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What's Hot (& What's Not) in Outreach

by Alan Nelson, reprinted from *REV!* nov/dec 2007

My dad was passionate about winning souls for Christ. Just ask my wife. One of the first questions Dad asked Nancy during her initial “interrogation” was “Have you wept for souls?”

The problem was that his evangelistic zeal was at times in conflict with his devotion to frugality. On more than one occasion after a family meal at a restaurant, I'd sneak back in, add to the tip, and then remove the gospel tract he'd left at the table. Otherwise, I feared the server would have a bad impression of Christians.

I grew up listening to Billy Graham. As a kid on an Iowa farm, I would often preach like Mr. Graham atop our haystack (including the arm motions), trying to get the hogs to come forward. (The buses would wait.) As a teenager, I went house to house presenting the Kennedy Plan. After knocking on the front door, I prayed that no one would answer. I still got “credit for trying,” and it used up five minutes of my assigned soul-winning time.

During college I preached a few dozen revivals, promoted as evangelistic campaigns. While visiting larger cities, I'd see street corner preachers and wonder how they thought that method was effective.

In spite of these mixed experiences with outreach, 75 percent of my 20 years in pastoral work involved planting “seeker” churches, where 60 to 70 percent of the people did not know Christ before coming to our church.

NOTE: For the purpose of this article, outreach means the process of reaching out to people in order to help them begin a deep relationship with Jesus, with an emphasis on a first-time friendship.

Outreach is “hot.” There are countless resources dedicated to helping churches improve their ability to pursue the Great Commission. It's indisputable that church attendance in America is on the decline, in spite of billions of dollars donated every year to churches. I'm convinced that in the next 10 years, churches will be even more intrigued to discover what does and does not work in outreach as most congregations continue to shrink in size—along with their resources and vitality.

Ecclesiology vs. Missiology

Part of the outreach dilemma among American Christians is that we don't agree on the purpose of the local church. Who are we and what are we to be doing? When we read outreach resources, attend seminars, and preach

sermons, it would help if we were on the same page, which isn't likely because the mission and role of the church are related to theological and biblical interpretation. Before your church figures out how it can become more effective in outreach, it must clarify its role as a congregation.

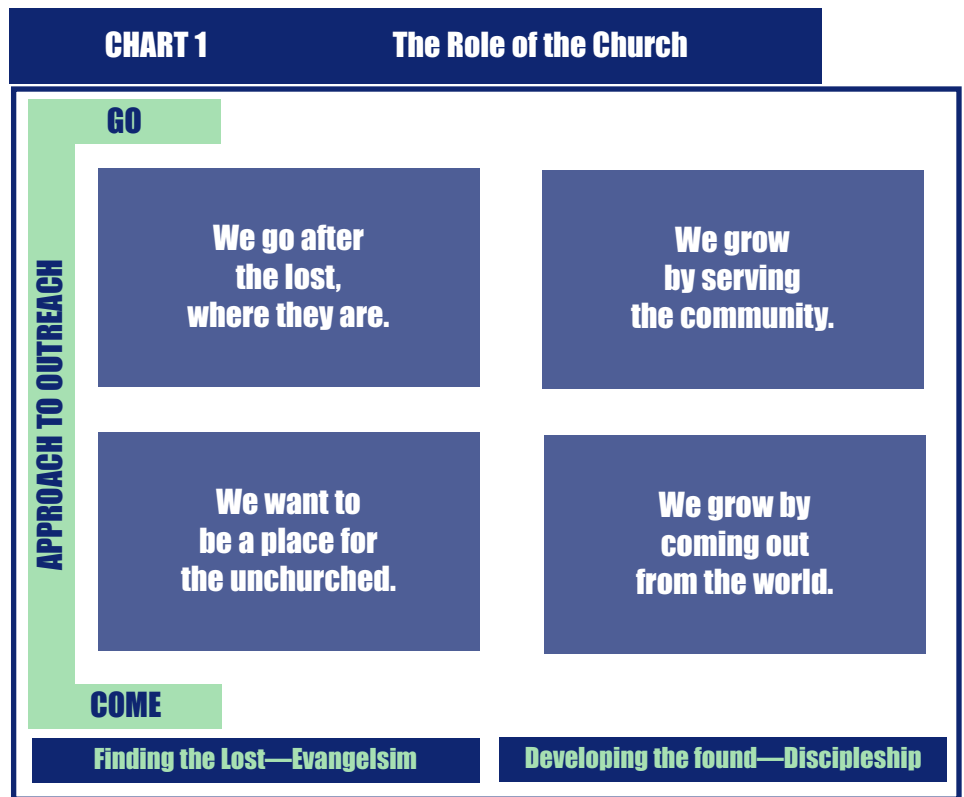
Terminology is important but can be misleading. We typically think of evangelism as the process whereby people come to know and follow Christ, focusing on the time prior to and including the initial decision to be a Jesus follower. Discipleship tends to define the process after this decision, whereby we mature in faith. Although these distinctions are difficult to make from Scripture, we'll defer to these more common uses for the explanation that follows.

