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How to Reach the Non-Seeker for Christ

Larry A. Gilbert

Much has been written in recent years on reaching Seekers. Since Bill Hybels made the term "Seekers" popular, pastors and church growth experts have explored numerous strategies from seeker-targeted to seeker-sensitive churches. We have explored the minds of Unchurched Harry and Mary, revamped our nurseries, changed our music, updated our sermons, and restructured our worship services to be more appealing and inviting to non-Christians seeking answers to spiritual fulfillment. These approaches to restructuring are good. They have helped us reach many people for Christ whom we would not have reached otherwise.

These Seekers we so desperately try to reach are people who are looking to fill the spiritual void in their lives, looking for a spiritual experience, or looking for "spiritual" (not necessarily biblical or Christian) solutions on how to cope in an overly complex and out-of-control world. Most are lost, but some are Christians seeking a more rewarding and fulfilling spiritual experience.

Now think of some of the people who you would love to see come to Christ. If you will stop and write the names of the top seven people you would like to see reached for Christ on the lines below this article will give you a greater understanding how to influence them towards salvation.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

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While we recognize that Seekers may be Christians or non-Christians, *all unsaved or unchurched people are NOT Seekers*. An overwhelming majority are NON-Seekers, those who don't really give a rip about spiritual things and would rather you not bring them up either. In fact, *most of the people we really wish we could reach for Christ are non-Seekers*. To evaluate this claim for yourself, go back to your list of seven people you would like to see reached for Christ. Notice how many are Seekers and how many are non-Seekers. If you are like most Christians, eighty percent or more of the names on your list are non-Seekers.

So what's the point? *Seeker-oriented methodology won't work for reaching, or as far as that goes for influencing, non-Seekers in today's culture*. Stop and think for a minute of the methods we have used to reach people for Christ in the past two generations. The most recent method of restructuring our churches to make them more "user friendly" is probably the first to come to mind—obviously Seeker-oriented services. But, consider the more widely known methods that we don't even think of as being Seeker-oriented—like crusades or revival meetings. Who comes to these meetings? Mostly Christians, but other attendees who are not Christians are Seekers, seeking answers to life's ultimate questions. Now think about the traditional Thursday night visitation program. Who do we visit? Non-members—typically Seekers—who visited our church on Sunday morning. On the other hand, look at the program that has probably trained more people in personal evangelism than any other—*Evangelism Explosion* (EE). You might say EE is not a Seeker-oriented approach. True, *but it only works with Seekers*. Non-Seekers are incapable of relating to its simple presentation.

Most methods of evangelism that have worked in the past are not working today. The culture has changed but our basic approach has not. In his book, *The Bridger Generation*, Thom Rainer gives statistics on the portion of each generation that has already been reached for Christ.

Generation	Percentage Reached for Christ
Builders (Born before 1946)	65%
Boomers (Born between 1946 and 1964)	35%
Busters (Born between 1964 and 1977)	15%
Bridgers (Born between 1977 and 1994)	4%

These percentages, coupled with the fact that 81 percent of

Christians accepted Christ *before* they were 20 years old, and the youngest Busters and oldest Bridgers are now over 20, indicate that, statistically speaking, we stand very little chance of reaching the majority of the last three generations for Christ. It's easy to blame this failure on a bunch of worldly Christians who really don't care about lost people anymore; but, I don't believe that is so. I believe today's Christians are just as concerned for the salvation of their loved ones as they ever were. The problem is that we continue to use Seeker-oriented methods on non-Seekers and our results are declining.

Take note that in Dr. Rainer's chart, a much greater percentage of the oldest generation (the Builders) have been reached for Christ. A logical conclusion is that they have had many more years for someone to influence them for Christ. However, the greatest reason for their stance is that Seeker-oriented methods worked with the Builder generation. Why? Because that generation had a built-in point of reference to the message of the gospel. Their mental environment allowed for the understanding and acceptance of the gospel because the roots to this message had become part of the foundation of their life. The government and society in general accepted our Christian roots. There was little hostility toward Christianity. That "built in" point of reference to the gospel message has declined with each consecutive generation to near nonexistence in the Bridgers. Let me explain.

