

Components of an Evangelistically Effective Congregation

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The Christian Church is a missionary organization. God's mission led to the formation of the Church so that the gospel would be preached, lives transformed, and the world saved from sin and the consequences of evil.

Mission is witness to the reign of God for the whole person and the whole creation. Action to bring about a more just society and to meet the needs of the hungry, naked, imprisoned, sick and poor is an essential art of mission. Just as essential is the invitation to all persons to be initiated into Christian discipleship. Thus, while mission is larger than evangelism, it must always include evangelism. The biblical basis for this unified understanding of mission is the Great Commission read as a corollary to the Great Commandments (Matthew 22:34-40 and 28:16-20).

As an integral part of its mission to praise, worship and serve God, a congregation should be a means of God's grace for the world. It should love God and neighbor in ways that are perceptible both to those inside and those outside the congregation. Evangelism is best understood as intentionally loving persons with the goal of initiating them into Christian discipleship.

How does one create an evangelistically effective congregation? Three truths will help put these 20 components into perspective. First, leaders of the congregation must make the conscious decision to do so. Of the following factors, 1,2,3 and 4 are the most important. If these are in place, the rest is just details. Second, leaders must pay attention to all of the factors. There is no single program, idea, or emphasis that can make a congregation evangelistically effective. Because evangelism is essentially relational, and relationships are multi-faceted, a congregation has to be doing all these different things at once. Third, leaders should see the congregation as a system. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Excellence in one area depends on and also reinforces excellence in other areas. One way to think of this is to see components 5 through 20 as comprising a possible or typical journey from being an unchurched or pre-Christian person to being a committed, growing disciple of Jesus Christ. †

The Twenty Components of an Evangelistically Effective Congregation

1) Create and Sustain a Missional Culture

- a) Each congregation should have a clearly defined, biblically based, simple and comprehensive statement of its mission which is known and owned by all of its leaders and most of its members. To be "biblically based" means it must be a contextually appropriate application of the mission of radically loving God and radically loving neighbors so they also become disciples of Jesus Christ
- b) Evangelism must have a high priority in the church's self-understanding and have an impact on all aspects of its ministry.
- c) All decisions must be accountable to the mission statement in both content and style.
- d) Ideally, every member of the church is able to state the purpose of this congregation.
- e) A missional culture is created and sustained best through preaching, prayer and Bible study and internal communication.
- f) The behavior of clergy, church staff and lay leaders sets the norm.

2) Create and Sustain a Spiritual Culture

- a) There should be an organized, sustained, prayer ministry interceding for pre-Christians and the unchurched.
- b) We must rely on God's action and understand that the Church is being used by God as a means of grace.
- c) There must be theological commitments compatible with evangelism evident among the clergy and lay leadership of the congregation. For example, some commitments to universal salvation lead to a lack of interest in inviting others to become Christians.

3) Create and Sustain a Culture of Hospitality

- a) The gospel is intended to reach all persons everywhere, crossing boundaries of race, age, nationality, gender and other cultural factors. Thus, every congregation should be determining which boundaries it should and can cross in the future.
- b) Each congregation must in word and in deed offer genuine hospitality to all persons.
- c) Despite your best research and planning, God will surprise you, so be ready. Read, mark and inwardly digest Hebrews 13:2, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."
- d) The congregation should avoid or minimize bias with regard to race, economic class, marital status, age, educational levels and other factors that would exclude reachable persons.

4) Determine Your Target Population and Learn to Love Them Well

- a) Given each congregation's social and cultural location and their limited resources of personnel and money, a congregation must focus those resources on a particular target population given to them as a reachable group of people. By necessity targeting one group will mean giving less attention to another group for the present, but successfully reaching one group will later open doors to reach other groups.
- b) The church's leaders must make a clear decision about who the target population is. This could be defined by age, family structure, geography, income, race, immigrant status or other cultural factors. It will be influenced by the group(s) that the congregation is already reaching and the possibilities for connecting with other groups from that base.
- c) The congregation's leadership must study this population so that they know the group's culture, its thought patterns, its needs, its hopes, and how the gospel might most readily be communicated to its members. The leadership should lead the congregation to love the members of that group as well.

