

**PROVIDING AN OPPORTUNITY
FOR PEOPLE
TO FOLLOW JESUS**



By

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INTRO

In reading the Gospels one is struck by the number of times Jesus invites people to become his followers. It's amazing to see how quickly people responded to that invitation even when the requirements were demanding and difficult.

The church's task is no different. We are to "go into the world [neighborhood, nation and world] to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Practically speaking an invitation should be a part of our public worship experiences but many of us feel inadequate or awkward in doing that in a helpful, creative way. Many churches are not in the habit of issuing a regular invitation; others do it in a perfunctory, routine way that leads to little if any response.

There seems to be a growing desire on the part of pastors and lay persons for help in knowing how to issue a meaningful invitation, and how proper that is.

The God we know through Jesus Christ is still seeking followers. The church, as the body of Christ, needs to be a willing partner in that search and invitation. I still remember instances when people responded to an invitation when I had little or no expectation of a response, but God had been working in their lives and they came prepared to respond. The sermon had not even been heard in some cases. What if there had been no opportunity to respond to God's leading on that day?

CONTEXT

The context for an invitation is set beautifully in Michael Green's book Evangelism in the Early Church (quoted by Morris and Fox in "Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So" p. 55) *First, "they proclaimed a person", Jesus of Nazareth. Second, "they offered a gift". It was the gift of forgiveness, new life in the Spirit, and reconciliation. Third, "they looked for a response", without apology they called for the response of repentance, faith, obedience, and baptism.*

A world figure from another era, John R. Mott, had another compelling way to state our task. *The supreme purpose of the Christian church is to make Jesus Christ known, trusted, loved, obeyed, and exemplified in the whole range of individual life – body, mind and spirit – and also in all human relationships.* ("The Summons to a Larger Evangelism" p. 7) Too often our services are heavy in helping people know Christ and admire Christ, but lacking in an opportunity to respond in trust and obedience.

BREADTH OF NEEDS

Mott also helps us understand the breadth of needs present in a typical congregation – thus the necessity of giving varied and specific invitations. *Think of those who are living worldly, selfish, proud lives; of others who are living indifferent, apathetic, unresponsive lives; of those who are living narrow, contracted, atrophied lives; of those who are sorrowing and lonely; of those who are hungering and thirsting for something purer and nobler; of the many who are fiercely tempted, sin-bound, habit-bound; of those defeated and discouraged; of multitudes in the mazes of skepticism and unbelief, bewildered and in a true and graphic sense literally lost – lost in the sense Christ himself had in mind when he said he was come to seek and save that which was lost.* (p. 8)

This expansive list of the human condition can give us pause to be creative in planning a specific invitation for different circumstances.

WORSHIP INVITES RESPONSE

Surely we can agree that worship services do more than remind us of the goodness of God, but that they should also invite a response. In Jesus Christ, we see the love and compassion of God, find forgiveness for our sins and failures, see the amazing possibilities of a life renewal after His likeness, and sense the call to be followers of such a Lord. To not enlist a response to such a gift seems negligent if not immoral.

Both Bishop Harold Heininger and Archbishop William Temple have been credited with saying, *It is immoral to preach the gospel and not give an invitation, and it is immoral to give an invitation without preaching the gospel.* Since God has acted so decisively on our behalf, we are encouraged to respond in specific and decisive ways as well. But we always remember that it is God who is giving the invitation. We try to cooperate in such a way that no obstacles are put in the way – and the omitting of an opportunity for response may be the biggest obstacle of all.

