Reversing a trend of evangelistic decline personally and corporately

RAINER ON

EVANGELISM

Thom S. Rainer
“Whatever happened to evangelism?”
“WHATEVER HAPPENED TO EVANGELISM?”

He asked the question in all sincerity.

“What is the best program or methodology for evangelism in the local church today?” he began. “Is it a certain program or memorized approach? Or is it simply encouraging members to develop relationships with unchurched people? Or is it an incarnational approach, where Christians live and work and play among non-Christians with an intentional desire to share the Gospel with them?”

My answer was yes.

Some who knew me at that speaking engagement began to laugh with hesitation. I could tell that they thought it was another Rainer attempt at humor. A weak attempt.

But my response came with no smile. I was serious.

“My prayerful approach to evangelism,” I began, “is better than what most churches are doing, because most churches are doing little or nothing.”

“Local churches are devoting less time, less funding, and less emphasis on equipping, encouraging, and sending people to share the good news of Christ.”

THE CURIOUS BUT SAD Trajectory

Because I have consulted with churches for over twenty years, I have been able to observe the pattern up close. Each year it seems that local churches are devoting less time, less funding, and less emphasis on equipping, encouraging, and sending people to share the good news of Christ, particularly within their own immediate communities.

At one point, I could see theological distinctions. As a rule, the more theologically conservative churches were more likely to emphasize evangelism as a critical component of the church’s life. Such is not the case any more. The conservative churches are almost as anemic in evangelism as others. And the even more troubling news is that the trajectory gets worse every year.

MORE EVIDENCE OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF EVANGELISM

If my anecdotal consultation observations are insufficient evidence, our recent studies support our thesis. In one study we asked senior or lead pastors how many times they had intentionally shared their faith with someone, or just developed a relationship with a non-Christian with the hope of sharing the good news. In this survey where anonymity was protected, over half of the pastors, 53% to be precise, said “zero” in the previous six months.

You read that correctly. The majority of pastors weren’t evangelizing.
Before we criticize these leaders too harshly, we see even less evidence of evangelistic efforts among the laity. And in some churches, the laity will get angry if the pastor doesn’t visit them when they have a minor illness. But they have no problem if no one in the church makes an effort to tell a lost person about Jesus.

"Meet my needs," they cry. "Who cares if those people spend eternity in hell?"

I’m sorry. My cynicism is not always healthy.

**DECREASING EVANGELISM, GREATER RECEPTIVITY**

The sad irony is that our evangelistic efforts are diminishing while a significant number of non-Christians are more receptive to hear about Jesus from a Christian. In one study we conducted, we found that nearly four out of ten (38%) of non-Christians would either be highly receptive or receptive to hear from Christians about their beliefs. And only 5% indicated an antagonistic attitude toward hearing the Good News.

Tens of millions of lost persons in America are waiting to hear from Christians.

The silence is deafening.

**THE EVANGELISM MANDATE**

So why should evangelism be one of the highest priorities in your church? Allow me to share several of them.

**Because Christ commanded it.** We typically refer to the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 as our evangelistic and disciples-making command. But there are many other places in the New Testament where the priority of evangelism is clearly evident. Christ commanded it. We must do it.

**Because Christ is the only way of salvation.** There is no way around it. Salvation is exclusive. There is only one way. Jesus could not have made it clearer in John 14:6: “Jesus told him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” Jesus had an urgent message. He had an exclusive message. We must be conveyors of that narrowly-defined hope.

**Because Christ died for the world.** There is a reason John 3:16 is the most familiar and most quoted verse in the history of humanity. Jesus died for the world. He is the only way, but He has provided a way for everyone. That is a message that is urgent and worth telling. Indeed it’s the greatest message ever.

**Because churches that are not intentional about evangelism typically are weak in evangelism.** Many pastors and church leaders will affirm this article. They will give mental assent to the priority of evangelism. But they do not practice the priority of evangelism in their churches. What are you doing today to make certain evangelism is a priority in your church?

**Because churches tend to obsess inwardly when they fail to move outwardly.** Where has a lot of your church’s energy been expended lately? Rancorous business meetings? Expressions of petty church preferences? Worship wars? Power struggles? Those are inward obsessions. Lead your church to an evangelistic priority and watch the focus shift for the better.
Because churches become content and complacent with transfer growth. Some churches are growing. Others are adding members without significant numerical growth. But many in both categories are growing at the expense of other churches. Some may be reaching unchurched Christians. That’s good, but that’s not evangelism. We can fool ourselves into thinking we are evangelistic when we are simply recirculating the saints.

Because evangelistic Christians actually grow stronger as better disciplined Christians. Those who are evangelistic are obedient to Christ. Being obedient to Christ means that we are following His teachings and becoming a better fruit-bearing disciple.