5) Demonstrate Concern for Physical Needs and Justice Issues in the Community

- a) The congregation as a whole, and especially identified leaders of the congregation, need to be active in the justice issues and physical needs of persons in the community they are trying to reach. Love must be concrete and embrace the whole person, including political issues where the Christian faith has a specific position to advocate.
- b) Food banks, medical and legal clinics, employment services, community organizing, demonstration for political change, community development and other actions may all demonstrate the love of Christ to people.
- c) Attention to the poor and marginalized is especially important.
- d) There must be a constantly maintained connection between ministry to physical needs and ministry to spiritual needs (e.g., praying in the food pantry and inviting the poor to worship).

6) Empower Laity to Witness Verbally to Their Friends, Associates, Relatives and Neighbors

- a) All laypersons should understand themselves to be verbal witnesses for Christ (1 Peter 3:15-16). They are in contact with pre-Christian and unchurched persons and they are more effective witnesses than clergy
- b) This witness can simply be talking about their church or inviting unchurched friends to come.
- c) Programs such as Bring a Friend Sunday, Home for Christmas, Faith-Sharing and Witness may be helpful in giving laity confidence in verbal witness.
- d) Three different types of faith-sharing are inviting, telling, and mentoring. All Christians can invite, some are able and should be encouraged to tell, and a few should be trained as mentors.

7) Achieve Visibility Among Your Target Population

- a) Word of mouth will give your congregation a reputation that should be positive. This is the best method to achieve visibility.
- b) The location and appearance of church buildings can be an effective way for unchurched persons to know you exist. Your facilities should be clean and well kept according to the community's standards.
- c) Use appropriate advertising which might include yellow pages, radio, television, direct mail, website, banners, posters, and signs in the laundromat.

8) Use an Appropriate Communication System to Invite Persons to Know Christ

- a) The congregation must use communication systems that are most effective in reaching the target population it is trying to address.
- b) One presumes that 21st century United States congregations cannot avoid using electronic media to reach persons outside the church and to enable authentic worship inside the church.
- c) Attention must be given to issues of language, images and the impact of particular words in specific communities in order to inculturate the gospel effectively.

9) Provide Adequate Parking, Signage and Facilities

- a) For some contexts, a church needs adequate, off-street, paved parking, assuming 1.5-2.3 persons per car. This average may vary from one community to another. In some situations parking helpers may be needed to direct people to empty spaces.
- b) In other situations, public transportation, church buses and ride sharing need to be considered. The basic question is how best to facilitate people getting to the site.
- c) There should be adequate signage to help first-time visitors to find where they need to go. They should be able to find the nursery, rest rooms, sanctuary, information booth, and church office.
- d) The buildings' architectural features should welcome everyone. Pay attention to flow of people, accessibility for disabled persons and other issues (colors, artwork, posted announcements) that make for a welcoming environment.
- e) Your sanctuary or worship space should not appear to be full to the first-time visitor. In many places this means that it should not be over 80% of capacity.

10) Welcome Visitors With Demonstrated Hospitality Measured by Perception of Visitors

- a) There should be greeters at every possible entrance who are genuinely interested in helping. They need to be sensitive enough to discern those who are first-time visitors and would welcome special attention.
- b) It is helpful if there is an information booth or other means of helping visitors feel comfortable and find what they need.
- c) This point of contact is the first of four opportunities to get names, addresses, telephone numbers and e-mail. The others are Sunday School, registration during worship, and conversation after the worship service.
- d) Following the worship service, laity should intentionally seek out visitors and welcome them.

11) Have Effective Nursery, Children's and Youth Ministries

- a) Your nursery should be brightly colored, inviting, safe and well staffed with repeated staff people each week.
- b) Periodic tests of your nursery's adequacy should be evaluated by a committee of young mothers.
- c) Make ministry with children and youth a priority in your congregation's programming. Enlist the best, most spiritually mature leaders in the congregation for this ministry.

