

## CGGC eNews: How friendly is your church to outsiders?

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Over the past several years, because of the influence of thinkers like Reggie McNeal and others, I've come to embrace the idea that "we know how to do church, but we don't know how to do the kingdom." In other words, we know how to offer weekly worship services, Sunday school classes, small groups and the like – it's what we know. But when it comes to the kingdom, many of us feel ill equipped. The kingdom is larger than a weekly gathering or producing a worship service on a regular basis, it's an invitation to a way of life. The kingdom requires an outward focus and calls us to be the missionary who goes into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. Generally speaking, I wholeheartedly agree that we do church better than we do kingdom.



In recent weeks I've been reflecting on the fact that perhaps we don't do "church" as well as what we tend to think. While I still mostly agree with the idea that we know how to do church, but we don't know how to do the kingdom, I also sense that there are many congregations who might be able to do a better job at "doing church" which might provide a small but significant step toward "doing the kingdom".

For instance, nearly every church I've ever encountered has made the same claim: "We're the friendliest church." In my experience, some of those congregations have been warm, friendly and inviting while others were not. So why do most churches believe they are friendly? Most likely it is a friendly place to you because it's familiar and known. If you were an outsider, you might not have the same experience.

I go to a bank branch across town because most of the staff are former coworkers of mine (I was a bank teller in my seminary years) and I think it's friendlier than the bank branch around the corner from my home. Is it actually friendlier than another other bank branch in town? If I'm honest, probably not. But at my favorite branch, people know my name and I get to catch up with people who are friends, I know which door to walk in and where to stand in line and all the other rituals of going to the bank. It's familiar and I feel comfortable and welcomed there.

One of the keys to the kingdom that we see in Jesus' life and ministry was his ability to welcome the outsider! Jesus welcomed outsiders: prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, and all kinds of sinners who were considered outside the reach of God. He welcomed them. He saw these "outsiders" that others missed or ignored and he related to them in a way that was genuine and caring.

How well does your congregation welcome outsiders? How easy is it for new people, folks who are outside your church body, to come into your church body? How hard is it to find information about your congregation (do you have a website?), your activities, your service times and what to expect if they choose to visit sometime? How easy it is for someone to find your church building or to find a place to park or to find the right door (some of our churches have a lot of doors and it's hard to tell which one is the main entrance)? Are people acknowledged or greeted warmly when they enter your space, is the environment warm and inviting or is it cold and sterile? Do you announce when the kids are dismissed to junior church or do you assume everyone knows the routine? What would an outsider tell you about their experience if they were able to be totally honest with you?

I'm going to take a leap here and suggest that your congregation may not be nearly as accessible, warm or as inviting as you might think it is, particularly when it comes to outsiders.

I've got a challenge for you if you really want to know if your congregation is as warm, friendly and inviting as you assume. Why don't you ask a friend who doesn't attend your congregation (and who is not familiar with a lot of the folks in your church) to visit a service sometime for the purpose of giving you some fresh eyes on the experience of walking into your church service as someone who's new. After the service take them to lunch and let them offer their honest, unedited feedback on the experience? You might begin to see some things that you'd otherwise overlook because you're familiar and comfortable there.

I recently visited one of our congregations for the first time and was so impressed that the pastor asked for this kind of feedback from me as a first time guest. "Tell me what you saw and experienced as a newcomer? Any holes or glaring issues that I should be aware of here?"

I'd be interested to know if you try this or if you've tried something like this in the past. What did you learn? What surprised you? What did someone help you see that you missed because it was just too familiar for you to notice?

Next week I'll give some ideas of little things that make a difference in helping outsiders feel welcome.

Christ's Peace,

**Lance**

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