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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Why Do People Connect with Christ and a Congregation?

Question: While acknowledging that each individual's journey is unique, is there a most prevalent way that the unchurched begin their search for the faith missing in their lives? Attend a worship service? Sign up for an educational class? Attend a special presentation?

Answer: Several studies agree that approximately 75 percent of unchurched adults "begin their search" when someone invites them to a worship service. And about 15 percent begin their search by attending worship in a church they selected from the *Yellow Pages*. And 10 percent begin their search by worshipping at a church building they had noticed while driving past on a weekday.

But why do individuals begin their search at that particular time? Most such individuals begin their search because they feel an inner need. This is usually during a period when their life is more stressful than usual, often during times of *negative* life change and sometimes during times of *positive* life change. But a few individuals report that "it was just time to find a church."

Two factors strongly influence whether adults begin moving toward church involvement:

- Religious beliefs formed in pre-college years—85 percent of people who become a Christian in their entire lifetime had a church experience prior to the age of eighteen. (This makes every congregation's ministry with children and youth among its most important endeavors.)
- Adult decisions based on current needs and social relationships.

What needs do churches meet for adults? Research indicates that four needs are especially important.¹

• *Religious education for children:* this includes moral and character education alongside learning about the Bible and church teachings (what Sunday school and youth programs offer cannot be purchased elsewhere, except in weekday, church-sponsored schools).

• *Personal support and reassurance:* especially in settings where adults can speak openly and honestly without fear of rejection (small groups of various kinds can provide this).

• *Social contacts and a sense of community:* this need is strongest in urban settings where family and friendship ties are weak, especially for newcomers.

• *Inspiration and spiritual guidance:* this means that adults want worship to be uplifting, empowering, and encouraging, especially the music, which sets the emotional tone for all the other elements.

Beneath that research data lurks two larger questions for congregations: Since inviting is the most important reason why unchurched adults visit a church's worship service the first time, (a) what causes a church's people to do a high volume of inviting and (b) what causes a church's first-time worship visitors to return a second time, a third time, and eventually make a spiritual connection with Christ and that congregation?

A magnetic menu increases receptivity. Far fewer adults join a church because of its denominational affiliation these days. In most churches, fewer than 50 percent of new attendees grew up in that denomination.

The majority of today's adults who respond to invitations base their decision to attend worship the first time and subsequent times on whether the church exhibits seven magnetic factors.



DADDY IS REALLY CONNECTING WITH THIS CHURCH...
HE FORGOT TO TURN THE CAR ENGINE OFF.

1. The style and tempo of the worship hymns fit newcomers' ages and preferences. Whether the congregation offers blended worship that contains more than one type of hymn in every service—or offers multiple worship services that feature a different style of hymns and praise songs at different times—the positive, uplifting atmosphere created by “my kind of music” helps people connect with Christ and this congregation.

In other words, whatever worship style the congregation offers, churches with a magnetic menu provide hymn-singing characterized by (a) a non-funeral tempo, (b) familiar and/or easy-to-sing hymns, and (c) hymn types that spiritually nurture worshippers *born during all four of these eras*: pre-1946, 1946-1964, 1965-1990, and 1991-present. Otherwise, the congregation is anti-magnetic for many adult visitors, dampening their receptivity.²

2. The sermons inspire newcomer-adults with biblical insights about how to live a meaningful life. Pastors in magnetic churches are enthusiastic about the messages they deliver. They communicate equally well with people whose birth dates fall after 1975 and the 15 percent of Americans with birth dates before 1946.

Three words seem important in the overall preaching and teaching milieu of churches of every denomination, size, and theological persuasion that attract large numbers of adults from every age group: *Christ*—high Christology; *Bible*—high emphasis on biblical authority; and *Love*—high emphasis on compassion and caring.

3. The pastors and staff exhibit strong spiritual traits and possess personalities to which prospective adult attendees can relate. The following three traits are especially important.

Spiritual enthusiasm: Effective pastors give you the impression that they want to lead you, not just someplace, but to a closer relationship with God. Also, their internal drives come from the fact that their own lives have been transformed and currently are in process of change. Therefore, they have something to share.

Joyful attitude: Oswald Chambers wrote, “Joy is the nature of God in my blood.” People are not attracted to a religious institution whose spiritual leader needs a transfusion.

Spiritual vision for this congregation: Effective pastors are not held prisoner by the perspective and traditions of their congregations. They are sensitive to where people are but not content to leave them there.

In summery, effective pastors balance what social scientists have called “Structure Behavior” (organizational-leadership skills) and “Consideration Behavior” (personal-relationship skills).

4. The excellent children and youth ministries meet an important need felt by young-adult parents. The nursery in magnetic churches is equipped for young par-

ents (recognizing that parents select the church that their infant attends). Magnetic churches have an extroverted Sunday school that goes beyond providing good content for the children of present attendees; these churches actively encourage other children to attend. Magnetic churches frequently list activities for children and youth in worship bulletins.

5. A wide variety of programs make newcomers feel “there is something here for every member of the family.” Examples: Magnetic churches often have youth and children’s choirs. Large magnetic congregations may have brass ensembles, orchestras, and other musical groups. Midsize and large magnetic congregations have several strong adult Sunday school classes and adult groups. Most magnetic churches of every size have a strong “young-adult fellowship nucleus” comprised of people twenty-five to forty-four years of age.

6. The congregation is friendly and newcomers feel welcomed and wanted. Two out of three people feel somewhat anxious when entering an unfamiliar church building. A well-trained greeter team is the first step in addressing this first-impression opportunity.

7. The church is a reasonable driving-distance from most of the newcomers' residences. Approximately 85 percent of American worshippers attend a congregation whose drive-time is fifteen minutes from their home, with a handful of people driving twenty minutes, thirty minutes, or even more. Magnetic congregations attract people from a much larger geographic radius than they did a few decades ago.

What if some of these seven factors are missing? In that case, numerous worship invitations and gracious efforts to encourage visitors to return get sparse results.

The Bottom Line: When served this seven-dish magnetic menu, more church members enthusiastically invite people to visit worship—which increases the number of first-time worship visitors.

And far larger numbers of those invitees return a second time, and eventually become regular attendees—completing that crucial first step as “they search for the faith missing in their lives.”

¹Reported by Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens in *Vanishing Boundaries* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox]

²See information in *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 32, Are We Singing the Right Hymns?* Download free of