Again Morris and Fox give a good summary in the words of David H. C. Reed: (p. 79) *The proclamation of a life-changing word that demands a decision has lain at the heart of the Christian Gospel from the beginning. It is the enduring mystery that through words spoken and heard the story of Jesus comes alive in such a way as to elicit an allegiance to him as Savior and Lord.*

PREACHING INVITES RESPONSE

Bishop James Swanson wrote the following in an article in the Wesleyan Christian Advocate, September 7, 2001: *Preaching demands a response. Preaching is proclamation with a purpose – the purpose being to introduce someone to Christ, to call for a deeper commitment on the part of some, re-commitment for others, or the development of a new understanding for others. But in all cases you are calling for a decision on the part of your listeners.*

And Swanson reminds us that while we give the invitation, the Holy Spirit initiates the response. We may fail the Spirit if no opportunity for response is given. An analogy from James Cowell's book, Extending Your Congregation's Welcome, is very helpful. *When the gospel has been proclaimed, a chance to respond to the message should be given. No one would prepare a banquet table for friends and then give them no utensils with which to eat. Similarly, by sharing the gospel you call for ways to enter into the abundant life and the way of discipleship spoken about in the message.*

PREPARING AN INVITATION

But the invitation should not be perfunctory or given automatically as an after thought. The invitation should be prepared along with the sermon, and it should reflect a connection to the message. However, since God has been working in people's lives, there should be an openness to people responding in a completely different way.

Leighton Ford in "The Christian Persuader" suggests that it may be wise to explain ahead of time, before or during the sermon what one intends in the invitation. Then the message builds toward a moment of decision. This will require thinking clearly about what one is to say and do. This will prevent a vague invitation to which everyone can respond. Help people understand that here is an open sign of an inward commitment "– like a handshake to seal an agreement – a ring to signify a long-time commitment – a salute to demonstrate deep felt loyalty." (pp. 126, 127)

And it is also important to explain what is to happen. Will there be a word of prayer with the pastor? Will there be the opportunity for counseling? Or instruction? Or will there simply be a quiet prayer with the responder and God? All of this should be quietly and simply explained beforehand.

EXAMPLE A

Dr. Charles Kinder, first full-time president of The Foundation for Evangelism writes a prayer of response that is printed in the bulletin. After a sermon on Christian coping: Theme - *Followers of Christ have resources available to handle anything life throws at them. Prayer:*

*Heavenly Father, apart from You,
I can not cope with life.
Left to my own resources
I am overcome with problems
and frustrated with responsibilities.
I believe the Gospel,
Therefore, I open my life to its truth.
Believing that Christ lives in believers,
I receive him into the depths of my heart.
Confident that divine resources are available,
I make this my request.
Through Christ and with Heavenly resources
I can more than cope with life.
I ask and believe this in the name of Jesus. Amen*

I ask the people to study the prayer silently (with appropriate music playing). I then ask those who are prepared to take this step of faith to read it aloud with me. This has always been well received. Many have said they cut out and keep the ones representing decisions they have made.

EXAMPLE B

Adam Hamilton, of the Church of the Resurrection, tells about the importance of helping people actually make a commitment to Christ. The value of the altar call is in calling for action and commitment. While seldom asking people to come forward, he extends this kind of invitation at the end of the sermon. (Unleashing the Word p. 72,73)

I then say something like this: ‘You may be here today and feel moved by this service – perhaps you’ve never actually told Jesus Christ that you would like to be one of his disciples. Maybe you’re in need of his forgiveness and grace today, and you would like to be made clean and whole. The first step in the Christian life is simply to acknowledge your desire to belong to Christ, and your acceptance of what he has done for you. If you would like to take that step today, to commit your life to him, join me in saying this prayer – you may use your own words, or say quietly under your breath those I am about to pray ...’ And then I lead them, line by line and very slowly, in a prayer that sounds something like this: ‘Dear Lord, I would like to be one of your disciples. I would like to follow you. I accept the forgiveness and mercy you offer me. Wash me clean and make me new. Help me to follow you as I commit myself to you. I pray this to you, and in your name, Jesus. Amen.’

I vary this prayer depending on the sermon content. One thing I have discovered is that many people need someone to actually lead them in a prayer like this. Recently a sixty-five-year-old man told me he had been attending church his whole life, but only that day did he finally feel he had committed his life to Christ and experienced Christ’s presence. He may have been a follower of Christ for years, but something happened to him as he finally made the commitment official.

