

Practical Ministry Skills: Building an Evangelistic Church



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training*. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of *Leadership Resources* and *Christianity Today International*, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This theme on building an evangelistic church is designed to help your church strengthen its evangelistic impact. You may use it either for a training session or to give individually to key people involved in evangelism. Simply print the handouts needed and use them as necessary.

To consider how your church's vision, values, and ministries play into your congregation's view of evangelism, read "Bullish on Evangelism" (pp. 3–4). To consider the factors that are shared among evangelistically-focused churches, see "It's a Group Effort" (pp. 5–6). "Evangelism Takes Time" (pp. 10–11) and the other articles in the final section of this theme focus on personal evangelism, seeking to equip people who have a burden for evangelism with the skills that can help make them effective.

We hope you enjoy this theme as you equip your congregation for building the body of Christ through evangelistic ministry.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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Bullish on Evangelism

Cultivate your church environment to be one where evangelism flourishes.

Matthew 18:18

Shortly after arriving as senior pastor, I asked my congregation of about 600 how many of them had been converted to Christ in the previous two years. I was trying to excite the people about what God was doing. Just six hands went up. Obviously, any growth had been transfer growth.

That brought my job into sharp focus: I had to move the congregation beyond its proud history to the point of making evangelism happen. Since then, I've discovered the frustrations and joys of seeing a well-established church embrace its mission. Looking back, here are the steps I've discovered for those wanting to create an environment in which evangelism flourishes.

Establish the Church's Vision

A church, if it expects to rouse from lethargy, must know why it exists and what God expects it to accomplish. This means going beyond knowing that it's God's intention for all churches to evangelize. Some congregations are called to be spiritual hospitals, some hotbeds of social activism, some teaching centers. Still others are front-line attack forces. Ask these two questions: First, what should be the direction of the church? Second, how best can we reach our community with the gospel?

Excite the Congregation with the Vision

People have to feel a personal conviction for evangelism. They have to want to grow and touch our community. We used a variety of means to encourage people to fulfill the vision God had given us. Here's what we found:

- **The pulpit:** In our church, we found that preaching about evangelism from the pulpit elevated the vision from the secular to the spiritual.
- **Conversations:** To be effective, we had to develop ways to introduce the church's vision into ordinary conversations and summarize the dreams.
- **Encouraging ownership of the vision:** At several meetings, we dealt with the question, "What will enable us to evangelize our community?" We then allowed time for free expression of ideas, fears, and concerns.
- **Opinion leaders:** We reached out through those we perceived to be congregational opinion leaders. Their influence may be felt in a business meeting, but more likely it's felt over coffee after church or in parking-lot conversations. Nurturing their excitement was key.
- **Testimonials:** We also had multiple people share what our church means to them and how they are praying for the church to reach out to the community. In doing this, we found that God speaks to the congregation through the testimonies of others.
- **An abundance of information:** Though it was expensive, it paid good dividends to communicate regularly with the congregation through the mail about our ministry objectives and progress.
- **Themes and emphases:** We discovered that a well-stated theme can mobilize people to a vision. When the theme is visible continually—posters, bulletins, signs, bookmarks—it reminds people of the church's passion.

Reshape the Ministries

Positioning a church for ongoing evangelism goes far beyond implementing a program or hiring additional staff. Ultimately, it takes a corporate change of heart. This is because many programs, personnel, and congregants will be asked to sacrifice or adapt. Although it's worth it, it's not always easy.

—CALVIN C. RATZ; Excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP journal, © 1989 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. What is our church's vision? Does it include reaching out to our community?
2. How can we adjust our ministries and sermons to welcome non-Christians without alienating our congregation?
3. What steps should we take to spread a vision for evangelism through our whole church?

BUILDING AN EVANGELISTIC CHURCH



It's a Group Effort

Six ways to transform your church into an evangelism-focused congregation

2 Timothy 4:5

How can regular Christians be turned on to evangelism? Based on a survey done of pastors by LEADERSHIP journal, here are six mindsets and actions embodied in churches that are evangelism-focused.