Churches are often too busy with activities, programs, and ministries. Few churches are truly sending out their members to evangelize those in their communities. The Great Commission has fast become the Great Omission.

Evangelism is dying

Churches are dying.

People are going to hell without Christ.

It is perhaps the greatest tragedy today.

What Keeps Christians From Evangelizing?

For now, let us focus on what is wrong. Let us look with stark honesty and candor at the ineffectiveness of most American believers when it comes to sharing their faith.

Spiritual Lethargy. One of the main reasons many Christians do not share their faith is simply explained by the word: disobedience. Spiritual lethargy takes place when we fail to obey Him. The problem for many Christians is that they are not growing spiritually, and lack of spiritual growth inevitably leads to a diminished desire to share Christ with others.

Growing Inclusivism. One of the faster-growing belief systems today is pluralism (all religions lead to God). A variation of pluralism called inclusivism is a dangerous doctrine that is gaining momentum in many American seminaries, Christian colleges, and churches. This view affirms that Jesus is the only way of salvation, but he can be found in other "good" religions. There is a subtle but growing belief among many Christians that somehow "good" followers will make it to heaven outside of a true Christian conversion. Our message will fall on deaf ears if this belief persists and grows.

Growing Disbelief in Hell. At one time, this was a view held almost entirely by unbelievers. However recent books by those claiming to be evangelicals have brought this discussion front and center. Those who truly have a desire to reach the unchurched have a burden to see people in the eternity of heaven, but they also desire to see them escape the wrath of an eternal hell. Denying the existence of hell undermines the urgency of placing one’s faith in Christ.

Busyness. Perhaps one of Satan’s most effective strategies is to get us so busy that we fail to do that which is such a high biblical priority. We can be deluded into complacency about the lostness of humanity around us. The unchurched are waiting for you to tell them about Jesus. They need to be on your to-do list. What priority do you give to reaching the lost?
Fear of Rejection. In research on this subject, I found that only one in four unchurched persons would be resistant to faith discussions. But nearly four out of ten of the unchurched will be receptive to your concern for their eternity, and more than one out of three will simply be neutral to your attempts. Simply stated, fear of rejection is unfounded. The few with an antagonistic attitude are not rejecting you personally; their anger is merely a reflection of something in their past. Fear of rejection is an often-used excuse by Christians for their failure to witness. And it is just that: an excuse.

A Desire to Be Tolerant. The message of the gospel, in some senses, is intolerant. The one true God insists there can be no other gods. He is a jealous God and leaves no room for other gods. In the post-modern culture of 21st century America, Christians should know the criticisms of intolerance will come. The great concern is that many Christians are unwilling to take a narrow view because they do not want to be labeled as intolerant. But Jesus never wavered in His insistence that He is the only way to the one and only true God.

Losing the Habit of Witnessing. Some Christians have been very active in sharing their faith with the lost and the unchurched. But, for a myriad of reasons, they get out of the habit, and it no longer becomes a priority. Witnessing, like prayer and Bible study, is a discipline. It is a habit to learn, to retain, and, if lost, to regain.

Lack of Accountability. Programmatic evangelism in local churches is sometimes denigrated because it is seen as a "canned" approach to witnessing. But one of the strengths of many of these programs is that some inherent system of accountability is built into the program itself. Accountability is likely to engender more witnessing attempts to the unchurched. Attempting more evangelistic encounters creates a habit of witnessing that then increases our zeal for evangelism.

Failure to Invite. When is the last time you invited an unchurched person to church? When is the last time you offered to take a person to church, or, at the very least, meet him or her at church? It’s a simple gesture, yet so few Christians do it.

We Go to Churches That Do Not Reach the Unchurched. The research from my book The Unchurched Next Door showed that churches reach one person for Christ each year for every 85 church members. That is a frightening and terrible ratio. One of the key reasons is because most Christians in America are members of churches that do not reach the unchurched.

So what are most of our churches in North America communicating to the world with our self-centeredness and lack of evangelistic fervor? It’s simple.

We are telling the world to go to hell.

May God convict us of our evangelistic apathy.

GETTING BACK TO THE ROOT OF EVANGELISM

The first time I read Michael Green’s Evangelism in the Early Church in 1984, it was a required textbook for a course at seminary. My subsequent six readings since then have all been the result of my desire to be reminded of the passionate heart of evangelism of the early Church. Green’s book, published in 1970, looks at the Church from the time of the Apostle Paul to Origen in the middle of the third century.

One of the greatest appeals of the book is the deep commitment to both theology and evangelism, and the recognition that the two cannot be divorced. Green says it well in the preface: “Most
evangelists are not very interested in theology. Most theologians are not interested in evangelism. I am deeply committed to both.”