Four basic camps exist, based on approach (strategy) and role (purpose). (See Chart 1). Most churches and parachurch groups function primarily in one of these quadrants:

Outflow/Evangelism (*upper-left quadrant*): The primary purpose of the church is to reach those who do not know Christ, and the way we do this is by sending equipped people to connect with others in offices, neighborhoods, and external networks.

In flow/Evangelism (*lower-left quadrant*): The primary purpose of the church is to reach those who do not know Christ, and the way to do this is to fashion attractive worship service and ministry menus that make it easy for people to invite their friends to church, where they hear the gospel.

Outflow/Discipleship (*upper-right quadrant*): The primary purpose of the church is to mature people in their faith, and one way we do this is by helping them become servants who reach out to others in the community. By doing this we grow spiritually and trust that others will find Christ in the process.



In flow/Discipleship (*lower-right quadrant*): The primary purpose of the church is to mature people in their faith, and the way we do this is by gathering people together for Bible studies, preaching in-depth sermons, and running Christian schools. The church is for the “found,” in hopes that witnessing is one of the results in the disciple’s life.

Application : Consider where your church is among the four quadrants, not in theory, but in actuality in terms of your budget, calendar, and those who attend your church. Ask your lay leadership where they think your church is and then compare and contrast your responses.

Trends for the Next 10 Years

So why aren't more (or any) people coming to know Christ in your church, or why is it that your people rarely bring potential Christians to attend church with them? Part of the

answer has to do with your ecclesiology and missiology. Another major part of it has to do with your awareness of what is and isn't working culturally.

In the recent past, well-meaning pastors and Christian leaders lambasted various approaches to helping people come to know Christ, believing theirs to be superior to the rest. But most of these were based on styles or programs that had evolved over the years, and thus lost potency as the environment from which they were born had changed.

Chart 2 (on page 3) gives a fast overview of what's hot and what's not. You'll always be able to find advocates for the various styles. However, those on the cold or cool end of the spectrum will have more and more difficult time finding people who respond to these; those on the hot end will have an increasing percentage responsive to these approaches. To be a good steward of your outreach resources, consider these trends for outreach efficacy over the next 10 years.