- 1. Salvation of lost people is the church's top ministry priority.** Evangelism—specifically, sharing the gospel for the purpose of conversion—must be a clearly stated objective. The allocation of time, energy, and resources must match the goal.
- 2. The pastor leads.** Many pastors don't feel that they're good evangelists, and examples such as Bill Hybels and Mark Jobe may only add to that perception. But the issue is not how many people the pastor leads to Christ each week; rather, it is a matter of how up front the pastor is with his or her efforts. The pastor regularly calls believers, likewise, to share their faith in the marketplace. And the pastor encourages program leaders to assess whether their ministries are outwardly focused, and how they can be made more evangelistic. A church is only as evangelistic as its pastor.
- 3. Evangelists are identified and unleashed.** In every congregation there is a small percentage that feels especially burdened for those without faith. These are the people who express the urgency of reaching lost people, ignite the congregation, and demonstrate that regular people can share their faith. They lessen the fear factor for others who are just getting started. They become the E-team, the organizers of the program. And they show the congregation that evangelism is not just the pastor's job.
- 4. Every believer is coached in sharing his or her faith.** After years of mailings from denominational headquarters and curriculum suppliers, pastors may feel they're drowning in an alphabet soup of witnessing programs. And while pastors may have an aversion to "yet another program," the fact is that most believers won't articulate their faith unless they're taught. Witnesses need a witnessing plan—whether it's homegrown or prepackaged, a personal testimony or a carefully crafted apologetic. Not everyone will memorize and recite a lengthy presentation, but some of what they learn will stick, and that much they'll tell others—if they're taught.
- 5. The church gets frequent reminders of the importance of sharing their faith.** Baptism services, particularly where the role of others in attendance in leading the person to Christ is told, keep a congregation excited. They see that God uses ordinary people to bring others to faith. At the least, they will be more likely to bring friends to church where they can hear the gospel.
- 6. Evangelism and prayer go hand-in-hand.** Every pastor we interviewed led his church to pray, regularly, and by name, for the salvation of his congregation's relatives and friends. Without fail, those congregations recognized that God responded to their prayers.

—ERIC REED

Discuss

1. Which of the six tips do we currently do well? How will we continue to perform well in that area?
2. Which of the six tips do we not do well? What can we do to improve?
3. Do we have an "E-team" at our church, and how can we support those men and women?



Evangelism That Flows

Shift the attitudes toward evangelism in your congregation.

Philippians 2:5

The natural flow of most churches is not toward evangelism. The reasons are many: a culture increasingly hostile to the message of Christ, fear of rejection, an inward focus on our own needs. Even so, some pastoral “engineers” have succeeded at reversing attitudes in their congregations and are seeing notable results. LEADERSHIP invited Mark Mittelberg, former director of evangelism for the Willow Creek Association, to discuss the task.

How do you shift people’s attitude from “I should evangelize” to “I want to evangelize”?

You begin with your own heart. If it’s not what it ought to be, admit that to God and then to the people around you. You can then gather a team that agrees this is what their lives and ministry will be about. You instill evangelistic values into more and more people around you. What happens then is you will attract other like-minded leaders into your church and repel those who are not. Many people are looking for a church that’s alive evangelistically.

Friends listen to friends. If we train individuals to naturally communicate their faith, we will see people come to Christ.

How does today’s seeker differ from the seeker of 1975?

Seekers are more skeptical now. They have less knowledge of the Bible and of what it means to be a Christian. So you have to do more groundwork, showing them this is not a blind leap of faith, that the Bible is a book with credentials, and that it works in our lives.

Why do some churches with godly leaders who teach the truth see few people, if any, come to the Lord?

Sometimes the problem is churches aren’t willing to try new things. If we’ve been doing evangelism the same way for 20 years and people aren’t coming to Christ, why do we keep beating our heads against the wall?

Other times, churches teach the Word but they do not put a priority on reaching lost people. Evangelism naturally tends to slip more than any other biblical value. It is what I call the law of evangelistic entropy. Believers get caught up with what they need.

Does God grant different gifts to churches just as he does to individuals? Do some churches evangelize and others teach?

God gifts leaders and churches to specialize in various ministries, but Jesus spelled out the purpose for the church in the Great Commission. That obviously includes teaching and edification and worship, but if a church says they’re just going to be a teaching church and not evangelize, they’re running counter to the purpose statement Jesus gave the church.

How often should you give some form of a specific “altar call”?