AN EMERGING AND ENCOURAGING TREND

Though my observations are anecdotal at this point, I am greatly encouraged to see more young church leaders today with a passion for both theology and evangelism. They realize that true evangelism will not take place without a solid biblical and theological foundation. And they realize that theology is dead unless it is lived out passionately in ministry and evangelism.

Nearly four decades ago, Michael Green rightly insisted that theology and evangelism must not be separated in the Church today.

EVANGELISTIC MOTIVES IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Green noted some of the evangelistic motives of the early Church. Not surprisingly, each motive has deep theological and biblical roots.

A sense of gratitude. The early Christians were tireless and unselfish in their evangelistic zeal. They were prepared to sacrifice all, even their own lives, in order to share the gospel of Christ. One of their primary motives was their overwhelming gratitude for what Christ did for them. So many of the biblical truths affirm this reality. For example, we hear the Apostle Paul declare, “And I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

A sense of responsibility. The biblical mandate of evangelism is clear. We hear Great Commission passages repeated often. But the Bible is replete with passages that reflect this sense of responsibility. Paul, in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, reported, “I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:21).

A sense of concern. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). The simple but powerful truth is that there are really two categories of humanity: the saved and the lost. The saved will spend eternity with Christ; the lost will spend eternity separated from Christ in hell. We must proclaim with passionate concern that Jesus is the only way of salvation (John 14:6). Our hearts should break over the lostness of humanity, and our response should be obedient and urgent evangelism.

A BEGINNING OF ONE

Whatever happened to evangelism? I have my thoughts and my research, but for now the question is unanswered.

I can whine. I can lament. I can point to what others are not doing.

Or I can do something myself.

I admit that I could do more. A lot more. I could specifically pray each day that the Lord would put someone in my path where I could at least begin the Gospel conversation. I could pray for more spiritually sensitive eyes to those around me. I could be consistently accountable to someone about consistently sharing my faith. And I could encourage others to join me.

It’s time to do less analysis, less complaining, and less finger pointing. It’s time for action. And for me, it has to begin in my heart.
EVANGELIZING DIFFERENT GROUPS

2
They aren’t antagonistic.

They welcome a conversation with believers.

They aren’t staying out of church for the reasons you may think.

They are the unchurched. And because many church leaders and members have such misperceptions about them, churches often fail to reach them, or even attempt to reach them.

**DEBUNKING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE UNCHURCHED**

In one of the most comprehensive studies ever done on the unchurched, LifeWay Research, in partnership with the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism in Wheaton, surveyed 2,000 unchurched Americans. They defined “unchurched” as someone who has not attended a worship service in the last six months.

One-third of the respondents were non-white. Genders were almost equally represented (53% male), and almost half have a high school diploma or less.

Here are some key insights we found from the study:

**Most unchurched do indeed have some church background.** Contrary to some perceptions, the great majority of unchurched have a church background. Almost two-thirds of them (62%) went to church regularly as a child.

**Most unchurched quit church because they got out of the habit of churchgoing.** For certain, a number of them did leave churches for negative reasons, but that is not true of the majority.

**One-third of the unchurched have plans to go to church in the future.** Please read that statement carefully. One of three unchurched Americans are actually planning to return to church. Is your church actively inviting them?

**The unchurched are very open to a gospel conversation.** Nearly half (47%) would interact freely in such a conversation. Another third (31%) would listen actively without participating. Pause for a moment. Look at those numbers. Almost eight of ten unchurched Americans would welcome a gospel conversation. Another 12% would discuss it with some discomfort, and only 11% would change the subject as soon as possible. We can’t use the poor excuse that the unchurched really aren’t interested in gospel conversations. In reality, church members are more likely not to be interested in initiating gospel conversations.

**If you invite them, they will come.** I received requests to provide a framework for churches to invite people to church. We called it “Invite Your One.” We are now getting responses from churches that have initiated this ministry, and we are blown away at what God is doing. Among the unchurched, 55% said they would attend church if invited
by a family member. And 51% said they would attend church if invited by a friend or neighbor.

These numbers are staggering. The opportunities are incredible.

**PERCEPTIONS THE UNEACHED HOLD ABOUT CHRISTIANS**

One of my greatest joys in research is talking to and listening to those who clearly identify themselves as non-Christians. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not celebrating their absence of faith in Christ. My joy comes from listening to those who don’t believe as I do, so that I might be better equipped to witness to them.

Over the past several years, my research teams and I have interviewed thousands of unchurched non-Christians. Among the more interesting insights I gleaned were those where the interviewees shared with me their perspectives of Christians.

I have grouped the seven most common types of comments in order of frequency. I then follow that representative statement with a direct quote from a non-Christian. Read these comments and see if you learn some of the lessons I learned.

**Christians are against more things than they are for.** “It just seems to me that Christians are mad at the world and mad at each other. They are so negative that they seem unhappy. I have no desire to be like them and stay upset all the time.”