COMMUNION AS INVITATION

There are two ways in which we invite people to make this commitment. We offer the Eucharist every Monday evening at a special service and then the first weekend of the month. As a part of our communion liturgy we explain that receiving the bread and wine is a tangible way to invite Christ into one’s life, and then I help persons understand how they might pray, following the reception of the elements, in order to commit their lives to Christ. We invite our congregation to come forward to receive communion, and thus the opportunity is present for persons to kneel at the altar railings for prayer as they make their commitment to Christ.

EXAMPLE C

Hamilton gives another example of a prayer at the end of a sermon. (“Leading Beyond the Walls” p. 82) *As your heads are bowed, perhaps you know today that you want to follow Christ, to be one of his disciples. If so, the process for becoming a Christian begins with one simple step; it begins with your saying a prayer. Pray this prayer after me quietly, ‘Jesus, I would like to be one of your disciples. I want to follow you. I invite you into my life. Please forgive me of my sins. Today, I have decided to entrust my life to you. Thank you for accepting me and counting me as one of your people. Amen.’ This simple prayer gives those ready to respond a way of expressing their desire, and a way of knowing that they have begun on this path. I break the prayer into short phrases so they can actually pray it after me.*

INVITATION AS HOSPITALITY

Swanson and Clement (“The Faith-Sharing Congregation” p. 37) point out that offering an invitation for people to act on their need is a profound ministry of hospitality. It enables persons to relate to God. Many persons are apprehensive about appearing manipulative through an invitation. Withholding the opportunity for persons to respond to the gospel can also be manipulative.

EXAMPLE D

They then give a wonderful story of Bob and his response. *Consider the story of Bob, a successful businessman, who carried deep wounds that had never healed from experiences with the church as a child. Except for rare and ceremonial occasions, his wife and family attended without him. One Sunday a granddaughter persuaded him to come to hear her sing. Watching her sing with her friends, Bob was deeply touched. Was it the innocent joy of his granddaughter and her friends? Was it their childlike trust in God? Whatever it was, Bob found himself in a place where he had never been before: on the edge of profound conviction and surrender.*

In the church Bob’s family attended, every Sunday just before the benediction the pastor offered a special invitation. ‘Church isn’t just an hour,’ Bob heard him say. ‘Church is an opportunity to praise God and to pray to God and to find your needs met. If church isn’t over for you this morning, you are invited to come and use the communion rail as a place for prayer. If you wish, someone will meet with you and pray with you. You may stay as long as you want. Those of you for whom church is over are asked to leave the sanctuary quietly.’ Bob whispered to his wife that he would meet her outside. He made his way toward the front of the sanctuary, sat in the first pew, and prayed. Today Bob is a witness to the generosity of God’s love in Jesus Christ.

But what if the invitation had not been given? Fortunately, the worship leader recognized that the church’s hospitality was increased through an invitation for people to allow God’s Spirit to communicate with their spirits.

EXAMPLE E

Sometimes the invitation can be as simple as this: If you wish to know more about Jesus Christ, or what is involved in being a disciple of Christ, or the meaning of church membership, please feel free to notify the Pastor or other staff. They would be honored to find a time to discuss these questions with you. There is great meaning, new life, and new usefulness to be discovered in rightly relating to God and the church.

PURPOSE OF INVITATION

Sir Alan Walker (“The Whole Gospel for the Whole World” p. 95) says that our task is to help bring the minds of men and women out of vagueness and uncertainty to the focus of decision. We preach and invite on the assumption that people need help in removing the obstructions that stand between God and the grace of God that would flow into human life. Those obstructions entail whatever would hinder aligning ourselves with the will of God or opening ourselves to the love of God.

EXAMPLE F

Then Sir Alan describes a method he uses in calling for a decision. *Following the sermon there is a minute of prayerful silence. Then people are invited to commit their lives to Christ for the first time. A simple sentence is suggested for statement in one’s own mind: “I commit my life to Jesus Christ in the fellowship of his church.” Then a brief prayer is voiced of thanksgiving, to God for his acceptance of all who have made the commitment with a request that they be given strength to keep the vow made.* (p. 103)

While the service could end here, Walker usually has people come forward during the singing of a hymn to signify a public confession. Persons are stationed with cards containing the words, “I commit my life to Jesus Christ in the fellowship of his church.” On the cards is a place to provide name, address, phone number, and any other helpful information. This allows for meaningful follow-up. (pp. 103, 104)

An additional request could be to remain for instruction or conversation. This could be crucial in helping people follow-through on these commitments. Provision should be made for people who wish to leave the cards with pastor or staff without coming forward.

