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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Why Are Worship Visitors Important?

Question: Someone told me that *only one in ten* first-time worship visitors return a second time, a third time, and eventually become members. We don't want our church membership to keep shrinking during the next few years. But does that formula mean we must have 100 first-time visitors in order to add 10 new members?

Answer: Like so many generalities, that formula contains some truth, but not enough! Review the following list of additional and equally important factors. Decide which of these predict your church's future.

1. What percent of its members does your church lose each year (deaths, transfers to other churches, moving out of town, or becoming inactive)? To stay the same size, a church must break even (replace its membership losses with new members). The average congregation across the U.S. loses 7 percent of its members each year. But many churches near military bases lose 15 percent. Many small-town churches in rural areas lose only 2 percent. Your church's annual losses illustrate the importance of first-time worship visitors to its future!

2. What percent of your worshippers are visiting for the first visit? On average, 2 percent of worshippers in churches across the U.S. have never previously attended that congregation. Without that 2 percent of first-time visitors, most churches grow smaller each year.

3. What percent of worshippers previously attended this church but are not yet members? On average—in addition to the 2 percent that have never previously attended that church—another 8 percent of each week's worshippers in churches across the U. S. are *not* members of that congregation.

4. What percent of first-time visitors return a second time, a third time, and eventually—after several months or years—become members? On average, the answer is 10 percent. But a few congregations achieve 20 percent. And in a micro-list of fast-growing congregations, 30 percent of first-time worship visitors eventually become members. That percent is more important to your church's future than its number of first-time visitors.

Example: What if your church averages three first-time worship visitors per week (106 for the year) and 10

percent of those first-time visitors became members each year? That translates into *sixteen* new members per year. But if 20 percent of those first-time visitors became members, your church receives *thirty-two* new members per year!

Note: In addition to those new members resulting from first-time worshippers, a few children and youth join through pastor's class each year. But most of them leave town after graduating from high school; thus, nullifying that statistical growth.

5. What causes an increase in first-time worship visitors? A major cause is your congregation's positive reputation in the community. When that is the case (a) members derive significant spiritual meaning from their church, (b) more members spontaneously invite, and (c) more people respond to those invitations.

More than 75 percent of new members in churches across the U.S. visit a worship service the first time because they were invited by someone who worships in that congregation. If you are skeptical about this statistic, conduct an opinion poll. Ask the last twenty people



"Please don't put that in, Sir. We ask our first-time visitors to take out what they intend to put into the offering plate for the next three Sundays."

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?” The results of your survey will reveal that more than 75 percent of your new members say that they came the first time because someone invited them.

Therefore, motivating more members to adopt the habit of inviting increases the number of invitations they extend and increases the number of first-time worship visitors. The following methods have increased the volume of inviting in countless churches.

The Personal Delivery Invitation: Two Sundays before a Christmas Eve candlelight service, print on church stationary 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 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 bundle of invitations to each pew. Invite each worshiper to take three of the envelopes and hand them to people during the next few days.

Christmas-Card Reach-Out: Some churches prefer the following variation of the above method. The pastor urges worshippers to take 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. Some members prefer to deliver 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!”

For a dozen other ideas that can increase first-time worship visitors, download, free of charge, *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 8, How to Attract First-Time Worship Visitors* at the www.TheParishPaper.com Web site.

6. What causes an increase in the percent of your church’s first-time visitors who eventually become members? Begin by recognizing that neither church members nor churches *do* evangelization. God does! Transforming people’s lives spiritually *begins* with Grace. God’s Spirit raises their consciousness of spiritual need, sometimes totally apart from any kind of human effort. After that initial spark, spiritual transformation *continues* when people connect with Christ through the ministry of a congregation.

Leaders of non-declining churches do not confuse their efforts and methods with God’s power. They know

that they are assistants to, not creators of, peoples’ spiritual transformation. But those assistants recognize the important role that three methods play in the evangelization process:

- *Methods that encourage people to visit their worship service for the first time.* Few people join a church until they have visited it at least once.

- *Methods that encourage people who visit their worship service to return a second and third time.* Visitors base their decisions to return on a different set of reasons than those that brought them the first time. Most people attended the first time because someone invited them. People who attend a second and third time base that decision on their own impressions of and experiences with that congregation.

- *Methods that encourage people to (a) connect with Christ and (b) become fully devoted disciples.* Without meaningful spiritual, fellowship, and program participation, few visitors continue to attend.

Effective leaders use all three methods.

7. What other factors increase the number of first-time visitors? Inviting people is an essential. But by themselves, methods are like an airplane without an engine. First-time worship visitors result from a mixture of numerous factors within four major influences:

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 inviting methods work.

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 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 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 methods—even when they see that those methods work.

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

The Bottom Line: God provides the spark of Grace for spiritual transformation. But God expects assistance from assistants.