

## **Bringing Our Friends to Church**

As we discern visions for helping Jesus make disciples, many of us are not sure how to invite people into our church community. Or perhaps we are a little afraid. As I am naturally uncomfortable knocking on doors or confronting people with the Word, it was comforting to find statistics showing that only about ten percent of all Christians have the gift of evangelism and are outspoken individuals who are comfortable and effective in confronting people with the Gospel. I began to think that maybe I could leave this evangelization stuff to the gifted people.

Lacking the gift of evangelism bothered me, however, because I do wish to see others accept Jesus as Lord. The significant decline in church membership during the last 40 years troubles me. Evangelism is now more important than ever because people do not necessarily feel that they need to go to church. Church members who say that others will eventually “come back” to church forget that ever greater numbers of people either have never been to church or were dissatisfied with church and left to look for something else. The traditional strategy of simply having an attractive church with good programs is no longer a strategy for bringing people into church. We cannot simply “attract” people to church, we need to “reach” them. We need to go out and meet people and bring them home.

When Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples” (Matthew 29:19), he meant each of us. We each need to use our spiritual gifts and personality to build relationships, to work together to network people into the church, and to draw others to Jesus. This process should not be difficult or scary.

Three Biblical stories of people inviting others to come and see Jesus are exemplary – the stories of Andrew (John 1:35-42), Philip (John 1:43-51) and the woman at the well (John 4:7-30). Each of these people simply shared Christ with people they already knew. Evangelism is most effective when we deal with existing relationships – our friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers, and so on. 89% of the people who come to church and stay come on the arm of someone they know.

If we wish to bring people we know to church, a first step is simply making friends. We generally make friends by spending time together and sharing activities – like playing golf or having a barbecue. These activities do not need to be at church or church-related. Most of us already can think of friends or acquaintances who do not attend a church and who should. We need to start praying for these people, make them a bigger part of our lives and see what happens. We are not trying to convert people to a theology, we are simply making friends.

If we want our friends to become part of our church community, we need to introduce them to our church friends. A second step in inviting people to church is including our church friends in small group activities with our non-church friends. This is really important because people who do not go to church have one main concern about church: The question they ask is “Are these people normal?” You can see why people might have this concern from the way

Christians are portrayed on TV and in movies. But if a person likes you and you genuinely like them, the person may want to be part of your church.

In addition to making friends and introducing them to our church friends, we need to introduce God into our relationships. This third step may make us uncomfortable but we will have opportunities to do this. When our friends are sick or have sick friends or relatives, we can ask if we may pray for them. When we share a meal, we may offer a blessing. Or we may share our own faith experiences at an appropriate time. If we pray for our friends to find Jesus, God often makes us part of this process. The Holy Spirit gives us opportunities to share our faith with our friends. Eventually, some of us will invite our mutual friends to church.

We can each go and meet people and bring them home: by making friends, introducing them to our church friends and introducing God into our conversations. Although you may not be the one who actually leads a person to Jesus and witnesses the conversion experience, you can take a vital role in helping a friend take one more step toward accepting Jesus; and you only have to be yourself.

Saint Paul says, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (II Corinthians 5:17) And Jesus says, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:32). This is the joy we experience as individuals and as a church community when we become part of this experience of saving love. "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, so I send you'" (John 20:21).