

# **GROWING THE CONGREGATION**

## **A 12-Step Evangelism Program**

"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow!" (!Cor.3:6)

The following outline describes a 12-step plan actually implemented at Lord of Life Lutheran Church, The Woodlands, Texas in the early 1990s, led by the Associate Pastor for Evangelism and Stewardship, which resulted in congregational growth over 4 years from 450 to 1,400 members. The steps are simple and easy to follow, yet they combine to make a mighty powerful witness. Here they are:

### **STEP 1 - INSPIRE THE FAITHFUL**

It all starts with the pastor(s) and people becoming convinced that the only proper adjective for the word "congregation" is the word "growing"! It is the mission of the church to SPREAD the Word and bring people to Christ, planting the seed, watering it, and watching God give the increase.

We must be a growing church, and so our members must be inspired to "welcome the stranger" (Mt.25:35) and trust the Spirit to "add to the number daily of those who are being saved (Acts2:47b).

So, in sermons, in announcements, in times of fellowship, in private conversations the message needs to be proclaimed that the heart & soul of our mission is to evangelize.

### **STEP 2 - ENHANCE THE AMBIENCE**

Take a new look at the church from the street and the entrance to the parking lot. Is the vista inviting to the stranger, rather than intimidating? Is the parking lot neat and tidy? Does the view of the outside of the church give off a warm and welcoming feeling. Most importantly, are there clearly marked "Visitors Only" parking spots and are they convenient to the main door? If first-time visitors can't find a place to park, they won't feel welcome and may just drive away. Involve the **Property Committee!**

### **STEP 3 - GREET THE STRANGER**

The congregation, far from being a private club that protects itself from the outside world, is an evangelization hub reaching out to the world. So, the first-time visiting family is a precious jewel, to be welcomed and honored and taken in to share the blessing of worship and congregational life.

So, train two **Congregational Hosts\***, chosen from your friendliest and most knowledgeable members, to stand *outside* the building, on the walkway and greet *all* who come to worship, encouraging one of them to follow anyone known to be a visitor into the building and see that they are recognized by trained **Greeters\***, who stand by the **Guest Book** (wearing Greeter badges) and encourage new folks to sign in - so you can get an address or least a phone number (see **Collate the Info**, Step 6).

### **STEP 4 - EVANGELIZE IN WORSHIP**

Train the **Ushers\*** to place **Pew Books**, with sharpened pencil at the end of every pew, and, in **Announcements** at the start of each service, remind folks to "sign in" and to greet strangers nearby while **Passing the Peace** and after the service.

### **STEP 5 - "STAFF" WELCOME CENTER**

The pastor, in those early announcements, invites visitors to learn more about the congregation and its mission by stopping at the Visitor Center on the way out. So, this Center must be easy to find, attractive looking, filled with packets of information, and staffed by **trained volunteers\***. It requires a pad of paper for volunteers to make notes about the visitors (after they leave) and for use *by* the visitor to put down info in cases where they haven't signed in as yet.

### **STEP 6 - COLLATE THE INFORMATION**

As soon as the last service is over and the honored guests have departed, the Ushers bring the Pew Book sheets, the Greeters bring the Guest Book, the Visitor Center volunteers bring their info, and it is collated with the Associate Pastor (or a lay leader), to triage the data and discover *which* visitors are local and new. The **Counters** are also trained to identify checks from local visitors and bring that info into the collation process. All of this preparation leads into the next step:

### **STEP 7 - RETURN THE VISIT!**

A dozen key members are trained\* as teams for the **Return-A-Visit program**. Packets of info and "goodies", having been prepared earlier, are already in the hands of the teams. Today's team(s) wait(s) at home or at church for assignments and then goes to the homes to just stand at the door (not entering the home unless specifically asked to) and thank the family for worshipping with us and ask how they enjoyed the experience.. (The visit can wait a day or two if necessary, but *today* is the very most effective.)

In the packet is a "business card" identifying the R-A-V representative and providing a phone number for the visitor to call for more info. If no-one is home, the Packet is left at the door and a follow-up phone call is made.

The R-A-V team then reports back to the R-A-V leader with special info - e.g., folks only came for a baptism or special event so don't pursue, or "very interested" so pastoral visit would be good, etc.

This all provides a second "triage" so pastor knows who the "hot" prospects are!

### **STEP 8 - SEND THE PASTOR**

It is amazing how many folks have never had a pastor in their home! So, this is a big deal! The reason for the above triage work is to save the pastor's time for the most crucial and "productive" visits. (Yes, it is possible to substitute a trained\* lay person who is very knowledgeable for questions and answers - e.g., Why do we baptize infants and Baptists do not?", "What is different among ELCA, Missouri and Wisconsin synods", etc.) but there is nothing to compare with the pastor himself/herself doing this visit.

It is an *inviting* visit, hopefully leading to membership in the congregation.

