does a one-color brochure.
- Studies show that the human eye automatically moves to the upper left of any *printed* material *first*. If the eye finds nothing of interest there, it tells the brain to skip the other parts. Therefore, print a need-meeting idea in that corner. *Never* put the history of your denomination on the left panel of a brochure. That information is institutional and “us-oriented.” Publicity material should be “you-focused,” connecting with a felt-need of people outside the church.
- Studies show that people are attracted to people more than to objects or to buildings. Therefore, include people pictures. Photos of buildings are okay but will draw fewer people into reading the print.
- Studies show that abundant white space increases readership. Brochures should not attempt to tell people everything about the church. That can come later, after they begin regular attendance.
- Studies show that people are particularly attracted to a church that provides a friendly atmosphere, strong youth and children programming, biblical preaching and teaching that relates to daily life, quality nursery care, and meaningful worship. If the congregation offers these, say so boldly—not in the fine print.
- Studies show that churches should make it easy for people to find the building—especially in metropolitan areas. Put a map on your brochure.

If you review several church brochures, you find that many of them are built around one of six different themes:

1. **Some brochures focus on the programmatic elements of church life**, such as Bible study, children and youth choirs, youth groups, and singles ministries.
2. **Some brochures focus on the spiritual and psychological, human need-meeting ministries of the church**, such as personal growth and educational opportunities for young adults.
3. **Some brochures focus on the biblical beliefs of the church.** This lets people know the congregation is biblically oriented by lifting up four-to-six Bible verses that support key church doctrines.
4. **Some brochures focus on the church’s ministry to the needy in the community and across the world**, such as food pantries, used clothing rooms, the world-peace movement, and community leadership involvement by church members.
5. **Some brochures focus on the congregation’s past history**, such as the distinguished, nationally known pastors who have served it in past decades, the construction dates of its great buildings, and its significant service to the community since 1810.
6. **Some brochures focus on the denomination’s history**, reviewing early founders’ names and thought patterns, the country or state of the movement’s origin, and the founding fathers’ 1820 belief systems.

The best overall advice is *blend and balance*. Hit the first three on the above list with greatest emphasis (upper-left of each page) and the last three lightly (right side and lower parts of pages and panels).

VIII. Event-Marketing Builds Bridges

Christmas and Easter are two annual events that provide powerful, culturally-embedded opportunities for bridging activities.

Home for Christmas. Many congregations have had excellent results by linking one or more of the outreach methods described in the previous two sections with a “Christmas Eve Candlelight Service.” Often, people who visit for the first time on Christmas Eve become members of the congregation in subsequent years.

Vacation Bible School. Some churches use a variation of the Small Town Reach-Out outlined above or a Vacation Bible School, front-door invitation as a first-step springboard. Through one of those avenues, they find families whose children they invite to Vacation Bible School. Then, using the list of children who attended Vacation Bible School, they invite them to Sunday school that fall.

IX. Community Service Builds Bridges

In Luke 10, Jesus defines “neighbors” as people we do not personally know, as well as people with whom we are acquainted. One of the many ways a church lives out with integrity its role as the Body of Christ is by helping to heal the various emotional and physical hurts of people in the community. Your church should therefore continually review needs that other organizations are not meeting and consider whether it should play a role in addressing these needs.

Various kinds of childcare programs, because they meet felt-needs of unchurched young adults, are often both caring endeavors and evangelistically productive. Churches can usually provide these services on a break-even basis. Discuss whichever of the following seems to make the most sense as a starting point: (a) A “Parents’ Day Out” one or two days each week. (b) A “Parents’ Night Out” on Friday or Saturday night from 6:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. that provides childcare at the church. (c) In small towns with one school system, some churches sponsor a “Home Game Childcare” program similar to the Parents’ Night Out noted above. In each of these programs, a small fee covers staffing expenses. *Warning:* such projects always crash and burn in a few months if they rely on volunteer staffing.

In most states, none of the above programs require additional liability insurance; nor are they regulated and licensed by state laws. (In many states, five-day-a-week preschool and daycare are a different matter, as they must meet state regulations related to staffing, facility construction, restrooms, first-floor only classrooms, etc.)

Churches in small towns where after-school transportation is easy to accomplish should investigate the possibility of a Wednesday, after-school children’s ministry such as “Kid’s Club.” Effective patterns for this type of ministry are available through the Christian Education Departments of the national or middle-judicatory offices of many denominations.

More than 50 percent of children in preschool, daycare, after-school, and Parents’ Day Out ministries are from families that do not attend church anywhere. Building a bridge from those programs to the church sanctuary and these ministries to parents and children in the community can become evangelistic opportunities. Sending invitations home with children does *not* get their parents into the sanctuary on Sunday morning. Nor does asking parents to attend other weekday ministries!

The only method that successfully bridges that gap: schedule an annual recognition and celebration of that important weekday ministry by spotlighting each program—daycare, preschool, etc.—in a different Sunday morning worship service:

- Invite all of the parents and children from that particular ministry to that Sunday service and provide a complimentary lunch afterward.
- Fourteen days ahead, mail the parents invitations, asking them to make meal reservations in advance by telephone or letter.
- During the previous week, follow that mailing with telephone contacts to parents who have not yet made reservations.

This procedure often helps parents who are not attending church anywhere to make the crucial first step in church attendance. *Warning:* The meal reservation is the one element without which nothing else will get the families to Sunday morning worship for the first time.

Leaders often lump the focus of their outreach efforts into one category: the unchurched. That distortion blocks churches from outreach effectiveness. Just as churchgoers differ from one another, unchurched people are not identical.

The following excerpts help to overcome that tendency to blur the distinctions between various kinds of caring services that can also be evangelistically result-full. They are quoted by permission from *Research Report*, published by the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention through its Strategic Planning Support team, under the leadership Director Phil Jones.

