

how to



Reach the Unchurched People in Your Community

and see them join the life and
fellowship of your church

A one-day seminar sponsored by:





Dear Church Leader . . .

Have you considered what it takes to reach unchurched families in your community these days?

Quite simply, it's a different world.

The days of opening the doors on Sunday and seeing the pews fill to capacity are long gone for most churches. Yet, a greater spiritual hunger exists in the people living in the homes and apartment buildings around our churches than ever before.

In a word — unchurched families in your community are receptive to God's message of love, healing, community, and joy.

But they won't respond to old and outdated methods. That is why we have researched churches that are successfully reaching unchurched families, and are sponsoring this one-day seminar to pass along the tools to you.

How to Reach the Unchurched Families in Your Community is a seminar that will provide a blueprint to dramatically increase the number of people who come in contact with your church ... and who experience God's love as expressed through your Christian community.

The joy in seeing unchurched children and parents begin a new walk of faith in Christ will energize every church member who has a part in it. It will move your congregation into exciting new initiatives of ministry and outreach. And it will change the lives of families for time and eternity.

Let's begin our adventure . . .

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "W. Charles Arn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

W. Charles Arn

SESSION ONE — Welcome, Get Acquainted & Introduction	p. 2 - 5
An overview of the day, schedule, and objectives. Then, a look at the “landscape” in which we are called to minister and reach out to unchurched children and adults.	
SESSION TWO — How the Unchurched Become Church	p. 6 - 11
Fascinating research on the differences between new converts who become active church members, and those who do not, gives us important clues for developing an effective disciple-making strategy.	
SESSION THREE — Defining Our Target Audience	p. 12 - 17
Most churches have a wealth of prospective — and receptive — unchurched contacts. Learning who these people are, and how they see the world, will help us communicate God’s love in a meaningful, attractive, relevant way.	
SESSION FOUR — Planning Successful Entry Events	p. 18 - 20
The first direct contact your church will have with many prospective new members will be through an “entry event.” What is an effective entry event, and what is an appropriate one for your church? How do you assure that your entry events are successful?	
SESSION FIVE — From Entry Events to Entry Paths	p. 21 - 24
Appropriate “entry paths” are an equally important part of the strategy for seeing newcomers find new faith and involvement in your church. We examine the process of moving people from an entry event to an entry path.	
SESSION SIX — A Successful Follow Up System	p. 25 - 30
A caring system monitors newcomers’ involvement and responds to individual needs. We will learn an effective system to track prospective new members to be sure no one “slips through the cracks” into inactivity.	
Summary and Action Steps	p. 31 - 32
A review of the content of the day, along with identifying next steps for your church.	
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Goal of Today's Seminar

To help seminar participants (lay and professional church leaders) develop strategies that will successfully reach unchurched families in their community, with the goal of seeing them become Christ's disciples and responsible members of His church.

Theological Assumptions Behind Today's Seminar

1. "It's God's will that His Church grow, that his lost children are found."
(John 17:18; Acts 1:8; Luke 19:10; Mt. 28:19; etc.) - Donald McGavran
2. *Great Commission Goal*: To proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, to persuade people to become His disciples, and responsible members of His Church.
3. Lost people matter to growing churches.
The Principles of Outreach that are Practiced by "Apostolic" [Growing] Churches: Church for the Unchurched (Abingdon Press; Nashville) George Hunter
 - a. They clarify the goal of outreach.
 - b. They understand evangelism as a process.
 - c. They regard outreach as lay ministry.
 - d. They train their people in outreach.
 - e. They practice social network evangelism.
 - f. They offer "the faith once delivered to the saints."
 - g. They address the life concerns of people.
 - h. They use the language of their target population.
 - i. They know that God gives the increase.

Strategic Assumptions Behind Today's Seminar

1. Churches grow in three ways: _____ growth, _____ growth, and _____ growth. All three are important, but *conversion* growth is the passion of Christ and the priority of His church.
2. Effective evangelism (conversion growth) begins with identifying and responding to _____, in Jesus' name. *Healthy family relationships* are one of the greatest felt needs of unchurched Americans today.
3. _____ contacts for outreach will be more responsive than cold contacts.
4. Most churches in America need a new approach to conversion growth.

The Process of Outreach to Unchurched Families



Thinking About Effective Outreach

1. In the average church, what percentage of first-time visitors become active members/ participants in that congregation the following year?
_____ 4% _____ 9% _____ 21% _____ 34% _____ 45%

2. Most people begin attending a church for the first time . . .
 - a) _____ when their lives seem in balance and things are relatively stable
 - b) _____ when their lives seem out of balance and things are relatively unstable
 - c) _____ there is no relationship between when people begin attending church and other events in their lives.

3. Most churches aren't reaching unchurched parents because . . .
 - a) _____ most unchurched parents have few or no relationships with members
 - b) _____ there is not an appropriate church activity for them to attend
 - c) _____ the benefits of attending are not well communicated
 - d) _____ the perceived *cost* of attending (primarily in time and discomfort) is not worth the perceived *benefit* from attending
 - e) _____ No one personally invites them
 - f) _____ They feel there is no one else like them at church
 - g) _____ All of the above

4. What percentage of children under 14 years are raised in non-Christian homes?
_____ 32% _____ 48% _____ 65% _____ 78% _____ 89%

5. Which of the following is responsible for most unchurched people beginning to attend church?
 - a) _____ Special need (personal, physical, emotional, spiritual)
 - b) _____ Walked into a church on their own initiative
 - c) _____ Received a visit from a church member (unknown to the person)
 - d) _____ Attended a church program (recreation, special interest, recovery, etc.)
 - e) _____ Friend or relative invited them
 - f) _____ Began attending Sunday School, adult class, or small group
 - g) _____ Went to a mass evangelism rally or viewed a religious TV program
 - h) _____ Pastor or staff person from a church invited them to attend

6. Which of the following is responsible for most church people leaving a church (other than moving to a new city)?
- a) ___ Conflict with the pastor
 - b) ___ Conflict with another member(s)
 - c) ___ No sense of spiritual growth
 - d) ___ Physical distance from the church
 - e) ___ Boredom
 - f) ___ Didn't feel needed/wanted
 - g) ___ Personal change in theology
 - h) ___ Spiritual backsliding
7. What percentage of unchurched people say they would attend a church event if asked by a friend?
- ___ 1% ___ 7% ___ 21% ___ 33% ___ 45%
8. What percentage of unchurched people will attend a church event upon receiving a well-written notice in the mail about an event they perceive to be interesting?
- ___ 1% ___ 7% ___ 21% ___ 33% ___ 45%
9. According to Lyle Schaller (considered the most widely respected church consultant today), what percentage of a church's governing board should be made up of new members who have joined within the past two years?
- ___ 1% ___ 5% ___ 10% ___ 20% ___ 30% ___ 50%
10. The most important ingredient in seeing a new member become an active member is
- a) ___ preaching
 - b) ___ facilities
 - c) ___ children's program
 - d) ___ friends
 - e) ___ theology
 - f) ___ proximity
 - g) ___ women's restroom
 - h) ___ parking

A Profile of the New Convert — Who Stays

1. *The new convert who stays has developed meaningful _____ with members _____ to his/her conversion.*

Why people first come to church?

Special Need	_____%
Walk-In	_____%
Visitation	_____%
Church Program	_____%
Mass Evangelism	_____%
Sunday School	_____%
Pastor / Staff	_____%
Friend / Relative	_____%

Conclusion: *“Among those not related by kinship to a congregation, those most likely to become active members are those who become part of a group, and develop meaningful relationships with others in that group, before formally uniting with that congregation. They are assimilated before they join.” - Lyle Schaller*

2. *The new convert who stays has been exposed to a _____ of evangelistic influences through the church.*

(“Evangelistic influences” in the study included: sermons, evangelistic meetings, small group Bible study, adult classes, books, printed literature, religious radio/TV, direct mailing, and social activities with members of a church.)

- ☛ Average number of evangelistic influences *active members* exposed to: _____
- Average number of evangelistic influences *dropouts* exposed to: _____
- ☛ Number of evangelistic influences provided in *growing* churches: _____
- Number of evangelistic influences provided in *plateaued* churches: _____
- Number of evangelistic influences provided in *declining* churches: _____

Conclusion: *When a person has no meaningful contact with the congregation in the process of his/her conversion, the person is likely to feel no meaningful sense of identification with the congregation after his/her conversion, and therefore likely to drop out.*
- Flavil Yeakley (researcher)

2. *The new convert who stays has been exposed to a variety of evangelistic influences through the church.* (continued)

John Wesley had three ultimate objectives for people: 1) that they experience the grace of God and the gift of faith, and become conscious followers of Jesus Christ; 2) that they be "united" with others in a "class" and a "society;" 3) that upon achievement of 1 and 2, they experience growth toward Christian perfection. It is crucial to point out that the first two objectives could be achieved in a person's life-history in either order, and the more usual sequence was, 2, 1.

*That is, most of the people who became Methodist converts first joined a class, and sometime later became conscious Christians! This helps to explain why Wesley, in his extensive open-air field preaching, **never** invited people to accept Jesus Christ and become Christians on the spot! That statement must surely shock those of us whose assumptions about public evangelism have been carved out in the Billy Graham era, as it would shock the evangelical Christians of any generation since Charles Grandison Finney began inviting responders to the "mourner's bench." (To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit by George Hunter III, Nashville: Abingdon, 1987)*

Try "Pastoring" the Unchurched (from: *The Growth Report* #31, Church Growth, Inc.)

Where did we get the notion that only church members need a pastor? Here's a great idea for touching lives and reaching people in the coming year:

Put a one-page sheet together with the headline: "*Your Pastor of [name of local community].*" Include copy such as: "*Everyone, sometime in their life, needs a friend to talk to. If you ever have that need but not the friend ... if you ever feel like talking and need someone to listen ... or maybe you just need a minister for a special health or family need ... here's a pastor you can turn to.*"

Add additional (but brief) copy, written from their perspective. Include a picture and short description of yourself that makes you a real person.

Then knock on some doors in your neighborhood. Introduce yourself as the pastor of -----Church. Explain that you're not asking them to join anything, or give anything. But if they aren't presently active in a church, you would like to be their "pastor." Give them a copy of the one page sheet. Explain that if the person or family ever has a need for a pastor in the future, they should feel free to call on you.

Leave a brief questionnaire with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Put your name (Rev. -----) and address on the envelope (omit the church name) and ask them to return it at their convenience. On the survey, ask for information that would help you effectively "pastor" the person/family.

Then contact each person/family that responds, at least monthly. A phone call, personal letter, gift, etc. Don't force yourself into their life. Just, through your periodic surfacing in their consciousness, remind them that you are there. Work on building a relationship, at their pace. You should be able to handle of 30 - 40 people/families. If you have a staff, each one should do the same thing with a different group of people. You'll find increasing opportunities for nurturing relationships with these persons, many of whom will begin moving toward active faith and church involvement.

3. *The new convert who stays views his/her conversion as* _____

Three Views of Evangelism:

1. _____

Views evangelism as a one-way transmission of information from a sender to a receiver. This view assumes that people will give the correct response when given the correct information. If the receiver does not do what is expected, it is because the sender did not transmit the information in the correct manner.