EXAMPLE G

Several Lutheran pastors have discovered a simple invitation that is proving a high point. *As you leave today, each one of you is asked to shake the hand of your pastor. If you are led by God to commit or re-commit your life to Christ, simply say, ‘I will’.* This verbal statement can be very moving, and make concrete what is experienced in the service. (Ford, “The Christian Persuader” p.136)

EXAMPLE H

An inviting word in the church bulletin can also be useful. It could be a word to speak to or call the pastor about becoming a disciple or member. It could be a reference to the vows in the Hymnal (p. 46) with an invitation to speak to the pastor. It could be an invitation to attend a new member class. *THE VOWS for accepting Christ as savior and profession of one's faith in the Christlike God are printed on page 46 in the United Methodist Hymnal. The congregation invites individuals to share in the ministries of Jesus Christ by baptism or transfer of membership. The pastor will be glad to schedule a time to call you.* (Wears Valley UMC bulletin, Sevierville, TN)

RESPONSE GUIDE

An occasional use of a response guide can be very useful. I first learned of this method while participating in a seminar with Dr. Lawrence Lacour in the early 1960's. He would introduce the guide before the sermon, and explain how it was to be used. Following the sermon he would give people time to prayerfully consider it, then ask the ushers to collect the filled in guides and bring them to the altar for a prayer of consecration. A fuller discussion is found in Fox and Morris' book Let The Redeemed of the Lord Say So, pp.173-175.

MY RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

God, being my helper, I now look carefully at these important areas of my life and make the following decision(s):

MY RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

1. Tonight I consciously become a Christian. I accept God's forgiveness and will live by God's will. ()
2. I rededicate myself to following Christ's lead in every area of my life. ()

MY RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHURCH

3. I want to join the _____ Church. ()
4. I am interested in a full-time church-related occupation. ()
5. I desire to join a study, sharing, or action group. ()

MY RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS

6. I will follow in accepting all people. ()
7. I will serve others in my occupation. ()

MY RELATIONSHIP TO THE WORLD

8. I will work for social, political, and economic justice for all persons and groups. ()
9. I commit myself to the lifetime cause of Christian peacemaking. ()

10. I will become involved in the political process as a Christian. ()
11. I would be interested in a task force on: poverty (), crime and penal reform (), drugs (), race (), population (), peace (), ecology (), the aging (), evangelism (), other _____.

RELATIONSHIP TO MYSELF

12. I will be a student of the faith. ()
13. I will prayerfully review my giving. ()
14. I will accept a needed discipline for my life. ()
15. I will practice daily devotions. ()
16. Please write down any other commitments. ()

Name: _____

Address: _____

It was understood that the pastor would make a follow-up visit to talk about the decision and pray with the person about additional steps that would be helpful.

I vividly remember one older man, not a part of the church, who would never have come forward publicly, but he checked “I want to become a Christian”. In a subsequent visit to the home he made a prayerful commitment and later joined the church. God used the response guide as a beginning point for a timid man who would have had great difficulty in stepping out publicly.

EXAMPLE I

Dr. Joe Hale, former General Secretary of the World Methodist Council, reports two variations on the invitation by well known world figures. *Dr. Donald English from London was a guest preacher in our church a few years ago. People were interested in his visit and came in great numbers to hear him – that particular Sunday we had an ‘Easter Sunday’ attendance! At the end of his sermon, Dr. English did an unexpected thing. It was not an evangelistic series, but he made it that. He said, ‘We’ve heard the gospel preached. Some of you here may need to commit yourselves to Christ for the first time. You may want to come forward. But we all need to respond to the gospel in different ways. Today’s preaching may be different things for different persons – a deeper commitment, something new we have learned, a challenge to do something, a challenge to give up something, a relationship to be put right. If today the sermon has been any of these things for you, I invite you to come forward, say a prayer at the altar, and then return to your seat. If you wish to stay for counseling and want the minister to talk with you after the service, please do so.’*