We weave the gospel into everything we do but not in an explicit form where we ask people to commit to Christ every week. We have to build a relationship with people and earn their trust and respect. We do that by teaching the whole counsel of God without compromise and by interspersing at regular intervals a call for people to come to Christ. Besides, we train our people to press appropriately for a commitment from the people they bring to services. Many conversions happen in one-on-one conversations outside of our services.

When a church’s valiant evangelism attempts haven’t met with much success, how do you keep up morale?

Avoid comparisons with Ginghamburg or Saddleback or Willow Creek. Decide you’re going to be who God called you to be, and keep doing your best to raise the value of evangelism.

In your efforts to lead others in evangelism, what has surprised you?

I’ve been negatively surprised by how rapidly this value slips, even in people who are fired up to share their faith. A year passes, and they’ve slipped into comfortable Christianity. The positive surprise: when you help people discover an approach to evangelism that fits the personality God has given them, many step up to the plate.

BUILDING AN EVANGELISTIC CHURCH

Do you ever feel you overemphasize evangelism?

I'm part of a church known for evangelism, but we have to fight the battle month after month to keep up the evangelistic temperature. This is not about getting our church to a certain size; our job is not done until all the people in our community have come to Christ.

Excerpted from our sister publication, LEADERSHIP journal, © 1988 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net

Discuss

1. Is our church currently living out the Great Commission, or are we stuck in evangelistic entropy? Where do you see this happening?
2. How do we equip our members to share their faith in one-on-one settings?
3. Describe a time when you naturally and respectfully shared your faith? What was it like? How could that experience serve as a guide or motivation for others?



Evangelism for the Ordinary Church

How can a pastor excite a church for evangelism? Read five ways to take the first steps.

Acts 2:47

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 resume 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. Here’s what we needed to do for evangelism to work for us:

1. Redefine “target group”

Our congregation was made up of various generations. Just which specific groups 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.

2. 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. 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.

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.

3. Set a climate for sharing

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.

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.

4. 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 when 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.

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5. 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.”

—STEVE R. BIERLY

Discuss

1. What are two or three specific things our church has done to equip our congregation for evangelism in the past few years?
2. Is the “E-word” a good word or a bad word in our congregation?
3. In what ways have we set up a climate in which our church is welcoming to non-believers?



Evangelism Takes Time

We need to listen, explain, and walk alongside people who are interested in Christ.

Proverbs 25:15

Evangelism, like sanctification, takes time. Therefore, we must take the time it takes.

When we relate to people, we must remind ourselves that we are on a long journey together. The idea that this is my only chance to talk to this person is a great detriment. Even on an airplane, we should speak as if we're going to know that seatmate for the rest of our lives. After all, to quote C.S. Lewis, "Christians never say good-bye."

Too many preachers try to say too much all at once. I've found the same tendency in counseling situations. Somebody comes into my office and begins sharing his life. I listen very closely, trying to listen with my heart as well as my head. My mind is soon flooded with impressions, statements, Bible verses that I can hardly wait to unleash as soon as my turn comes. "Look at this ... let me tell you this story ... read this book ... what you need to do is ..."

But in evangelism, people do not need to be admonished as much as they need to be carefully heard. Once I'm listening, I range through their arguments to find out where I can agree with them. Very often the "God" they're rejecting I would reject, too. Why not let them know that?

I'm not saying we should not be urgent. But the gospel has its own urgent edge and does its own convicting of sin. Isn't it good that the Holy Spirit takes care of that as we simply witness to the truth?

We have to make room for people to struggle, because the stakes are so big. We should not be too pleased if someone comes to Christ with little struggle—it may mean this is simply a compliant person, and the same compliance that eases them into Christianity may also ease them toward the next thing that calls for them.

The Next-to-Last Word

The more sensitive we are to journey evangelism, the more we will recognize pre-evangelistic preparation. So many things in our culture are pre-evangelistic. Whether Robert Frost was a Christian, I don't know; but "Mending Wall" is most definitely a pre-Christian poem. It raises all the right questions.

Evangelists who ignore the person's journey are missing something important. We make the mistake of listening once—and then freezing people in that state of rebellion. They may have spoken more outrageously than they believe; they may have only been trying to shock us; or they may have moved on from their first rejection of Christ. We must keep hearing the clues and moving along as they move.