Perceived relationship: _____ to _____

2. _____

Views evangelism as a process of manipulation. The message might be an emotional appeal or it might be leading a person through a set of carefully prepared questions. The techniques of high-pressure salesmanship are based on this model of communication.

Perceived relationship: _____ to _____

3. _____

Views evangelism as a two-way interaction between equals. It is based on the recognition that no two people see things in exactly the same way, and is an effort to look at things from the perspective of the receiver. This model does not rule out an effort to share one's convictions, but it is based on an interest in the other person that would motivate an effort to share such conviction.

Perceived relationship: _____ to _____

MEMBER'S VIEW OF EVANGELISM

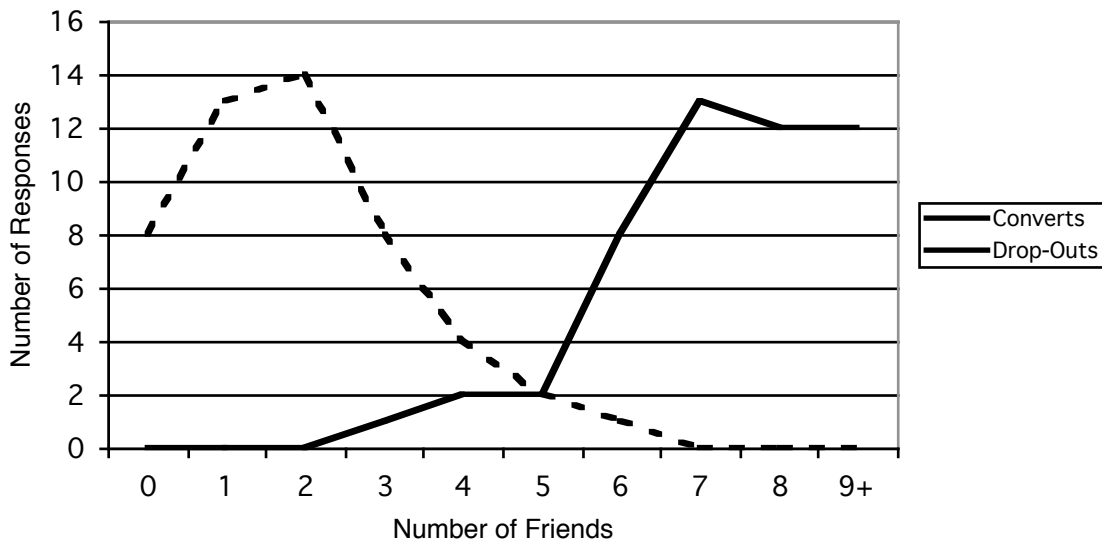
Category of Subjects	<i>Information Transmission</i>	<i>Manipulative Monologue</i>	<i>Non-Manipulative Dialogue</i>	TOTAL
Converts	33	38	169	240
Drop-Outs	25	209	6	240
Non-Converts	180	58	2	240

SUBJECT PERCEIVES PERSUADER AS BEING LIKE A:

Category of Subjects	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Salesperson</i>	<i>Friend</i>	TOTAL
Converts	5	65	170	240
Drop-Outs	36	203	1	240
Non-Converts	208	22	10	240

5. The new convert who stays has established _____
with members _____ conversion.

NEW FRIENDSHIPS ESTABLISHED AFTER MEMBERSHIP



- The typical “convert” made an average of _____ new friends in the church.
- The typical “drop-out” made an average of _____ new friends in the church.

Conclusion: “When subjects formed personal relationships with members of the congregation, they were likely to remain.” - Flavil Yeakley (researcher)

6. The new convert who stays has become involved in a small group, a role, and/or a task in the church

- Ideal ratio of small groups to members: _____: 100
 - Ideal ratio of *new* groups (<2yrs. old) to total groups: _____: 5 (20%)
 - Ideal ratio of *long-term* church members in a small group: _____: 100
 - Ideal ratio of *new* church members in a small group: _____: 100
 - Ideal ratio of roles/tasks to members (growing churches): _____: 100
- Plateaued churches — _____:100 Declining churches — _____:100

John Wesley, as he reflected on the strategies he found most effective, was once asked: “Is it advisable for us to preach in as many places as we can, without forming any societies?” To which he answered: “By no means! We have made the trial in various places; and that for a considerable time. But all the seed has fallen as by the highway side.”

Wesley would not preach where he could not unite awakened people into small redemptive fellowships. That is why George Whitefield’s famous reflection is all the more tragic: “My brother Wesley acted wisely; the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class and thus preserved the fruits of his labors. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand.” (To Spread the Power, Hunter op. cit.)

Summary, Evaluation, and Implications

1. *The new convert who stays has developed meaningful relationships with other members prior to his/her conversion.*

What do we do in our church to encourage relationships between members and non-members?

2. *The new convert who stays has been exposed to a variety of evangelistic influences through the church.*

How many evangelistic influences do we provide in our church, and how many non-members are exposed to them?

3. *The new convert who stays views his/her conversion as non-manipulative.*

What is the “view of evangelism” we communicate to our members?

4. *The new convert who stays has recently experienced a high degree of change.*

Do we have a way to identify people in periods of change and transition? Do we have a systematic method to respond to these people in a timely and appropriate way?

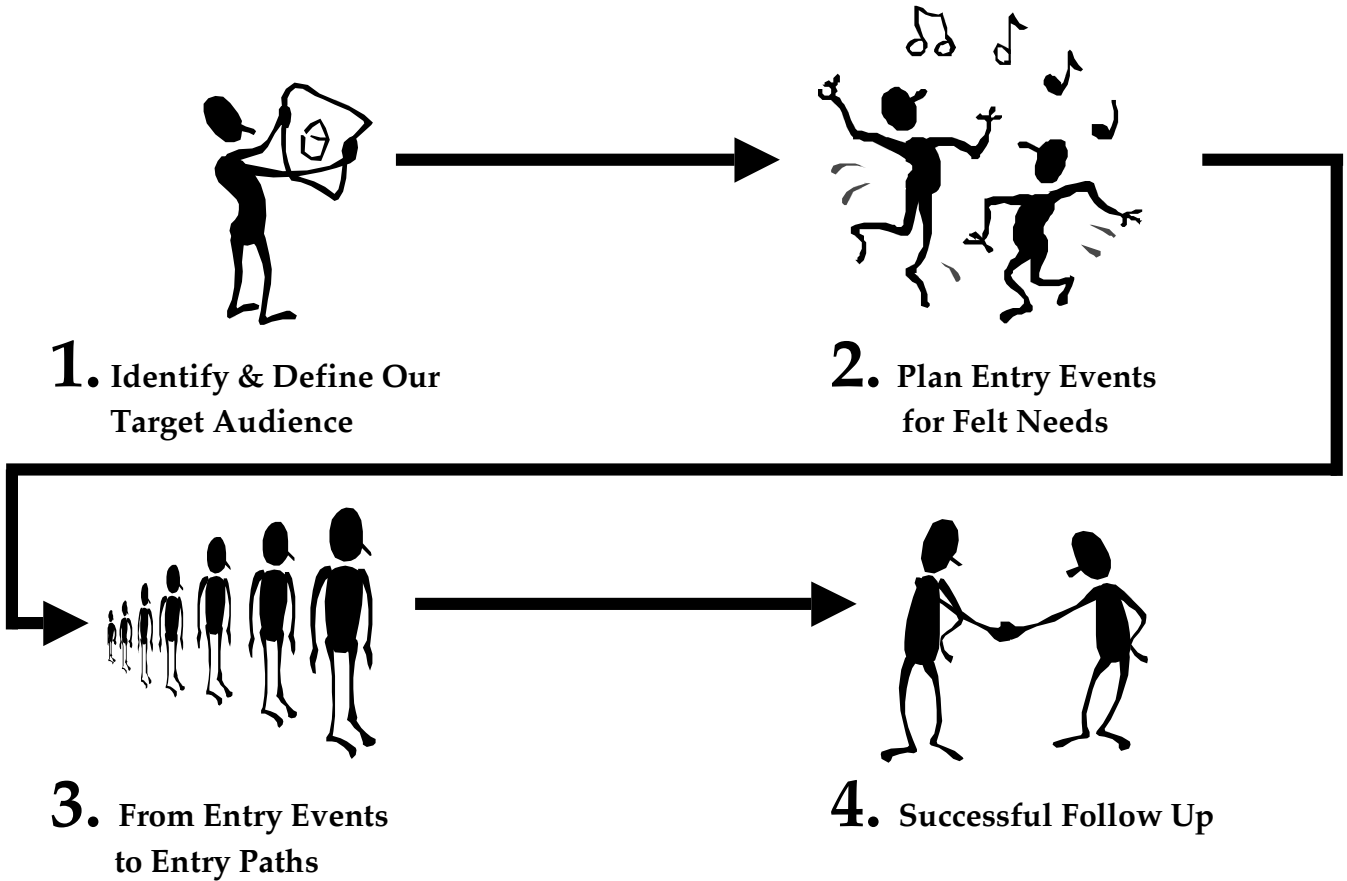
5. *The new convert who stays has established relationships with members after conversion.*

What priority do we place on building/nurturing relationships between newcomers and our members? How is it accomplished? Who is responsible?

6. *The new convert who stays has become involved in a group, role and/or task.*

How many of our new members are presently involved in a group, role, or task? Do we have an effective way to help new members find such involvement?

Reaching Unchurched Families



Who Are Our Best Outreach Prospects? (in order of receptiveness)

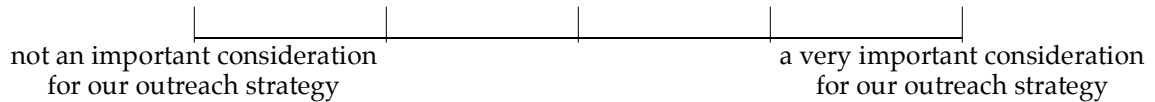
- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____
- 5. _____
- 6. _____
- 7. _____
- 8. _____
- 9. _____

Understanding Our Target Audience/s

Goal of Your Research: 1 – 2 page summary report which describes what you have learned about your target audience. The summary should include:

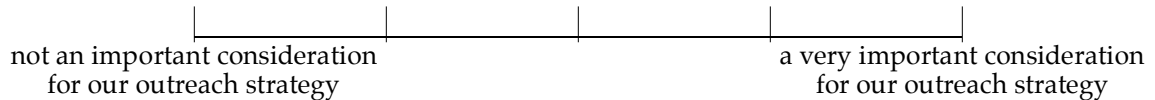
A. _____.

For our church this is:



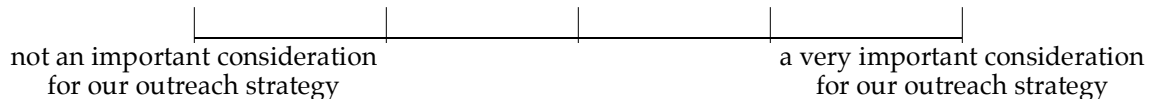
B. _____.

