

## A Failure to Plan is a Plan for Failure by Glenn Lucas

*This article first appeared in the October 7, 2005, Mission Moments newsletter from the Center for U.S. Missions. Permission is given to copy this article for distribution within your own congregation. Please credit the author and the Center for U.S. Missions in Irvine, California, [www.centerforusmissions.org](http://www.centerforusmissions.org). For more information, contact the Center at 949-854-8002 x1780.*

“We had 300 children at our VBS this year!”

“Over 1500 people attended our Easter services last week!”

“Our Christmas Eve service was packed!”

Churches work very hard in planning events, and the planners and workers feel joy when large numbers of people turn out. Without a doubt, these events are exciting. When the word is proclaimed and the sacraments properly administered, many people are blessed.

These events, however, often miss the greater opportunity because the event has become the goal and the sole outcome sought is attendance at the event. The greater opportunity is realized when the church executes an intentional follow-up plan that brings event attendees into regular worship and a saving faith in Jesus.

An effective follow-up plan should be

- mission-focused
- strategic
- planned
- intentional
- consistent
- patient

### **Mission-Focused and Strategic Follow Up**

When all is said and done, every congregation shares the same mission: to make and nurture disciples through the proclamation of the word and administration of the sacraments. But the strategies used by congregations to execute the mission differ widely.

Many churches are doing too much. What they are doing is unfocused and doesn't serve their mission well. Their effectiveness is diminished because they are not clear on what they are trying to accomplish and whom they are seeking to reach through their ministries.

Effective churches have very focused strategies to fulfill the mission in their specific context. They know what their ministries are intended to accomplish. They regularly measure the effectiveness of their ministries to learn what works and what doesn't work. They are willing to drastically change a ministry, or even eliminate it, if it does not help them effectively reach people who do not know Christ or are unconvinced by the gospel.

Effective churches know whom they want to reach in their community. They design specific ministries that address the needs of that target group. While they serve and nurture the disciples in their church, they focus their mission on those who are not yet disciples. These churches choose to execute fewer ministries so that they can execute them well. Ministries are *always* filtered through the focused mission and strategies of the church.

### **Planned Follow Up**

When church leaders tell me about the number of people that attended one of their special events, I always ask, “How many of those who attended did you pre-determine to bring into a regular worshiping relationship with your church?” No one has yet answered this question with a number or percentage. I then ask them about their follow-up plan for the event. Most have no plan for follow-up. When a follow up is in place—a letter sent to attendees, for example--it is too often generic and untargeted.

Too often the event is seen as the end of outreach when it should be seen as the beginning. The church that is reaching new people with the gospel, and drawing them into a worshiping relationship with the church and faith in Jesus, sees guests as people with souls who matter to God the Father. These churches have already identified how they will follow up with those who attend an event. The follow-up plan is an integral part of the event plan.

### **Intentional Follow Up**

Intentional follow-up is about relationships. Understanding that people attending their special events or regular worship will respond differently to the invitation that God makes through the word, effective churches prioritize their follow-up contacts, assigning a higher priority to some guests. A guest assigned a high priority may receive a personal visit, handwritten card and a follow-up phone call during the week following the special event or worship service. A guest assigned a lower priority may only receive a handwritten card or phone call. It is not that one guest is more important than another. But the guest assigned a higher priority meets a set of predetermined criteria for follow-up, based on the church’s mission and focused strategic follow-up plan. It is a simple matter of good stewardship of resources.

The church should identify in advance who will follow up with guests and, based on the priority they have been assigned, what form the follow-up will take. Those who follow up should be trained for this special ministry with the church’s guests. They should be friendly and inviting in demeanor, recognizing that the follow up contact is a visit with the guest, even if it is only a handwritten note in a friendly card.

An excellent resource for developing a relational visitation strategy is *Visiting In The Age Of Mission* by Kennon L. Callahan. Another great resource is the *Friendship Ablaze!*

material available free online at <http://www.friendshipablaze.com>. Note the plan for follow-up in the Planning Guide section.

The church should have a system for tracking contact with guests, especially those who are a high priority for the church or frequent guests. The system should note the frequency of visits to the ministry; the means by which they came into contact with the ministry; the follow up priority that has been assigned to them; the type of follow up completed; the person completing the follow up; and the response to the follow up. A free database for tracking this information is *Prospect Keeper*, available free at <http://www.icro.net/html/prospectkeeper.html>.

### **Consistent and Patient Follow Up**

Patience and consistency are required for follow up. People today are slow in joining most organizations, including the church. We need to recognize our society's consumer mentality, even if we don't like it. Several positive contacts are frequently needed before a person will establish a lasting relationship with a church. Churches need to be careful not to fall into the trap of instant gratification. If a guest doesn't respond to the first or second contact, patience dictates that the church review its strategy in relationship with that person, modifying the strategy if necessary, or simply patiently continuing in the follow up as planned.

Effective follow up is consistent. It is important that frequent guests receive intentional, consistent and high-quality follow up that invites them into a relationship with the members, staff or a ministry of the church, depending on their needs. People who attend more frequently are teaching us that there is something about our church that they find attractive. Most will respond positively to caring relational follow up contacts.

Most guests come to a church looking for help, hope or community. Follow-up strategies need to connect to guests based on these very relational longings. Effective churches see follow up as an integral part of their focused mission and strategies. They build the follow up directly into their event and worship planning. The follow up is intentional in its strategies, identifying who will follow up and how the follow up will take place before guests arrive on the campus. Effective follow-up strategies are consistent and patient in relating to guests, understanding that it takes time in today's culture to draw people into a relationship with the church and, through the church, with Jesus. ■

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## **Reflect**

1. How is your church strategically fulfilling the mission of the church?
2. Who in your community context is your church seeking to reach with the good news of Jesus?
3. Is your church doing too much?
4. On what is your church focused?

5. What is the largest event your church does each year? Is it designed to reach seekers and people who are unconvinced that Jesus is the Savior of the world? If not, how might the ministry be adapted to reach new people with the gospel of Jesus? What follow up plan is in place for this event?
6. Sunday morning worship is the largest ongoing event a church does. How is your worship strategic in fulfilling the church's mission?
7. What follow plans are in place in your church? Are they relational and specific?
8. How could your church be more intentional in following up with guests?
9. Is your follow up consistent and patient in approach to the guests who attend your special events and regular worship?
10. What do you need to start doing? Stop doing?