

A photograph of two light blue ceramic coffee cups on matching saucers, set on a rustic wooden table. The cups are filled with a light-colored beverage, possibly coffee or tea. The lighting is warm and soft, creating a cozy atmosphere. A large black circle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the text.

# Relational Outreach



CONGREGATION & VISITORS



# Relational Outreach

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**RELATIONAL OUTREACH****Leader's Guide**

*How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.*

*Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Leadership Journal, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.*

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

Pastors and church leaders will find this theme useful in understanding how to equip people to do outreach through meaningful, personal relationships. Evangelism is something every Christian is called to do, but to many people the idea of walking up to a stranger can feel unnatural and uncomfortable. While some people may be naturally gifted in that way, others will best evangelize through relationships built over a long period of time. An important task of the church is to prepare people to share their faith with others and to prioritize outreach in the community. This resource includes articles that will help you prepare people to have relationships that matter. From intentionally seeking out non-Christian neighbors to asking good questions to demonstrating God's love through service, relational outreach helps people see, know, and feel the love of Christ through his children.

For a first-hand account of how spending significant time with those outside the church leads to transforming relationships, see "Acting Like Jesus" by Syler Thomas (pp. 3–5). For a practical overview of how outsiders view and talk about church, and what brings them to faith, read "How Outsiders Find Faith" (pp. 6–8). To think more deeply about how to ask good questions in outreaching relationships, you will find Tony Kriz's "Beyond Answer Man" (pp. 9–12) helpful. David Dwight and Nicole Unice offer four tips to relational evangelism in "Reforming Evangelism" (pp. 13–15). And "Know Your Neighbors?" (pp. 16–18) offers a case study in how one church came to understand its call to evangelize as a call to be good neighbors, and in doing so impacted its entire community.

This theme recognizes that relationships are a significant agent of outreach in your church and community. We hope you find this material helpful as you disciple people toward more meaningful relationships that share the love of Christ with those who so desperately need it.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at [www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com).  
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**Acting Like Jesus**

*Spending quality time with nonbelievers creates unique opportunities.*

Matthew 9:9–13

I was sitting with two buddies from college in the upper deck of Wrigley Field. Midway through the baseball game, Kevin turned to me and said, “I’m directing a play that I think you’ll like. It’s about Jesus and Judas. I’ll send it to you.”

Kevin and I had graduated together from the Theatre School at Chicago’s DePaul University ten years before. All my life to that point, I’d wanted to be an actor.

During college, my passion gradually shifted from acting to ministry. When I graduated, I simply didn’t have the drive to pursue an acting career, so I considered this chapter of my life closed. I went to seminary and then into youth ministry, while Kevin and most of my college friends pursued theater and film. I kept up with their work, reading plays that friends were involved with, and trying to attend as many as possible. But Kevin’s project would be different.

The play he sent me, *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, was named one of the Top 10 plays of 2005 by *Time*. The play is set in a courtroom in Purgatory and centers on the trial of Judas Iscariot. Judas is in hell, and a renegade attorney brings his case before a judge and jury claiming that Judas has been unfairly condemned.

During his trial, key witnesses from history take the stand, including Mother Teresa, Sigmund Freud, Simon the Zealot, Caiaphas the Elder, Pontius Pilate, and Satan. It includes Saint Monica (Augustine’s mother) as a foul-mouthed saint who revels in her role as a nag to God.

Jesus is there too, included as a hero.

Major themes of the play include despair, suicide, evil, and living with regret. It was a powerful play. Just reading the final scene brought tears to my eyes. I called Kevin as soon as I could. “Kevin, this is unbelievable! If there’s anything I can do to help you with this thing, just let me know.”

**A New Role**

Kevin invited me to a reading of the show. When the person who was supposed to read Jesus’ part didn’t show, Kevin asked me to read the part. Afterward I went out with Kevin.

As we were processing the evening, he asked about the date of my upcoming sabbatical. “Middle of March to the middle of May,” I said.

He looked at me for a moment. “Our show runs from the middle of March to the middle of May. I think you should play Jesus.”

It felt like this had fallen into my lap. Plus I was eager to participate in such a unique play, with a powerfully redemptive message.

Kevin was not a religious person, but he decided that because faith was central to the play, it would be a good idea to have cast members talk about their faith journeys. So over the next week of rehearsals I had the opportunity to hear these urban twentysomethings discuss their faith, or lack thereof.

Their stories had a very common theme: in most situations, they had had an unpleasant interaction with a Christian that had soured them on organized religion.

One cast member recalled being “outed” as a Jew at her Christian private school, and how the teacher explained that she was going to hell. Another talked about being in high school and showing up for an advertised “fun night” at a local church with a friend and having a great time in the gym ... until the “inspirational speaker” came out and began preaching. He felt duped.

By the time it was my turn to share, I told the group that listening to their stories made me want to crawl under the table. I shared very simply that I hadn’t found God; God had found me. And that Jesus had changed my life. I left it at that.

I was energized by the rehearsal process. I loved getting to know the cast members, providing any background I could about biblical characters, and rehearsing my one scene, the climax of the show, when Jesus finally shows up to have it out with Judas. It was utterly refreshing to get outside of the walls of the church.

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I was interacting with people that Jesus himself certainly would have hung with, and using some of my long-dormant gifts. As Becky Pippert might say, I was “out of the saltshaker” and felt a sense of usefulness that I hadn’t experienced for a long time.

### Opening Night

As I waited backstage on opening night, I prayed silently, grateful to God for allowing me to be part of the play. I had felt I had been prepared for “such a time as this” and was honored to be portraying Jesus onstage. It was a powerful convergence of emotions.

Jesus’ role in the play is very small, so I spent a good deal of time backstage, chatting with other cast members. They paid me the ultimate compliment of being completely transparent. They asked tough questions, including ones about sexual ethics and why the Jews were God’s chosen people. It kept me on my toes, but I loved every minute of it.