For our church this is:



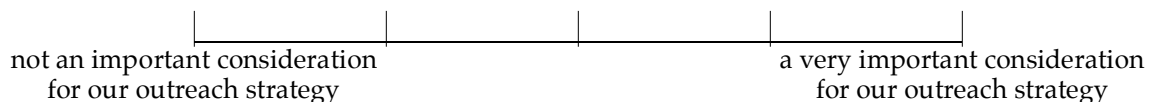
C. _____.

For our church this is:



D. _____.

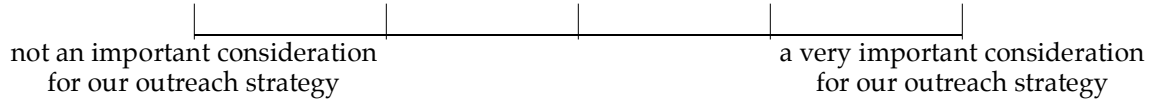
For our church this is:



Understanding Our Target Audience/s *(continued)*

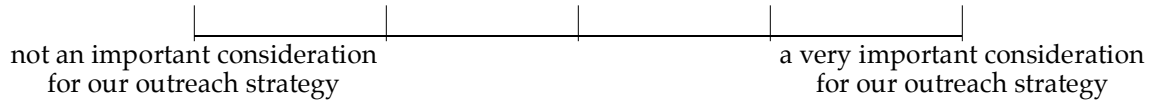
E. _____.

For our church this is:



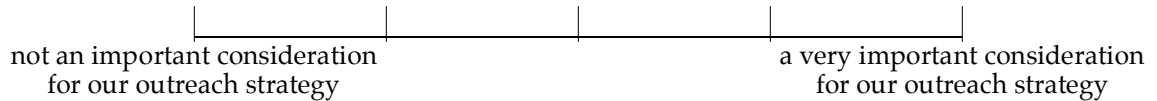
F. _____.

For our church this is:



G. _____.

For our church this is:



How Do We Get The Best Information About Our Target Audience?

Characteristics of a Good Focus Group:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

See Appendix D (p. 43) & E (p. 50) for more information

Profiling Your Target Man/Woman (from: *How to Start a New Service* by Charles Arn, p. 125-126)

Leith Anderson summarizes the simple process of target group evangelism: 1) Decide who is to be reached; 2) Learn about those people; 3) Discover the most effective means of reaching them.

Some churches find it helpful to create a “personality profile” of a person/s who typify their target audience. Creating and defining your target audience helps personalize the general characteristics you have learned into a “real” person. Develop at least two personality profiles (one male, one female). You may wish to create three or four, with each person representing a slightly different subset of your target audience. Variations might include specific age (within the range of your target audience), different marital or family status, different religious attitudes, slightly different ethnic identity. This exercise will help members realize that not everyone in your target audience is an exact replica, and that within broad categories there will be some diversity.

A characterization of your target audience will help those planning the outreach to identify appropriate issues and themes. And it will help your members more easily identify with an otherwise vague concept of “target audience.” Grant Memorial Church (Winnipeg, Manitoba) focuses its service on “Prairie Pete.” Willow Creek Community Church has defined “Unchurched Harry” and “Unchurched Mary” as representatives of their target audience.

Rick Warren describes the profile on their church’s target audience: “ ... we’ve named our composite profile ‘Saddleback Sam.’ Most of our

members would have no problem describing Sam. We discuss him in detail in every membership class. Saddleback Sam is the typical unchurched man who lives in our area. His age is late 30s to early 40s. He has a college degree and may have an advanced degree. He is married to Saddleback Samantha, and they have two kids, Steve and Sally. Sam likes his job, he likes where he lives, and he thinks he’s enjoying life now more than he was five years ago. He likes contemporary music. He’s either a professional, a manager, or a successful entrepreneur. Health and fitness are high priorities for Sam and his family. Sam prefers casual informal meetings over anything stiff and formal ... He is over-extended in time and money. He is very materialistic and yet will honestly admit that his wealth has not brought him lasting happiness. He is skeptical of what he calls ‘organized religion’.” Warren concludes: “Why do we go to all this trouble defining the typical person we’re trying to reach? Because the more you understand someone the easier it is to communicate with him.”

An Exercise in Anticipating Felt Needs

At your table, list some “felt needs” for the members of the following target groups:

Newly “Blended” Family (both spouses have children from previous marriage)

Felt Needs:

Appropriate Entry Events:

Young Parents With 3 Elementary School Children

Felt Needs:

Appropriate Entry Events:

Recent Divorcee With Children

Felt Needs:

Appropriate Entry Events:

Single Senior Adult (76 yrs.)

Felt Needs:

Appropriate Entry Events:

New Neighbor Family (moved into community)

Felt Needs:

Appropriate Entry Events:

Christian Mom; Non-Christian Dad

Felt Needs:

Appropriate Entry Events:

Needs Of People Today (from: *How to Lead Small Groups*, Neil McBride)

1. People feel disconnected and isolated, they are looking for a place to belong and feel part of a family or community.
2. People are feeling the pressure of a busy and stressful world. They are looking for a greater sense of balance and ways to manage priorities.
3. People sense the shallowness of superficial encounters with others. They are looking for authentic relationships.
4. People are feeling empty and drained from striving to meet their desires through work, material possessions, or entertainment. They are looking for spiritual answers to their unfulfilled "hunger."
5. People are feeling overwhelmed by the pace of change in every aspect of their world. They are looking for help through transitions.
6. People are feeling demoralized by the decay and decadence of our society. They need help in maintaining Judeo-Christian values at home, work, and in the community.

What is an “Entry Event”?

Definition: A high-visibility (usually one-time) activity/event, sponsored by the church, designed to be of interest to churched and unchurched in the community.

Assumption: People change their behavior for the purpose of resolving felt needs (and gaining improved quality of life), when the benefit is perceived to be greater than the cost. Therefore, their attendance at your entry event will be based on their assessment of its value vs. its cost.

Goal of an Effective Entry Event: To see a large number of adults/families from your “prospect list” attend this event.

Eight Characteristics of a Good Entry Event

1. _____ participation in defining, planning, and conducting the event.
2. _____ participation in defining, planning, and conducting the event.
3. The event is _____. (see Appendix B & F)
4. The event is conducted in an _____.
5. The event addresses a _____ which cannot be met elsewhere.
6. The event requires _____ for prospective attendee.
7. The church’s purpose — and appropriate opportunities for _____ — are communicated.
8. The _____ of participants are obtained.
(see Appendix C for more information)

What Should the Message of Your Entry Events Be?

Exercise

Based on the “felt needs” identified among the target audiences on page 16 & 17, list one or more Entry Events that would respond to these needs.

Sample Entry Events

Holidays/Seasonal

- Valentine’s Day Father/Daughter banquet
- Christmas Pageant
- Halloween/Harvest Festival
- 4th of July celebration
- Memorial Day picnic and parade

Sports

- Super Bowl Sunday
- Trip to local sports game
- Local Christian sports celebrity speaker

Family/Parenting Issues

- “Discipline For Your Child” seminar
- Guest speaker on relevant topic/s
- “Beginning a Blended Family” seminar
- “Potty Training Your Youngster” workshop

Marital Issues

- Getting Started in Your Marriage seminar
- “Handling Divorce” seminar
- Guest speaker on relevant topic/s

Special Interests

- Visit to local points of interest
- Picnic
- “Welcome to the Neighborhood” orientation
- Tax planning
- Parent/kid hike

Kids Events:

- Taffy pull
- Ice cream social
- Pet show & races
- Swimming party
- Pinewood Derby race

Responsibilities for a Successful Entry Event

Program (possible names) _____

- Coordinating the overall event and its various components
- Communicating with the primary platform personnel

Room/Facility Set-Up (possible names) _____

- Selection of where the event be held
- Room / facility preparation
- Lighting, electrical, sound, etc.

Promotion/Invitations (possible names) _____

- Determining the media to be used, and how it will be developed (i.e. mailings, newspaper ads, phone calling campaign, etc.)
- Coordinating production and distribution of promotion
- Managing the advertising budget

Support Personnel (possible names) _____

- Identifying "hosts" who will serve before and after the event
- Identifying other support staff that will be necessary

Evaluation & Record Keeping (possible names) _____

- Evaluating the event
- Obtaining (and cataloging) names and addresses of those who attend

Other (possible names) _____

What is an “Entry Path”?

Definition: A church-sponsored program, group, or activity in which a non-member can become involved on a regular basis. An ongoing function in which the non-member can develop a longer-term relationship with people in the church.

Assumption: Most people come to faith and join a church through the influence of a friend, neighbor, or relative.

Goal of an Effective Entry Path: To provide an opportunity for your members to develop friendships and relationships with the unchurched people in your target audience/s.

What Should the Message of Your Entry Paths Be?

Seven Characteristics of a Good Entry Path

1. The group/activity is of interest to _____ and _____, alike.
2. There is low _____ and _____ required.
3. It is held in a _____ meeting place.
4. Prospects are _____ invited.
5. Time is spent building and nurturing _____ among group members. *(see Appendix F for more information)*
6. The group is composed of people who share things _____.
7. The _____ is perceived to be greater than the _____.

Sample Entry Paths

Sports/Physical Fitness

- church sports league/s (volleyball, softball, basketball, football, etc. teams)
- aerobics class
- weigh-down workshop (weight loss course)
- codependency group

Marital Issues

- pre-marriage class
- couples small group
- divorce recovery support group

Parenting Issues

- parenting study/support group (book/video study)
- MOPS (mothers of pre-schoolers)
- Single moms group

Special Interests

- spiritual discovery/study group
- crafts (basket weaving, quilting, carving, etc.)
- what does the Bible say about ...
- community service task force

Curriculum Publishers *(call for free catalog)*

Abingdon Press 800-251-3320	Gospel Light Publications 800-446-7735	Presbyterian Publishing 800-227-2872
Aglow Publications 800-755-2456	Group Publishing 800-447-1070	Recovery Publications 800-873-8384
Augsburg Fortress 800-328-4648	InterVarsity Press 800-843-9487	Serendipity House, Inc. 800-525-9563
Bethany House Publishers 800-328-6109	LifeWay Publishers 800-458-2772	Standard Publishing 800-543-1301
Broadman Press 800-251-3225	Moody Press 800-621-7105	Stephen Ministries 314-645-5511
Chrism House 800-641-4310	NavPress 800-366-7788	Tyndale House Publishers 800-323-9400
Cokesbury 800-672-1789	Nazarene Publishing 800-877-0700	Word Ministries 800-933-9673
David C. Cook Ministries 800-323-7543	NewLife Publications 800-235-7255	Zondervan Publishing 800-727-3480

The Spiritual Decision Process (What's Gone Wrong With The Harvest, James Engle)

GOD'S ROLE		COMMUNICATOR'S ROLE			MANKIND'S RESPONSE
General Revelation				- 8	Awareness of Supreme Being but No Effective Knowledge of Gospel
Conviction		Proclamation		- 7	Initial Awareness of Gospel
↓		↓		- 6	Awareness of Fundamentals of Gospel
				- 5	Grasp of Implications of Gospel
				- 4	Positive Attitude Toward Gospel
				- 3	Personal Problem Recognition
				- 2	DECISION TO ACT
		Persuasion		- 1	Repentance and Faith in God
REGENERATION					NEW CREATURE
Sanctification		Follow-Up		+ 1	Post-Decision Evaluation
↓		↓		+ 2	Incorporation into Church Body
				+ 3	Conceptual and Behavioral Growth
				+ 4	Communion with God
				+ 5	Stewardship
				•	Reproduction
				•	Internally (spiritual gifts, etc.)
				•	Externally (witness, social action, etc.)