Children and Youth, Age 0-19. Ministry takes two avenues—children and their parents. Examples: preschool programs, before- or after-school care, children’s clubs, teen clubs, parenting classes, and crisis pregnancy counseling. Older teens at universities, military bases, or correctional institutions: student or chaplain ministries.

Young Adults, Age 20-34. Two avenues—singles and married young adults. Examples: recreation, premarital counseling, marital adjustment counseling, singles retreats, campus ministry, day care, parents’ morning out, parenting classes, single-parent support groups, crisis pregnancy counseling, and AIDS ministry.

Middle Adults, Age 35-59. Organize programs to deal with job loss, disabling injury, death of the primary wage earner, and broken marriage. Provide opportunities to participate in meaningful ministries that utilize gifts and talents.

Older Adults, Age 60-Retirement. Financial/legal counseling, transportation, reading and/or letter writing services, adult day care, grief-support groups, medical/dental clinics, nursing home ministries, and senior adult clubs plus the opportunity to volunteer for church ministries.

Married Couples with Children. All types of family ministries, plus preschooler mothers’ groups, latchkey programs, parenting seminars, children’s mission organizations, and Vacation Bible Schools.

One-Person Households. Needs related to peer relationships, finances, care of older parents, loneliness, feelings of rejection, grief support groups, day care, Big Brother/Sister programs, divorce recovery, food pantries, clothing closets, homeless shelters, craft classes, and senior adult clubs, plus opportunity to volunteer for worthy ministry projects.

College Graduates/Some College. Provide personal, career, and family counseling; opportunities to serve others through traditional church programs; housing for homeless people; literacy training; and refugee resettlement.

High School/Less than High School. Provide tutoring for children, literacy training, and high school equivalency training.

Racial Groups. Immigrants may need language classes. Economically disadvantaged groups require the full range of community and family ministries listed in previous and subsequent categories.

Mobile Home, Trailer, and Other Housing Units. These people often respond best to on-site ministries: social activities, counseling, assistance with material needs, and activities for children plus the range of other ministries.

Low-Income People, \$0-\$14,999 Per Year. Provide ministries of already-listed categories plus literacy training, job-referral services, substance abuse treatment, transportation, legal advocacy, and leadership development plus coordination of ministries with those that other churches and social service agencies provide.

High-Income Households, \$50,000 Plus Per Year. Provide ministries that focus on intellectual stimulation, developing community, finding meaning and fulfillment in life, and professional counseling plus opportunities to use personal gifts and resources in ministry.

Evangelistically effective congregations are Great Commandment conscious: They love neighbors who need their help inside and outside the church.

However, they do not stop there. They are also Great Commission conscious: They attempt to connect with and spiritually transform the lives of unchurched people.

Evangelistically effective churches therefore match the methods by which they offer Christ with the type of people to whom they offer that gift.

To what kind of people does your church want to offer that matchless gift?

X. More than Inactive Members

In developing an effective bridging strategy, do not mix your efforts with attempts to recover inactive members:

- Assign evangelism and inactive member efforts to two different committees or ministry teams.
- Give the leadership group responsible for inactive members the four-year plan outlined in *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 6, How to Shrink Your Church's Inactive Member List* (Download free at the www.TheParishPaper.com Web site.)

XI. More than Methods

What causes evangelism results? Not methods alone!

Methods are essential, but by themselves methods are like an airplane without an engine.

Evangelism results come from a mixture of numerous factors within these four major influence components:

God's Spirit. What God does by the Spirit's interaction with the flow of each individual's life, circumstances, and needs is the invisible influence without which no evangelism method matters.

The Congregation's Actions. What the congregation does to help meet the spiritual, psychological, emotional, and relational needs of individuals increases their receptivity to the influence of God's Spirit.

The Staff and Governing Board's Theological/Biblical Motivation. If the pastor, staff, and governing board members have a strong spiritually based motivation to help people connect with God, they will find and continue to use effective evangelism methods. If, however, a church's leaders are motivated only by the need to balance the budget or reach a membership growth goal, they soon stop using effective evangelism methods—even when they see that those methods work.

Prayer's Power. If you want your congregation to find and retain the use of effective evangelism methods, find methods that influence your members to pray for God's Spirit to touch the lives of people who need God's presence. Example:

- At the beginning of governing board meetings, split the group into triads.
- Ask people to take turns sharing a bit from their week and the name of one person they would like to influence toward Christ and the church.
- Ask the three people to pray daily for one another and the person they named.

Bridging churches rely on more than methods. They combine proclamation, presence, and prayer with practical methods.

XII. The Bottom Line

While traveling, I drove my rent car through a western Chicago suburb on the way to attend a Palm Sunday worship service. A mile from the church I passed a commercial sign that read, "Service Center." A half-block further on, the sign on another building read "Recruiting Center" and listed all branches of the armed forces. Shortly, I came to a sign that read, "Memorial Gardens."

Many congregations fit one of those three categories.

- Some churches are memorial gardens. They point to the past. The best things happened yesterday.
- Some churches are service centers. Helping hurting people in the community is their primary and sometimes their only aim.
- Some churches are recruiting centers whose flag seems to say, "Evangelism and nothing but evangelism."

The Apostolic Church reported in the New Testament served in all three categories.

- The early Church was a memorial center that remembered, not just its past, but its Lord, Jesus Christ.
- The early Church was a service center, reaching out to a pagan world with better news than it had ever heard.
- The early Church was a recruiting center for service in the greatest kingdom on earth, the kingdom of God, into which people can step anytime they decide to.

What do congregations need today?

- They need to become a memorial center in the Christ sense of that word.
- They need to become a service center in the spiritual sense of that word.
- They need to become a recruiting center in the bridging sense of that word.