Builders were taught Judeo-Christian values from day one from a variety of different sources including society itself. By the time many of them reached adulthood they had been to Sunday school nearly 1,000 times and those who were not "church goers" sent their kids. When I was in public school we started every day with Bible reading and prayer. Many Builders were even taught Bible as a subject in high school while many elementary school stories were based on Bible characters. Society supported the Ten Commandments as the foundation for human behavior. We were taught there was definitely a "right" and "wrong"; and it was always wrong to lie in any situation. Don't get me wrong, Builders were no angels, but at least they *knew* when they were doing wrong and, in most cases, felt guilty about it. What I'm saying is that the culture in which the Builders and many Boomers were raised instilled the values of Christianity in them. Even if they didn't live by these values or agree with them, the values still became part of their very being; part of their life's foundation. Thus, when someone talked to them about religious matters or presented the gospel to them they had a built-in point of reference.

Unfortunately, this built-in point of reference to Christianity

has been on a steady decline over the past three generations. Most, if not all, Christian influence has been removed from our public school systems. Hollywood and television has served to form a distorted doctrinal belief for most. There's a whole new mind-set among our younger generations that is critical of Christianity. I could go on forever citing instance after instance of the decline of Christian influence and the rise of humanism, but that's not my purpose. Sometimes when I listen to how some non-Christians think, I have to admit that my mind simply can't comprehend how they could possibly think that way. Then one day it dawned on me, if I can't comprehend the way they think then it stands to reason that they can't comprehend the way I think. The point I am trying to make is until a non-Christian starts seeking some answers, thus becoming a Seeker, a gospel-presentation-only approach to reaching them for Christ is as foreign to them as a computer would be to Moses. They may relate our spiritual emphasis to the "Force" of *Star Wars*, the "spirits" of *Ghost Busters*, or the "Boss up there" in *Touched by an Angel* who is portrayed *only* as a God of love, but they won't relate it to the need for a righteous savior. How can people relate to the need to be saved from their sins when in the minds of a situation-ethic-based-society sin doesn't exist? Builders were immoral, they knew what sin was, they knew right from wrong, they just choose to do wrong. Many Boomers, the majority of Busters, and almost all of the Bridgers are amoral, that is, they don't know right from wrong.

Have you ever heard, "You can't get a man saved until you get him lost?" Well, you cannot get a non-Seeker "saved" until you turn him or her into a Seeker. Non-Seekers lack the mental environment for accepting the gospel. Therefore, we must change the environment in which they think. To do this we must build trusting relationships with them.

Trusting relationships are the key to reaching people for Christ and bonding them to His church. Research, done by church growth experts Win and Charles Arn, shows that the more relationships an individual has within the church the more apt that individual is to stay in the church, and the fewer relationships an individual has in the church the less apt that individual is to stay in the church. O. J. Bryson calls it "the rule of seven: When a church member has seven close friends in a church, he or she will never leave it." Elmer Towns says, "Relationships are the glue that make people stick to the church." Other research shows that 86 percent of those accepting Christ or joining a church are doing so because of the influence of a friend or a relative (I call it "existing relationships"). The same research

concludes that only 2% are influenced to come to church because of advertising (yellow pages, sign, newspapers, etc.), while 6% come because of organized visitation, and 6% come because of pastoral contact. In essence the more relationships non-Seekers have with those who attend church, the greater the chance the non-Seeker will become more receptive to the gospel. *Thus, if I want my unchurched friend to believe in Christ and attend my church, then I must get my friend to establish a trusting relationship with as many of my church friends as possible.*

Here's how one of Delaware's fastest-growing churches (Glasgow Reformed Presbyterian Church: Chuck Betters, Pastor; Jamie Swalm, Jr., House Church Director) is using their house churches as teams to reach non-Seekers. The tool is *teams*; the application is called *AMEs* and *RSAs*.

What are AMEs and RSAs?

AMEs: Acquaintance Making Events. An AME is an event for the purpose of introducing nonsaved and nonchurched friends to other church members. These events usually take place in larger groups (8 plus), never one on one, and are more formal than not in the sense that they are planned ahead of time and organized. AMEs are social gatherings, picnics, cookouts, parties, hospitality events, afternoon teas, etc. They usually take place outside the church. Their purpose is simple: to help develop a three-way relationship or friendship bridge between you, the nonsaved or nonchurched friend you invite, and the regular members of the group.

AMEs are perfect for helping existing church members develop caring, receptive, redemptive, trusting relationships with outsiders when we remember four basic rules.

1. Be sure to invite your nonsaved and nonchurched friends every time your group has a *social* function. Most people don't come because we don't invite them. We tend to socialize with the same crowd all the time and forget those outside our comfort zone.
2. Be sensitive to who your friends are. Don't get too churchy or too pushy. AMEs are not for presenting the gospel, but for *creating an environment for accepting the gospel*. These functions are far less threatening to the non-Seeker when held outside the church.
3. Be sure to mingle and do not ignore the newcomers at social functions. We have a tendency to spend all our time socializing with those we already know and ignore all strangers, beyond being introduced to them. If they feel ignored or don't make new friends they won't come

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back. Make an extra effort to include them.

