

The Power of Relational Evangelism - Conversion Responses

A friend or relative	78%
Pastor	06%
Sunday school	05%
Church service or program	03%
Walk-in off the street	03%
Special need	02%
Personal visitation	02%
Evangelistic crusade or TV show	1/2%
<i>(Source: Church Growth, Inc.)</i>	

Evangelism Must Begin Beyond the Sanctuary

LifeWay Research study looks at evangelism trends

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Unchurched adults interested in finding a congregation aren't nearly as likely to visit one in person as a church member who is shopping for a new congregation. That means effective evangelism must begin outside the sanctuary in relationships between Christians and unbelievers, according to research from several recent studies from LifeWay Research.

A survey of 1,684 adults who had not "attended a religious service in a church, synagogue or mosque, other than for a religious holiday or for a special event such as a wedding or funeral at any time in the past six months" revealed that only 49 percent would visit in person if they were looking for a church. By contrast, 83 percent of church switchers in an earlier survey said they made an in-person visit when they "actively searched for a new church."

Significantly, more than half of unchurched people would follow a recommendation from family, friends, neighbors or colleagues if they were looking for a church, but 24 percent said they didn't really see themselves using any of the usual ways of finding a church.

"The location of our evangelism needs to shift if we want to reach the unchurched and not just move sheep around," said Ed Stetzer, director of LifeWay Research. "At LifeWay Research we want to encourage churches to grow through conversion. To do that, they must not rely only of the unchurched visiting our churches. Church switchers are primarily the ones who visit churches. The unchurched stay home.

"So, if you build your outreach on recruiting and reaching church visitors you will often build a church on church switchers," he said.

Stetzer continued, "For several decades we have focused on come and see, invest and invite, bring your friends to church by attracting them with a great program. We call that attractional ministry. Now we are facing the reality that fewer unchurched people are willing to visit a Christian church.

"This will compel us to embrace a go and tell – or incarnational – approach," he said. "Should we invite our friends to church? Sure. But should we be, do, and tell the Gospel to people in culture? You bet. It is not only biblical, but it is even more essential today as our culture grows increasingly resistant to the church."

Scott McConnell, associate director of LifeWay Research, said many churches use visitation effectively, "but all churches must learn to equip individuals to reach those who have never had contact with the church."

The situation is compounded by the fact that more than half the 1,402 respondents in a 2007 study of unchurched adults said they never wonder whether they would go to heaven if they died, McConnell said.

"Our evangelistic efforts must acknowledge that we no longer live in a culture in which people are simply putting off coming to the church to find truth," McConnell explained. "Many people today either don't believe truth exists or that the church is the place to find it."

According to Stetzer, "That 'how' of evangelism is in many ways determined by the who, when and where of context. And, we have to learn that culture has changed and is changing. Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ must happen in relationships, not just at church. Each individual believer, not just church staff, must own the responsibility."

Developing relationships with people who don't believe in Jesus Christ is what earns a church member the right to invite them to church, McConnell said.

Unchurched people indicate that recommendations from friends and family would be the most common means of finding a church if they were looking, but only half of them anticipate they would utilize such an invitation.

"For the other half, relationship is still important, because your only hope may be for you to initiate a conversation about faith rather than waiting for them to hear it in a church service," McConnell noted. "And the kind of conversation we have with them must change too. A typical question about heaven won't even relate to the half of the unchurched who never think about heaven.

While unchurched people are open to relationships, few church members are intentionally investing time developing relationships with non-Christians. A soon-to-be published 2007 survey of more than 2,500 adult church members found only 25 percent agreed they "spend time building friendships with non-Christians for the purpose of sharing Christ with them." A full 38 percent actually disagreed with the statement and 36 percent were noncommittal about it.

"Too often the way our churches measure success revolves around what happens at church when we ought to be focusing on what happens in building intentional relationships with those far from Christ," McConnell said. "Some of the activities on our church calendars may actually be preventing effective evangelism by keeping believers away from the people they need to reach."

In addition to developing relationships with unchurched people, churches also ought to put significant effort into creating an effective Internet site, McConnell said.

"The 2008 study revealed that 25 percent of unchurched adults would use a church Website or an Internet search tool to find a congregation to visit," he said. "For one out of four unchurched people, the first visit to your church may be on the Internet. Churches need a Website that favorably represents who they are and, more importantly, who Jesus Christ is."

The upshot of all this is that evangelism efforts and strategies need to shift toward more incarnational and relational approaches than simply an attractational approach, McConnell explained.

“In laymen’s terms, the “We’ll open the doors and they will come” approach to evangelism will not be effective with many unchurched people,” McConnell said. “As believers and as churches, we must invest in building relationships with unbelievers and find tangible ways to show the love of Jesus Christ to them in everyday life.”

“Believers must resolve to step into their world to share the Good News with them,” Stetzer explained. “If we are waiting for them to someday walk into our churches, that someday may never come.

“We have tried that approach for decades – many church buildings/services are looking great. They have new looks, new music and new strategies,” he added. “We have gone to great length to fix up the barn, but the wheat is still not harvesting itself. I believe we must move from attractional ‘come and see’ ministry to incarnational ‘go and tell’ and join Jesus in the harvest fields all around us.”

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