The Spiritual Decision Process

The gospel is not effectively spread, however, merely by proclaiming the message and exposing another to its claims. The convert is to be *baptized* and *taught* to observe all that Christ has commanded the Church. Thus, becoming a disciple is a *process* continuing over a life span as believers are conformed to the image of Christ (Phil. 1:6). The Church has a definite obligation to cultivate the new believer, helping him or her to grow in the faith.

It appears, then, that the Great Commission contains three related but distinctly different communication mandates: (1) *to proclaim* the message; (2) *to persuade* the unbeliever; and (3) *to cultivate* the believer. Part of the problem with the harvest comes from fuzzy thinking at precisely this point because of a tendency to blur the essential distinctions between these communication functions.

This scale is critically significant because it represents an attempt to place these communication ministries in the perspective of the spiritual decision process as one becomes a believer in Christ and grows in the faith. This model of spiritual-decision processes in some ways is similar to decision models in other areas of human endeavor. But it represents a vast step beyond mere secular models in that it depicts the interactive role of both God and the human communicator in this process.

Everyone will fall somewhere on the continuum represented in the preceding figure. Some will have awareness of the Supreme Being through God's ministry of general revelation (conscience and nature) but no effective awareness of the gospel. Others will have the necessary awareness and grasp of its implications. When this is accompanied by strong felt need for change (designated as personal-problem recognition), the individual is open to a challenge to turn his life over to Christ. Prior to that time, there is neither sufficient understanding nor felt need to permit a

valid response to such a challenge. Those who have made such a commitment, then, are in various stages of spiritual growth as they are being conformed to the image of Christ through the ministry of the Spirit.

God and man uniquely interact to influence the spiritual decision process. It is God's sole responsibility to bring about awareness of the Supreme Being through revelation. From then on, however, the human communicator assumes a critical responsibility. It is his task to impart the necessary awareness of the claims of the gospel through a ministry of *proclamation* as God, through the Holy Spirit, convicts the recipient of sin. Once sufficient biblical awareness and problem recognition have been achieved, the function of the communicator is to *persuade* — to call for a life commitment to Jesus Christ. After this step has been taken, God, and God alone, imparts new life through regeneration.

New life does not stop, of course, with regeneration. The new life of the believer must be *followed up* and *cultivated* while God brings about spiritual growth through the ministry of sanctification. Such maturation continues throughout a lifetime for eternity.

Each person's spiritual journey is a lifelong decision process. It may begin many years prior to the point when a decision is made and one becomes born again, or regenerated, in the biblical sense. There usually is a complex of influences in this process and these must be understood.

The responsibility of the Christian communicator is to approach people where they are in terms of their spiritual position and, through an appropriate combination of message and media, to cause them to *progress in their decision process toward initial commitment and subsequent growth*. The goal, in short, is to bring about demonstrable and *measurable* change in people with respect to their response to the gospel. (*What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest? Grand Rapids: Zondervan, p. 44-47.*)

How Open Are You To Newcomers?

Membership tenure — _____ (one of every two members have joined the church during the past five years)

Leadership tenure — _____ (one of every five leaders have joined the church during the past two years)

Likelihood Of Your Church Assimilating New Members

- If 1/2 of your members joined 1 – 5 years ago: _____
- If 1/2 of your members joined 7 – 12 years ago: _____
- If 1/2 of your members joined 15+ years ago: _____

How and What Are We Now Doing?

The following exercise will help you examine your church's presently operating system. The question is, "Who is performing these functions in your church, and how well are they being performed?"

	Who is Now Responsible?	Current Procedures	How Well We Now Succeed
Locating and listing receptive persons and potential new members			
Contacting, inviting, communicating with potential new members			
Guiding potential new members to program, fellowship groups or other paths of entry			
Follow up — seeing that newcomers are involved in a meaningful group, role, or task			

The Caring System

DISCOVERY

SOURCE AND DATE. How did you learn of the individual or family whom you consider a potential new member? When? By whom?

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS. What do you know of this person or persons from the information available? This will help you in assigning and deciding which person or group should make the first contact. This will also provide the caller with some preliminary and introductory information about the person.

FIRST CONTACT ASSIGNED. Who makes the initial contact, and when, are quite important. (How soon you respond after receiving the name of a prospective member, especially if the name came to you by a call or through worship attendance, becomes a clear and certain expression of your caring.)

FIRST CONTACT COMPLETED. What were the results of the first call? Should the person remain on the prospect list? What was learned about the individual or family? (This will help you in determining the next step, which is asking specific group leaders — Sunday School teachers, neighbors, youth leaders, laity — to call on the person/s.) Matching their needs and situation with the appropriate church group or program assures a better chance of reaching and assimilating.

PROFILE. After the initial contact, what do you now know about the person you wish to reach? Be specific and complete in compiling the profile. The more you know or can “hunch” the better you can meet and respond to the needs of the person.

ENTRY EVENTS AVAILABLE. “You never have a second chance at a first impression.” How can the value and need-fulfilling strengths of the church be creatively introduced to the prospective new member/s? What opportunities are available for the individual (or family) prospect to experience the church and its people in a meaningful and positive way?

ENTRY PATHS AVAILABLE (TASK, ROLE, GROUP). Given the special profile of the new prospect, what opportunities for need-fulfilling involvement in the church exist? What tasks, roles, or groups in the life of the church would seem to be appropriate for the prospect?

RECEIVED MEMBERSHIP PACKET OR BROCHURE. Was some printed material given to the potential new members, which appropriately describes the church, program, and opportunities for involvement? (Match the material to the needs of the persons. The more you know from preliminary analysis, the more specific you can be in referring to information that would be of interest to the individual or family members.) The piece should always reflect the nature of the church, and promise only what the church can deliver

MAILING LIST. Some churches routinely include the names of potential new members on their mailing list. Potential and prospective new members receive the newsletter and other program announcements. This may continue for a limited time in the case of those who choose not to participate.

The Caring System (continued)

RESPONDING

ASSIGNMENT FOR ADDITIONAL FOLLOW UP CALLS. On the basis of the personal profile, and other known information about the person/family, analyze the needs of the person, and the person-to-person calls required to respond to these needs.

These calls may be made by pastor, staff members, a calling team member, a selected lay person, and most certainly by the leader and members of groups/programs that have particular relevance to the prospect. Thus, one family might have four or five invitations from the church to join , or attend an activity, program, or group. In each case the person assigned to make the contact needs to complete the call, and someone needs to know what response, if any, was expressed.

Review your church groups and programs. Which seem to be the most “open” to new persons, and have a good potential of growth?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS. Based on the information gathered from the initial series of contacts from the church to the prospective new member/s, what are additional initiatives that are appropriate for the church to take? Who are the people who should make those contacts on behalf of the church?

This process of reviewing and identifying appropriate initiatives to take with the prospective new member comprises an ongoing process of building a relationship. The results may be immediate, they may be long-term, or they may be known only in eternity. No one should be arbitrarily dropped from a “caring system” unless they specifically ask for no further contact from the church.

ASSIMILATION

ENTRY PATHS UTILIZED. The newcomer who stays will have made new friends in the church. He/she is also beginning to identify with the church’s mission and direction, and ideally is having a part in the process. Entry paths may be involvement in a relevant small group, or perhaps in an appropriate role or task in which the newcomer can begin to make friends and build relationships.

INVITATION extended. An invitation is then extended. It may be one’s first commitment to Christ, a re-dedication, or a transfer of membership long neglected. Your invitation is a continuing expression of your caring, and is an invitation to involvement and belonging.

MEMBERSHIP CLASS. When a person chooses to become a member, celebration and new membership training is provided as an opportunity to mark the belonging of each person, and to allow the congregation to receive and welcome them as new members.

The Caring System *(continued)*

STEWARDSHIP CALL. Each new member is asked to make a stewardship commitment as part of their spiritual growth, and their involvement and belonging to the congregation.

3-MONTH CHECK UP. Within the first three months a review should be made of each person's involvement. This review should include a personal visit by a church staff person with each new member, asking about how they are being received, how they feel about their participation, and asking how the church can become more meaningful for their lives. There must be continued effort to match each person to the appropriate task, role, and group. This assures that the new member will grow in faith, discipleship, and service.

NURTURE

6, 9, & 12-MONTH CHECK UP. This step provides the church with the opportunity to nurture the growth and development of new members on a continuing, long-term basis. If, within the first six months, a new person is not significantly involved and included in a task, role, or group, (formal or informal) the chances are very good that the person will be lost to your church.

At some point, the pastor or other staff person needs to make a call on the recent new member to express continued interest in the person. This gives the pastor, or others in charge, an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the caring and assimilating ministry of the church.

Participation in the first year should be evaluated at 3-, 6-, 9-, and 12-month intervals, and if action or attention is needed, it can be immediately given.

ENTRY PATHS STILL IN USE. The goal for new members should be to help them find a place where they are using their gifts. At least 90% of all new members should be involved in a group where they are needed and loved. Meaningful roles and tasks can help the new member develop a sense of belonging and ownership of the goals and priorities of the church.

Principles for Effective Assimilation of Newcomers

1. Build an assimilation _____.
2. Create opportunities to build new _____.
3. Regularly start _____.
4. Create new _____ and _____, and communicate them.
5. Monitor _____ levels.

Steps for Effective Outreach to Unchurched Families (Summary)

1. *Pray regularly for God's guidance and blessings of your church's outreach endeavors*
 - Encourage small groups, classes, committees, and boards to pray for unchurched friends/relatives
 - Publicly celebrate answered prayer as new people come to faith
2. *Select a "target audience"*
 - Ask God for guidance on unreached "people groups" in your community
 - Interview and inquire as to the passions which present members may have for reaching a "people group" in your community
3. *Conduct at least two focus groups with persons in your target audience*
 - Select a moderator for the focus groups
 - Select an appropriate location (neutral)
 - Recruit/invite participants
 - Invite other church member observers (one-way mirror)
 - Provide refreshments
 - Record the session (video preferable; one-way mirror; with permission)
 - Summarize the information into a "profile" of your target audience
4. *Identify "entry events" of interest to your target audience*
 - Identify an appropriate/appealing program
 - Select the best date, time, location
 - Determine promotion/advertising campaign & budget
 - Enlist the support personnel who will be needed for the event (set up, refreshments, hosts, etc.)
 - Determine how to best obtain names/addresses from guests
5. *Identify "entry paths" of interest to your target audience*
 - Identify an appropriate/appealing topic
 - Select the best date, time, location, number of sessions
 - Determine promotion/advertising campaign & budget
 - Enlist the support personnel who will be needed for the event (set up, refreshments, hosts, etc.)
 - Extend personal invitations
6. *Stay in communication with each person/family prospect*
 - develop a personal profile of each individual/family (their background, needs, interests, etc.) for appropriate subsequent contacts
 - assign additional contacts from members of the church based on appropriate "matches" of background, interests, etc.
 - monitor involvement level of individual/family

Thank you for taking a few moments to complete the following survey. The purpose for requesting this information is to develop a "profile" of our church family...to identify common ages, interests, concerns, marital status, family status, etc.. If you are a member or regular attender of our church, we would appreciate your taking time to complete and return this survey. As our "church profile" becomes clearer, we will share the information as we explore ways to be most effective in ministry to and through the body.