While we typically look at the manifestations of outreach (activities, pro-

CHART 2

<p>COLD TURN OR BURN; CONFRONT “THEM” WITH THE TRUTH.</p>	<p>COOL WE’VE DISCOV- ERED THE TRUTH; LET’S CONVINC “THEM.”</p>	<p>WARM WE HAVE SOME- THING WE THING “THEY’LL WANT; WARM THEM UP SLOWLY.</p>	<p>HOT I’M HERE FOR YOU; EXPERIENCE THE DIFFERENCE IN MY LIFE THAT GOD MAKES.</p>
<p>TURN-OR-BURN PREACHING and STREET CORNER EVANGELISM</p> <p>CONFRONTATIONAL APPROACHES (Evangelism, Explosion, door-to-door surveys)</p> <p>CANNED PLANS (Interacting with strangers using The Four Spiritual Laws, The Bridge, gospel tracts)</p>	<p>STADIUM EVENTS (Crusades — Graham, Palau, Harvest)</p> <p>APOLOGETICS (Convincing facts and arguments)</p> <p>ALTER CALLS / INVITATIONS TO COME FORWARD AT THE ED OF SERMONS</p>	<p>ATTRACTION EVENTS (Family fun days, comedy nights, Friend Days)</p> <p>HIGH-QUALITY “SEEKER WORSHIP (North Point, Willow Creek, Saddleback, Fellowship)</p> <p>FRIENDSHIP EVANGEL- ISM (<i>Contagious Christian, Just Walk Across the Room</i>)</p> <p>EXPERIMENTAL WOR- SHIP (<i>Worship evangel- ism, house churches, emerging congregations</i>)</p>	<p>SERVICE EVANGEL- ISM/LET ME SERVE YOU—NO STRINGS(Outflow, Sjogren)</p> <p>INCARNATIONAL EVAN- GELISM/LET’S SERVE OTHERS TOGETHER (Bono, Habitat for Humanity, Group Workcamps)</p> <p>CO-JOURNEY/AGENDA- LESS FRIENDSHIPS/ “US” (<i>A New Kind of Christian, Jim and Casper Go to Church</i>)</p>

The Externally Focused Church

Rick Rusaw, pastor of LifeBridge Christian Church in Longmont, Colorado, was seeing great growth and had a Christmas program that was attracting 30,000 visitors. But he started to wonder if they were really making a difference in the community. So he did something drastic: He canceled the Christmas program. Rick realized that if LifeBridge was going to make a long-term impact on its community, it needed to become externally focused. “We decided to take all the volunteer hours and effort and use those resources in serving the community,” Rick says. Thus began the birth of what is now the Externally Focused Church network. In addition to making a broad and deep impact in their city, LifeBridge is working on a 300-plus acre planned neighborhood that will incorporate dynamic partnerships between the church and community. For more info, go to www.externallyfocusednetwork.com.

grams, events, books), we need to analyze deeper motivations, which are the root of the fruit. If we’re to be more effective in the future, we need to change our mind-set, how we think of pre-believers and our attitude in connecting with them.

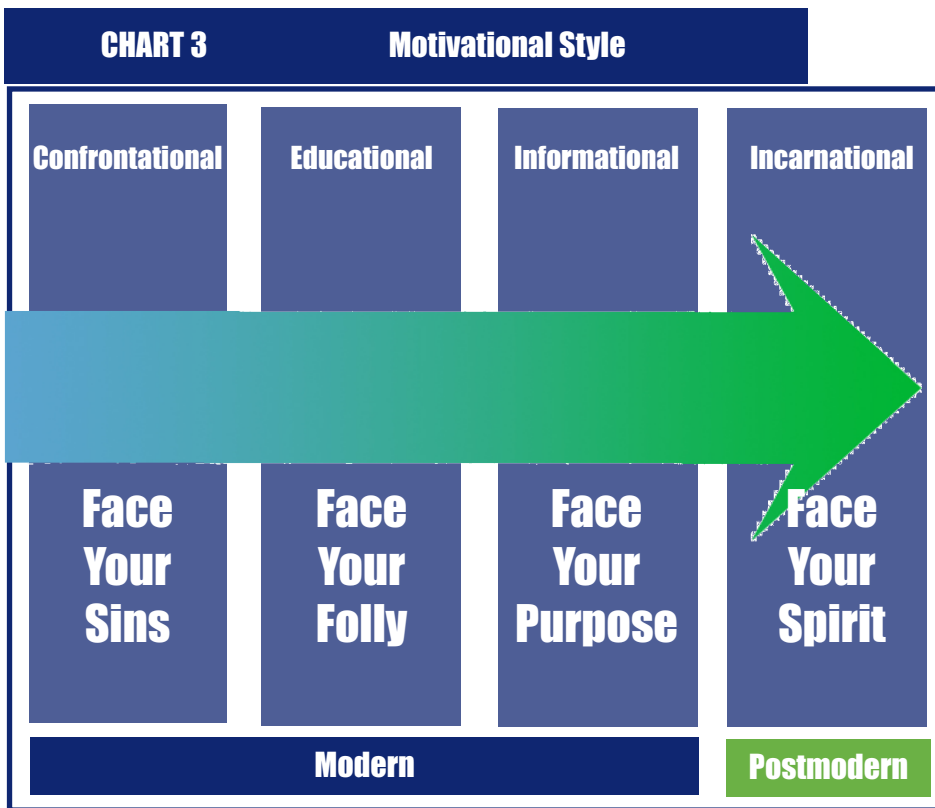
The complexity of our culture means that far fewer people are responding positively to styles and methods that are on the left end of the motivational spectrum. (See *Chart 3*). A growing problem is the paradigm shift in thinking between modern and postmodern. The latter are far