Many people responded. It was a broad invitation, but it was no broader than needs that were represented in that congregation. People needed a chance to respond – not just for the initial act of trusting Christ, but for the problems and sins with which they battle on a daily basis. (“Choose Ye This Day” p.117)

EXAMPLE J

After he preached, Dr. Harry Denman walked down to the front of the audience. The people were seated in four sections. He turned to the section on the left and said, ‘If you feel you can say it, I’d like you to repeat after me: ‘I believe that Jesus is Christ, the Son of God.’ Many of the people said it. Then, he went on to the next sections. ‘I believe Jesus is Christ, the Son of God,’ and on to the next.

He then proposed a second affirmation: ‘I believe that God raised him from the dead and he is alive.’ He had each section say it – ‘I believe that God raised him ... and he is alive.’ He gave a third sentence: ‘I believe that he is able to save any person from the law of sin and death if he will repent and believe – because of my own experience.’ Each section was given the opportunity to repeat that aloud.

The final affirmation was a promise: ‘I will tell it with my lips and life.’ We repeated it section by section. Then he said, ‘If this is your commitment, write it in the front of your Bible along with the date, and sign your name to it.’

I did it! I wrote those affirmations in the Bible which I used for many years: ‘I believe ... Because of my experience ... I will tell it with my lips and life.’ For me it was a landmark, a milepost. I’ve read those sentences perhaps a thousand times. (“Choose Ye This Day” pp. 117, 118)

SPECIAL SERVICES

There are often overlooked opportunities in the special services of the church. The invitation received for Holy Communion is a wonderful call to Discipleship, and a simple reminder of its significance can be profound. *You that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; draw near with faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort and make your humble confession to almighty God.*

Opportunities abound to give people an opportunity to respond to the invitation, if we would simply become focused on that part of our task.

EXAMPLE K

James B. Henry, a Baptist pastor, gives the following account: *One year at the holiday season, we had a ‘singing Christmas tree.’ We had about a hundred people up on a Christmas tree singing the music of Christmas. At the end, a cross came up in lights, and the choir sang, ‘There’s Room at the Cross for You.’*

I stepped out on the stage and told a little story as they sang the gospel, and then I said, 'Some of you here tonight may have never asked Jesus to come into your heart. Maybe you never knew how to pray, and so I'm going to lead you in a prayer. Most of you are familiar with the sinner's prayer, so just pray this prayer to God with me.

There were two thousand people there; I was up on the platform, and I began to pray, 'Dear Lord...'

And I heard someone say, 'Dear Lord...'

'Tonight...'

'Tonight'

'I realize I am a sinner...'

'I realize I am a sinner...'

At first I thought it was a problem with feedback in the speakers. Then I realized that a guy in the balcony was praying the prayer with me – out loud, in front of two thousand people! Electricity ran through that room; everybody realized what was happening. As I was praying, his voice began to get louder, and he began to cry. He accepted Jesus, and just broke out into weeping. In front of two thousand people he made a very public confession of faith.

When it was over people surrounded him. We found out later that he had been an agnostic, and had come with some friends who had been praying for him for a long time. He had come under duress, to please his friends, yet the Holy Spirit had spoken to him during the performance that night. Nonetheless, had I not given the invitation, I can't be sure that he would have actually come to Jesus, except for the sovereignty of God. ("Choose Ye This Day" pp. 53, 54. World Wide Publications Billy Graham Association)

AN AFTER SESSION

There are times when an opportunity to ask questions, or explore the faith is appropriate. They may be struggling with questions or intellectual problems. So it would be appropriate to provide a time where people could come to an after session or join a seekers class (or new member class).

A room near the sanctuary can be set up as such a place. During the closing hymn they are excused to meet the pastor or other designated person for further instruction, a period for questions and answers, etc. They could simply be saying, "I want to hear more, or I have questions I want to explore."