The show turned out to be a hit! It was extended and transferred to a trendy neighborhood closer to the heart of the city for an additional five-week run. The top reviewer at The Chicago Tribune gave us a glowing review, and there was talk of another extension at another venue in the fall.

The play touched people. On opening night of the extension, someone I had met through a cast member approached me: “You know, walking into the theater, my religious views included some ideas about reincarnation and Buddha. But I see this show and all I want to do is go to Mass. It’s all about Jesus for me.”

Later in the run, I got an email from a friend who was deeply moved by his experience and invited his brother the following night. The brother was not a believer but had struggled with issues similar to the ones addressed by the play. He began sobbing during the final scene as the message of God’s grace touched him deeply.

The highlight of my experience came when the playwright came to town to see the show on a Sunday afternoon. After the show, he came backstage to congratulate everyone in the cast. Afterwards, he joined us at a neighborhood bar. Because I had to get to youth group, I made sure to grab him right away, to share my thoughts about the play.

He was incredibly friendly, and we chatted about his experiences with religious people in his life. I tried to wrap up our conversation, but he stopped me and asked me a very simple but profound question about God’s desire for humanity. I responded with my perspective, and a Bible verse I thought would be helpful, then thanked him for his time, and left.

### Curtain Call

As I walked back to my car, I was struck with a sense of wonder. I had just portrayed Jesus in a hit play, and had the opportunity to talk about significant matters of faith with a playwright from New York.

*How exactly did I get here? I wondered. What lessons did I learn?*

First, I realized that as a pastor I spend far too much time in the Christian ghetto. We attend meetings, send emails, and study books at the expense of investing time in the larger world. Our studies are safe; the world is risky.

We must not “neglect the ministry of the word of God” (Acts 6) but we also can’t forget that Jesus came for the sick and not the healthy (Matthew 9). That’s a balance we must maintain. We lose our mission when our schedules only include people who share our faith.

Second, our agenda with those outside the community of faith should be to love them, while being ready to share “the reason for our hope” (1 Peter 3) at appropriate times. If I had (intentionally or not) communicated in any way that I had an interest in “converting” my fellow cast members, I would have been dismissed as readily as those about whom they had told hurtful stories. I had to be careful not to be too forceful, especially as a pastor playing Jesus! Any hint of hypocrisy would have been damaging.

I wasn’t shy about my own passion for God, but I made sure I wasn’t trying to sell them anything. I just took an active interest in their lives. I tried to show them that to participate in the kingdom of God is the most fulfilling thing one could ever hope to do.

As far as I know, no one in the cast became a Christian. But some made significant strides toward faith. And at the very least, by the grace of God, their idea of what a Christian looks like had to be expanded to account for a pastor in their green room.

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Finally, I learned that God defies our categories with the direction our lives can take. Throughout the experience, I was reminded of Eric Liddell’s famous quote from the film *Chariots of Fire*. “I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure.”

I would take that thought even further. God’s purpose was for Eric Liddell to preach the gospel by his missionary work and by running. God’s purpose for me was to make disciples in my youth ministry and to appear in a play about Jesus. When I minister to a teenager, and when I appear onstage, I participate in his kingdom, and I feel his pleasure.

Even though I thought I had closed the acting chapter of my life, God hadn’t. Just because I began pursuing ministry, it didn’t mean I stopped having gifts in the arts. Just because there’s only one box to fill in on the “Occupation” line on our tax return, doesn’t mean our lives have to be confined to that one role. I can be a pastor who acts. Or an actor who earns a living shepherding young people.

Or perhaps, a basketball-playing, Cubs-cheering pastor who loves his family and acts in the occasional play—all to the glory of God!

—SYLER THOMAS is the high school pastor at Christ Church Lake Forest in Lake Forest, Illinois; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2012 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit [www.LeadershipJournal.net](http://www.LeadershipJournal.net).

### Discuss

1. What opportunities might I have to get outside the “Christian bubble” and interact directly with non-Christians on a regular basis? Why is this important?
2. How can I be more intentional about my conversations and quality time with non-Christians?
3. How can our church or ministry encourage others to seek out these kinds of relationships? How do we demonstrate that this is a value for us?

**RELATIONAL OUTREACH****How Outsiders Find Faith**

*Personal relationships are often the difference-maker.*

Acts 6:1–7

It was something I had heard repeated as long as I had been in ministry: “85 percent of all people who accept Christ do so before the age of 18.” I was never exactly clear where that statistic came from, but I had no reason to doubt it either. Everyone I knew considered it an evangelistic axiom.

The good part of the statistic was that it reinforced the importance of reaching children and youth with the gospel. They are receptive. Important decisions are made before adulthood. And we must reach our young people with the gospel.

However, when I made the transition from ministry with students to adults, I quickly saw the downside of the statistic. Now I wanted to help adults reach their friends and neighbors for Christ. Though most were willing to try, I could see they didn’t have much expectancy. They assumed that once people got past a certain age (the axiom indicated it was 18) the odds of them responding to the gospel were dismal.

I couldn’t help but wonder: Was it really that dismal? Does “85 percent of all people who accept Christ do so before the age of 18” mean that it’s doubtful that many adults will make a life-changing decision to follow Jesus?

I could understand if someone was raised with faith, they would likely make up their mind before they left home, but what about someone who didn’t have that advantage? Were the odds forever stacked against them?

Interestingly, what I was seeing in my own ministry didn’t match up with that. I was watching unchurched people at every stage of life respond to the gospel. Were these just anomalies to the pattern, or was there something more?

**Search and Research**

I’m a pastor, not a researcher, but with the assistance of two sociologists from Oregon State University, I decided to test the “85/18 Rule.” I wanted to know when, why, and how those not raised in the church come to faith in Christ.

I wanted to find people who had decided to follow Christ and remained active in their faith and church—the exact kind of disciple I would be hoping for if I led someone to Christ. I found lots of people like that in evangelical churches across the country who were willing to share their stories. They worshipped in rock-and-roll megachurches and quiet roadside chapels. They lived out their faith in little towns in Wisconsin and sprawling cities of Southern California. Eventually, through surveys, personal interviews, and statistical analysis, I compared the faith experiences of more than 3,000 believers from 31 states and a dozen denominations.