### **STEP 9 - TRAIN THE NEWCOMERS**

The **Witness Committee**, which oversees the entire program of evangelism, keeps records of all identified visitors, which ones have had the R-A-V, and have shown an interest in possible membership, and sends a letter of invitation to all active prospects to attend a series of "Inquiry Sessions". These are best held on Sundays, either during one of the services or just after the last one.

We recommend 4 sessions, as follows:

- 1- Warm-up and Intros, Fill out Info Forms, study "Christianity 101".\*
- 2 - Luther's Life and Theology and The Sacraments.\*
- 3 - Our Congregation & Its Mission & Programs, & the Wider Church.\*
- 4 - Your Response of Witness & Stewardship as a Precious Child of God.\*

### **STEP 10 - ASSIGN THE "SHEPHERDS"**

The **Witness Committee** has a sub-group, which reviews the Info Forms, studying the family composition, hobbies/other interests, and picks a committed member-family to be a sort of "sponsor" for the new family for the first 6-12 months. Shepherds are then trained\* to offer to sit with the family at services, introduce them to the flock when they join, have coffee with them once a month, help them get involved in a **Small Group** (see Step 11) & generally make sure assimilation into congregational life really does happen.

### **STEP 11 - CELEBRATE NEW MEMBERS**

Prepare a list of those joining, with addresses, phone numbers, e-mails and submit it to the **Council** for ratification. Share highlights with the Council. Prepare a special badge & ribbon for each new member, get them together with their sponsors (on the Saturday morning before they join?) with Council reps present. Have them choose the Worship service at which they want to join on the big day, bring them forward, have the Shepherds introduce them, provide lists in the bulletin for all members to review, pray with them, have **Fellowship Committee** prepare a light reception after church.

### **STEP 12 - INVOLVE SMALL GROUPS**

It is well-known that, for those new members who only attend worship, without further involvement, 60% are gone within a year. So, Shepherds, with the help of the **Witness Committee** and the **Small Group Ministry Committee**, work hard to connect the new member to a small group. This can be a spiritually-based group (choir, Bible Study, Prayer Group, Altar Guild, etc), or a hobby-based group (Bridge Club, Dinner Club, Quilters, even Model Railroad group). The point is to get the newcomers involved with a small enough group of members so that friendships and comfortable situations result in the congregation becoming the "extended family" for the new member.

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**"EACH ONE REACH ONE (John 1:42-46)**. Combined with all above, Pastor & Council can promote a plan that each family reach out to 1 un-churched family and bring them to worship each year. If only 1 out of 10 were to stick, the result would be another 10% increase in membership, AND every family would become evangelists!

## SUMMARY

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt.25:35)

"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts2:47b)

"I (Paul) planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow!" (1Cor.3:6)

The word "church" should always be preceded by its correct adjective - "growing". It is never a private club, to be quietly nurtured and protected from the world, but an inspired, spirit-filled proclaiming force, empowered to "share the love of Christ **as** a community **with** the community" (from Lord of Life Mission statement).

The **beauty** of this 12-step plan is that it involves the whole congregation in the Outreach, and assigns specific pieces of it to so many groups - the **Property Committee**, **Congregational Hosts**, **Greeters**, **Ushers**, the **Witness Committee**, the **Return-A-Visit** teams, the **Shepherds**, the **Fellowship Committee**, the **Council**, the **Small Group Leaders**, the **Pastor & the new members themselves** (who may become shepherds for the next group). And yet, all the tasks are of manageable size and easy to grasp.

The **danger** is that congregations will try to use *pieces* of the plan and will cut corners. This will reduce, to varying degrees, the effectiveness of the program.

The **question** is - **How high a priority** for pastor and people is "Growing the Church"? If it is as high as we hope, they will all find new excitement, new fervor, new inspiration in making this program work and in **watching God make the church grow!**

## ADDENDUM

We must always remember that growing the church also has to do with what we call "**Inside Evangelism**". That, put in its simplest form, is the prevention of erosion by people just quietly dropping away.

In a larger congregation, with multiple worship services, it's hard to notice who is missing. We recommend a quarterly detailed review (maybe 3 hours work) of the **Contribution Records**, which will reveal which regular contributors have stopped giving.

A pastoral visit should be made to these folks - **without** a prior phone call - **not** about financial matters but about - "We miss you at worship. Can we talk about that?" We find about a 10% recovery rate from that process, but, if 50 families have stopped coming, that's five of the *lost* who have been *found*, and that's worth *celebrating!*

\* This symbol, throughout the plan, denotes the use of training materials - used for: **Hosts, Greeters, Visitor Center Volunteers, Return-A-Visit folks, Shepherds, and the New Members themselves**. New Member packets include at least the following: Membership Info Form, Training Agenda, one-pager on Martin Luther, the Small Catechism, outline of The Bible, one-pagers on the Sacraments & on the Creed, lists of Council, Committee Chairs, Staff, booklet on Lutheran Basics, Stewardship info.