Fox and Morris list several clear options that are noted below:

EXAMPLE L

Reiner Dauner, Regional Secretary of Evangelism for the Methodist Church of Germany, outlines another method which creates an occasion for people to make a first-time commitment to Christ. He says:

During my closing prayer I ask the people to bow and be in a spirit of prayer. Then, I ask those who wish to make a decision for Christ to lift their hands. I find that people are freer to do this if they do not feel they are being watched by others. Afterwards, I pray a 'decision prayer' and invite those who wish to do so to make their own decision by repeating the prayer after me sentence-by-sentence. Sometimes I distribute a card with a decision prayer already printed on it and invite the people to pray it together aloud. After this time of prayer, I call the people to come forward and light a little candle from a large candle which symbolizes Jesus 'the light of the world.' Finally, in Germany we have in our Methodist churches, a card on which is printed: 'I have chosen Jesus Christ as my Savior and King and I desire to follow Him. I ask Him to take control of my life and I want to be His servant forever.' I offer this card to the people while greeting them at the exit. The people are encouraged to sign the card and write the date and the place on it. This becomes a very important remembrance of a transforming commitment. (Let The Redeemed of the Lord Say So!" p. 130)

EXAMPLE M

The late O. Dean Martin's book addresses the challenge of offering an invitation for response on a week-to-week basis in the local church. He says:

At the close of the service I ask the congregation to bow their heads and make their pew an altar of prayer. I ask them to consider prayerfully the key idea of the message of the service, which might be conversion, social responsibility, stewardship, or being more loving. I then give them adequate time on their own to deal with the subject as they can and if they will, during private, individual prayer. On many occasions, for those who want to respond but do not know 'the right words,' I slowly word a prayer that might assist them in making a meaningful commitment concerning this subject.

I make a strong effort to place myself in the same frame of mind as if I were kneeling at the altar rail with an individual and he/she was saying, 'Pastor, I want to act on this proposition but I don't know how to pray.' In a personalized case like that, I would help the individual word an appropriate prayer. And, I have learned that most of our people do not know how to pray specifically concerning specific personal needs. I therefore respond to their earnest quest....I also often add, 'If you are here and do not have the courage to respond to this message, or are simply not ready, or are just not interested, then you are invited to remain courteous and patient. No one is going to manipulate you here. The service will be dismissed shortly.' This simple and occasional addition to our 'group counseling' time can convey many meaningful things to people throughout the congregation. ("Let The Redeemed of the Lord Say So!" pp. 131, 132)

WRITING YOUR OWN PRAYER

EXAMPLE N

Many who preach and testify have found the use of small cards a most helpful means in enabling persons to respond to the gospel. These cards can be made available in the pew racks or they can be passed out at the door as the people enter or they can be given out to each

member of a small group. This method of invitation goes by several names (written response, writing your most earnest prayer, writing your most heartfelt prayer) but the mode of operation seems to be similar in each case.

After the sermon or testimony the witness calls for a time of silent prayer in which the people are encouraged to write their deepest, most heartfelt prayer. This is an especially helpful experience for laypersons. Though pastors are accustomed to the discipline of writing prayers, many laypersons have never attempted to write a prayer. Once the people have written their prayers several options are available. During the closing hymn in a worship service, the prayer cards can be received by the ushers, brought to the altar of the church, and presented with a prayer of dedication. Some leaders prefer to have the people bring their written prayers forward, kneel for a few moments at the kneeling rail and leave the prayers 'face down' inside the kneeling rail. Others prefer to encourage the people to take the written prayers home with them as a remembrance of a time of commitment and worship. It is possible to offer a combination of these options and to indicate the nature of these options before the prayers are written. ("Let The Redeemed of the Lord Say So!" pp. 134, 135)

EXAMPLE O

One of the easiest and most effective methods is to announce a quiet time or moment of prayer at the conclusion of the message. Persons can be invited to come to the communion rail to pray, returning to their pew when ready, or they can simply pray while seated in their pew. Some congregations will need to be taught to use silence, but it can be very powerful.

People can respond specifically to the message as directed by the leader, a need in their own life, a concern for a family member or friend, a national or world concern.