Our Part in the Mystery

In the Bay Area where I live, I sometimes make jokes at the expense of a small town called Milpitas. Once while speaking on radio, I said, "You know, Beethoven is not on trial when the Milpitas Junior High Orchestra plays the Ninth Symphony. And Jesus Christ is not on trial when you or I, or even C.S. Lewis, tries to express the faith in a conversation or a sermon."

Then about a year later it occurred to me: But were it not for the Milpitas Junior High Orchestra, who would hear Beethoven? Even if badly played, it is better than not playing at all. Who plays Beethoven perfectly?

Some people trudge from church to church looking for the perfect rendition. They'll never find it. W.H. Auden once observed that even though the line is smudged, we can read the line, and that is the mystery of evangelism: even though we smudge the line, it can still be read.

Evangelism is far greater than any of us. That is why it takes time. But without us, it would take an eternity. And human beings do not have that long to make up their minds.

—EARL PALMER

Discuss

1. What do you think about the author's call listen?
2. How you would rate yourself on your listening skills and why?
3. Do you find yourself rushing evangelism? How can you keep that part of your personality in check?



Post-Modern Spirituality

Lessons learned in evangelism and Christianity while serving a cynical generation

1 Corinthians 4:2

Daniel Hill holds a steady part-time job working one or two shifts a week at Starbucks. It's hardly a career-track position, and it's not that he needs the extra cash or battles a secret caffeine addiction. It's the people. Purple hair, belly-button rings, tattoos, black-painted fingernails—those people.

For Hill, whose day job is ministering on staff with Willow Creek Community Church's Axis ministry, Starbucks provides a context to build meaningful relationships with postmodern, Gen-Next twentysomethings who are far from God.

"Nothing has been more transforming for me than working at Starbucks," says Hill, "These people matter to me."

But the moonlighting gig isn't a free pass to easy evangelism. His coffee colleagues are like a good cup of triple espresso—plenty of steam, a little bitter, and enough kick to knock you on your backside if you aren't careful.

With fingers pointed at Christians, we're obliged to identify the underlying accusations and offer a response. Three questions are at the core.

1. Why should I trust you?

Anyone who claims authority today—politicians, parents, or pastors—will face the question of trust.

Rick Richardson, author of *Evangelism Outside the Box* and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's national field director for evangelism, observes: "When people ask questions about homosexuality, for instance, we're tempted to think they're asking questions about right and wrong. But they're not. They're asking about dominance and oppression."

In other words, the answer requires more than words. Christians, with PowerPoint presentations and four-point evangelistic outlines, have mastered the art of proclamation. But words alone aren't going to answer the trust question. Trust is built by actions, not words.

One of the most fundamental ways to represent God's kingdom is by being kind to the disaffected, even when we have genuine disagreements with the way they choose to live. In whatever way we respond, the one thing we can't do is ignore the trust issue.

2. Isn't that just your reality?

The Starbucks-serving Daniel Hill says that the "whatever works for you" mentality is a foundational part of the postmodern mindset. Still, he says, it can be fruitless to engage that argument directly.

Hill calls the postmodern mindset "kind of the air they breathe" rather than a deep-seated philosophical barrier to faith.

"I've never been able to persuade someone intellectually to abandon the relativistic mindset," he says. "That's never the doorway I get someone to walk through. What's more likely to happen is that they'll see the power of a transformed life in another Christ follower and be transformed."

Hill says we also do well to remember that relativism has its plus side. "People are open to Jesus," he says. "They just don't consider him the only way. I try to engage them in who Jesus is and not that the others aren't correct."

3. What good is Christianity?

Richardson calls this the question of utility and relevance. Does your belief change lives? Does your religion work? Does it help me, whether I'm in your group or not? Or are you just another self-serving group?

"The question of the uniqueness of Christ is not primarily philosophical," he writes. "People are not looking for theological comparisons but for attractiveness, relevance, and usefulness."

In today's culture there will always be questions and accusations—some fair, others unfair; some informed, others ignorant. As ministers of the gospel, what is our response?

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Hill suggests the best way may also be the simplest. “Be intentional and authentic in your friendship,” he says. “Their response to my overtures can’t determine whether we stay in friendship. If it does, then it’s not a friendship but a manipulative ploy to get them to become a Christian. It’s a difficult paradox to reconcile.”