**How Many Adults Make It From Outside In?**

People from an unchurched upbringing are a clear minority among evangelicals. On a typical weekend they represent 28 percent of the adult believers in church. Generally these are people who grew up with parents who were not Christians and with little spiritual activity in their home. They rarely, if ever, went to church. Their exposure to the Bible was limited. They didn’t pray regularly. They were raised irreligiously.

What quickly became apparent in the data was that the large percentage of believers from Christian homes skews not only our evangelism statistics but also our understanding of the situation. While many of us say we are determined to reach “the unchurched,” many of our assumptions are based on the experiences of those who were raised as Christians—for instance, the assumption of when people come to faith.

With research data under my belt, I headed out on a road trip to meet more than 50 people, all who had come to Christ from clearly unchurched backgrounds, and who were willing to tell me the story of their upbringing, their conversion, and their life with Christ since.

It quickly became evident that most of them considered themselves “exceptions to the rule.” They all picked up around their churches that the way they came to Jesus doesn’t fit “the normal pattern.”

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Although they felt like exceptions, the research indicates that they're not. For someone coming to Christ out of an unchurched background, their experiences were not uncommon at all. They were just different from people who had been raised as Christians—which happens to be most of the people in church.

### When Does Faith Come to the Unchurched?

I discovered that when someone from an unchurched background makes a lasting decision for Christ, it happens much later than we have often assumed and is spread out across every stage of life. Of those, a majority (57 percent) accept Christ between the ages of 21 and 50.

I must admit that the “85/18 Rule” was partially confirmed in my research. In fact, 84.5 percent of evangelicals do accept Christ before that age. However, the statistic only holds true if they were raised in a home where both parents were Christians with either a high or moderate level of spiritual activity. If, however, they were raised without that benefit, the percentage drops by two-thirds. The rest of the unchurched make their faith decisions throughout the course of adulthood and even into retirement.

I interviewed those who came to Christ as teenagers in the midst of losing a parent or battling drugs. Others had wrestled through the decision in college. Young marrieds in their twenties had come to faith, as well as new parents in their thirties. There were career people in their forties and grandparents in their fifties. The oldest person we talked to who'd made a decision for Christ was a woman named Karen, who in her mid-sixties, simply felt that after all those years, something was just missing.

I've become increasingly optimistic about who can believe and when. I can't predict who will receive Christ, I've just learned that people—especially unchurched people—come to Christ at every stage of life.

### Who Helps Them Find Faith?

In the surveys, when I asked people to identify those who had influenced them in their decision for Christ, some of the statistical differences were expected. For people raised in Christian homes, 80 percent identify their parents as one of the most important influences. Almost never does an unchurched person say that.

Other differences, however, were more surprising. For instance, I assumed that pastors—“the professionals”—would have a greater impact on unchurched people. Not so. Statistically, a pastor or youth leader is more likely to nudge someone from a Christian home toward a decision than to help an unchurched person find faith.

What made the real difference with the unchurched were personal relationships. The majority who find Christ, look back and say that it was a friend who influenced them toward faith. In my interviews, over and over again, people shared about someone in relationship with them.

This friendship may have been for a lifetime or just a season, but it was the right person at the right time that helped bring them to faith.

I place much more confidence in the people of my church than I used to. I understand now that most of them are far better situated to lead unchurched people to Christ than I am. And I've learned that if I do lead someone to Christ, I will likely be wearing the “friend” hat and not the “professional minister” hat.

### How They Describe Coming to Faith

I discovered that when unchurched people wrestle with faith, it normally takes them longer and is more of a process.

When you ask someone raised Christian, “How did you come to Christ?” they typically answer by telling about an event. They'll describe a time and a place where they made their decision, often mentioning who they were with.

People from unchurched backgrounds, however, answer the same question differently. They typically tell about an extended process, life circumstances, key relationships, and significant issues they were working through.

Often their actual point of decision is less defined. For instance, 11.4 percent of committed Christians from unchurched backgrounds cannot identify a specific time or place where they accepted Christ. For those of us raised as Christians, this can make us a little uncomfortable. Their less defined and sometimes unconventional turning points are not what we're used to.

I'm far more flexible than I used to be about what constitutes a conversion event. Today I'm far more interested in what authentic, ongoing faith looks like in a person's life. As someone who spends a lot of time



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helping irreligious people find faith, I can't begin to explain some of their faith stories. What I can't deny, however, is their confession of faith, the fruit in their life, and their ongoing growth in Christ.

Unchurched people are far less hung up on the details. I'm trying to be, too.

### What Points Them to Faith?

My final discovery was that, of those Christians with an unchurched background, most (56 percent) report coming to faith in the midst of a significant transition or crisis. Most often it's family-related—either transitioning into parenthood or coping with a marriage crisis. But other times the crisis may relate to addiction, illness, death, finances, even world catastrophes. The transition may be into a new relationship, a new community, or a new career. These circumstances often are the open window of opportunity for the gospel to take root.

When that window is open in an unchurched person's life and they are surrounded by the truth and people of God, the Spirit works remarkably through things that might not even look evangelistic on the surface. A broken man in a 12-step group suddenly finds himself getting saved. A desperate couple at a marriage seminar unexpectedly embraces faith. A hurting woman in a prayer group surprisingly finds herself believing.

I've learned to pay attention to the person's life, to be sensitive to what is happening, and ready to share when the window opens. Someone who has been closed to faith for their entire life may become inexplicably receptive when circumstances change. When a heart opens, even the tiniest seed can take the deepest root and the simplest relationship can make the biggest difference.

Despite what many have assumed from the "85/18 rule," adults from unchurched backgrounds are still what Jesus calls "good soil."

—MIKE FLEISCHMANN is pastor of Inland Hills Community Church in Oceanside, California; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2010 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit [www.LeadershipJournal.net](http://www.LeadershipJournal.net).

