



## **Reaching the Disinterested: What Works?** *Why People Will or Won't Choose to Come to Your Church* *A Travel Free Learning Article*

By  
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A question whose answer often eludes the members and leaders of plateaued and declining churches is, "Why don't more people come to our church?" Many who attend churches feel they have friendly, inviting churches filled with wonderful people and can't understand why the unchurched don't attend.

There are several spiritual, cultural and generational influences at work in our society that may attract or repel people considering participation in the local church. Let's take a look at some of those influences and also consider how to make our churches more attractive to those considering church involvement in the light and context of church transformation.

### **Why Do People Attend Your Church?**

A good place to start on this topic is to ask, "Why do the people who do come to your church come to your church?" Ask church members and you will find that many people stay in a church for different reasons than why they first came to the church. We asked that questions at several different churches and received replies like these:

- Family ties – "I have family that attends this church who invited me. It is something good we share in common."
- Friendships – "I have made some of my best and most important friends at this church."
- Commitment to the vision and mission of the church – "I like what this church stands for and the things we are involved in."
- Commitment to God – "I am a believer and worship is what I do."
- Denominational affiliation – "I grew up in the Baptist (Catholic, Lutheran, Christian, etc.) Church and that is where I feel comfortable."

### **Why Do People Not Come To Your Church?**

Several decades ago, people who considered attending a church did so with positive preconceptions about church and what church attendance would mean to them. Some of those preconceptions were:

- Church is a good place to be
- Church attendance is socially acceptable
- Church is a safe place
- Church is a good place to make friends
- Church is a great place to make good business connections

In our present time, people still approach church with a set of preconceptions. Unfortunately these preconceptions are not the same as their parents' preconceptions and are not nearly as positive. Some of these are:

- Church is boring and Irrelevant
- It will be unwelcoming
- The people there are judgmental
- I am busy and don't have time for church attendance
- Cookie cutter mentality – All Christians are alike
- I don't believe what they believe/I can't buy the theology
- Church people are only Interested in me working for their projects
- They are only interested in getting my money
- I had a bad experience at a church
- I had to go to church as a child
- I don't believe in organized religion
- I don't have to go to church to worship God
- I never been invited (Enough)
- I can't find your church

### **How to Attract People to Your Church**

One of my favorite resources on this topic is Thom S. Rainer's book ***Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them.*** [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.] In his research are some interesting findings. Take a look at some of those results:

#### **Top 13 Reasons that Unchurched People Choose a Church**

1. 90% - Pastor/Preaching
2. 88% - Doctrines
3. 49% - Friendliness of Members
4. 42% - Other Issues
5. 41% - Someone from the Church Witnessed to Me
6. 38% - Family Member
7. 37% - Sensed God's Presence/Atmosphere of Church
8. 25% - Relationship Other than Family Member
9. 25% - Sunday School Class/Small Groups
10. 25% - Children's/Youth Ministry
11. 12% - Other Groups/Ministries
12. 11% - Worship Style/Music
13. 7% - Location

Knowledge is power if you use it to your advantage. Some church leaders gather the information of why the unchurched do not attend church, but refuse to use this information to make any changes. We, of the church, often insist on doing business as usual and just complaining that others don't come.

Armed with the knowledge of some of the reasons people may be disinclined to attend your church, and research on why some of the unchurched do decide to attend a church, the next question becomes: What can I(we) do to attract some of the unchurched to my(our) church?

- They can't find the church
  - Signage – Erect a readable sign.
  - Phonebook – Put a small ad in the Yellow pages. Few people use them anymore but it is still a good idea.
  - Web presence – Over 90% of the people who are likely to visit your church will first check out your church web site. If you don't have a web site, most under the age of 50 will assume your church does not exist. Keep the web site interesting and up to date or potential visitors will assume your church is uninteresting and out of date. Set up your web site to cater to visitors instead of church members.
  - Direct mailings – Rarely do direct mailing directly attract visitors. But they do help with branding your church in your community. The positive effects are long term.

- Location – There is very little you can do about the location of your facilities. But a change in church mission and target audience may call for a change in location.
- Work on your sermon – Make your sermon interesting and the content understandable and full of useful information. The pastor’s sermon will be one of the most vital factors visitors consider when they are deciding whether to return or not.
- Know your vision and target audience – Design all you do to impact your target audience. For example, if you are targeting families with school aged children, make sure your children’s ministry is top notch. Expend the majority of your resources in children’s ministry.
- Personal invitations – This is the key to attracting new people to the church. Everything else we do is to make sure they find the church attractive and comfortable and that their experience in attending church is positive. But very few will attend without a personal invitation.
- Systemic evangelism – Teach the present church membership to make the sharing of their spiritual lives second nature – comfortable and meaningful.
- Random Acts of Kindness (RAK)/Servant Evangelism – Reach out to the community in ways that help them see the church and God as kind and giving expecting nothing in return.
- Connecting ministries – Connect with the unchurched in your neighborhood by hosting free, Block parties, VBS, car washes, auto maintenance days, school supply give-a-ways, etc.
- Make sure that people know that your church is offering relationships instead of religion
- Offer people something they can’t get anywhere else – a loving and growing relationship with the Living God who has expressed love to them in undeniable ways.

### **Connecting People in Your Church**

When visitors show up at Sunday morning worship, connecting is just one of the many steps the church must have in place to bring them into full participation in the life of the church. Getting them in the door is a challenge but it is just the beginning of a process. If you are not ready for your visitors and fail to connect with them you will most likely not see them again. There are the few individuals who are determined to come to your church come hell or high water, but many visitors are uneasy and insecure about attending church and it doesn’t take much to discourage them from returning.

There are many approaches to church hospitality. Many churches believe they are friendly and welcoming when in fact they are not. I encourage you to carefully look at the Sunday morning experience of your visitors, and then put a team in place to improve on that experience. It is a good idea to hire some unchurched people to attend your morning worship and report back on their experiences. Continually look at the church experience you offer through unchurched eyes.

Some very simple things that all churches can and should be doing are:

- Welcoming with individual attention and introductions. People want to be noticed but not displayed. Have a cadre of people available and trained to seek out new attendees and engage them in conversation. Introduce them around.
- Reconnect with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> time visitors. Continue to introduce them to more and more church members.
- Offer coffee, tea and a place to interact with other people.
- Have very clearly communicated steps to connect with the people of the church. Have a simple process in place and let visitors know what that process is.
- Walk people into connecting with a small group.
- Develop a path for spiritual growth and make it clear what it is.

Getting visitors to your church boils down to having highly motivated church members who are excited about your church and excited about growing relationship with the Living God. Moving new people from first time visitors to become fully functioning followers of Christ takes planning, training and the commitment of many members of the church. Evangelism doesn’t just happen. It must be a core value of your church.

## **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](http://www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org), send an e-mail to [Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org](mailto:Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org), or call 803.622.0923.

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