



Evangelism for the Ordinary Church

Just because your people don't like to evangelize doesn't mean they can't share their faith.

Steve R. Bierly

A few years ago while candidating, I looked at a number of profiles sent to me by congregations searching for a pastor. One question my denomination asks churches to answer on such profiles is, "Name two or three specific things you have done to evangelize your area in the past year."

My heart sank as I read responses such as, "We let the local Rotary Club use our fellowship hall once a month for its dinner meetings," and "Our Christmas Eve service is always advertised in the local paper." It seemed few congregations were excited and intentional about reaching their world for Jesus Christ

I eventually found a congregation that said it was ready to evangelize, but I was in for a shock. The first year I pastored Cobblestone, I conducted a two-day evangelism seminar. Only three people attended. Though tempted to start sending out my resumé again, I decided to make the best of it, hoping someday the Lord would guide me to a healthy church that wanted to evangelize.

But as I was waiting, I got to know the people of Cobblestone. I discovered they were willing, even eager, to do evangelism. It just wasn't the sort of evangelism I originally had in mind.

Redefine "target group"

The conferences I attended urged me to target a specific group (baby boomers, Gen X-ers, etc.) and gear up my congregation to reach it. The only problem was that our congregation was made up of various generations. Just which specific group were we called and equipped to reach?

I found out the people of Cobblestone had another target audience in mind. They were concerned about friends, co-workers, and family members (of whatever age and group) who didn't know the Lord. As long as we kept asking, "How can we reach those close to us with the gospel?" evangelism took place and unchurched people began joining Cobblestone.

Stop using the E-word

For many, evangelism is what Billy Graham does when he preaches to stadiums full of seekers and thousands come forward. Nobody in my congregation felt he or she could do that.

To others, evangelism meant intruding into the lives of total strangers by handing out tracts at the mall or calling door-to-door or phoning a list of names. Nobody wanted to do that. People here in the Northeast value their privacy. To violate another's privacy is seen as a downright un-neighborly and uncivil act.

A year after my ill-fated evangelism seminar, I decided to try again.

I offered an evening on "How to Explain Christianity to Your Friends." I felt encouraged enough to offer another one on "How to Share Your Faith with People Who Think They Already Know It All." It seems the folks at Cobblestone are willing to be trained in evangelism—as long as we don't call it that.

Set a climate for sharing

When I presented proposals for seeker-sensitive services, the response was, "Why can't the unchurched just accept us as we are? When we first came to this church, it took us a while to feel comfortable, but we stuck it out. They can, too!"

This response came not from stuck-in-the-mud, long-term members but from boomers and busters who had recently joined the church!

Even though we don't have a seeker service, I'm careful not to use theological jargon in my sermons and Bible studies. If I use terms unfamiliar to non-Christians, I define them. My illustrations are drawn from tv, movies, sports, and pop music.

I also wrote a little booklet explaining the basic truths of the faith in language easily understood by the people living in our area. These booklets are placed at strategic locations in our building.

Rather than telling shy, introverted people who don't have a great deal of biblical knowledge or theological training to lead their loved ones to Christ, I urge my congregation to invite their friends to become part of Cobblestone Church, where they can meet Christ. Our members invite friends not only to our Sunday morning services, but also to our social events.

After one of our church talent shows, in fact, we gained several new members. I had never thought of my Elvis, Bob Dylan, and cast of "Star Trek" impressions as evangelistic before, but the Lord used them nonetheless.

Members of Cobblestone feel comfortable inviting others to our services because they know their friends will get something out of it. And I have had to replenish our supply of booklets quite often.

Work to reduce conflict

Visitors can sense when something's not right. If they do, rarely will they come back.

My early teaching at Cobblestone stressed the church as a fellowship where love, acceptance, forgiveness, and patience are practiced. I tried to practice what I preached in dealing with difficult people. When arguments broke out at board meetings, I reminded everyone that this wasn't the way the church conducted business.

As a result, the atmosphere has greatly improved; visitors almost always characterize us as a "warm, friendly congregation." I came to see that time spent working on reducing tension is really time spent on church growth.

Get people to pray

Will God really cause a church to grow just because people ask him to—even if that church does not have an aggressive evangelism program? At Cobblestone, he has. We continually

get visitors who say, "We just felt that it was finally time to check out church and for some reason we were drawn here."

When my daughter, Abigail, was three-and-a-half years old, she asked her mother why she couldn't have a Sunday school class with kids her own age. My wife explained there weren't any children her age in the church and suggested that she pray for some. Abigail began to pray confidently for more kids. New families started coming that summer and by fall, she had her class—with eight students! Although pastors often hear "Everything depends on leadership," in reality, "Everything depends on God." If you can get some of your people to pray seriously and faithfully for growth, you've done a lot!

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