### Discuss

1. Which of these findings most surprised you? Why?
2. How does it look different to prepare people to reach out to unchurched people, versus people who grew up in or have experience in the church?
3. How do we form our current evangelism and outreach plans? Do we assume a church background? Unchurched? How could we better reach both populations?

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**Beyond Answer Man***What happens when eternal questions fill the room?*

Matthew 22:2–3, 8–10

I was raised in the Christian church. It is one of the great gifts of my life. The church is still my home.

As a boy I was persuaded a magical membrane encompassed a Christian church. As you passed through the membrane, it marked you with an essential truth. You were one of the God-people. Those who chose to reside outside the membrane could not claim this eternal privilege. I was taught to take great pride, seasoned with gratitude, that I existed among those inside the church.

I continue to serve in the church. My eyes continue to take in the sounds, the faces, the symbols. The chairs are arranged so that everyone is facing the altar of Christ. Everybody is pointed at the One from whom we all receive life. The very shape of the sanctuary reinforces the membrane belief. Those outside shuffle to and fro, oriented every which way, toward the things of this world. But for those inside, our bodies are our compass, pointed at the cross.

There is only one problem.

While my body is oriented toward the altar, my soul so often is not. Many Sundays, when my eyes shift from the external—the stage, sermon, and sacraments—to the internal, I must admit that my heart is not on Christ.

I wonder what would happen if we re-arranged the chairs of the church to reflect the congregants' true heart longings. How many chairs would still face the cross? How many would face some other place, a place far away? How interesting it would be to see the seating arranged according to the actual state of our hearts.

Then I wonder, what if we applied the same experiment to those beyond the membrane, giving a chair to every person in my neighborhood? How many would have chairs pointed at least partly toward the cross? Their conscious selves may not know that the gospel is the answer, but their longings would betray their desire for it. These people are the ones the Bible might call “the stranger.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused. . . . Then he said to his servants, ‘The banquet is ready. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the [strangers] they could find” (Matt. 22:2-3, 8-10).

Are we dazzled by our neighbors' stories, full of their beliefs, hopes, wounds, and experiences?

How might that begin to look in today's church?

**Being Dazzled**

I live in a delightful neighborhood in Portland, Oregon. Portland has gained quite a reputation. It has often been called the least-churched city in North America. Whatever the reputation, my little faith community and I knew that we wanted to understand our neighbors better. We wanted to understand their lives of faith.

So, we decided to ask them. It was only a beginning, but we compiled a survey and interviewed 200 of our neighbors. We interviewed folks in coffee houses and schoolyards, at bus stops and in parks, on front porches and at street corners.

We asked about their perceptions of religion and their perceptions of themselves as religious/spiritual beings. It was fascinating. To our surprise everyone was more than willing to help us out. (It's amazing how responsive people can be when we religious folk humbly ask for help.)

We asked, “What, if any, spiritual tradition do you currently claim or practice?”

We could not have predicted the responses.

One quarter of the respondents claimed one version of Christianity or another: Catholic, Presbyterian, etc. Another smattering represented a potpourri of other traditions: Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Unitarian, atheist, etc.

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Now, here is the amazing part. More than half the respondents (people we were inconveniencing with our appeal for help) told us a story. Yes, not a label, a story! Their story was about their process of adopting a very individualized belief system, one that could not fit into any publicly recognized category.

Half! One hundred people gave us a story and in sharing it, gave us a piece of their life.

As a religious person, I am aware of my tendency to define people by which side of the “church membrane” they stand. The world is made up of two teams: Christians and everyone else. And if I am honest, I find myself wanting to dismiss those on the other team.

However, if we go back to the “chairs experiment,” I really have no idea of the ultimate direction another person’s life is heading.

To love someone is to be captivated by their story. That includes their experiences, yes, but also their beliefs, convictions, and hopes for themselves and the world.

If I love someone, I find her or him to be fascinating. Like a grandmother listening to her seven-year-old grandson talk about his personal zoo of stuffed animals. Like two lovers, lying on a lawn, faces inches apart, sharing dreams. Like best friends reunited after years apart.

Our 200 surveys was only a start. We wanted to collect more stories, longer stories, deeper stories. We increased our volunteerism in local schools, neighborhood associations, and non-profits in order to meet our neighbors on “neutral turf.”

We also started a Sunday evening sacred meal in my dining room. For the last six years, we have hosted a weekly meal for any of our neighbors to attend. The meal includes good food and sacred readings from the Bible and historical prayers. Ten to eighteen people come each week. We have had Buddhists, ex-Christians, atheists, and searchers. It has been a table of beloved “strangers.” We sit and listen to each other’s sacred stories. Everyone knows there will be Jesus-words shared and prayed, but somehow that is part of the attraction.

### Think in Questions

I spent a few wonderful years as a volunteer chaplain at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Some of the stories from my Reed years were chronicled in Donald Miller’s book, *Blue Like Jazz*.

Reed is a unique place. Princeton Review annually declares Reed College among the least religious colleges in America. It is the sort of place some pastors use in sermon illustrations, in the same way that they talk about North Korea. Some churches send small teams to Reed on spiritual safari to observe the wild pagans in their natural habitat.

But I assure you that what I experienced was quite the opposite. It was one of the great garden spots in my Christian story. It is true that most Reedies want nothing to do with organized religion, but I found them to be one of the most challenging (and encouraging) communities with whom to cultivate my faith.

When I first arrived, there were only a few students on campus who were willing to identify with the historical Jesus-faith. I wanted to find some ways to be an effective spiritual presence on campus, so I sought their advice.

Reed is built on a classical learning model. All the students study the great works of Western civilization, which includes the Bible. In fact, Reedies read the Bible more than most Christians I know. I wanted to help them do more than treat it as just a historical document. I wanted them to believe it.

So I asked the students how best to proceed. I suggested a Bible study. I suggested a lecture series of great Christian scholars. I thought we could bring some answers. You see, I was stuck. I could only think in religious declarations.