EXAMPLE P

The following recollection from a local church is shared by Bob Shepherd, Chairperson of an Advisory Council of The Foundation for Evangelism. *I think of invitations to come to the altar in my present church, Acton UMC. Rev. Paul Hacklander periodically invites the congregation to come and kneel at the altar in addition to the relatively frequent communion services where we do this. Sometimes the invitation is to remember our baptism and to rededicate our lives. Other times it is for those who may have special prayer concerns. Sometimes we write down our concerns and put them in a basket, confidentially or by name. This sometimes results in confidential follow-up by the pastor as he learns of these concerns. These have been meaningful for me and seem very well-received by the congregation.*

SPECIAL DAYS

Special days provide unique opportunities that we often miss. More people attend services at Easter and Christmas than any other time. Adam Hamilton has trained his people to know that the emphasis on both days will be on the unchurched, so the sermons will be very basic. They will aim at helping the nonreligious or nominal people understand the significance of Easter or Christmas for their daily lives. The aim is to be “gentle but persuasive, to inspire the unchurched to want to know more about Christ.” (“Leading Beyond The Walls” p.80)

CHRISTMAS EVE

Hamilton’s discussion of the Candlelight Christmas Eve Service is particularly illuminating:

In large part the growth of the Church of the Resurrection has been driven by Candlelight Christmas Eve and the sermon series that we have announced following this holiday. The candlelight Christmas Eve service is one of the most powerful and emotive services of the year, and the unchurched will come to these services if invited. Even longtime unchurched persons are looking for the deeper meaning of Christmas by Christmas Eve.

We have sent direct mailings to the community inviting them to our Candlelight Christmas Eve, and we provide our members with beautiful color postcards or brochures to use as invitations to their friends.

On Christmas Eve we generally double our worship attendance from its fall average.

Our aim throughout these services is to offer the highest-quality worship service possible, with great music and a twenty-five-minute sermon that is clearly designed to speak to the unchurched about the need for and meaning of Christmas. At the beginning and end of this service we will take a moment to announce our upcoming sermon series, which will begin the second week of January (we’ve found that folks are not back in town from the Christmas break the first week of January). We usually show a short video promo for the January sermon series. We will also have a postcard that advertises the upcoming sermons. If the series of sermons is enticing to the unchurched, we will see a significant increase in worship attendance in January over our prior year’s attendance.

We call these January sermon series ‘fishing expeditions’, drawing from Jesus’ invitation to the first disciples to become ‘fishers of people.’ Our aim is to cast out the net on Christmas Eve when the largest number of nonreligious and nominally religious people are present in our worship, and try to encourage them to return for worship after the holidays” (“Leading Beyond The Walls” p.63)

Mainline churches do give altar calls every time we have Holy Communion. For in the act of Holy Communion we ask persons to come forward (in our tradition, members come forward to receive the elements), and to visibly, tangibly, invite Christ into their lives, and to symbolize their acceptance of his death on the cross for their sins, his grace, and his presence in

their lives, as they eat the bread and drink the wine. This is the invitation we give to our congregation every time we celebrate the Eucharist. After the Great Thanksgiving I say to our congregation, 'This meal is your opportunity to express to God your desire to live for Christ, to receive Christ into your life, and to accept his mercy and grace. When you take the bread and the wine take this as an opportunity to rededicate your life to him.' It is remarkable how this simple invitation has, for many, helped to transform Holy Communion from an empty ritual to a 'means of grace.' ("Unleashing the Word" p. 83)

IN CONCLUSION

A good summary of the elements of an invitation is given by Billy Graham in "Choose Ye This Day" (p. 142). *An invitation usually will consist of at least three elements. First, there will be an appeal for people to accept Christ by repentance and faith. Second, there will be a brief explanation of how we are asking people to respond. Third, is the follow-up message spoken to those who respond.*

In explaining what is involved in a Christian decision, one might use some easily remembered words of Leighton Ford, (The Christian Persuader p. 130). *The Gospel may be presented as the three R's. Recognize our need and Christ's ability to meet that need. Renounce our sin, our past. Receive Christ as Savior and Lord. And I like to add, Reflect Christ in our life and work.*

And we always need to help people know that a decision is only the beginning. Any decision must be nurtured by Bible reading, study, prayer, worship, fellowship in the life of the church, and sharing with others the Good News.