**I would like to develop a friendship with a Christian.** “I’m really interested in what they believe and how they carry out their beliefs. I wish I could find a Christian that would be willing to spend some time with me.”

**I would like to learn about the Bible from a Christian.** “The Bible really fascinates me, but I don’t want to go to a stuffy and legalistic church to learn about it. I would be nice if a Christian invited me to study the Bible in his home or at a place like Starbucks.”

**I don’t see much difference in the way Christians live compared to others.** “I really can’t tell what a Christian believes because he doesn’t seem much different than other people I know. The only exception would be Mormons. They really seem to take their beliefs seriously.”

**I wish I could learn to be a better husband, wife, dad, mom, etc., from a Christian.** “My wife is threatening to divorce me, and I think she means it this time. My neighbor is a Christian, and he seems to have it together. I am swallowing my pride and asking him to help me.”

**Some Christians try to act like they have no problems.** “Harriett works in my department. She is one of those Christians who seem to have a mask on. I would respect her more if she didn’t put on such an act. I know better.”

**I wish a Christian would take me to his or her church.** “I really would like to visit a church, but I’m not particularly comfortable going by myself. What is weird is that I am 32-years old, and I’ve never had a Christian invite me to church in my entire life.”

Do you see the pattern? Non-Christians want to interact with Christians. They want to see Christians’ actions match their beliefs. They want Christians to be real.

It’s time to stop believing the lies we have been told. Jesus said it clearly: “The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest,” (Luke 10:2, CSB).
I have been involved in church research and practice for four decades, a testament to both my passion and elderly status. These data confirm my anecdotal observations that there has never been a more opportune time to connect with the lost and unchurched.

THE NONES, THE NOMINALS, AND THE NOMADS

There is an abundance of books, strategies, and research on two large groups of unchurched Americans. It is my thesis and subject for future research that one group that is increasing its distance from churches has not been adequately studied or pursued by church leaders.

For that reason, I will examine the group I call the nomads. As background, I’ll briefly review the more common unchurched groups: the nones and the nominals.

The Nones

The nones represent those American adults that self-identify as having no church affiliation. A 2012 Pew Research study garnered much attention when it noted that the number of American nones had grown from 15% of the population to 20% of the population in the past five years. One major factor behind the growth of the religiously unaffiliated is generational replacement, the gradual supplanting of older generations by newer ones.

The total number of nones in America is 46 million adults. This number also includes 13 million people who identify themselves as agnostic and atheist. The remaining 33 million adults simply say they have no religious affiliation.

Most research and strategies for churches to reach the unchurched have dealt with reaching the nones. There are, however, two other groups that are largely neglected.

The Nominals

About 80% of the American adult population has some religious affiliation. But over half of that group states they attend church monthly, yearly, seldom, or never. I call that group the nominals. Churches would do well to reach out to this group that is self-identified as both religious and relatively inactive in churches. Though church leaders intuitively know there are large numbers of these persons to reach, few develop strategies for doing so.

The Nomads

From my perspective, the nomads are one of the most neglected groups by church leaders. The reason we neglect them is simple: we see them often so we don’t think of them as unchurched. From a definitional perspective they are not truly unchurched. The nomads instead are wandering from a high level of church commitment to a lower level.

Let me offer a simple example. Let’s assume you are in a church of 200 members where everyone shows up every week. Obviously, the attendance is 200 if there are no guests included. Now let’s assume the attendance pattern of these members changes to where they miss one Sunday out of four. Now the attendance has dropped 25% to 150 with a relatively slight change of behavior: missing just one Sunday out of four.

It is my thesis that much of the attendance drop in churches today can be explained by the commitment and attendance behavior of church
members. Simply stated, a large part of church decline can be explained by members attending less frequently.

My thesis is anecdotal and unproven at this point. There is no objective evidence that points to a decline in those reporting they attend church weekly or more. Most of the studies include categories that jump from weekly attendance to monthly attendance. So those who attend two or three times a month see themselves as attending weekly rather than monthly. They consider themselves weekly active church members even if they are attending slightly less than they have in past.

It is my contention that less frequent church attendance of some of our most committed members is a real and present challenge before church leaders. Anecdotally, I see the baby boomer generation Christians being at the forefront of this change. As they move into retirement or just have more free time, they are more likely to be somewhere other than church on Sunday.

Pastors and other leaders must fall on their faces before God and ask Him to reignite their congregations with an evangelistic passion. When evangelism dies as a priority in the church, the church has already begun to die.

INTERFAITH EVANGELISM

When many think of evangelism, they simply consider it to be sharing Christ to those who do not know Him as Savior. While this is true, we should not neglect sharing our faith with those following other religions.