12) Worship Indigenously

- a) The three most important factors creating indigenous worship are music, music, and music.
- b) Other key factors include the pace and sense of formality of the service and the content of the sermon and stories told by the preacher.
- c) The bulletin should be user-friendly for pre-Christians (e.g., print out The Lord's Prayer).
- d) The criterion of true worship is not whether we've always done it that way before, but does the liturgy enable the people authentically to worship God.

13) Get Names, Addresses, Telephone Numbers and E-mail

- a) Sometime during each worship service there should be a registration procedure that does not single out visitors but elicits feedback from all persons in worship.
- b) This is an opportunity for all persons in the church community to communicate with the church's leadership and staff.
- c) There should be spiritually mature persons in each section of the sanctuary who see it as their ministry to greet and care for newcomers they find near them.

- d) There must be a systematic, comprehensive and accurate record-keeping system for the constituency. When a person has been visiting for three months, you should know their names, address, phone number, e-mail, which Sunday School class they have attended (if any), which Sundays they have attended and which Sundays they have missed, and important information about their family life and needs.

14) Preach Biblically and Evangelistically

- a) Preaching should be well done and biblical. For United Methodists, this means in accordance with our doctrine—the way of salvation—creation, sin, repentance, justification, the new birth, assurance and sanctification.
- b) Good preaching focuses on the intersection of the gospel with the lives and issues of the people. Assume a secular context.

15) Communicate Effectively in the Sermon

- a) In most contexts, this means without notes.
- b) Proper use of media and drama may enhance communication of the gospel, but are not ends in themselves. Because evangelism is based on love, there is no substitute for knowing one's people.

16) Respond Quickly and Appropriately to First-time Visitors

- a) There should be a response made to first-time visitors by a layperson within 36 hours—either by telephone or in person, depending on the culture.
- b) At some point—perhaps toward the end of the first week—there should be contact with a pastor—letter or telephone call.
- c) The ideal model is to establish repeated, continuing contact with the same spiritually mature friend to help in the assimilation/discipling process.

17) Establish and Maintain Significant Small Groups for Seekers

- a) Establish regularly scheduled Alpha groups, or some other program to teach the basics of the faith.
- b) There should be multiple discipling groups, including such things as Bible studies, Sunday School classes, Disciple groups, twelve-step support groups, mission teams, and food pantry volunteer groups.
- c) Every small group for seekers should include all of the aspects of initiation into the Christian life.
- d) Enable the seeker to connect with spiritually mature friends who nurture the person to a deeper relationship with Christ and the Church.

18) Give Appropriately Timed Invitations to Commitment

- a) Be sure to ask for a commitment when the time is right, with gentleness and reverence (1 Peter 3:15-16).
- b) Communicate the community's expectation of what the Christian life is like in its fullness: moral, experiential, theological, church (baptism, membership), operational (gifts of the spirit), disciplines (worship, communion, fasting, prayer, Bible study, works of mercy, etc.), and faith-sharing. Do not be guilty of false advertising.
- c) Stress the sacramental/liturgical aspects of baptism, confirmation and joining the church.

19) Establish and Maintain a System of Discipleship for New Christians and New Members

- a) Have high and clear expectations for membership in the body of Christ.
- b) Have formation processes that regularly nurture those attitudes and behaviors with systems of accountability.
- c) For United Methodists, make commitments to prayers, presence, gifts and service a reality. I teach church + 2: Every Christian should be in worship every week (unless physically prevented by health reasons) and should be involved in two small groups—one where he or she is spiritually fed, and the other where he or she feeds others in some way.
- d) Spiritual Gifts studies can also help new members find a place of belonging and serving.

20) Establish and Maintain Small Groups for Growth in Discipleship and Service

- a) Every believer should be involved in an intentional small group activity to continue discipleship growth. Possibilities include Emmaus, Disciple, Christian Believer, Stephen Ministries, Lay Speaking, Wesley Groups, and Sunday School. These will probably overlap with groups for seekers.
- b) Each group should understand its function in relation to the missional culture of the congregation.
- c) Each small group must play some role in the missional tasks of evangelism, nurture and service. Ideally (as in the Wesley Group model) each small group has a complete overview of mission in five parts: prayer, study, fellowship, accountability and service.