If there are questions you do not feel comfortable answering, please don't feel obligated to do so. The purpose of the survey is to gather information on our church family, not to be intrusive into areas of your life you do not wish to share. The information, when compiled, will not identify individuals by name. It will only summarize categories and groupings of our church family.

Please complete one survey per person (13 yrs. and older).

Name: _____ Birth date: _____

Address: _____

City/ST/Zip: _____

Phone: _____ E-mail: _____

Marital Status

- Presently Single (please check one box below)
- never married
 - divorced # of years since most recent divorce: _____
 - widow/er # of years since most recent loss: _____
 - other: _____
- Presently Married (please check one box below)
- 1st marriage # of years married: _____
 - 2nd marriage # of years in present marriage: _____
 - 3rd marriage # of years in present marriage: _____
- Presently Separated # of months or years since separation: _____

Family Status (check all that apply)

- I have children living at our home
- Please list year of birth of each child: _____
- I have grandchildren living at our home
- Please list year of birth of each child: _____
- Some children in our home are not *biologically* related to me ("blended family," adopted, other)
- I have grown children living out of the house
- I have some children grown and some still at home
- Please list year of birth of each child: _____
- I have never had children
- I have minor (biologically-related) children who are not living in my home

Special Interests

Please list hobbies you enjoy, and the approximate number of hours you spend with each in an average month.

<u>Hobby</u>	<u>Approx. # hours/month</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Special Concerns

I feel particularly concerned/worried about:

- my marriage
- my children
- my parents
- my health
- my job
- my finances
- _____
- _____

Below is a list of major and minor “transition events” that occur in people’s lives. Please check any box you have experienced in the past five years.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Death of a spouse | <input type="checkbox"/> Change in number of arguments with spouse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Divorce | <input type="checkbox"/> Loan over \$100,000 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Move to nursing/retirement home | <input type="checkbox"/> Foreclosure on a mortgage/loan |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Marital separation | <input type="checkbox"/> Significant feeling of not being wanted/needed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Death of a close family member | <input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding personal achievement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Major physical problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Spouse began or stopped work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Marriage or remarriage | <input type="checkbox"/> Significant decrease in contact with children |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Void of personal life goals | <input type="checkbox"/> Dramatic change in personal behavior patterns |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial loss of retirement money | <input type="checkbox"/> Significant decrease in contact with friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Forced early retirement | <input type="checkbox"/> Trouble with the boss |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of ability to drive | <input type="checkbox"/> Minor physical problems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Marital reconciliation | <input type="checkbox"/> Significant change in recreational habits |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Retirement | <input type="checkbox"/> Significant change in church activities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spouse confined to nursing home | <input type="checkbox"/> Significant change in social activities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change of health of family member | <input type="checkbox"/> Loan of less than \$100,000 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gain a new family member | <input type="checkbox"/> Significant change in sleep habits |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Significant change in financial condition | <input type="checkbox"/> Change in frequency of family get-togethers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Death of a close friend | <input type="checkbox"/> Significant change in eating habits |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty in getting medical insurance | <input type="checkbox"/> Minor law violation |

Receptivity Rating Scales*

*“God whispers to us in our pleasure, but shouts to us in our pain.
It is his way to rouse a deaf world.” - C.S. Lewis*

PRESCHOOL

Life Event	Rank
1. Death of a parent	89
2. Divorce of parents	78
3. Marital separation of parents	74
4. Jail sentence of a parent for one year or more	67
5. Marriage of a parent to step-parent	62
6. Serious illness requiring hospitalization	59
7. Death of a brother or sister	59
8. Acquiring visible deformity	52
9. Serious illness requiring hospitalization of a parent	51
10. Birth of a brother or sister	50
11. Mother taking job	47
12. Increase in arguments between parents	44
13. Starting nursery school	42
14. Addition of a third adult to family (e.g., grandparent)	39
15. Brother or sister leaving home	39
16. Having visible congenital deformity	39
17. Increase in number of arguments with parents	39
18. Change in acceptance by peers	38
19. Death of a close friend	38
20. Serious illness requiring hospitalization of brother or sister	37
21. Change in father's job requiring increased absence from home	36
22. Jail sentence of a parent for 30 days or less	34
23. Discovery of being adopted	33
24. Change to new nursery school	33
25. Death of a grandparent	30
26. Outstanding personal achievement	23
27. Loss of job by a parent	23
28. Decrease in number of arguments with parents	22
29. Decrease in number of arguments between parents	21
30. Change in parents' financial status	21

* *The Growth Report #10*, p. 2 - 3 (Church Growth, Inc., Monrovia, CA)

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Life Event	Rank
1. Death of a parent	91
2. Divorce of parents	84
3. Marital separation of parents	78
4. Acquiring a physical deformity	69
5. Death of a brother or sister	68
6. Jail sentence of parent for one year or more	67
7. Marriage of a parent to step-parent	65
8. Serious illness requiring hospitalization	62
9. Becoming involved with drugs or alcohol	61
10. Having a visible congenital deformity	60
11. Failure of a grade in school	57
12. Serious illness requiring hospitalization of parent	55
13. Death of a close friend	53
14. Discovery of being an adopted child	52
15. Increase in number of arguments between parents	51
16. Change in child's acceptance by peers	51
17. Birth of a brother or sister	50
18. Increase in number of arguments with parents	47
19. Move to a new school district	46
20. Beginning school	46
21. Suspension from school	46
22. Change in father's occupation requiring increased absence from home	45
23. Mother beginning to work	44
24. Jail sentence of parent for 30 days or less	44
25. Serious illness requiring hospitalization of brother or sister	41
26. Addition of third adult to family (e.g., grandparents)	41
27. Outstanding personal achievement	39
28. Loss of job by parent	38
29. Death of a grandparent	36
30. Brother or sister leaving home	36
31. Pregnancy in unwed teenage sister	36
32. Change in parents' financial status	29
33. Beginning another school year	27
34. Decrease in number of arguments with parents	27
35. Decrease in number of arguments between parents	25
36. Becoming a full-fledged member of a church	25

JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Life Event	Rank
1. Pregnancy out of wedlock	95
2. Death of a parent	94
3. Divorce of parents	84
4. Acquiring a visible deformity	83
5. Marital separation of parents.....	77
6. Jail sentence of a parent for one year or more.....	76
7. Male partner in pregnancy out of wedlock	76
8. Death of a brother or sister	71
9. Having a visible congenital deformity	70
10. Discovery of being an adopted child	70
11. Becoming involved with drugs or alcohol	70
12. Change in child's acceptance with peers	68
13. Death of a close friend	65
14. Marriage of a parent to step-parent	63
15. Failure of a grade in school	62
16. Pregnancy in unwed teenage sister.....	60
17. Serious illness requiring hospitalization	57
18. Beginning to date	55
19. Suspension from school	54
20. Serious illness requiring hospitalization of a parent	54
21. Move to a new school district	52
22. Jail sentence of a parent for 30 days or less	50
23. Birth of a brother or sister	50
24. Failure to be accepted in an extracurricular activity he or she wanted.....	48
25. Loss of job by a parent	48
26. Increase in number of arguments between parents	48
27. Breaking up with boyfriend or girlfriend	47
28. Increase in number of arguments with parents	46
29. Beginning junior high school	45
30. Outstanding personal achievement	45
31. Serious illness requiring hospitalization of brother or sister	44
32. Change in father's occupation requiring increased absence from home	42
33. Change in parents' financial status	40
34. Mother beginning to work	36
35. Death of a grandparent	35
36. Addition of a third adult to family (e.g., grandparent).....	34
37. Brother or sister leaving home	33
38. Decrease in number of arguments between parents	32
39. Decrease in number of arguments with parents	29
40. Becoming a full-fledged member of a church	28

SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Life Event	Rank
1. Getting married	101
2. Unwed pregnancy	92
3. Death of a parent	87
4. Acquiring a visible deformity	81
5. Divorce of parents	77
6. Male partner in pregnancy out of wedlock	77
7. Becoming involved with drugs or alcohol	76
8. Jail sentence of a parent for one year or more	75
9. Marital separation of parents	69
10. Death of a brother or sister	68
11. Change in acceptance by peers	67
12. Pregnancy in unwed teenage sister	64
13. Discovery of being in adopted child	64
14. Marriage of a parent to step-parent	63
15. Death of a close friend	63
16. Having a visible congenital deformity	62
17. Serious illness requiring hospitalization	58
18. Failure of grade in school	56
19. Move to a new school district	56
20. Failure to be accepted in an extracurricular activity he or she wanted	55
21. Serious illness requiring hospitalization of a parent	55
22. Jail sentence of a parent for 30 days or less	53
23. Breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend	53
24. Beginning to date	51
25. Suspension from school	50
26. Birth of a brother or sister	47
27. Increase in number of arguments with parents	46
28. Increase in number of arguments between parents	46
29. Loss of job by a parent	46
30. Outstanding personal achievement	46
31. Change in parents' financial status	45
32. Being accepted at a college of his/her choice	43
33. Beginning senior high school	42
34. Serious illness requiring hospitalization of brother or sister	41
35. Change of father's occupation requiring increased absence from home	38
36. Brother or sister leaving home	37
37. Death of a grandparent	36
38. Addition of third adult to family (e.g., grandparent)	34
39. Becoming a full-fledged member of a church	31
40. Decrease in number of arguments between parents	28
41. Decrease in number of arguments with parents	26
42. Mother beginning to work	26

ADULT

Life Event	Rank
1. Death of a spouse	100
2. Divorce	73
3. Marital separation	65
4. Jail term	63
5. Death of a close family member	63
6. Personal injury or illness	53
7. Marriage	50
8. Fired from work	47
9. Marital reconciliation	45
10. Retirement	45
11. Change in health of family member	44
12. Pregnancy	40
13. Sex difficulties	39
14. Gain a new family member	39
15. Business readjustment	39
16. Change in financial state	38
17. Death of a close friend	37
18. Change to different line of work	36
19. Change in number of arguments with spouse	35
20. Mortgage over \$100,000	31
21. Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
22. Change in responsibilities at work	29
23. Son or daughter leaving home	29
24. Trouble with in-laws	29
25. Outstanding personal achievement	28
26. Spouse begins or stops work	26
27. Begin or end school	26
28. Change in living conditions	25
29. Revision of personal habits	24
30. Trouble with boss	23
31. Change in work hours or conditions	20
32. Change in residence	20
33. Change in schools	20
34. Change in recreation	19
35. Change in church activities	19
36. Change in social activities	18
37. Mortgage or loan less than \$100,000	17
38. Change in sleeping habits	15
39. Change in number of family get-togethers	15
40. Change in eating habits	15
41. Vacation	13
42. Christmas	12
43. Minor law violation	11