For my book The Unexpected Journey, my wife, Nellie Jo, and I spent several weeks interviewing Christians who had been previously devoted to non-Christian religions. It made an indelible impression on both of our lives. I will share some of the lessons we learned from our conversations with those who had journeyed from other gods to faith in Christ.

Know what you believe. Most of the interviewees told us that they were amazed at the biblical ignorance they witnessed when they were not yet Christians. Several times we heard them say that they knew more about the Bible than Christians did. We cannot expect to defend the faith if we do not know what we believe. And we cannot know what we believe unless we spend time in the Bible.

Know what they believe. While we cannot expect every Christian to know every detail about every other religion, we can train ourselves to know enough to have conversations with people of a specific belief system. Quite frankly, Christians often do more harm than good in our conversations with those of other religions. We cannot expect to have their ears unless we have done our homework to find out as much as possible about what they believe. And that means we must be willing to listen to them, which is the next lesson.

Listen to them. Sometimes Christians are just too eager to talk and unwilling to listen. Listening means we are willing to learn from others. Listening means we are not threatened in our own Christian beliefs by hearing what someone else believes. Listening means we really care for the person.

Pray for them. Some of the most "hopeless" persons became followers of Christ through the persistent prayers of Christians. How many churches actually set aside corporate prayer time to pray for those who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?
Invite them to church. I’ve done a great deal of research on this. In every instance, data has overwhelmingly shown that many non-Christians will come to church if we would just invite them. What are we waiting for?

Learn about their home lives. Many of those we interviewed shared with us some very sad stories of a difficult childhood or home life. If we listen with sensitivity to learn about others’ childhood and youth, we can relate to them better.

Get them to look closely at their own documents. Not all belief systems have specific documents, but many do. Many times, people of different religions will be open to discussing Christianity because of the doubt raised by their own documents once they start to study them. Of course, this approach presumes the Christian has also studied his or her belief system well.

Encourage them to study the Bible openly. The Bible is God’s Word. It will stand the test of any objections or doubt. God works to convict and convince through His Word. If a person of another faith system is so certain about his or her own beliefs, he or she should not fear studying what Christians believe with an open mind.

Churches must be prepared for a pluralistic world. We heard from more than one respondent that they had attended church for several weeks without hearing a gospel message. This is an all-too-frequent occurrence in churches and a travesty. Pastors and church leaders: please realize that each week you have attendees in your congregation who are spiritually dead. The gospel is their only hope.

Christians cannot be intimidated by other beliefs. We shouldn’t be intimidated to share Christ with satanists and witches nor Muslims and Hindus. The gates of hell will not prevail against us. We have nothing to fear, but in Christ’s name, we have much to offer.

Share your faith regularly. Christians have become spiritually lazy and disobedient. Telling others the good news of Jesus Christ is not optional for any Christian. It is not something left to the pastors and ministers we sometimes treat like hired hands. It is the calling and the mandate of every Christian.

Live like a Christian. I believe without a doubt that persons of other faiths would be strongly drawn to Christians if we just acted like Christians should act. It may be cliché, but wouldn’t it be a different world if every Christian preceded each decision by asking "what would Jesus do?"

Be willing to invest time with Non-Christians. Christ spent time with people even though his recorded earthly ministry was only about three years. Will Christians today be willing to develop long and sacrificial relationships with those who are not followers of Christ? Such an act is a true act of love, our final but most important lesson.

Love people with Christ’s unconditional love. Non-Christians are drawn to those who demonstrate Christlike love. We who are Christians can win many to Christ if we just demonstrate the love that Christ commanded us to show. The hurting world waits for people just like that.

THE HARVEST IS WAITING

Satan is the author of excuses. There is no reason to wait to reach those who don’t know Jesus Christ. We must go now. The harvest is waiting. And the Lord of the harvest has prepared the way.
Personal and Corporate Steps Towards Evangelism
In spite of radical evangelistic decline, some churches seize the opportunity and launch culturally relevant outreach ministries. There has been a decline of traditional outreach ministries in many churches. Most churches no longer try to connect with people through “cold call” visits in their homes. These churches, more often than not, begin to see declines in their attendance if they do not replace the traditional approach with something else.

**Changes in Church Outreach**

Too often, churches are doing nothing rather than something.

But, to be fair, thousands of churches are doing some type of outreach to their communities and beyond. But the times have definitely changed. Here are some of the most common changes in church outreach practices over the past one to two decades.

**From in-home visitation to lunch or coffee shop visits.** Relatively few churches do in-home visits. But many are connecting with people at lunch or at a coffee shop. In fact, I believe every church should have some budget dollars allocated for this type of outreach.

**From newspaper ads to Facebook ads.** Facebook ads are not only affordable; their algorithms allow a church to be highly focused on the target audience. Starting as low as $15 per month, almost every church can afford some level of Facebook ads.

