

How to grow a church without visitation

Andy Stanley is fond of saying, "Think steps, not programs." (See <http://www.practicallyspeaking.org> for a FREE audio)

What he means is that it is important to think through the steps for an irreligious, non-Christian person to become a fully devoted follower of Christ. It doesn't happen all at once. It doesn't happen automatically. It happens because someone has thought through the steps to get from A to Z.

Andy tells the story of demonstrating this to his staff by making a series of dots that represented pave-stones. They were strewn about the conference room where the meeting was being held. Andy led the staff to walk on the dots all around the room until they got to two dots that were too far apart. You couldn't take the next step. The whole process stopped because the steps were too far apart.

Every church does well to think steps, not programs.

Step #1: People hear about Christ and hear about your church

This may be from a member who attends your church. It may be as simple as driving by your church. It may be from advertising.

Speaking of advertising, I think there is a tendency for church leaders to think logically to the wrong conclusion on this one. Here is how this goes. We do a survey. We ask people "How did you hear about our church?"

- Friend or personal contact
- Advertising
- Drove by and saw the building.

Most people will say #1. Around 90%. So, we conclude that advertising doesn't work. One more question we might ask: did we do any advertising? If we didn't do any advertising, it stands to reason that nobody would have heard of our church through advertising. I talked to one pastor who told me 90% of their visitors come from advertising. Apparently, they had figured out a way to make it work.

Saddleback advertised heavily for years. Eventually, they reached a critical mass so that they did not need to advertise any more, but it is fair to say the church was built on a strong advertising effort.

Advertising, if done right, is free. That is, it is paid for by the people who would not have come had we not done the advertising. Churches would do well to experiment with advertising and see if they can discover a way to make it work so that it is free.

Most of my ministry is driven by word of mouth. Pastors tell pastors and I get more invitations to speak. But, I also do some advertising--about 5,000 letters a year to targeted churches. The good news is, this advertising is all free. It is paid for y products I would not have sold had I not done the advertising.

Step #2: Finding more information

Between finding out about Christ and about your church, people will normally need to get more information before they will be ready to show up.

I was in a church recently that had a receptacle on their church sign similar to what realtors use on houses. You drive by the house, it looks interesting. You could call the realtor, but realtor's often use another step. They provide a one page flyer that describes the house. This way, if their are not enough bedrooms, or the price is too high, you can find that out right away and don't have to call the realtor. The realtor gets the calls from the people who are actually interested.

In a similar way, this church had put some brochures in a receptacle so that anyone who drives by could get one and find out more about the church.

Clearly, the #1 way to communicate more about your church is the web. You can learn a lot about a church from their web page. Northpoint has a really cool piece on their web page called "Before you attend." <http://www.northpoint.org/before-you-attend> You can watch a short video that gives you a pretty good feel for what you will find if you actually show up. It allows you to test drive the church in your pajamas. Really cool.

Step #3: They show up for church

The seeker-driven approach has created more than a little conflict in the church. One misunderstanding is the assumption that Bill Hybels invented the seeker driven approach. He did not. It is in the Bible.

The verse is tucked away in a passage where the main theme is speaking in tongues, but look at the secondary truth in this verse:

But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, 1 Cor. 14:24 [NIV]

The main idea has to do with speaking in tongues, but the secondary truth is this: when you do church, you ought to pay some attention to what this whole experience feels like for an outsider.

Every church would do well to do an outsider audit once a year or so. Think about the bulletin, the greeters, the order of worship, the preschool, the sermon, the announcements--everything, asking the question, "How would this play for an outsider?"

There is an unfortunate dichotomy where we see ourselves as

- A) a seeker church or
- B) not.

Every church ought to think about how church feels for an outsider to visit the church.

Step #4 Visitation, or. . .

The next step, after people visit has traditionally been we visit them through our regular visitation program. For many churches, this is not working all that well. I asked a group of pastors recently, "How is visitation going?" They laughed out loud. I took that to mean it wasn't going very well for that group.

However, this is not universally true. In many churches visitation is still proving to be an effective step between a visitor visiting and a visitor joining and becoming active in the church.

My own church uses the G.R.O.W. program which is a combination of visitation as well as other forms of outreach--calling, card writing, etc. It has proven an effective tool in our church, as well as many other churches. The idea is that you sign up for a team--the G team, R Team, etc. Then, once a month you show up at the church for an hour. We do our on Sunday night before the Sunday night service. You can do visitation, make phone calls, or write cards. Lots of people are involved. Lots of ministry happens. It is a good thing.

In many other churches, they are struggling and visitation is not working for them. They have abandoned visitation. That is O.K. You can grow a church without visitation. But, you need to replace visitation with some other step.

What step would that be? Well, glad you asked! My favorite step is what a party. This could be a large group "all-skate" kind of party or a smaller party where you invite a couple of couples friends along with one or two recent visitors to your church.

Some of you have heard me talk about this "Give Friday Nights to Jesus" plan for years, but you have not really taken it seriously. (See <http://www.joshhunt.com/friday.html> for details.) I'd like to propose a challenge: the 3X3X3X3 challenge.

The 3X3X3X3 Challenge

Here is the challenge: See that every visitor in the next three months gets three invitations to three events within the first three weeks that they visit. My gut tells me if you do it, and really take it seriously, you will never be the same again. Your church will never be the same again. My gut tells me it will double or triple the number of people you have joining in the next three months. Hey, but don't trust my gut, try it and see. Take the 3X3X3X3 challenge. Write me in three months and tell me how it goes. My email address is josh@joshhunt.com

Step #5: Get the thoroughly assimilated in a group

From one perspective, Jesus asked us to do the impossible. He asked us to make disciples. We can make anyone be a disciple. About all we can do is create an environment where a disciple can grow.

Perhaps an illustration from farming would help. We can make a seed grow. If the miraculous life force is not already in the seed, there is nothing we can do to cause it to grow. All we can do is to create an environment--water and soil and sunlight where, if it really is a seed, it will grow.

The same is true of a disciple. We cannot make a disciple grow any more than we can make a seed grow. What we can do is create an environment that cooperates with the life that God has put inside the person.

One final question: what is that environment?

What is the win?

Another saying Andy Stanley has made famous is, "Define the win." For some, the win is to get a big crowd and a hot band and a powerful presentation from the stage. I don't think this is the win from Jesus' perspective. Jesus told us to go and make disciples of all nations, not get a big crowd. I believe disciples are made the way Jesus made them--in small groups. The win is to get people in small groups where in the environment of loving relationships and practical, biblical teaching and prayer, they can grow to be fully devoted followers of Christ.

But, it is going to take some steps to get them there. Think steps; not programs.