SENIOR ADULT

Life Event	Rank
1. Death of a spouse	100
2. Divorce.....	73
3. Move to nursing/retirement home	70
4. Marital separation	65
5. Death of a close family member.....	64
6. Major physical problems	53
7. Marriage or remarriage.....	50
8. Realizing a personal lack of dreams/purpose.....	47
9. Financial loss of retirement money	47
10. Forced early retirement.....	46
11. Unable to drive	45
12. Marital reconciliation.....	45
13. Retirement.....	45
14. Spouse confined to retirement home	45
15. Change of health of family member.....	44
16. Gain a new family member.....	39
17. Change in financial state.....	38
18. Death of a close friend.....	37
19. Difficulty in getting medical insurance	36
20. Change in number of arguments with spouse.....	35
21. Mortgage over \$100,000.....	31
22. Foreclosure of mortgage/loan.....	30
23. Sense of not being needed	29
24. Outstanding personal achievement.....	28
25. Spouse begins or stops work	26
26. Significantly decreased contact with children or friends	25
27. Revision of personal habits	24
28. Significantly less contact with support group/s	24
29. Trouble with the boss	23
30. Minor physical problems.....	20
31. Change in recreation habits.....	19
32. Change in church activities	19
33. Change in social activities	18
34. Loans of less than \$100,000.....	17
35. Change in sleeping habits.....	16
36. Change in number of family get-togethers.....	15
37. Change in eating habits.....	15
38. Vacations.....	13
39. Christmas	12
40. Minor law violation	11

Focus Groups*

The most common form of qualitative research is focus groups. Increasingly, churches are turning to focus groups to help clarify issues and opportunities, or to uncover the hidden thought processes of the congregation as they relate to ministry. Let's explore focus groups more thoroughly.

Understanding Focus Groups

A focus group is simply a planned group discussion. It is named a focus group because the idea is to take a topic or series of topics and focus on them in a concentrated manner. The coverage of the topics is meant to be more intensive than extensive. Although the discussion itself is unrehearsed, the discussion is guided by a facilitator, generally called a moderator, who has a carefully developed set of guidelines for how the discussion should proceed.

The key concept of focus groups is for people to be made totally comfortable in the group setting. They must feel that whatever they have to say, as long as it is on the topic being discussed, is important and valid. A pastor may have to make a conscious effort to "change hats" at this point. One legitimate role of the pastor is to warn against sin and error. But a focus group is not an appropriate context for this pastoral function. Another important pastoral role is to *really hear* what people think-and that is what focus groups are for. Here we are not as interested in right or wrong answers as in people being open and honest.

Focus groups are meant to include everyone in the discussion: it is to be more of a group conversation than a series of questions directed from the moderator to one individual after another. Good focus groups involve each person so that they do not feel like they are under the "research microscope" but are simply having a good time sharing their thoughts and feelings with others who are doing the same.

Recruiting the Participants

Ideally, focus groups consist of 8 to 10 qualified adults who have been invited to come together for a group discussion. The people are generally recruited by telephone one to two weeks in advance of the discussion session. They may be chosen at random from the community, from a congregational member

list, from other lists available-it depends on the types of people you wish to hear from.

The initial telephone call is designed to screen people to make sure they qualify. When they are contacted they are asked to answer a few questions to determine if they fit the profile of the people you wish to study. People whose answers meet the desired criteria are then asked to attend the discussion session.

Because these discussions usually last between 60 and 120 minutes, it is generally conceded that people need a tangible incentive to give up that time. The typical incentive these days is cash. Depending on whom you are inviting and your location, the amount varies. Members of your church may be willing to participate for as little as \$10 or \$20 a person. Outsiders with busy schedules and a limited interest in the subject matter-for instance, non-Christian, unchurched adults who are being asked to attend a session about attitudes toward churches may have to be persuaded by larger sums (e.g. \$50 each). Cost of living also enters into the picture: Rural communities can usually pay lesser amounts than major cities. The incentives are usually higher in the Northeast and in California than in other areas of the nation.

The screening process is important. If you do not have people with the desired profile in the group, it will be awkward for them, difficult for the moderator, and a waste of your time and money because their presence has added nothing to your knowledge base. The screening questionnaire and interview must therefore be carefully thought through and created with your needs in mind.

For instance, if you desire to learn how effective the singles ministry in your church has been for young adults who have never been married (as opposed to divorced or widowed singles), you should develop a screening questionnaire to reflect those limitations. Questions might ask if they have participated in the activities of the singles group during the past year; if they attend the church regularly; their age; and if they have ever been married. Assuming they meet the predetermined specifications of the people you are seeking (e.g. active in the singles group, attend church twice or more a month, are under age 30, and have never been

married), you would then finish the telephone interview by inviting them to participate in the discussion group.

If, instead, you wanted to know what it would take to reach the unchurched adults in your community, your screening questionnaire (known as a screener) might ask about their church attendance patterns; their openness to attending some type of Christian church within the coming year; and whether they have ever visited your church. If the people with whom you speak meet the desired profile, they would then be told of the group session, the incentive, and be invited to participate. (For an example of such a screener, see appendix 3.)

During the screening process, people generally are told only in vague terms what the discussion session will be about. The reasons for this masking of purpose are to avoid people dropping out because they are not interested (they may be the very people whose opinions are most important), and to preclude preparation for the discussion (unless the topic merits such premeditation).

When it comes to how many people to include in a focus group, preferences vary. It is generally conceded that because of the nature of group dynamics, having 6 or fewer people in a session is problematic; 7 is marginally acceptable; 8 to 10 is ideal; 11 or 12 is difficult; 13 or more is untenable.

My experience has been that having more than 10 people participate at a time makes it difficult for everyone to feel comfortable speaking, and to hear from each person a sufficient number of time to understand their perspective. Should more than 10 people recruited for the group actually show up, it is common practice to decide which 10 would, be the best to involve, and to simply give the remaining people the incentive they had been promised and let them leave without participating in the session.

When recruiting people, realize that for every 14 people who say they will show up to the sessions about 10 will normally do so. Thus, if your goal is to have 8 people participate (which is about the fewest that you would want to have), count on recruiting 11 or 12 people; if you are seeking 10 to show up, try to get commitments from 13 or 14 people.

When the recruited people show up for their session, you might wish to “re-screen” them. This

means that they would fill out a one-page survey, which contains the same questions they were asked by telephone during the recruitment process. It is amazing how many people give different answers during the re-screening process than they did over the telephone. If the discrepancies disqualify them from participating, the common practice is to ask them about the discrepancy. If they indicate that some type of error was made in the telephone survey (meaning that their real answer would disqualify them), thank them and pay them the incentive. Tell them that because of the error, they will not be able to participate in the group.

It is imperative to reconfirm people’s agreement to participate in writing. Immediately after recruiting the person send a confirmation letter stating the time, date, and place of the session and the incentive they will receive. Also, confirm by telephone the night before. Our experience has shown that confirming attendance the night before the session can increase attendance by as much as 50 percent. Put differently, failure to confirm participation 24 hours ahead of time may cause a disastrous turnout and a useless research exercise.

The Moderator

The importance of having a talented moderator cannot be overstated. A good moderator can overcome a number of deficiencies in the focus group process; a bad moderator will negate the value of the entire process.

The moderator is more than just the person who sits at the head of the table and directs the course of the conversation. The moderator is responsible for working with you to develop the recruitment screener; for creating a discussion guide or outline; for re-screening all of the participants before they enter the session; for leading the actual discussion; and for providing an analysis of the sessions (either in writing or verbally, as agreed upon).

Depending upon your requirements, the moderator may be required to arrange for a suitable facility for the discussions. He may also need to arrange for related activities, such as providing the incentives to people, taping the discussions, overseeing the confirmation of the recruits, providing the food or snacks for the group participants and so forth. If the moderator is not expected to make these

arrangements, you or another person or organization you designate must do so.

What makes a moderator effective? This is a key question. Even if the recruiting goes smoothly, everyone shows up, the room is comfortable, and the participants are talkative, the direction (or lack of direction) can sway a group provided by a moderator. You might examine potential moderators to see if they have the following qualities:

- nonjudgmental, able to be accepting of all honest responses;
- articulate, without being verbose, pedantic or overly intellectual;
- flexible enough to allow and follow up useful divergences in the discussion to a logical conclusion, before returning to the predetermined track;
- sensitive enough to distinguish between a useful divergence and a useless sidetrack-and capable of gently but firmly guiding the discussion back to the main track without an excessive loss of time or focus;
- experienced enough with group dynamics to understand how to quiet a loudmouth without being insulting or scaring the others in the group from saying whatever comes to mind; and how to draw out the thoughts of those who are quiet, reluctant or otherwise uncommunicative;
- capable of following people's lines of thought over the course of the session and understanding their thought processes;
- knows when to probe answers for greater depth and when to leave superficial answers untouched because they will yield little of real value;
- able to translate the discussion into insights that make your decision-making process better.

Where do you find such a person? You may hire them from market research companies; psychologists often have these skills; and many pastors and other people-oriented, marketing-savvy people may possess the requisite characteristics.

If the people participating in the group sessions are from your church, it is best not to have the pastor or staff members moderate the groups. People will be less likely to give honest feedback in front of the pastor, especially if the discussion turns to matters related to the pastor's performance or the aggregate effect of the church and its programs. Sometimes it is

best to have a total stranger lead the groups; someone who is competent, sympathetic but not biased, and with whom the participants will feel comfortable to speak their mind.

If you or someone you work with closely will be moderating the sessions, here are a few tips on how to more successfully guide the group discussions.

- *Managing loud people.* Invariably, every group has someone who wishes to emerge as the leader. They talk louder than others do, they talk more frequently than the rest, and they speak more extensively. The task you have is to quiet them without scaring everyone else into silence. Some ground rules should be shared at the outset: "We want to make sure that everyone has opportunity to participate. There may be times when I will have to remind you of this. This will enable everyone to have opportunity to share."

A method that works is to avoid looking at people as you look around the room. Refuse to look at them as they give their answers. When asking for responses, if they begin to answer, politely cut them off and say "I've heard from you quite a bit, (name), let me hear from someone else on this one"; or prefacing a question with a statement like "I think I'm getting a sense of how (name) feels, let me hear from some of the rest of you on the matter of

- *Separating friends.* In most cases, it is advisable not to have people who know each other in the same group. If you are conducting a group of people from the church, though, this is virtually impossible. The best thing to do when the session begins is to arrange people's seating so that those who are most friendly with each other are not tempted to be nudging each other all session, passing notes back and forth, or sharing whispered comments.

