

IS GETTING PEOPLE TO COME TO CHURCH AN EFFECTIVE EVANGELISTIC METHOD?

By Bob Young

Traditional (Attractional) Evangelism: Getting people to come to church

I am thinking again about our evangelistic outreach programs. In the past, many of our evangelism efforts focused on getting people to visit our church buildings, either for regular or special activities. Most traditional evangelism models focused on church attendance and success was counted by the number who attended.

Our changing world is raising new questions. Is what we have done (and are continuing to do in many places) working? Why or why not? Who are our evangelism targets? What motivates those we want to reach? What can we do to maximize results? What activities are most effective? Is inviting people to church the best thing we can do? Does church attendance work as an evangelistic tool? Why or why not? Why do people come? Why do people not come? Why do people come back? Why do people not come back? When one considers that across our nation almost all churches with an attendance less than 300 are in decline, we must ask ourselves, how can we be different? What will reverse the trend?

In reality, getting people to come to church has never been as effective as we assumed. That which has worked consistently through the years is sharing information and encouraging people to act upon the information. Here is the basic problem: in most congregations we do not have a plan for teaching people. When we do have a plan for teaching, we do not have a plan for encouraging response. Our teaching plan has been almost exclusively focused in our Bible classes and sermons. We invite people to come to church so they can attend a class or hear a sermon. We seldom follow up. We have depended on proclamation without addressing persuasion. For the most part, those we want to reach are not in our Bible classes and do not attend worship regularly to hear the sermons. What then, is our plan for sharing the gospel? One person has described evangelism as “presence, proclamation, and persuasion.” While a Christian presence is essential, we must eventually include proclamation. And when presence and proclamation are in place, we must address persuasion.

A Changing Nation: Ours is now an unchurched nation

Our world is changing. At the beginning of the 21st century, we live in an unchurched nation. For years, I said that about 1/3 of the population was church, 1/3 minimally church, and 1/3 unchurched. (I believe those numbers came from an old Barna report in which the definition of church included all who attended church at least once a month.)

More recent observations and research cause me to conclude that on an average Sunday, probably no more than 15-20% of the U.S. population is in church. In 2003, a church survey of a southeastern Oklahoma city of about 20,000 population found 31 churches. The 10 largest churches had a combined attendance of about 2500, with the 10th largest church reporting an attendance of 50. If one were to count the other 21 churches as having attendances of 50 (to add 1000 to the total), the average weekly attendance would be only about 3500 persons (17.5%). Based on other research and statistics, this is likely an accurate measure of general church attendance in our nation.

Information from major opinion research firms suggests a higher percentage (around 40%). For example, National Opinion Research Center reports 38%, Institute for Social Research's World Values 44%, Barna 41%, National Election Studies 40%, and Gallup 41%. The estimate of 40% church attendance is widely reported in the media. More and more, this commonly reported number is being challenged. Perhaps it is accurate to say that 40% of Americans *claim* to attend church regularly.

Various studies during the last 10 years have addressed problems related to polling: how was the question asked, what was the desired answer, how does one correct for under or over reporting? In 1998, Stanley Presser (University of Michigan) estimated that the actual percentage of those attending church during the last third of the century was about 26%. Also in 1998, C. Kirk Hadaway and P.L. Marler researched some polling factors and published an article ("Did You Really Go to Church This Week? Behind the Poll Data", *Christian Century*). They focused on individual counties, surveying actual attendance and comparing it with random surveys they conducted. They found that actual church attendance was about half the rate indicated by national public opinion polls. Their estimate for US actual church attendance was around 20%. Dave Olson surveyed only Christian churches (i.e., evangelical, mainline, and Catholic) and reported that the percentage of Americans regularly attending church is 18.7%.

The director of the *Center for the Study of Religion* at Princeton University, Robert Wuthnow, in a report that concluded that the terrorists' attacks did not change the basic religious convictions of the U.S. population, says:

- About ¼ of American adults are devoutly religious,
- About ¼ are secular, and
- The remaining half is only mildly interested in religion.

Wuthnow concluded: "We are in some ways a very religious country, especially compared to Western Europe. But we're of two minds, and the other mind is that we really are pretty secular. We are very much a country of consumers and shoppers, and we're quite materialistic. And as long as we can kind of paste together a sense of control through our ordinary work and our ordinary purchases, we're pretty happy to do that."

Is getting unchurched people to attend church an effective evangelism tool today?

At least two evangelistic options are available to the church today. These are sometimes called missional and attractional.

Missional churches are asking new and different questions. Those who seek to evangelize ask: How can I share the gospel? As the church commits itself to carrying the gospel to the world outside the walls of the church building, the focus is not on "come" but on "go". Kingdom things happen outside the building. Christianity is not confined to what occurs on Sunday in a certain place. It is more important that church members go than that non-church members come.

In contrast, **the attractional model** continues to bring people to a central location where "church" happens. In today's world, those who issue invitations to attend church are really asking, "How can one get people to do what they are not currently doing?" With an attractional focus on church invitations, one must ask, "What will cause people who do not currently attend church to begin to attend church regularly?" Answering this question is essential, given that only a small percentage of the U.S. population attends church regularly, and that the numbers are decreasing steadily.

What is the future of evangelism?

You and I hold the key to answering this question as we determine how we are going to “do church”. Some Christians think the future of evangelism is still in an attractional, institutional church model. Such churches continue to try to attract people, but those attracted are mostly Christians and those with Christian roots, heritage and beliefs. Such churches grow by swelling more than by evangelizing unchurched people. Other churches see the challenge of our society and ask, “What can we do to attract people who do not want to attend church?” Such churches often attract folks with non-spiritual and even non-Christian activities, hoping that some will buy into the spiritual offerings after they are attracted with secular activities. Still other churches continue to struggle with the question, “How can we encourage people who do not attend church to begin to do so?” Such churches may have some success, but generally success will be limited.

On the other hand, a church can choose a missional alternative and purposefully go into the world and make a difference among those friends and family, neighbors and associates in its spheres of influence and its daily marketplaces. Christians can take the name of Jesus with them as they leave the church building. Christians can decide there is no such thing as an anonymous Christian. The church can go forth with the gospel, and redefine discipleship in new and biblical forms and practices that are not exclusively location-centered. Success can be measured by counting meaningful Christian contacts and conversations rather than Sunday morning attendance.

I believe the greatest hope for the future of evangelism lies in the efforts we make to take the gospel to the world that exists outside the walls of our buildings. May God help us as we seek to be disciples everywhere we go, encouraging and making other disciples, baptizing them, and continuing to teach them. Almost sounds biblical, doesn't it?