Then those few Jesus-students shared with me some wisdom. They said, “Tony, if you want to move these students, stop talking in answers and start talking in questions. Trust the power of questions. Trust the power of God’s Spirit to show up when eternal questions are filling the room.”

So that is what we did. Every Thursday evening we would gather students, ask a question, and let the power of conversation, tickled by God’s Spirit, fill the room. Our questions went like this: What is God like? What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be spiritually whole? Why is the world so screwed up? Why are we so screwed up? Why was Jesus such an influential person in human history? What is the meaning of the

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cross? What is the meaning of the resurrection? What does spiritual conversion look like? What does it mean to be good?

Our Thursday evening group started with just a handful of us. It was a place where every opinion was heard. Every person was a full participant in the process of discovery. We Jesus-folk would also share our ideas, inspired by the Scriptures. In just a few months the group grew to dozens. Some became inspired by Jesus. We all began to follow him in fresh ways.

Today, when I sit in a Portland coffeehouse, the topic of faith inevitably comes up. I honestly can't help it. My unchurched and spiritually independent neighbors might notice what I am reading or ask me what I am thinking about. When they do, I try to answer them in questions. "This book is causing me to ask, 'what is God like?'" Or "I'm thinking about why do I struggle so much to be a good person?" Or "Lately I'm inspired by the question, Does Jesus still have a place in our modern globalized world?"

That is when the conversation takes off. You see ...

Religious declarations draw a line in the sand; questions open up relationship.

Religious declarations set up a monologue; questions reveal a desire for dialogue.

Religious declarations put people at odds; questions create camaraderie.

Religious declarations catalyze debate; questions catalyze exchange.

Religious declarations say, "I have arrived"; questions say, "I always have more to learn; I am on a journey."

### Chocolate Cake or Sunsets?

As a boy, I was taught it was essential to "share my faith." But what does "share" mean? Words are like bowls, filled with meaning. Often the bowl contains an influential metaphor.

For me, in those formative years, the major metaphor was this: Sharing my faith is like sharing a chocolate cake. Chocolate cake is something that everybody wants. Who doesn't like chocolate cake? As a Christian, I was one of the lucky ones. I had been entrusted with this wonderful thing. I get to enjoy the cake for sure, but if I was a loving Jesus-person, I would always look for opportunities to share my cake with others.

It had been given to me (and to others who believed like I do). It was our possession. If other people wanted some, they had to come to us to get it. And cake only travels one direction: one person is the distributor and the other is the receiver. In "sharing," the other person has the opportunity to receive my stories, my beliefs, my insights ... my cake.

While the cake metaphor is commendable, it also has many limitations.

It's a condescending exchange. It treats the gospel as a commodity. The cake metaphor assumes that one person has fully arrived and the other has nothing. It ignores the fact that I am also fighting to turn my chair toward the cross of Christ everyday.

Is there is another metaphor? A different way to think about "sharing"?

What if "sharing faith" is not like sharing a chocolate cake but more like sharing a sunset?

Imagine two people standing on a cliff over the Pacific Ocean, watching the sun slowly slip down the sky and dip into the distant water. When you share a sunset, you stand shoulder-to-shoulder, not face-to-face. Sharing a sunset draws people together.

When you share a sunset, both people are caught up in the beauty, the grandeur, the inspiration. When you share a sunset, everyone has equal opportunity to contribute thoughts. It is a remarkably shared experience.

One of those present may have more specifics to share about sunsets. One of the people may have studied and therefore has unique insights into photo-physics, atmospheric density, and the relationship of celestial objects. But the other person, even if they haven't studied, may have unique perspectives on the creative power of color or the hope that beauty evokes.

Shoulder-to-shoulder the experience grows. Both are learners. Both are contributors.

The conversation has no set course. It takes on a life of its own as these two neighbors consider the awe of this everyday miracle, this mystery. Sometimes the best way to share is just to sit in silence. Sometimes it releases a sadness since clouds hide the sky. Often though, a truly shared exchange will produce unexpected laughter, profoundness, or even transformation.

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Ultimately, no one owns a sunset. It releases awe. A sunset is clearly not painted by mere humans. It is not the product of our limited world. It leaves everyone wanting more.

It is something to be shared.

Our world is full of cliff tops to share with your neighbors. There are centers of common-good where people come inspired by meaning (volunteering at local schools, non-profits, or community centers). There are lingering spaces in every town (coffee shops, pubs, or parks). And there is always the opportunity to invite people to spaces of story exchange, like your dining room table.

The people we are with sense when we are truly dazzled by their stories. They will be inspired to hear that we are also souls on a journey. They will feel truly invited if we learn to talk in questions and not just religious declarations.

We will be amazed by how much our faith is nurtured by these shared encounters.

—TONY KRIZ is a writer and church leader from Portland, Oregon, and Author in Residence at Warner Pacific College; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2013 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit [www.LeadershipJournal.net](http://www.LeadershipJournal.net).

### Discuss

1. How do my outreach and evangelism efforts make room for peoples' stories? How could I do this better? How can our church's outreach and evangelism efforts reflect the importance of stories in peoples' spiritual journeys?
2. Why are questions important when it comes to outreach and evangelism? How can you help people learn to ask good questions?
3. How does the sunset metaphor change the way you think about sharing your faith? How can this help people have stronger outreaching relationships?

## RELATIONAL OUTREACH

## Reforming Evangelism

*4 ways to make sharing your faith more natural.*

1 Corinthians 3:6

Driving up the East Coast's Interstate 95 will teach you about one approach to evangelism. Sponsored by an anonymous donor, several billboards present travelers with various theological messages. "Have you read my #1 Bestseller? There will be a test," reads one. And, "You think it's hot here?"

These billboards represent the kind of evangelism that many ministry leaders today grew up with. I (David) was told as a young believer that I needed to share my faith so people could avoid hell. The approach was transactional: "Just get them to pray a sinner's prayer."

But what I was taught about how to do evangelism didn't match up with my own experience of coming to faith. My search began with questions and a lot of doubt. Sometimes I would get answers like, "You just need to give your life to Christ." I felt these Christians were really saying, "You shouldn't ask these kinds of questions—just believe."