What is...

THE FOUNDATION FOR EVANGELISM?

The Foundation for Evangelism was organized in 1949 because of the deep commitment and the concern of the late Harry Denman, who believed that United Methodism is inherently evangelistic and that Christ's command to "go make of all disciples" must be held up constantly before the church. The Foundation for Evangelism is an affiliate of the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church.

Our Mission

"The mission of The Foundation for Evangelism is to promote, encourage, and provide resources for responsible evangelism, enabling The United Methodist Church to bring persons into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and help them grow as His disciples."

Our Vision

"Our vision is to raise up generations of leaders who have an evangelistic passion by partnering with boards, seminaries, local churches, campus ministries and emerging populations to make disciples of Jesus Christ."

Our Goals

The goals of The Foundation are to renew and revitalize The United Methodist Church by:

- **Challenging** The United Methodist Church and its people to use extensive resources for evangelism
- **Raising** adequate funds for providing resources to implement The Foundation's work
- **Influencing and resourcing** The United Methodist Church around the world through the General Board of Discipleship, annual conferences, and theology schools
- **Promoting** training of laity and clergy to do personal evangelism
- **Praying** for and accepting the guidance of the Holy Spirit to be sensitive to changing conditions in the world and responsive to new opportunities to "Offer Them Christ"

Our Current Ministries

- ☛ **PROFESSORS OF EVANGELISM** in 15 seminaries (twelve in the U.S., one in Germany, one in Africa, and one in Russia).
- ☛ **DENMAN FELLOWSHIPS** are for doctoral students preparing to be professors in UM related seminaries, colleges or universities.
- ☛ **TIMOTHY SCHOLARS** are doctoral students focusing on practical theology in youth and campus ministry.
- ☛ **CAMPUS MINISTRY GRANTS** are given to Wesley Foundations and UM supported ministries on college and university campuses.
- ☛ **CHRISTIAN ART** by the distinguished artist Kenneth Wyatt: *Offer Them Christ* and *Jesus and the Apostles*.
- ☛ **CONGRESS ON EVANGELISM SCHOLARSHIPS** provided for first time attendees who have a heart for evangelism.
- ☛ **DENMAN AND CHAPPELL LECTURES** are presented at the Congress on Evangelism and at Methodist seminaries, respectively.
- ☛ **DENMAN EVANGELISM AWARDS** recognize clergy and lay persons for outstanding service in evangelism.
- ☛ **DISCOVER GOD'S CALL** retreats designed to help lay persons discover their spiritual gifts.
- ☛ **DISTINGUISHED EVANGELIST IN RESIDENCE** provides a specialized staff person in evangelism at the General Board of Discipleship.
- ☛ **DISTINGUISHED UNITED METHODIST EVANGELIST AWARD** is presented annually to a person who excels in evangelism.
- ☛ **FITZGERALD PASTORS PROGRAM** provides training and support for pastors in new church starts.
- ☛ **FORWARD**, a quarterly newsletter describing the work of the Foundation.
- ☛ **TECHNOLOGY MINISTRIES:**
 - ☛ **THE EVANGELISM NETWORK** uses the Internet and cutting edge technology to help spread the Gospel in the digital age.
 - ☛ **THE WEB-EMPOWERED CHURCH** ministry innovatively applies Web technology to empower the worldwide church for ministry.
- ☛ **"AC - 70" PROGRAMS** make funds available to annual conferences to encourage innovative evangelism ministries.
- ☛ **WITNESS**, a 25-week study for small groups to build confidence in the sharing of one's faith.
- ☛ **WORKSHOPS AND CONSULTATIONS** to train clergy and laity and to address issues related to evangelism in the Wesleyan tradition.
- ☛ **YOUTH WORKER MOVEMENT** provides a vital ministry for this great need in the UMC (YouthWorkerMovement.org).

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