**From worship services to the church website as the front door.** Guests to a church in the past would check out the church first by visiting the worship services. Guests today often make their first impression decisions by checking the church website. There is no excuse for a church to have a poor and dated website today. They are affordable and user-friendly.

**From complex gospel presentations to simple gospel presentations.** The most popular gospel presentation of the past several decades was “Evangelism Explosion.” Theologically rich and highly effective for a season, EE did, however, require a great deal of memorization and training. Today many churches look for an effective gospel presentation that requires less training. My favorite simple gospel presentation is “Three Circles,” conceptualized by Family Church in South Florida, and its lead pastor, Jimmy Scroggins.

**From multi-service to multi-venue and multi-site.** In the 1960s and 1970s many congregations moved to multiple worship services on Sunday mornings. Such transitions were not without their critics and detractors. Today a number of churches are adding a worship service on a different day; or adding a new campus in close proximity to the church; or adding a different venue in the same facility; or moving to video venues. While churches still use the multi-service approach as a strategic means to reach people, more resources are being invested in new sites and new venues. These new starts tend to grow faster and...
reach unchurched persons more effectively than existing services. While churches above 500 in attendance were more likely to add a venue, many smaller churches are moving in this direction as well.

From attractional to going. Many churches have invested significant resources in attracting people to their worship services or to some big event. More resources are now being expended on members going into the community. Hands-on ministry and small group connections are becoming a more normative approach to reaching people today.

From national and international giving to contextual giving. Churches are now more likely to fund outreach ministries where they know the ministry or people involved in the ministry. They are becoming less likely to fund a national or denominational fund that then decides funding recipients. Of course, this issue is presenting challenges to many denominations, including my own. Churches have developed ministries that encourage and equip members to invite persons to church on an ongoing basis. Those that have proved successful have some type of accountability built into the process. It is not a simple exhortation from the pastor to invite someone to church. It is rather an organized system that can account for the number of people invited to church each week.

These are not merely shifts; they are dramatic changes. And most of the changes took place in a relatively brief period.

It appears that many churches began to decline when they abandoned traditional outreach programs but did not replace them with anything else. And it appears that the churches that continued to grow made certain that such a void was filled.

This one thing is clear: If your church does not have some ongoing approach to reach those outside the walls of the congregation, it is likely to be in decline.

**Potential Issues Surrounding Church Outreach**

Hear me well: There is nothing wrong with outreach programs *per se.* They can be very helpful if put in the proper context. The problem is that most highly prescriptive programs do not do so. As a result, they do not deliver their intended results.

In fact, they can, in some cases, do more harm than good if they are not framed well. Allow me to share seven reasons why most well intended outreach programs fail.

They are seen as an end instead of a means. As a consequence, some will be a part of an outreach ministry as a sense of legalistic obligation. Most church members, especially Millennials, refuse to participate in something unless they know the “why” behind it.

Most outreach programs are not addressed in front-end membership classes. The best time to help shape expectations and responsibilities of members is when they first become a part of the church. Rarely is the issue of becoming outwardly focused addressed.

Many outreach programs do not feel natural. Though it is cliché, the best way to share the love of Christ is in the natural overflow of our love for Him. The best outreach ministries should teach us how to channel that overflow. When a church has an outreach program, it can be perceived as a ministry for the few. So the majority of the members can...
say it’s “someone else’s” ministry. The Great Commission is not a multiple choice question. Most outreach programs fail to explain that sharing the love of Christ is a vital part of spiritual growth. Instead it is often seen as a “check list” among other obligations at the church.

Outreach programs can offer excuses for people not to be outwardly focused. I used to conduct church surveys when I was a church consultant. A common theme I heard was: “I do this ministry, so I don’t have to be involved in evangelism and outreach.” In other words, being an outwardly focused Christian becomes an option among many. And it’s usually not chosen.

Outreach programs can put the responsibility of evangelism on institutions. So if a church is not evangelistic, it’s because the denomination or other resource providers are not doing their jobs. Local churches and local church members shift accountability to an institution.

**Protecting Your Church From Outreach Pitfalls**

However, on the other side, outreach programs can be effective when the heartbeat of the church is able to sustain such programs. Here are some practical steps to align your church with an outwardly focused mindset to enable effective outreach programs:

**The church takes time during each worship service to pray for the community.** Prayer is powerful; and the church members become more focused about their communities.

**A volunteer or staff person is accountable for the outreach ministry of the church.** If no one has leadership responsibility, it does not get done. A regular report is provided to church members about outreach and ministry efforts in the community. What gets reported gets done. Have you noticed most churches provide financial reports to the church members? That says the money is important. We need at least equal emphasis on the importance of outreach ministries.

**Churches have regular “mystery” guests come to the worship services.** One church leader told me that his church asks someone in the community to be a mystery guest every quarter. Those guests are always first-time guests, and they share their experiences with leaders later that day or week. The church members thus get to see the worship services through the eyes of a community member.

