

"Who's There?"
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A Lutheran church planter recently asked the Center for U.S. Missions about the effectiveness of door-to-door canvassing. As I researched the question, I found a lot of opinion based on anecdotal experience and perception of today's culture, but I found no definitive answer based on research. So the question remains: "Is this type of evangelism effective?" The short answer: "Probably not."

Door-to-door canvassing is likely to be perceived as intrusive by people. Think about it. Do you look forward to opening your door to a complete stranger? When someone rings my doorbell, it usually is someone wanting to sell me a magazine subscription, school candy or pest control. When our development was new, it was the Mormons. All seem to come around dinnertime, our time to be a family, when we don't even answer the phone.

I doubt that I am alone in my sentiment about strangers at my door intruding on my time, unexpected and uninvited. Today, people are more private and protective of their down time.

Yet door-to-door evangelism endures, according to an Ellison Research study that reports that 37% of all Protestant churches used it as an evangelism method during the last 12 months. Southern Baptists are most likely to use this style of evangelism, with 65% reporting its use. Thirty-seven percent of Lutheran churches report using this method of evangelism.

Is there a place for door-to-door canvassing? Obviously 37% of Protestant churches think so, but from my research, few if any are reporting any great success with it. I wouldn't recommend it as the sole or primary means of doing evangelism.

Such canvassing could be part of a larger evangelism thrust. A church may establish its presence in the community by handing out post cards, or surveying neighbors about what they perceive to be community issues and needs, or even what they would look for in a church if they were considering attending a church. But these surveys should not be used to directly confront people about their own spiritual walk and evangelize them. That is dishonest.

I also advocate walking neighborhoods and meeting people on the street so that the church can know its community. This can be especially effective in new developments during the summer. Most new houses don't have backyards yet, so people sit and work on their front yards. A brief greeting and an attractive post card describing your church may be all it takes to get someone into a conversation or through the door of your church.

It's similar to door-to-door, but less intrusive. It is important to understand the context of your community and use the methods of outreach that best match that context.

So if door-to-door and other confrontational methods of evangelism are not effective, what is? Relational evangelism remains the most effective means for sharing the gospel with lost people. Almost all Christians came to faith through a relationship with one or more Christians. People in genuine relationships with lost people find it easier to connect the "hope that is in them" with the lives of their family, friends and co-workers.

The opportunity churches have today is to help their members learn this natural way of evangelism, by helping people to develop their faith story in the context of their life experience, and practice connecting it to the lives of others.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing our church today is not method, but the fact that so many churches don't have an interest in outreach. The Ellison Research study found that 4 out of 10 pastors are not interested in reaching their community.

The study noted the various reasons pastors offered as to why their congregations are not effectively reaching out to their community, and that they frequently cited lack of resources. It also says, "Lutheran ministers are less likely than others to point to a lack of resources such as staff, funds, and facilities, but more likely to say their congregation just isn't interested in community outreach." Interestingly, the study found that having more resources did not increase the congregation's likelihood of outreach to the community. How these pastors and congregations, Lutheran and other, reconcile this disinterest with Jesus' clear directive to go and make disciples through the proclamation of the Word and the use of baptism, what we Lutherans call the means of grace, I don't know.

No matter what methods of evangelism a church employs it is important that they kindle a passion for lost people among their members, equip members to do the work of an evangelist, utilize various methods and evaluate the effectiveness of those methods.