

HOW DO NEW PEOPLE HEAR ABOUT YOUR CHURCH?

When asked, “How did you first find out about this congregation?” visitors give surprisingly diverse answers. Because not all visitors are seeking the same thing, their path to your church door reflects their specific needs and interests. Thus, congregations need multiple strategies to publicize and promote their presence in the community.

Types of Potential New Members

There are three major types of potential members in your community and they usually have a variety of methods for seeking you out.

Transplants are new community residents who tend to search for a congregation of the same denomination they were previously a part of. They generally use the narrowest search strategy, such as denominational lists or a recommendation by their previous pastor.

Neighbors are friends and relatives of people who already attend or who live close by. These visitors are more likely to respond to a personal invitation to attend.

Seekers are potential worshipers who have not attended church before, or at least not in a long time. They usually find a church in less direct ways and may be looking for an experience that addresses an emotional need.

Building Bridges

Many congregations excel at building bonds—personal connections among members—but it takes something more to build bridges to new members. Congregations build bridges to potential new members when worshipers want to share something that they find meaningful with those outside the church. Unfortunately, without planning and intentional efforts, these bridges never get built.

Congregational leaders and members assume that new people first engage by attending a worship service. However, growing numbers of people, especially younger people, have no church affiliation or previous exposure to faith communities. More than ever, congregations need different mechanisms to engage new generations and populations.¹

Ways to Build Bridges

There are multiple bridging approaches, and the effectiveness of each strategy depends on the type of visitor a church is attempting to reach.

Personal communication. Word of mouth remains the most frequent way new people find out about a church. Decades of research support this finding: current estimates range from at least half to two-thirds of surveyed adults find a church through personal invitations. People are infinitely more likely to trust information if they hear it from a person they know.

Virtual word of mouth. If current members use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Yelp, Foursquare, Meetup, or other platforms, your church already engages in digital evangelism. When members post photos of church experiences and friends, their side-door evangelism spreads information about what your church has to offer to their friends *and the friends of their friends*. Online avenues allows people to feel like they belong before they ever step foot on church property.²

Mass communication. An effective church website gives new people the chance to do in-depth research about



a church before they visit or engage in activities there. A high-quality website connects people to the church's ministry goals, including opportunities for volunteerism, social advocacy, and meeting spiritual needs.

Other communications still make a difference. Congregations can produce attractive brochures, postcards, and mailings. Others use signs and banners on church property and in the community. Radio ads tend to be inexpensive and can reach a wide audience.

Promoting and hosting events. Fairburn United Methodist Church, with many members more than eighty years old, recognized that new actions could strengthen their congregation's role in the community. The church created an "Open Doors Day" for the community, a carnival-type event that offered free rides, games, food, and tours. When more than 300 people attended, the church felt more connected to new residents in their changing community.³

Community service activities. Meaningful service and advocacy efforts grow out of church ministries. These activities both minister to struggling or hurting people and give potential new members an avenue for social activism as well. For some, service volunteering can lead to deeper involvement in a faith community.

Increasing visibility. A national study of new members found that one in five first found out about the congregation because they noticed the building.⁴ Thus, attractive grounds and facilities also advertise and can say, "Welcome." Notifications about preschools, after school programs, and service programs increase foot traffic as well as raise the visibility and use of church facilities.

Designing Bridges That Work

Before launching plans for reaching out to new people, gather some information about what is working now. Find out what current church efforts yield the best results. Above all, make only one or two changes at a time and continue monitoring the results.

Conduct a survey. Ask your last twenty new members: "Through whom, or by what means, did you first visit our church? What got you on the property the first time?" Share the findings with the appropriate committee or governing board and plan new strategies.

Assess the church's reputation. Ask ten nonmembers in the community to tell you what they know about the church. Which of your programs or services are you effectively communicating to the public? Do these assessments match your congregation's goals and mission? If not, where is the communication faltering?

Bolster your digital message. Try googling your church and see what comes up. Does the church website come up first? What else can a potential church visitor learn from an internet search? Is the address displayed and are service times easy to find? Consider completing a review of church website basics and making the necessary changes to enhance your site.⁵

To enable current members to electronically communicate with their friends about the church, learn about their usage patterns. Expect church members to fall all along the social media spectrum—from non-users to experts. An excellent Church Internet Usage Survey is available to get this critical information.⁶ Based on accurate information, a social ministry team can build a comprehensive plan for enhancing the church's ministry through this technology.

Plan big worship days. Churches see spikes in attendance at predictable times throughout each year—Christmas, Easter, and Mother's Day—and even larger numbers can be expected if people in the neighborhood receive personal or print invitations. Other promoted service times might be a Back-to-School Sunday in the fall, a day in February when people are less busy, or a Visitor or Bring-a-Friend Sunday. Each of these promoted services attract different types of people, such as inactives, families with children, and relatives or friends of members. However, given the planning and effort involved, carrying out more than three or four of these special Sundays a year is counterproductive.

The Bottom Line

What causes an increase in first-time worship visitors? Major causes are your congregation's meaningful ministry, visibility, and positive reputation in the community. When that is the case, members derive significant spiritual meaning from their church, more members spontaneously invite, and more people respond to those invitations.

1. F. Douglas Powe and Jasmine Smother, "Create New Entry Points," *Leading Ideas*, October 2014 (www.churchleadership.com).

2. Powe and Smother.

3. www.sacredplaces.org/reimagine-your-sacred-place/training/graduate-success-stories/2015/02/23/fairburn-united-methodist-church

4. U.S. Congregational Life Survey (www.USCongregations.org).

5. See Scott Thumma, "Review of Church Website," www.theparishpaper.com/review-church-website-basics-scott-thumma.

6. See Scott Thumma, "Church Internet Usage Survey" www.theparishpaper.com/church-internet-usage-survey-scott-thumma.