

Healthy Habits That Support Outreach by Mike Ruhl

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Aristotle wrote: *We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.* If true, that suggests that our character is basically a composite of our habits. Congregations develop “habits” as well--some wonderful and God-pleasing, and others that can run counter to their mission.

Missiologist and evangelism consultant Thom Rainer and a research team conducted a seven-year study at Southern Seminary. Combining both old and new research, and including surveys of more than 4,000 churches and interviews with more than 1,000 individuals, Rainer identified nine habits of congregations that both reach and keep the unchurched.

Habit of Intentionality

Congregations effective in outreach make intentional efforts to reach the unchurched, yet 83% of all congregations surveyed did not have an intentional plan for reaching the lost. However, among effective evangelistic churches, more than 75% of the formerly unchurched members said that someone from the church shared the plan of salvation with them--and in most cases, it was not a staff member.

Habit of Cultural Awareness

Intentional outreach to the unchurched necessitates a thorough *understanding* of the culture of the mission field around the congregation, but never at the expense of compromising the Word of God with that culture. For example, it is crucial to understand the most unchurched generation, those born between 1977 and 1994, called the Bridger Generation. Only 4% of this group is Christian! By comparison, 65% of the generation born before 1946 (Builder Generation) are Christians.

Habit of High Expectations

There is a direct correlation between how much is demanded of a new member and how long the member stays active in the church. Churches that expect much missional investment, receive much. Conversely, churches that expect little, receive little. By the way, the average retention rate of new members in all churches is only 35%.

Habit of Clear Doctrine

People want to hear about doctrine on the front end. They will not make a commitment to a church if they are not told what the church believes from the start.

Habit of Risk Taking

This habit involves *acting on faith* and doing what seems to be risky through the world's eyes, or maybe even the church's eyes. This will mean making ministry decisions based on "Who will we reach?" rather than on "Who might we lose?"

Habit of Dynamic Small Groups

68% of the people in healthy evangelistic churches are involved in spiritual growth groups.

Habit of Effective Leadership

The pastor himself and the preaching were the most important factors in the unchurched returning. The pastors of the effective evangelistic churches tended to 1) Spend five hours a week in personal evangelism; 2) Be good time managers; 3) Have an average tenure of 10.3 years; and 4) Delegate and give away ministry assignments.

Habit of Effective Preaching

Pastors of effective evangelistic churches spent an average of 20 hours per week on message preparation. *Expository* (direct Scripture exposition) preaching was the most dominant style in the survey.

Habit of Prayer

New members are called and told that they are being prayed for. 83% of the effective evangelistic churches had corporate prayer ministries that were operational and emphasized.

In his bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey writes: "**Habits are formed at the intersection of knowledge, skill and desire.**" Something will not become a *habit* unless these three elements intersect: knowledge (essential knowledge about the behavior), skill (mastery of how the behavior is expressed) and desire (passion for the behavior to be mastered and repeated).

How many of these "healthy habits" have been developed in your congregation? ■