—BRETT LAWRENCE; Excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP journal, © 2003 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit www.Leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. How can we reach beyond the walls of our church to interact with nonbelievers?
2. How have you combated the “whatever works for you mentality,” and what was the result?
3. What does it mean to present the “relevance and utility” of Christ to nonbelievers?



What Are They Really Asking?

Learn to understand what people are really wondering about Christianity.

Acts 28:24

My ministry has brought me into contact with thousands of curious, questioning people. I've discovered that people ask spiritual questions because something in their lives isn't working. Uncertainty, fear, and pain provoke their questions. What they really want isn't information, but relief.

Most seekers' questions, whether intellectual or emotional, indicate underlying issues. Choosing to believe in Christ carries major internal ramifications. Snappy, pat answers don't satisfy these inner struggles. Nobody wants a two-cent answer to a million-dollar question.

Behind every question is a person asking that question, and we need to minister to that person

What Do You Think?

A great irony in Scripture prompted me to rethink how I answer seekers' questions. When the Son of God walked the earth, people came to him with dilemmas, doubts, and questions. He had all answers available to him. And yet he met their questions with questions of his own.

- **Luke 10:25–26:** “An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”

Jesus didn't give the answer. Instead, he asked a question in return. “‘What is written in the Law?’ he replied. ‘How do you read it?’”

- **Matthew 18:12:** Jesus asked, “What do you think? If a man owns 100 sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the 99 on the hills and go look for the one that wandered off?”

The heart of the parable is nothing but two questions!

- **Matthew 22:41–46:** “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?”

Jesus conducted a little Bible study on Psalm 110 with the Pharisees. Through this conversation Jesus affirmed that the Christ would be more than an earthly son of David, but also the Son of God. Jesus' answer was to recite one verse and ask four questions. He responded not to the question, but to the person behind the question.

What To Ask

I've found several specific questions effective at reaching the underlying issues. Now, when someone asks me a spiritual question, I almost always reply, “That's an interesting question. What do you think?”

This is the approach Jesus used when he asked, “What's written in the Law? How do you read it?” It gives me an opportunity to understand the person. It also affirms that I care for him or her, even more than I do about having the “right” answer.

Often, exhibiting care for the questioner is a greater ministry than answering the question.

Another good question: “What situation in your life makes you wonder about that?”

Sometimes, however, a seeker's questions and thoughts do require challenge. For instance, many seekers struggle with Jesus' claim to be the way, the truth, and the life. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Many times what keeps people from faith is fear of the consequences. Many of my college friends were living with their girlfriends. They knew if they accepted Christianity, they'd have to stop. So they put up diversions. As long as they could keep God looking silly and Jesus looking less than divine they could continue their unexamined lives. Their doubts had little to do with theology and everything to do with morality.

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Once the objection is uncovered, it can be addressed with compassion and truth. “In Hebrews 11,” I might say to one who fears what God will demand, “it says they who seek God must believe that he is a rewarder. He rewards, not tramples, those that serve him. His character is not to make you miserable, but to bless you.”

—JUDSON POLING

Discuss

1. What questions have you asked unbelievers in the past, and what were the results?
2. Why is it important that evangelism involve an exchange, not just a one-sided conversation?
3. Describe a time when you worked at uncovering a person’s objections to Christianity. What happened?



Premature Harvest

We need to learn to wait on God's time, not our own.

Galatians 6:9

My grandpa had a large garden. One spring he showed me how to cut seed potatoes so that each piece had at least one eye, and we planted them in the soil behind the house. The waiting was agony. Grandpa had to gently dig up one potato just to show me it was too early.

The process was so long that I gave up checking my potatoes. It wasn't exciting anymore. It took too long.

But on the day Grandpa announced the harvest, we unearthed sacks of potatoes. The harvest was exciting! Every mound was a new discovery. And I found more than potatoes that day. The lesson I learned has served me well in ministry. The harvest was worth the wait, but without the wait there would have been no harvest.

Everything Has a Season

As a young pastor in northern California, I had made a habit of visiting the local café for lunch. The owner grew to know me, and we began to talk. One day she asked me, "Do you do any counseling?"

"I haven't done a lot, but I do some."