- *Simultaneous responses.* How frustrating it gets when everyone speaks at the same time. You miss most of what is going on, and if you are relying upon the tapes to capture the information, you will wind up with a garbled, unintelligible mess. At the very beginning of the session, take three minutes to lay down the ground rules: one person speaks at a time, feel free to disagree with others, do not engage in attempts to convert people to a particular perspective, no one monopolizes, etc. If the group

breaks into a spontaneous outburst, quiet them and ask each individual, to share what they were saying.

- *Group involvement.* You have 8 to 10 people present because you want interaction, and because you want everyone involved. Actively encourage such engagement. Have people react to what other group members have said. When only one or two people are consistently answering, use silence as a means of drawing people out of their reticence. You can also call on people, but must do so cautiously: some people will be frightened into further silence by this approach.

- *Losing control.* Even the best moderator encounters a group that gets out of control. It is critical to quickly re-establish leadership of the situation. Some ways of doing so are to stand and hold up your hands, indicating the need for silence, enabling you to remind them of the ground rules, and return the session to normalcy. Alternatively, you might simply ask outright for people to be more courteous and controlled in their participation.

- *Affirmation without confirmation.* To encourage people to continue to provide honest feedback, it is important to provide affirmation of what they have to say. At the same time, though, be careful not to come across as suggesting that you agree with or otherwise embrace their position. The moderator must remain neutral if a valid discussion is to take place.

- *Use humor.* Sometimes the tension in the room builds due to positions taken by people, the sensitive nature of the topic discussed, or people's fatigue with the topic. A good moderator is able to use humor to break the tension without undermining anybody's position. Be careful not to rely too much on humor, lest the group become an amateur comedian's night and people try to get a laugh with their responses.

- *Paper and pencil.* Sometimes you may fear that once someone provides a socially desirable answer to an inquiry, people who hold less fashionable or socially desirable opinions may be apt to clam up. By having everyone write their responses on paper before they verbalize any answers, then going around the room and asking everyone to share their responses, you get a more complete set of options. Further, it is more likely that people will not change the opinion they share with the group after they hear what other people say; they are more likely to feel obligated to read what they wrote.

- *Use visual aids.* People can respond to concepts, but they are much better equipped to react to tangible stimuli such as drawings, videos or products. If you want them to describe colors, give them samples of colors: red means different things to different people. If you want them to design a logo, provide them with a chalkboard or easel and allow them to sketch out what they have in mind. If you are delving into a corporate image, give them copies of the organization's print advertisements to respond to. The more tangible the stimulus, the more precise their response-and, often, the more you learn.

- *Play devil's advocate.* Sometimes people give answers you believe are simply the responses they think you want to Confront this head-on, by playing the devil's advocate role and having them defend their stated position. If the discussion becomes too predictable, this type of soft confrontation can bring out nuances and insights that might have been missed otherwise.

- *Role-playing.* On occasion, it might be advantageous to ask people to play divergent roles. If conducted properly, everyone can get involved, not just the handful of role-players. Suggest points the characters overlooked or did not adequately develop. This approach enables you to understand perceived strategic weaknesses of positions, untapped image points and the like.

The Discussion Guide

The discussion guide is a critical piece to the entire puzzle. This outline takes your objectives (i.e. the reasons for conducting the research) and converts them into a non-threatening, logical, flowing road map for the discussion.

Before asking a moderator to prepare the guide, the people sponsoring the research should provide the moderator with a detailed list of the types of information desired from the process, and how it will be used in the marketing process. Armed with that insight, a skilled moderator can then develop a guide that will contain the needed information.

Moderators each have their own style, and the guides may well reflect these different approaches. Some provide guides in which they write out the questions they intend to ask word for word. Others write down the order of the concepts they will pursue, but leave the exact language to be determined

by the nature of the group discussion. Other moderators offer a combination of these two varied styles.

Regardless of the approach used by your moderator, be sure you see and approve the guide before the groups meet. You should receive the guide a week or so in advance of the sessions, and provide changes and eventual approval of the guide at least two days ahead of time.

Expect the discussion to require that the moderator jump around a bit from the plan outlined in the discussion guide. In a freewheeling discussion, this is unavoidable. A good moderator, however, will keep the discussion focused and will eventually hit all of the topics that were originally designed for examination.

Location of the Meeting

The most professional approach is to have the groups meet in a room designed specifically for focus groups. These facilities generally have two adjoining rooms, separated by a wall that has a one-way mirror. To preserve the discussion, microphones are built into the ceiling, the table, or other unobtrusive areas. Such focus group facilities are available in all metropolitan areas and in some smaller markets. Look in the Yellow Pages under “Marketing Research” and contact the companies listed to determine if they have such a facility. Such companies will also make moderators and recruiting services available to you, for a price.

While the participants conduct their discussion in the larger room, the people who are commissioning the research may sit in the adjoining room and watch the discussion from behind the special mirror. Ethically, the moderator has a responsibility to tell the group members before the discussion starts that they are being watched and, if appropriate, audiotaped. This circumstance may cause a bit of discomfort for people for a few minutes, but once they get into the discussion they tend to forget about the observers and concentrate on the ideas being shared.

If this arrangement is not feasible or desirable, you may hold the discussion meeting in a conference room at a nearby hotel or business center. Although the one-way mirror for unobtrusive observation is not available, a suitable setting with adequate parking

and facilities is provided. Other viable options include using classrooms at local schools or a small auditorium or theater.

Alternatives that have been used, but not recommended, are holding the sessions at a restaurant—too many distractions during the discussion, may be hard to hear everyone’s answers and very difficult to cleanly tape the discussion. A church setting brings too much emotional or perceptual baggage with the discussion, possibly influencing people’s answers and giving misleading information.

How Many Groups Are Needed?

Ideally, you should schedule groups in pairs until you have conducted enough sessions so that you are no longer learning anything new related to your objectives. This strategy, of course, requires a considerable budget and an open-ended time frame.

In the real world, these two resources are rarely available in sufficient quantities to allow the ideal approach. The more practical approach, then, is to conduct a minimum of two sessions with people from the same group, but hopefully at least four.

Why at least two sessions? Because it is possible that one of the sessions was somehow biased, or that the group itself was not sufficiently representative of the area from which they were drawn to provide reliable insights. Four sessions are preferable because this allows for some repetition of information, giving the analyst a better sense of the dominant emotions, viewpoints and considerations for people.

If your research is designed to understand the thinking of more than one people group—say, for instance, baby busters, baby boomers, pre-boomers, and senior citizens — you need at least two groups for each separate segment. In the example listed here you need at least eight sessions, two for each of these group segments.

Strategically, you are frequently better off keeping the groups homogeneous. In other words, rather than spread people from each of the four people groups evenly across the eight sessions, you gain greater clarity of insight by separating them into the age groups suggested.

What to Expect from Focus Groups

You should emerge from this discussion process with two or three products.

First, if your recruiters keep good records of their interviews in the screening process, you should be able to tell *the proportion of the people contacted who met your criteria*. This is known as the “incidence level”: the percentage of people from the target population who fit the profile you were seeking. This figure, in itself, can be very helpful information.

Recently we conducted research for a ministry that wanted to know how many people in a specified area were Christian; gave money to charities other than churches; and held specific opinions on a prescribed set of current issues. Finding these people for the qualitative research was more difficult than expected. After we had recruited all of the people we needed, we went back to all of the screening questionnaires we had used, tallied the answers, and found that only about 1 out of every 10 adults had been qualified, by our predetermined criteria, to participate.

Be forewarned that not everyone who is qualified for involvement in your research will agree to participate. There is no standard expectation for the proportion who will ultimately participate. In some people segments, we have had near-perfect acceptance; in other groups, the acceptance rate has been less than 25 percent. In the study I mentioned above, about half of the qualified people agreed to be involved in the research.

Think about these ratios for a moment, because they may greatly influence your willingness to do all the focus group recruiting in-house. In our study for the above ministry, for every adult we successfully recruited for our research, we actually contacted about 40 adults: 15 to 20 refused to be interviewed (i.e. screened); 18 were screened but did not qualify; 1 was screened and qualified, but declined the invitation to the session; and our 1 adult was screened, qualified and agreed to participate. To conduct 2 focus groups with adults meeting these criteria would require that more than 1,000 adults be contacted, drawn from a list of at least twice as many potentially qualified names and numbers!

In this case, it was an expensive and time-consuming process just to find and recruit qualified participants. Not all projects require locating such a small incidence population, though. That ministry was seeking a group with a 10 percent incidence. If you are after the unchurched, the incidence might be from 25 percent to 60 percent, depending on your definition of unchurched and the area of the country. If you are seeking people who attend your church, you ought to be able to provide a list that provides 90 percent to 100 percent qualified people.

The point, however, is that by keeping track of the outcome of each screening interview and tabulating the results, we then had a better idea of just how large (or, in this case, how tiny) the group of people was who shared the heartbeat of this particular ministry. Notice that the qualitative research process has provided us with a bit of quantitative insight.

Second, you might wish to have audiotapes (or, possibly, videotapes) of the session for future reference. Especially for key people who were not able to attend the sessions live, hearing the tapes can be instructive.

Third, have a written summary of what was learned. The product might be a simple analysis, which summarizes the key findings. It might be a comprehensive analysis, which includes verbatim quotes from participants as needed to shed light on a discussion point, along with recommendations for action as a result of the discussions. Another option is to have a typed transcript of the discussions, without any type of formal analysis. Our experience has been that the top line analysis, if properly developed, proves to be the most efficient use of everyone’s resources. (An example of a top line analysis is included in Appendix 3.)

If you have someone prepare an analysis, what should it include? The purpose of the research was to explore (1) how people think, (2) why they have drawn certain conclusions, (3) the breadth of the conclusions that have been drawn, (4) the intensity of people’s feelings, (5) new ideas that people offered, or (6) the potential for motivating people to respond in desired ways. The analysis should keep these types of objectives in mind and tie all discussion references to such ends.

The analysis should also conclude with ideas related to the relationship between these insights and the marketing plans or opportunities of the church. Research conducted for its own sake is a waste of precious resources. Research tied to concrete conclusions regarding how to enhance the efforts of the ministry is good stewardship.

What should the analysis *not* include? *First*, be sure it does *not* contain percentages of people who gave specific responses: “30 percent of the participants said they had heard of Calvary Church.” To convey the same idea, the report might indicate that “a minority of the participants” or perhaps “roughly one-third of these adults” had heard of the church. Because this is not quantitative information, it should not be treated as such.

Second, the conclusions drawn from the research should be neither dogmatic nor too broad-based. The value of qualitative information is its ability to open our eyes to new ways of understanding people’s perceptions and reactions. However, because we do not have any idea how representative these new insights are, we cannot justify recommendations that are overly ambitious or that are stated with excessive confidence. Instead, this research should lead to suggestions for further study; to ideas that might be considered in marketing planning; and warnings

about potential consequences of specific decisions or directions.

Determining the Budget

Primary research is rarely inexpensive, although given the amount of time and money that can be saved by having the right information and preventing serious mistakes, such money is often well spent.