4. Be patient. It takes time (sometimes years) to develop relationships that are strong enough for outsiders to feel comfortable with new people. As they become comfortable with your church friends, they will also be more comfortable and receptive to the message of the gospel. Don't give up on your friends. Keep inviting them, even if they do give excuses for why they can't come "this time."

RSAs: Relationship Strengthening Activities. RSAs are any activity for the purpose of developing, cultivating, strengthening, and building trusting relationships between your nonchurched friends and other church members. These activities usually take place in smaller groups (four or less) or one on one and are more informal in the sense that they are less planned and more spontaneous.

After you have met and become acquainted with new people at the AMEs, practice RSAs—involve them in your daily activities - *like you do with any friend*. Get their phone numbers and invite them out to dinner or invite them to your home for dinner or dessert. Take them fishing or to a ball game with you. Ask them to go shopping with you. Or, just call them and say, "I'm going to the hardware store, do you need anything or would you like to ride along?"

My wife and her friend, Fran, host a "Make-it, Take-it" night at our house once a week. They invite a group of ladies over to do crafts. (They *make it* and *take it* home the same night.) They have brief devotions and prayer before their mid-meeting refreshments. The rest of the time is spent making crafts and getting to know one another. The key to RSAs is to spend time with people to cultivate the relationship. Here again we need to observe a few simple rules.

1. Don't be on the edge of your seat all evening looking for the perfect place to twist the conversation into a presentation of the gospel. If the opportunity or question arises, take advantage of it. If it doesn't, don't worry about it. Just relax and enjoy each other's company. Remember, the goal is not to present the gospel as quickly as possible, but to create an environment for accepting the gospel when it is presented, whether by you or someone else.
2. Be a good witness. Avoid questionable activities such as R-rated or in some cases even PG-rated movies. Don't take your friends any place you wouldn't take Jesus.

3. Don't condemn or belittle your friends lifestyle. If you go to a restaurant and your friend orders a glass of wine, don't get hyper; just order your glass of ice tea and go on with the evening. If your friend is living with open sin, don't make an issue of it. Don't discuss politics. Who knows, your friend may have voted for the guy you think is a jerk. Let the Lord deal with these issues after the person "gets saved."

As mentioned earlier, trust is a very important factor in cultivating these relationships and bonding with people. Charles Handy, in *The Hungry Spirit* (Broadway Books, 1998), lists 7 principles of trust. Keep these principles in mind when dealing with non-Seekers.

1. "Trust is not blind." To trust someone is to know them. AMEs and RSAs provide an environment conducive of building relationships and trust. In these regular get-togethers, people get to know one another better.
2. "Trust needs boundaries." There are boundaries we cannot cross over in getting to know people. We must not be nosy and must be careful of the questions we ask acquaintances. Typically, the more time you spend with someone, the more comfortable you both are in sharing thoughts, feelings, and so forth with one another.
3. "Trust requires constant learning." We must be open to new ideas and ways to strengthen relationships. We should look for opportunities to learn from our mistakes—and know when to take action or speak and when not to do so.
4. "Trust is tough." Gaining someone's trust takes time and effort. Trust is hard to regain once broken. Be careful how you use the information you know about someone else; take care not to offend them nor pass on personal information to others in the form of "religious gossip."
5. "Trust needs bonding." We must be willing to spend time with others in different environments—in fun activities outside the church as well as activities inside the church.
6. "Trust needs touch." In other words, we need to make people feel special. We need to invest time in their lives and have genuine concern for them—and prove it through our actions.
7. "Trust has to be earned." We must be consistent in our "walk" and "talk." We must prove ourselves worthy of trust.

The key to AMEs and RSAs is to create receptivity in the mind of the non-Seeker by building a bridge between the gospel and their non-Christian foundation. In its truest sense, this form of reaching out to others is *Team Evangelism*. Individual Christians are no longer charged to go it alone to fulfill the Great Commission. The group works together as a team to support each other, pray for their lost friends, and especially to create the environment of friendship that is needed to bond newcomers with a lasting relationship to Christ and His church. If you want to reach the Seekers *and the non-Seekers* in your sphere of influence, I challenge you put together teams and encourage the use of AMEs and RSAs in your own church. Remember most people who are non-Christians are also non-Seekers. . . and the best way to turn non-Seekers into Seekers is through the influence of trusting relationships.

Writer

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