**The church gives obsessive attention to their websites.** A church website is the new front door for churches. It’s almost always the first place prospective guests go. These websites should be designed in a very guest friendly way.

**The churches are intentional about scheduling ministries, events, and activities for reaching the community.** One pastor told me that his church always focuses on one key community outreach ministry per month. The church’s attendance is less than 80, but it was under 40 two years ago.

**Churches are intentional about connecting with their communities through social media.** It is mind boggling that we have the most pervasive form of communication in history, but very few churches use it strategically. I know a pastor in a rural community who worked with a Millennial and asked her to lead the social media outreach. It has been a great success because someone is responsible for it.
SOUL WINNERS

It is inevitable that, when we do research on evangelistic churches, we learn about one or more members in the church who, to use the book title by Charles H. Spurgeon, embody the traits of "The Soul Winner." Oftentimes one of those members is the pastor. But we have also seen many laypersons who are themselves soul winners.

In our interviews with these people, or with those who tell us about the soul winners, we began to discern some clear patterns. We called those patterns “the seven characteristics of highly evangelistic Christians.”

They are people of prayer. They realize that only God can convict and convert, and they are totally dependent upon Him in prayer. Most of the highly evangelistic Christians spend at least an hour in prayer each day.

They have a theology that compels them to evangelize. They believe in the urgency of the gospel message. They believe that Christ is the only way of salvation. They believe that anyone without Christ is doomed for a literal hell.

They are people who spend time in the Word. The more time they spend in the Bible, the more likely they are to see the lostness of humanity and the love of God in Christ to save those who are lost.

They are compassionate people. Their hearts break for those who don’t have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They have learned to love the world by becoming more like Christ who has the greatest love for the world.

They love the communities where God has placed them. They are immersed in the culture because they desire for the light of Christ to shine through them in their communities.

They are intentional about evangelism. They pray for opportunities to share the gospel. They look for those opportunities. And they see many so-called casual encounters as appointments set by God.

They are accountable to someone for their evangelistic activities. They know that many good activities can replace Great Commission activities if they are not careful. Good can replace the best. So they make certain that someone holds them accountable each week, either formally or informally, for their evangelistic efforts.

GOAL SETTING AND EVANGELISM

“It’s human-centered, not God-centered.”

“It’s another attempt to transfer a secular methodology to the church.”

“It’s not dependent upon God and prayer.”

Those are three of the most common objections I’ve heard to goal setting in the church, particularly for evangelism.

I get it. You can indeed make goal setting a human-centered endeavor. But the reality is that most any effort in the church can become prayerless and not dependent on the Holy Spirit.

But I want to suggest that goal setting for evangelism can truly be used for God’s glory and Great Commission obedience. To be clear, I advocate lead metrics for goal setting more than lag metrics. We commonly set goals for conversions, baptisms, professions of faith,
salvation decisions, or similar nomenclature. Those are lag metrics. I suggest, however, your church use lead metrics along with lag metrics.

Lead metrics are acts of obedience that, in God’s power, result in the lag metrics noted above. They include goals for sharing the gospel; writing letters or emails to non-Christians and unchurched persons; meals or coffee with people without Christ or a church home, or flyers about the church left at homes. Those are but a few examples of evangelistic efforts or pre-evangelistic efforts.

I argue that churches that set lead metric goals for evangelism will actually see greater evangelistic fruit. Here are five reasons why:

**Reasons Goal Setting Can Increase Evangelism**

**Goal setting makes us intentional about the Great Commission.** Our natural inclination is to be inwardly-focused. But if we are regularly focused on reaching outwardly through goals, we are more inclined to do so.

**Goal setting is a statement about church and individual priorities.** Do you think it helps your marriage to have a goal to have one date night a week? For certain. That is a statement of the importance of your marriage relationship. Likewise, goal setting for evangelism is a statement that the church is serious about the Great Commission.

**Goal setting is working in many churches.** Yes, there is a pragmatic reality here. I know of a church of 130 in attendance that had been plateaued for five years. That church set a faith goal of “1,000 in One Year.” The 1,000 goal noted was the church’s way of using lead metrics. They counted gospel presentations, visits with unchurched persons, and the delivery of hanging invitation brochures (an invitation to the church that can be hung on the door handle or knob or a home) in the 1,000 total. At the end of the year, they had exceeded the goal of 1,000 with 1,700 contacts! The church attendance increased by nearly 50 percent to 190, and the church saw 24 people become believers in Christ through the efforts, the highest number in two decades!

**Goal setting is a constant reminder to the church members to be outwardly focused.** The church noted above kept a running total of the evangelism contacts before the church and reported every week the growing number. It was a clear statement the church and the members were to be outwardly focused.