Perhaps that's why, some 30 years later, evangelism is a hot topic for me and for the church I serve. What does it mean to evangelize today? Here are four principles that we've applied to reform our evangelism.

### 1. Start with sovereignty.

In ministry, success is not easy to measure. We yearn to be effective in our work, and it can become easy to look for ways to know we are getting it right—attendance, finances, new members, baptisms, etc. These things are important but they can become a tempting way to decide just how well we're doing—with or without God. This same performance temptation can apply to our evangelism. We have mixed motives. We want people to know Christ because we love them, but we also want people to know Christ so that we can feel good about ourselves and "count our work."

We both realized early in ministry that trying hard to be an effective evangelist led to being really ineffective evangelists. It took time—and awkward conversations—to realize that the methods we'd been taught placed the burden of conversion on ourselves. It felt like a personal responsibility to actually be the one to pray with someone to receive Christ. That kind of pressure actually sabotaged our efforts.

Now we possess the paradoxical spirit of urgency and lightness when it comes to salvation. We stay urgent in prayer, but we embrace Paul's attitude. "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow." (1 Cor. 3:6.) We do our part, as authentically as we can, but expect that the Holy Spirit is ultimately the one who draws people. Turns out, it is much easier to help people find a relationship with Christ once you jettison the idea that we are the sole responsible party for their conversion.

### 2. Incarnate the message.

Jesus embodied obedience to his Father and a relentless love for people. He attracted the humble ones who needed him and repelled those who were too proud to admit their need. And that is our model for evangelism.

Now, consider the popular programs and classes that characterize the modern-day approach to evangelism. It's not that the content of these models is bad or the people behind them aren't well-meaning. The problem is that they take what was meant to be a way of life and make it impersonal. They reduce evangelism to an inquiry of knowledge. They seek to initiate conversations designed to spark confrontation.

An incarnational model is relational, rather than transactional. Years ago a mentor said to me, "David, let your spiritual life be natural and your natural life be spiritual." I've never forgotten it—it felt like something I could do. Christ came into the world as a human being to reach human beings. As followers of Christ, we should do the same.

We find that now when we share Christ, we ask more questions than we ever used to. The intent of the questions is to get to know the heart and mind and story of a person's life. Some time ago, a person who was new at our church told one of our colleagues, "This church is a safe place to be human." It's a compliment that we've cherished. He meant, "I can bring my questions, my doubts, my hope—the real me."

We lead from this incarnational model in the way we approach God's Word and God's people. We try to lead with humility. We allow room for doubt in the way we communicate and teach. We don't assume everyone listening to us already believes, but try to address those doubts with gentleness. In doing so, we communicate

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that it's okay to be human here. It's okay to not have it all figured out. And then we trust that it's God who's doing the work, drawing people to himself, wooing them into the kingdom as we assist in the process.

### 3. Give invitations, not answers

I (Nicole) remember a conversation with a friend who was struggling to accept Christ. I began to ask her about whether she was ready to commit to life with Jesus. She was definitely not, she informed me, in very colorful language.

Earlier in ministry this would have disturbed me. I would have felt like I messed it up somehow and that it was all on me to “close the deal.” But that night I didn't try to give her answers. I told her stories. I told her the story about Peter wondering who Jesus was and his answer: “Come and see.” I talked with her about Nicodemus, and the woman at the well, and Adam and Eve, and Jesus' resurrection. That relationship sharpened my theology and Bible knowledge more than any Christian friendship I had! Another three years went by, and my friend received Christ, not because I answered all her questions, but because she had a true encounter with God's love and surrendered to his grace. In this case, God didn't need my help for her to pray the Sinner's Prayer. With her, I was relational rather than transactional.

What if a better measure of our success as evangelists was about how we are helping people become hungrier for God? When my friend reacted negatively to my question I was forced to think of ways to help her be intrigued by God. This means that she was really in my life—not just coffee once a month, but truly in life together—in raising kids, in marriage, in hanging out on Thursdays nights on the couch. Relationships like that are demanding and time-consuming. And they don't fit well into programs.

Jesus often asked questions instead of offering statements—and he made his questions personal. “Who do you say that I am?” “Do you believe this?” In our ministry we invite people to consider such questions and ask ones of their own. Rather than giving answers, we see Jesus giving invitations: “Come to me,” “Follow me.” And as we help people on this road, we encourage them when they're ready, when they know enough of God to trust him, to receive him as the beginning of this new life.

### 4. Remember that it's all evangelism.

For those of us who like structure and systems, an incarnational model of evangelism can feel too loose. We wonder how we will know if people are being saved, if our leaders are effective, if the work we are doing is, well, working.

What if a better measure of our success as evangelists was about how we are helping people become hungrier for God?

Rick Warren once tweeted, “You naturally evangelize anything you love.” We've come to believe that the main effort of our work needs to be helping our elders, staff, and leaders love Christ more. This means that whether people are beginning a relationship with Christ or have known him for decades, we are always helping them grow more in love with him. We pray from Psalm 51:12: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” We believe that it is our mandate to keep drawing people toward their own experience of joy and love in Christ. We believe that if our leaders are in love with Jesus, they can't help but evangelize. Our lives become a testimony to the grace and joy of living in the kingdom.

On a recent Sunday, we closed a service singing the familiar words “Holy, Holy, is the Lord Almighty.” As we listened to the voices all around us, it felt like we were singing people into the kingdom of God. This is the power that we are invited to live in, to share, and to love from. This is a different evangelism—a host of souls in love with Christ, creating an irresistible place with God being the irresistible force, drawing those around us toward himself. We still have a long way to go, but we're learning.

—DAVID DWIGHT is the Senior Pastor of Hope Church in Richmond, VA; NICOLE UNICE serves on the ministry staff; Together, they've authored *Start Here: Beginning a Relationship with Jesus* (David C Cook, 2014); adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2014 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit [www.LeadershipJournal.net](http://www.LeadershipJournal.net).