We set an appointment, and she and her husband came to my study. Their daughter had gotten in with the wrong crowd, and they were worried about her.

I listened carefully, trying to think what I was supposed to do next. For some reason I kept thinking, *Always present the gospel, always present the gospel*. So I began, "The only way you can help your daughter is by making sure that your relationship to God is right. If you were to die tonight..."

It was the strangest sensation. It began to feel as though an immeasurable gulf divided us. No one got saved that day, and I was of no help whatsoever. I pulled up every one of the seeds I had planted in my lunch counter conversations. And I preempted the possibility of any future harvest. I had mistaken planting season for harvesting and ended up with nothing.

An Almanac of Excuses

If a premature harvest is so dangerous, why do we insist on plucking up sprouts before the fruit is ripe?

1. **One reason is zeal.** While attending Bible college, a friend and I decided to make an evangelistic foray onto the local university campus. We were going to turn that campus upside down for Christ!

The evening ended a dismal failure. If we presented the gospel at all, we did so poorly with no positive response. We had zeal, but no experience, no wisdom, no preparation, and worst of all, no harvest.

2. **A second reason that we sometimes harvest too soon is lack of faith.** As a believer zealous to see souls won for Christ, it is sometimes difficult to trust that God will bring it about in his time, not mine.
3. **Another reason for a premature harvest is attempting to be someone we're not.** A friend used to tell the story of his first preaching experience: When my friend was a teenager, his father told the boys in their small church that he would like some of them to try their hand at preaching. My friend claims that he memorized one of Billy Graham's sermons word for word and preached it like his own. Everything went great until he came to the part where he said, "Thousands are coming down to the front ..."

True or not, my friend's story always draws laughs and it makes a point: Trying to fit someone else's mold will never work. It is better to discover your own style of ministry.

Knowing When to Dig

Sometimes we need to push back the dirt gently and see if the crop is ready yet. If so, it's time to dig. If not, we back off and trust God for the right time. We also need a bigger view of God. When we believe the harvest is largely dependent on us, we find ourselves fearful and anxious, and we usually fail.

God brings people to faith in his time, but we must trust him enough to wait.

BUILDING AN EVANGELISTIC CHURCH

—RICK WEINERT

Discuss

1. Has there been a time when you mistook planting season for harvesting season? What happened?
2. Do you agree with the author's three reasons for a premature harvest? Can you think of any others?
3. How have you been able to reach out to people when the time was right for them to hear the gospel?



Further Exploration

Books and other resources to equip your church for evangelism.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

- “Evangelism” Assessment Pack
- “Doable Evangelism” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Engaging Evangelism” Training Theme and Power Point

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

a.k.a. Lost, *Jim Henderson*. A handbook on how to make meaningful connections with the “missing,” who are the people formerly known as “lost.” (WaterBrook, 2005; ISBN 1578569141) www.akalost.com

Building a Contagious Church: Revolutionizing the Way We View and Do Evangelism, *Mark Mittelberg*. This book anchors evangelism in the local church. It reviews Mittelberg’s thinking in *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Zondervan, 1996) and expands it into a church plan (Zondervan, 2000; ISBN 0310221498).

Evangelism Outside the Box: New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News, *Rick Richardson*. The national coordinator of evangelism for InterVarsity Fellowship USA offers ways to spread the gospel in a postmodern age. (InterVarsity Press, 2000; ISBN 0830822763)

Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith, *Bill Hybels*. This book contains practical ideas for helping Christians step out of their comfort zone and into conversations that can lead others closer to Christ. Also available for small groups. (Zondervan, 2006; ISBN 978-0310266693)

More Ready Than You Realize, *Brian McLaren*. Contains new ideas on evangelism designed to attract postmodern people. (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 0310239648)

Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens, *Neil Cole*. Describes a shift that takes the message of Christ to people where they are, rather than expecting them to come to church. (Jossey-Bass, 2005; ISBN 078798129X)

Share Jesus without Fear, by *William Fay with Linda Evans Shepherd*. This book is an antidote to argumentative and antagonistic approaches to evangelism. The foundation is solidly biblical and the method refreshingly relational, offering clear evidence that one-on-one evangelism is easier than it seems. (Broadman & Holman, 1999; ISBN 0805418393)