**Goal setting leads to church unity.** The greatest reason for church conflict is members who have an inward focus. They think church membership is all about getting their own way. When they don’t get their way, they become frustrated and even combative. Evangelism goal setting keeps the focus on the “other” instead of “me.”

Goal setting, when used in a gospel-centric effort, can truly be an evangelistic instrument for the church.

**Looking Up and Moving Forward**

I know. I have been a spokesman for gloom and doom of the local church. I’ve even written a book about church autopsies—not necessarily a topic of hope and joy.

There have, however, been reasons for my notes of caution and pessimism. First, we must face facts if we are to do something about them. We can’t expect to move forward if we have our metaphorical heads in the sand. Such is the reason I wrote a book on church deaths. Second, the negative situation I have described is a reality. It would not demonstrate integrity if I said something differently.
But, in the midst of the gloomy facts, I remain an obnoxious optimist about local congregations. I do believe there is a very good possibility that we won’t go the way of many other places that have seen the decline of churches to the point of irrelevance. Allow me to share twelve reasons why I remain hopeful.

Leaders in congregations are demonstrating a willingness to face reality. They are no longer playing games as if everything is okay. We must face the facts as we seek God’s power to do something about them.

Prayer movements are developing in many churches. These movements are typically more spontaneous than planned. When God’s people start praying, revival has already begun.

Both church planting and church revitalization are being emphasized. These two emphases have historically been viewed as competitive with one another. Today, more church leaders see them as complementary and vital. That is good.

There is a wedding of theology and practical ministry. In the 1970s and 1980s, the church growth movement advocated practical ministry often to the neglect of biblical and theological foundations. For the past 15 years, there has been a needed emphasis on good theology, but often to the neglect of practical issues. Today, there is a growing balance that realizes good theology should birth healthy practical ministry.

There is a growing emphasis on local church evangelism. Related to the issue in number four, more church leaders are now realizing they are in congregations bereft of evangelistic health. That is changing for the better.

Almost everywhere is a mission field. The bad news is that fewer people are Christians today, at least in America, than any point in known history. The good news is that our towns and neighborhoods are mission fields ready for workers.

The “multi-” movement is reaching into new areas. Church leaders no longer view a single church site or service as the limits of ministry. The growth of multi-service, multi-venue, multi-site, and multi-campus has provided more opportunities to reach more people.

More church leaders are engaging culture rather than isolating themselves from culture. While the degradation of biblical values in our culture can be a temptation to withdraw from the world, more church leaders are moving into culture to be “salt and light.” We don’t have to compromise our biblical values, but we can be gracious ambassadors in this new and often strange world.

Church members are doing greater ministry in the local communities. We can largely credit Christian Millennials with this trend. Local church ministry is moving from “you come” to “we go.”

I am not suggesting that these developments are indicative of a quick turnaround of our congregations. Many are still in dire straits. But I am hopeful. Above all, my trust is in the one true God who is still working among His people. I am excited to see what He will do.

**The “Secret” of Evangelistic Churches**

The secret is really no secret at all. Ultimately, evangelistic churches see more persons become Christians through the passionate efforts of
highly evangelistic Christians. More than any programs. More than any church events. More than anything else, we are the instruments God has chosen to use.

Sometimes we ask the question "What is my church doing to become more evangelistic?" But the better question is "What am I doing to become more evangelistic?"

Charles H. Spurgeon was right. We need more soul winners.

We need more highly evangelistic Christians.

**A GREAT COMMISSION RESURGENCE: WHEN THEOLOGY MEETS EVANGELISM**

Will the evangelical church in America experience a Great Commission resurgence? With the early Church as our pattern, we can have great hope that such a resurgence will take place.

But no great evangelistic move of God has ever taken place without the rightful wedding of theology and evangelism. When evangelism has no theology, it degenerates into human-made methods and manipulation. When theology has no evangelism, it degenerates into a dry and powerless academic exercise.

May we see a Great Commission resurgence like the early Church.  
May our motives be deeply theological.  
May our actions be passionately evangelistic.  
And may God do a great work in our land.

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**RESOURCES FOR EVANGELISTIC ACTION**

- EvangelismRenewal.com
- ThomRainer.com
- Rainer on Leadership
- ChurchAnswers.com
- RevitalizedChurches.com
- I Am A Church Member
- Autopsy of a Deceased Church
- I Will
- Who Moved My Pulpit?
- Turning Everyday Conversations into Gospel Conversations
- Effective Evangelistic Churches
- Surprising Insights from the Unchurched
- The Unexpected Journey
- Life on Mission App
- Tell Someone
- Sharing Jesus without Freaking Out

**CREDITS**

Portions of this eBook were compiled from *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, *The Unchurched Next Door*, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, *The Unexpected Journey*, and blog posts at ThomRainer.com.