

Jim's Tool Box

Has Your Church Asked Your Neighbors What They Are Looking For in a Church?

As you know if you read my Tool Box articles, I am a big proponent of the demographic resource that our annual conference is currently using. [MissionInsite](#) is a great resource for helping your congregation learn more about the folks who live in the area around your church or in a neighborhood or community that your congregation may be targeting for ministry.

However, when I am teaching folks about how to use the great features in MissionInsite, I also advise them that MissionInsite cannot replace talking to people who live around your church. I was reminded of this at annual conference last week when I attended the workshop that was led by the Rev. Bill Lyle. In his workshop on 'Unbinding Our Worship,' Bill shared what he and the folks at Evangelical UMC in Greenville found out when they went out into the community and began to ask people who did not attend church what they would look for in a church if they were to attend church.

Bill said that he and the members of the church went out to ask this question of folks in the community early in his ministry at Greenville EUM. He reported that they went out in the community and asked folks if they attended church regularly. If they already attended, the team from the church went to the next house. At the home of any unchurched folks, the team from EUM asked folks two basic questions:

1. What is the reason(s) that you do not attend church? (the response to that question could be the subject of another Tool Box article).
2. If you were thinking about attending church, what would you look for in a church?

Here are the top ten things that the folks in Greenville, OH told the teams from EUM about what they would look for in a church:

- 10) Alternate Service Times**
- 9) Support Groups**
- 8) Social Events/Family Gatherings**
- 7) Support through prayer**
- 6) Truthfulness**
- 5) Caring/Sharing with others**
- 4) Youth Groups or Kids Programs**
- 3) Good Preaching**
- 2) Casual Comfortable Atmosphere**
- 1) Friendly People/Fellowship**

As Bill pointed out in the workshop, "Great Worship" did not even make the list of what folks were looking for. The church found that most folks are seeking relationships and friendship for themselves and for their families.

Here are some observations and learnings that I have from the experience that Bill described about the folks at Greenville EUM going out to talk to their neighbors and people in the community:

1. It is difficult in many congregations to get the folks in the church to focus on the people in the neighborhood and the community around their church. Too often the focus ends up being on the needs and interests of those already in the church.
2. Often when the church members do begin to think about the needs and issues that people in the community are facing or what they are looking for in a church, they will project their own needs and their own ideas about they are looking for rather than going out to ask folks what they need.
3. Members of a congregation really have to move outside of their comfort zone to go out and ask their neighbors and the community around them why they don't come to church or what they would look for in a church if they were to attend a church.

So when is the last time that your church went out in the community to ask folks what they would look for in a church they might attend? When is the last time that your congregation went out in the community to ask the community how the folks in your church could pray for the issues they are facing in their lives?

Of course if you go out and ask folks what they need or what they are looking for in a church, it won't do any good if you do not begin some ministries or programs that began to address the issues that your neighbors in the community identified. The members and friends of your church will need to commit to moving beyond their own needs to meeting the needs of the community. In the case of Bill Lyle and the Greenville EUM congregation, Bill reported in the workshop that the folks in the church moved the time of their traditional worship service to an earlier time to accommodate a later time for a contemporary service that the church started.

Please note that the folks in the church did not insist on keeping their "prime time" worship hour to meet their needs. They changed the time of their service so that the guests and visitors/unchurched folks could worship at a time that was more attractive and easier for them and their families to attend. It was through changes of that sort that the EUM congregation began to turn around and to grow from about 40 mainly older worshippers when Bill went to the church in 1997 to about 900 in worship in a new facility on the edge of Greenville today.

When is the last time that the folks in your church went out into the neighborhood and community around your church to ask them about what they would look for in a church?

Isn't it about time that your church began to ask those questions and build those bridges in the community around your church?