

Evangelism in the New Church Plant by Paul Mueller

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What? Isn't evangelism in a new congregation hand and glove? As any church planter can tell you, the focus of a new congregation is easily swayed from reaching the lost to taking care of the found. Although the vision to grow is usually present for 12-15 years, the tendency is to begin programs and ministries which support those who are joining the community of faith. After all, they are the ones frequenting the new congregation to hear about God's grace and love, so programs need to be developed for them. But can evangelism and nurture exist side by side in a new church plant?

Strategy #1 – Tell the Good News as it is: both Law and Gospel. Christians are made and kept and motivated because they hear the Good News taught in all its fullness. Don't pull any punches, but don't forget to bathe people in God's grace. Which presentation to share at which moment in time with which person or group of people is the key. C.F.W. Walther notes that this insight is taught by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience. Bob Kolb asks the question, "Why do you want to know?" If the people you are communicating with are secure in their sins and simply want justification for their actions, then the law is appropriate. If they are afraid and concerned about consequences for their actions, then the Gospel is in order.

It is very easy to get caught up in the issues of the day and preach to the needs of people without sharing the absolute truths which ultimately bring people face to face with the peace offered for eternity through Christ. So, the #1 evangelism strategy in a new church plant is preaching all of God's word to all who will listen.

Strategy #2 – Keep God's mission the main thing. Or in other words, let the mission vision of Christ (Luke 19:10 – seeking and saving the lost) become the litmus test for everything that begins or continues to be done in the church. If what is being done in the wheel of the congregation does not have God's mission action intentionally moving through it to the world, then make it so or drop it from the ministry. God's mission should be central air conditioning, not a single air conditioner in a room in the church. Of course, a revolving door of people in and out is not God's goal or mission, and nurturing the faith of the faithful is very important. One cannot have a mission heart if one does not understand the gift given by God. But nurture must be seen as means to an end, not an end in itself. Whatever program or teaching opportunity a new plant offers must continually be infused with the missionary dynamic.

Strategy #3 – Avoid any missionary dynamic which is driven for the sake of paying the bills and packing the pew. As the new church plant grows, expenses rise, new staff is needed, equipment becomes obsolete or in need of repair, and facilities seem too small. A congregation may be tempted to answer those needs through an energized evangelism

program driven by the need to fill the church in order to fill the offering plate. Remember, the reason for evangelism is to bring God glory and move His kingdom forward according to His mission, not pay the bills.

Strategy #4 – Everyone a missionary. A catch phrase in the church some years ago was “everyone a minister.” Change that to “everyone a missionary.” Preach it from the pulpit. Teach it during Bible studies. Role-play it in Sunday School classes. Hang it up on your bulletin boards. Write it in your newsletters and worship folders. Everyone in the church needs to be reminded that they are missionaries in their Christian role. A caution – this does not mean that everyone is an evangelist or on the evangelism/mission committee. “Missionary” needs to be re-defined as people living the Christian life as a witness to the world. Teach the congregation that Christian living is not only a thankful response of faith to God. The Christian life is a living witness to those around who keenly watch Christians for the hypocritical lifestyle.

Strategy #5 – Develop programs which match the resources of the congregation. “Did you see what that church down the street is doing? We should try that!” seems to be a popular method for choosing ministry programs. As a new church begins to discover its gifts, talents, and resources, it must be careful to match gifts with ministry programs and strategies. As God brings people into the church, trust that He has brought them because of the gifts they bring. Then, capitalize on those gifts present. Don’t force a round peg into a square hole. Jim Collins in *Good to Great* notes that a business will bring in the best and then let those gifts develop the products. Likewise in a congregation – as God brings the gifts to the new plant, allow those gifts in people to percolate and develop ministries. The church will then have not only the programs and ministries, but also the people with the gifts to lead them effectively.

Strategy #6 – Develop programs which match the needs of the community. Although strategy #5 is important, developing contextual ministries matching the needs of the community is the goal. It makes little sense to develop a youth basketball program if most in the community are retired, even if the gifts for doing so are present. Wisdom guided by common sense is key.

Strategy #7 – Be creative, use common sense, but risk. Many strategies for a new church plant are not exclusive to a new congregation. But, new plants can try new things. Any new church plant should be welcoming to all – the regular and the visitor. Develop small group ministries (book clubs, movie review clubs, garden clubs, Bible study times, mom’s/dad’s day out) to which anyone is welcome – member, friend, visitor, and newcomer. Incorporate new people immediately into participation in the congregation and ministry tasks, even if they are not yet members – usher, singing in the choir, reading lessons, preparing Bible class coffee, the softball team, the board of properties, helping with picnic and social events, hosting a small group study in their house. Think outside the box. Nothing is a tradition in a new church plant. Therefore, don’t develop ministries as if tradition already exists.

Strategy #8 – Allow the organizational structure to “morph” based on changing size, situation, and circumstance. Once the constitution is written, it is often very difficult to change how the organization works. Eventually, the organization serves the structure rather than the structure serving the organization. Be clear from the beginning to those who attend that as the new plant grows, new ways to make decisions and do things will also emerge.

Strategy #9 – A new church plant can easily take on that family feeling. Intentionally move from a family church to a community church. Understanding the community and offering ministries in which the community can join is the place to start. Open the building to community meetings and events (but don’t simply become a landlord), develop relationships with the leaders in the community, know the agencies, service organizations, churches, and schools which work in your community and partner with them. Your new church cannot simply be the newest one in town. It should be part of the community to be effective. Start that outreach from the beginning.

Keeping these few things in mind will help the new plant keep evangelism and outreach at the front of their mission and ministry. Of course, each context is different and methods will vary. But the focus needs to be God’s vision and mission through the church. Once that focus is lost, the ministry will turn inward, traditions will begin to rule, and God’s mission will begin to take a back seat.

Rev. Paul Mueller is Director of the Oswald Hoffman School of Christian Outreach at Concordia University, St. Paul, MN.