If you under-take all aspects of the focus group process with in-house personnel for recruiting, conduct the groups in donated facilities. Possible facilities may be a nearby school that allows you to use their rooms and equipment, or a hotel managed by a member of the congregation who donates its conference room. Utilize a talented moderator who lives in the area and wants to offer his services for free. Your expenses would be minimal when you take advantage of these free services. Incentives, food, telephone line charges, confirmation postage, and audiotapes for a high-incidence pair of groups might run in the neighborhood of \$800 for the two sessions. (The vast majority of that—about \$600—is for incentives.)

If you subcontract the project to a marketing research organization, and have them do the entire process, from recruiting through analysis, the cost is likely to be in the area of \$2,500 to \$3,000 a session.

CHART 7

Which Approach to Choose: Quantitative or Qualitative

Characteristic	Quantitative	Qualitative
Dominant question answered	How many?	Why?
Generally accepted minimum size	200 people	2 groups
Projectable data	Yes	No
Typical project duration	4-6 weeks	3-4 weeks
Average project cost	\$6,000	\$5,000

For quantitative study assume 200, 10-minute telephone interviews with a 90% incidence population. For qualitative research, assume two, 10-person focus groups, lasting 90 minutes each, giving \$30 incentives, at a focus group facility.

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Planning Your Focus Group/s

The following responsibilities should be assigned prior to your focus group/s:

- *FINDING A LOCATION* (person responsible): _____

The ideal location is a neutral site designed to conduct focus groups. That is, the room is relatively small, it has a two-way mirror for observation, and a microphone/speaker so that the conversation can be monitored in the observation room. Such locations may be often be found in universities, counseling centers, and business complexes.

If an ideal room cannot be located, the second choice would be in a neutral location with a secluded room, such as a restaurant, motel, school, or office. The disadvantage of not having a room with a two-way mirror is that it is more difficult for observers to be present and benefit from the comments shared.

- *RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS* (person responsible): _____

The ideal number for a focus group is eight to twelve. Less than eight persons tends to cast doubt on the validity of the information obtained. More than twelve makes the focus group difficult to manage and participation from all persons difficult to elicit.

Persons invited to participate should be selected because they are representative of your target group. The best way to invite persons is a telephone call or personal invitation. Since it is likely only one of every three persons will be able to participate, it is best to make a list of persons to call that is somewhere between 25-35 persons for each group.

People are most likely to accept an invitation to participate in a focus group if they are invited by a person they know who is a member of the church. Ask church members to explain to the persons they are inviting that their church is doing research on the community and the needs to which the church might respond. Most people (members and non-members) do not find such an invitation to be inappropriate or difficult.

A second option is to send a letter to selected people in this target group asking for their participation. The letter should include a postage-paid response card indicating their response. It is not uncommon in business-oriented focus groups for participants to be reimbursed \$15 - \$25 for their time. You should decide if you feel this is appropriate.

- *LEADING THE FOCUS GROUP* (person responsible): _____

Focus groups are best led by a person other than the pastor. He/she is responsible for preparing the questions and directing the discussion. The focus group should run approximately 50 minutes. The goal is to create an environment where group members feel free to share their feelings and attitudes about the topics discussed. A series of questions are used by the focus group leader to guide the discussion, however the direction of the discussion frequently reflects the issues raised during the actual session.

In a sense, the focus group is similar to a group therapy session. That is, the purpose of the time together is to find out how group members feel about a particular issue. There are no right or wrong answers. When a comment is made, it may be followed up by the focus group leader. Or further clarification may be asked. Or other members in the group may be asked about how they respond to the original comment. Therefore, the focus group leader should be sensitive to the group interaction, and able to “bring out” the thoughts and feelings of people on various topics.

- **SUMMARIZING THE INFORMATION** (person responsible): _____

Immediately following the focus group, the leader and observers from the church should meet and debrief the session. (Observers may wish to make notes throughout the session, as well as during the discussion afterwards.) Try to develop some key generalizations from the session, particularly as it relates to new ministry initiatives (new worship service and/or new groups) in the church. *A completed summary paper should be brought to the next meeting.*

- **PROVIDING REFRESHMENTS** (person responsible): _____

Participants in the focus groups should be treated as guests. They will probably arrive prior to the starting time, so refreshments (coffee, doughnuts, etc.) are a nice touch. Refreshments may also be provided during the focus group session.

- **RECORDING THE FOCUS GROUP** (person responsible): _____

If the room in which you will be meeting is designed for focus groups, it may be that a tape recording system is available. The microphone designed to carry the conversation into the observation room may also be jacked into a recorder. If this is the case, make arrangements *prior* to the day of the focus group to test the system and be sure you know how to operate it.

If you do not have access to such a room, or the room is not equipped with recording equipment, simply obtain a tape recorder/microphone and place it on the table around which the group is sitting.

Whatever your final set-up, be certain to test the equipment, batteries, microphone, etc. well before the meeting. Be sure that the microphone/s will pick up the comments when group members are seated around the table. At the outset of the meeting the group should be made aware that the recorder is there only for the purpose of recording comments and allowing the focus group leader to concentrate on the conversation rather than on taking notes. Permission should be asked for the use of the recorder. If anyone strongly objects, don't use it. Very few, however, have a problem with it.

- **INVITING OBSERVERS** (person responsible): _____

If there are persons in the church who you feel would benefit from, or be interested in, observing the focus group, you may wish to invite them. Often times this can be an "eye-opening" experience for people who have difficulty believing that change (i.e. a new service, new groups, etc.) is really what is needed. When these people hear comments from your "target group" their minds are often opened to new ideas.

If you are not able to conduct the focus group/s in a room with a two-way mirror, several observers may sit in the room, but should be physically removed from the discussion group. They should be introduced as observers. Participants should be encouraged to ignore them, and observers should not participate in the interaction of the focus group.

Getting Good Press

How the media can help you reach out.

BY PAUL RANDOLPH

During the Christmas holiday, our church was featured on the front page of Philadelphia's leading daily newspaper and two suburban papers. We also appeared on two-network television station's newscasts in the fourth largest media market in the country.

What's more, it took me less than 30 minutes to write and send a fax to nine local newsrooms to get the coverage. "That must be a mega-church," you're thinking. Hardly. Our average attendance is under 200. What helps is knowing how news media work and how to get them to notice what you're doing. Here's what I've learned through my own educational background in broadcasting and from some media professionals.

What will not get coverage is sending a letter written in extended paragraph form two to four weeks prior to an event. This might get your event announced — in the newspaper's religion section or radio's community bulletin board — but it won't get your event *covered*.

To have your story *reported*, you need to understand how a newsroom works.

The inside story

With both TV and newspapers, the first person who decides what gets covered is the assignment editor. This person is the gatekeeper who determines where reporters and camera crews are sent. Then a producer or editor decides from these stories which will actually appear.

Whether they cover your church depends on many factors. Religion is low on the priority list of most newsrooms. Crime, fires, politics, international news, sports, and weather get top consideration. You have to know how to get your event noticed, or it will not stand a chance. This means:

1. Contact the assignment editor, by name if possible.

2. Keep it short. This individual has a demanding and stressful job. A TV newsroom will receive more than 40 phone calls and over 30 faxes an hour. An editor has 30 seconds or less to decide on your request for coverage. That's why a two-page letter in paragraph form "goes right into the trash," according to one assignment editor. "I just don't have time to read it."

3. Send it a day or two before assignments are made. If you send something two weeks in advance, even if it's concise, it may be forgotten by the time assignments for that day are given out.

4. A fax or e-mail is better than regular mail. I once sent out a letter two weeks in advance of an event. The day before the event, I called to see if it was being considered. The newsroom staffer finally found my letter buried under a pile of faxes. He mentioned that faxes always are at the top of the pile, and the snail mail is always on the bottom. And some editors prefer e-mail.

Faxes that get noticed

The format of the fax is important. Make it concise. Give the editor something official from you.

- Send your fax on church letterhead.
- Lay out the most important information — who, what, when, where, why — in an uncluttered way.
- Direct your fax to the assignment editor. That tells the newsroom you want coverage, not just an announcement. Call, if necessary, to get the name of the assignment editor. This will get your fax more notice.
- Include a single paragraph describing the event. Don't get too wordy. Tell the editor why your event should be covered.

• Finally, provide the name and phone numbers of one or two contact people. Include day, evening, and beeper numbers. Reporters may need to contact someone at a moment's notice. If the location is hard to find, include directions or a map.

What's the visual or news angle?

To think like a newsperson, ask yourself, "What is the visual appeal of our program?" This, of course, is why TV news includes so many fires and car crashes. Newspapers prefer items that produce good photographs, but the editor needs to know if your event merits sending a photographer.

In your fax, suggest how the event will come across visually. For our Christmas Eve service, I mentioned the children would be dressed in costume to re-enact the Christmas story among the beautiful decorations in the sanctuary. This gives an assignment editor a stimulating visual scene, action, and children. That, for TV news, is a three-run homer! Most news broadcasts need one or two “feel good” stories to contrast with the murders and fires. Stories with children always have a better chance.

Ask yourself whether your event relates to something current in the news. Holidays are a natural opportunity for churches to get press coverage. One station showed scenes from our Good Friday service.

The press is also interested in religious events involving cooperation among several churches or denominations. Our church participates in a joint service for Thanksgiving and I always mention this prominently in the press release. Cross-cultural angles also have a strong appeal.

Programs that address current hot topics often get reported. My children’s school arranged to have the Philadelphia police bomb squad demonstrate safety with guns and firecrackers. In my description, I mentioned the police equipment (visual) and the dangers of explosives for kids (news). Two TV crews showed up.

Never promise what you can’t deliver. Don’t inflate anticipated attendance. Integrity is vital.

Don’t be discouraged if you don’t succeed with every event. Just because they send out a reporter doesn’t guarantee coverage. When a TV station sends a camera crew, I’ve found the story makes it to air two thirds of the time, When a newspaper reporter comes, the likelihood of publication is greater.

When the crew arrives

I tell the head usher that someone from the paper or TV news may be coming (often you won’t know until they show up). He knows to welcome them politely without acting starstruck, and to inform me of their arrival.

I try to greet them, thank them for coming, and offer my help. I have found reporters and photographers to be polite, professional, and sensitive to being at a church, especially if it is a worship service.

This is the time to inform them of any restrictions you have on how the camera crew does their work. Television is by nature intrusive, so expect bright lights and a little noise. The crew will probably need to move close to the action to get good video and sound.

We often put together a simple press kit: a bulletin or order of service, a church business card, and a sheet with pertinent background information. The ushers have this to hand to the reporters immediately upon their arrival.

Be ready for a brief interview. In this day of the 10-second sound bite, prepare a single sentence that gets to the heart of what you want to say about your event.

Say thanks

Finally, send a thank-you.

One crew covering our Christmas Eve service spent time getting extra shots of the church involving creative camera work. The reporter gave an excellent summary of the service and its spiritual significance. So I wrote her a letter of thanks.

Since the media often is criticized for poor or biased coverage, a letter of appreciation really stands out, as a friend who works in TV news told me later. It also helps you to establish a relationship.

Media coverage has increased the community awareness of our church in a way that religion-page announcements never accomplished. It’s a great way to reach out.

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