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### Discuss

1. Why do you think people struggle with evangelism? Why does it feel unnatural?
2. How does traditional evangelism put pressure on the individual? How is evangelism different when it recognizes God's sovereignty?
3. What is the difference between an invitation and an answer? How do these two types of approaches look different in outreaching relationships?



**RELATIONAL OUTREACH****Know Your Neighbors?**

*How one community learned to know and love their neighbors.*

Acts 17:26–27

A house in the neighborhood was becoming an eyesore. One junk car sat in the front, another in the back, and trash and weeds ran rampant. So a neighbor called Bob Frie.

“It looks terrible,” the man told Frie, a friend who is also the mayor of Arvada, Colorado. He thought Frie might be able to help. He was right. The mayor knew the first step to initiate a response was to call code enforcement, and that’s what he did.

But something didn’t feel quite right to Frie. And that feeling stayed with him a few months later, in January 2009, as he drove with his wife, Candy, to a meeting convened by a group of local pastors and church leaders. The agenda for their time together was built around one question: If you could eradicate one problem in our community today, what would it be?

There was no shortage of ideas. Arvada, population 106,000 and located just 10 miles northwest of downtown Denver, enjoys good schools, clean neighborhoods and parks, and civic pride, but it suffers from its share of social ills, too. And that’s where local churches wanted to step in.

At the meeting, after sharing his vision in which “no one falls through the cracks,” Frie paused.

“Wouldn’t it be great if Arvada could become a city of good neighbors?” he asked. “You could address a lot of these problems just by teaching the people in your churches how to be good neighbors.”

For the two dozen pastors in the room, their minds raced. Could it really be that simple?

“God was using our mayor to preach to us,” says Dave Runyon, the former teaching pastor of a local church who began convening regular meetings with nearby pastors in 2006. “It got our attention. He is basically telling us we could help the city best by teaching our people to do what Jesus said matters most and love your neighbor.”

In the months that followed, they wrestled with a simple but powerful idea: Local churches might change the world if they taught their people to take Jesus’ teaching in Luke 10 literally. The result is Building Blocks, a program which is growing in Denver and beyond.

**Tic-Tac-Toe**

In 2010, the Pew Internet and American Life Project asked more than 2,200 adults about their communities. Some 28 percent didn’t know the name of even one neighbor. Only 19 percent said they knew all of them.

One summer evening, after an impromptu outdoor barbecue with his small group introduced him and his wife to numerous people in his apartment complex, Jay Pathak, pastor of Mile High Vineyard in Arvada, began thinking how to encourage the people in his church to meet their neighbors. He drew up a tic-tac-toe grid to visualize this situation. The middle box represents a person’s residence, while the remaining eight boxes represent those surrounding them, be they houses, townhomes, or apartments.

“The diagram is so basic, but it helps people to realize they don’t even know their neighbors’ names,” Pathak says. He and other Arvada pastors began using the grid with their church leaders and congregations, and usually less than 10 percent can name all eight neighbors.

When Runyon’s wife, Lauren, tacked a grid for the first time on their refrigerator at home, they only knew half. “I call this the chart of shame,” Runyon says half-jokingly as he speaks about Building Blocks. Then he turns serious. “What does that say about how well we’re doing about the most basic thing Jesus told us to do?”

“We all need a place to start,” Pathak says. “The challenge is realizing where we are starting from.”

**Building Great Neighborhoods**

A few months after meeting with the mayor, the church leaders met with Vicky Reier, the assistant city manager for Arvada and herself a member of the Arvada Covenant Church. She told the leaders that she and other city leaders saw no noticeable difference between Christians and non-Christians in terms of their interactions with neighbors. How could they help their congregations grasp the basic teaching by Christ about how to meet neighbors and relate to them?

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The pastors came up with a plan for all the churches to teach this theme during a three-week period. They would use the same Scripture passages, but the pastors were free to deliver their messages in their unique styles and voices. They focused mostly on overcoming barriers, such as time or fear, prodding people to knock on doors, host barbecues and parties, and help neighbors with tasks. The goal: to see people move from strangers to acquaintances, and from acquaintances to relationships with their neighbors.

Now 55 Denver-area churches are committed to taking the neighboring message to their combined 27,000 regular attenders. In 2011, they created an interactive map on [ArtOfNeighboring.com](http://ArtOfNeighboring.com), which has blossomed with more than 4,000 metro-area households who pledged to connect with their neighbors.

Reier, after nearly 14 years in her role, says the needs in neighborhoods aren't glamorous, but they're significant, and the willingness of churches to make this commitment is a win for the cities.

Elderly people need their walks shoveled after snowstorms. Parents need a child watched during an unexpected crisis. Residents feel reassured knowing neighbors might see suspicious activity and act. Encouraging churchgoers to develop relationships with the people around them becomes the natural springboard for meeting those needs. "If you know your neighbors, you feel more invested in their well-being. You notice when things aren't right," she says. "Neighborhoods where people know each other tend to be safer neighborhoods."

More important, Frie says, neighbors who connect relationally establish goodwill. When his friend called about the problem neighbor's junk cars, trash, and weeds, "I should have gone to that guy first instead of code enforcement," Frie says in retrospect. "I might have found out the guy was sick or unemployed or needed some help. I felt that a good neighbor would've done things better."

While teaching last fall at Denver Community Church, Runyon drove his point home with Acts 17:26-27. "You didn't choose to be where you are. God has actually placed you where you are at this point in history and he's done it for a reason: So that others would perhaps reach out for him and find him, 'though he is not far away from any one of us,'" Runyon tells the congregation. "If you get this, if you let this sink in, it will change the way you drive in and out of your neighborhood. It will change the way you walk around your neighborhood."

After the meeting with Frie, "I drove home that day thinking Jesus is a genius. He's the smartest guy ever," Runyon says. "Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself—it's a simple, strategic plan that would change the world if every believer did it," he adds.