less interested in Truth (capital T), but are interested in personal story (MySpace.com, Facebook.com) and incarnational evangelism, which basically means, “If your faith is worth having, I’ll catch it by engaging in conversation and authentic community with you.” That means we’ll have to be good news before we *share* the good news. Training people in this new approach is far more apt to be accomplished through coaching and communication skills than it is in loading them up with slick strategies resembling bait and switch, or savvy apologetics. In other words, it’s more about asking strategic questions than in providing exemplary answers.

This is not to say that these previous strategies were (or are) wrong, but they’re increasingly becoming impotent. Therefore, thoughtful churches must rethink how they are interacting with pre-believers, who are spiritually open but religiously closed.

12 Common Myths About Outreach

- 1 Evangelism is the “organized” church’s job. (*Nope, it’s up to individuals.*)
- 2 When people say, “outreach,” they’re all talking about the same thing. (Some mean social service, doing things outside of the church, and others “foreign missions.”)
- 3 Canned approaches still work well.
- 4 A rmed with ample apologetics, we can convince people to believe in Christ.
- 5 Church mission statements (including “evangelism/outreach” components) are effective.
- 6 Revival services and camp meetings are still productive means of outreach.
- 7 Church marketing with slick ads and postcards is sufficient to gain new members. (The best PR won’t change a lame church.)
- 8 A growing church is a sign of effective evangelism. (*Fifteen percent of churches are growing, but only 1 percent grow primarily from new believers.*)
- 9 Attraction events are sufficient to introduce people to Christ.
- 10 Confrontational evangelism is effective; more Christians should implement it.
- 11 Altar calls (*invitations*) at the end of church services are the primary way that people make decisions for Christ.
- 12 If people are attending church, it’s fair to assume they have a deep relationship with Christ.



NOTE: I prefer the word “prebeliever” as internal language rather than “nonbeliever,” “lost,” “non-Christian,” or “sinner,” because it implies a mind-set that people are more ready to embrace faith than most of us perceive.

If your church is going to be effective in getting people to reach out to

pre-believers, you’ll need to be intentional. You can’t say, “You should share your faith,” and expect anything positive to happen. We’re also not suggesting we make prebelievers feel like targets, objects, or projects. If sharing faith is not something that’s natural or that would make sense within their immediate friendships and relationships, they’re not apt to do it. If people are

not sharing their faith, then we should consider changing the methods we advocate. Unfortunately, far too many Christians equate outreach to being pushy, nerdy, socially odd, and just plain weird. That’s why most avoid it like the plague, in spite of our passionate preaching and witnessing seminars. (Go to www.rev.org and click on “Videos” and then “Life In the Office—Faith” to see how one church portrayed this.)

People have a sense of whether something will connect in the world in which they live. But when left to having ineffective tools or nothing, they’ll defer to nothing. Therefore, pastors and church leaders must become much more savvy in offering opportunities in which people can participate in full and that allow them to reach out in a manner that makes sense and will not embarrass them or their friends.

Alan Nelson is the author of Me to We (Group) and the executive editor of Rev! Magazine. For a free slide show of Alan’s presentation of this workshop from the National Outreach Convention, go to www.rev.org, click on “Extras” and then “NOC 07 Seminar Slides.”