

Outreach Mistakes Churches Make

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How can a church best connect with people who are exploring faith?

What works? What does not work?

What do many churches get wrong when they organize outreach efforts?

What are proven methods for reaching people for Jesus?

Trying to establish connections with outdated communication tools

Which communications do you pay attention to? Mail? Email? Texts? Facebook? Short reels? Churches have relied on traditional communication tools for a long time, but even committed members will tell you that some items receive little attention. Some methods are only more “noise” in a world overwhelmed by communication.

What is the probability that an unchurched visitor is going to fill out a card, give you an email, or give you a phone number? (I am not talking about churched visitors who are visiting.)

What is the probability that a visitor will text a prayer request to a provided number? What is the probability that a visitor will interact by texting? Texting is now the primary way most people interact with organizations they trust. Texting captures engagement, relationship, and messages sent and received.

Using the wrong metrics, misreading the metrics, or having no metrics at all

Soft metrics (attendance at community events, contacts at public events, new visitors, information requests) are often interpreted as trust and interest.

Newcomers and searchers usually evaluate connections for consistency, and content that matches their desires or expectations. This means that “touch points” must provide a clear picture of what they can expect from the church. That newcomers want to evaluate should not be mistaken for trust and interest. Churches too often perceive a deeper engagement than exists, based more on hope than realistic evaluation of limited engagement and interaction.

Of course, even worse is to be paying no attention at all to the metrics and what they could potentially reveal to the church.

Depending on programmed, organized events

The most effective outreach is done by nurturing natural relationships. Building relationships takes time, frequent communication and interaction, and commitment.

Communicating to others that they are welcome to be part of a faith community occurs best when they experience the faith community regularly. Outreach must involve many, not a few or one.

Focusing too much on a local church (“my” church instead of “Christ’s” church)

It is natural that church members want people to engage with their own local church, but the better beginning point is to present a larger view of God’s kingdom. Connect people to the bigger picture.

Few entry points present greater possibilities and flexibility than coming to Scripture together with a blank slate. Encouraging knowledge and application of Scripture can reach people in various life settings and communities, opening doors to respond to spiritual, emotional, and relational needs. Beginning with a panoramic view will not be a hindrance, but will be a help in most interactions.

Seeking total agreement on teachings up front

Many Christians have learned that outreach means sharing the gospel. It is natural to want to share the Good News. However, the faith journey is personal. Each person must come to his or her own faith. The beginning place is great Bible truths about God, Christ, the Word of God, and Bible themes such as sin, repentance, faith, and obedience. The beginning point is not salvation doctrine. Why? Because salvation doctrine makes little sense without the underlying Bible teachings that support it.

Further, various political and religious distortions swirl about in our world, and many people are wary of yet another distortion. Interactions must value the faith journey of the individual.

Spending too much time with people who are not interested in spiritual matters

Few churches have a good tool for perceiving the spiritual condition of the soil. Sadly, many (if not most) people do not interpret their daily life experiences through a faith-based lens. I have written extensively about the development of an evangelism sieve or funnel so that the gospel can be inserted into hearts at exactly the right time in exactly the right place.

A related problem is that many in today's world are starved for connections and community. Too many churches make the mistake of believing those felt needs automatically translate into spiritual interest.

Failure to be Christ-centered (outreach that is client-centered or customer-centered)

Many people in our world have learned to be church clients or consumers. Some will come because of what is being offered, but they seldom stay around very long. Better to be honest up front! Instead of thinking broadly, develop a plan for helping people see the local church in its focus on Christ. Help others see what the church is really like so each can decide if, when, and how to fit in.

Focusing upfront on spiritual needs is essential, making clear the demanding nature of discipleship, and the beautiful blessings that come to faithful followers.

With clear and effective communication, carefully evaluating spiritual interest, cultivating a personal touch that will build trust and connection, focusing on spiritual needs, and pointing always to Christ as the essential foundation of faith, others are helped and encouraged to make progress on their own personal spiritual journey.