### Not an "Evangelism Strategy"

It's a simple, strategic plan, but it's "not an evangelism strategy," Runyon says.

And that's where some pastors and leaders get uncomfortable. One leader met with Runyon last summer to learn more about Building Blocks. After Runyon explained the concept, the man asked him what method is used to share the message of salvation. Runyon told him participants aren't prodded to share the gospel with any specific formula or at any specific time in their relationship. The man expressed his doubts.

"The tension in that is pretty interesting," Runyon says.

But sharing of the Good News does happen.

"When people have significant relationships with their neighbors, they'll naturally share their stories, and how their stories intersect with God's story," he adds. "When people who love Jesus are in relationship with their neighbors, great things happen, period. We share what we love."

Runyon also believes "people sniff out when strings are attached," so an evangelistic component forced into the equation only "limits the effectiveness," he says. Early on, he learned that many city officials were wary of anything that might involve proselytizing. They had been burned in the past by working with Christians who offered to help, but expected opportunities to proselytize the people being served.

Reier, who says she's upfront about her faith in her workplace, also says she sees an advantage to letting the sharing of the gospel happen naturally and not as a stated objective.

"The key factor in moving people anywhere in a spiritual life is a relationship. People need to be loved for who they are, respected as human beings, treated with kindness. Born out of that, then people ask you why you are the way you are," she says. "This truly puts feet on the gospel. It's not about what I say, but about me living out what I believe."

### More Ministry Opportunities

## RELATIONAL OUTREACH

One night not too long ago, the phone rang at Frie's home. A neighbor called to ask if he'd go down the street to check on their 14-year-old alone at home because someone was outside throwing eggs at the house. Frie was out the door to see what he could do. Another day, a different neighbor approached him and asked him if he could keep an eye on his house while he went away on vacation. Frie didn't know him before Building Blocks, but things are different now. "You know when someone has a baby, or needs help with a screen door, or a flat," Frie says. "Neighbors can pull together to help a neighbor."

A similar dynamic is playing out on a block in Westminster, a city just north of Arvada, where the Tillapaugh and Crowe families live. About eight years ago, the two families connected and became deeply intertwined in each others' lives.

Chris Crowe, with the help of her ex-husband, raises eight adopted children, fosters two young adults with physical and mental disabilities, and cares for one placed into their permanent custody. The pace is fast every day between getting kids to school, getting others to and from doctor appointments, getting through grocery shopping, laundry, cleaning, "and meltdowns—mine and the kids," Crowe quips.

Todd and Karla Tillapaugh and their three children, who moved back to the United States after serving as missionaries to American military personnel in Japan, have become an anchor for Crowe in the midst of these parenting challenges and her divorce three years ago. Their 16-year-old son Zach tutors three of Crowe's boys. Likewise, Crowe has become deeply invested in the well-being of the Tillapaughs, whether it's keeping them updated and connected with other neighbors on the street, watching the kids, or letting them know a garage door was left open. All of their kids play together regularly and the doors of both homes are open to each other. "It's very blended," Crowe says.

All of them attend Foothills Community Church in Arvada, where Karla also serves as community outreach director. The families already were neighboring in the Building Blocks' sense of the word, but the initiative pushed them to reach out to more families. They're now more deeply involved with five families on the street and connected with several more.

"Even though it looks like we're doing good, we still can get scared, lazy, or apathetic," says Todd, a vice president with a Christian ministry called Cadence. "Now we're pulling these four or five families together to say, 'Okay, how do we look beyond ourselves?'"

That includes the house owned by "Grumpy John," who hasn't always been the most receptive to their efforts. They've watched for opportunities to serve or visit, usually with limited success. But they continue to try, whether it's delivering an ice cream sundae during a block party or raking leaves.

"Jesus Christ was as spiritually nonverbal as He was verbal," Crowe says. "The first house he would go to is Grumpy John's."

—MATT BRANAUGH is the director of editorial for Christianity Today's Church Management Team; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2012 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit [www.LeadershipJournal.net](http://www.LeadershipJournal.net).

### Discuss

1. How many of your physical neighbors do you know? How many of your church's physical neighbors do you know? What does it mean to be a good neighbor?
2. What issues do we see rising up in our community? How is the local government responding? How could we partner with them to reach people?
3. How does service connect to our call to evangelism?

## RELATIONAL OUTREACH

### Further Exploration

*Resources for developing impactful, outreaching relationships.*

**BuildingChurchLeaders.com**. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

- “Connecting Service and Evangelism” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Engaging Evangelism” Training Theme
- “Evangelistic and Newcomer Ministry” Best Church Practices
- “Reaching Your Community” Survival Guide

**LeadershipJournal.net**. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

**Conspiracy of Kindness: A Unique Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus** by *Steve Sjogren*. This book is an excellent introduction to practice of servant evangelism. With real-life stories and strategic wisdom, Sjogren, a leader of the movement, shows churches how they can impact unbelievers with the radical love of Jesus. (Gospel Light, 2008; ISBN: 9780830745722)

**The Equipping Church** by *Sue Mallory*. Mallory’s story of becoming the director of equipping ministries in a California church serves as a framework to explain what an equipping church is, how it functions, why this is a biblical model, and what is involved in making this transition. The book offers several examples of churches that are successfully equipping lay people. (Zondervan, 2001; ISBN: 0310240670)

**Guide to Building the Equipping Church** by *Sue Mallory and Brad Smith*. This hands-on ministry resource road map—the practical companion guide to *The Equipping Church*—helps churches develop leaders and systems for gift-based team ministry. Section one discusses building an equipping ministry and culture. Section two addresses building an equipping ministry system. (Zondervan, 2001; ISBN: 0310239575)

**Servolution: Starting a Church Revolution Through Serving** by *Dino Rizzo*. Pastor Rizzo has recruited an army of like-minded believers in Louisiana—7,000 strong and growing. His focus: serve those outside the church with the love of Jesus, especially the poor and forgotten by society. *Servolution* is a blueprint for starting your own serving revolution. (Zondervan, 2009; ISBN: 0310287634)