

HOW TO REACH THE RECEPTIVE

When I decided in 2002 to leave my pastoral position and launch out as an urban missionary and church-planter, I did so with a burning heart but next-to no plan. Now I can look back and discern a recommendable pattern with some transferable principles. You may find these helpful as you consider how to make evangelistic outreach a larger part of your life and your church.

1. Find Them.

Jesus referred to those who might be initially receptive to the gospel as “people of peace.”¹ They are warm, friendly, welcoming in demeanor and willing to consider what we have to say, even after they discover what we’re about. They have a “Tell me more!” attitude. The Lord Himself usually looked for them among the poor, the simple, the failures and rejects, the sick and the needy, because they often have less pretense and arrogance to get past.

After asking the Lord where I should start, it occurred to me early on that I ought to try attending some Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. I have drug addiction in my distant past, so that was my ticket in. At A.A., I discovered many, many people who were crying out for someone to help them get better at life and closer to God.

God has in mind somewhere you could go in His name (and not just your own). The best places are usually where people gather and have awhile to interact. They may include relatives, acquaintances, co-workers, neighbors or complete strangers. Where will *you* look?

2. Join Them.

Once you find some people, hang out with them. If they’re regulars in that place, become one also. Notice what they’re doing and talking about. Become familiar to them. By all means, be friendly and warm. Acknowledge and greet them. Introduce yourself and get to know them. Make an effort to fit in. Ask things like, “What brings you here? What’s your story?” Be a great listener and question-asker. Decide in advance to accept them as they are. Concentrate on agreeing with what they say as often as possible.

Enjoy them. If someone tells an off-color joke, try not to pass out (or laugh *too* hard). When it seems right, divulge some details about the real you, especially if it reveals a weakness. People are usually drawn more to transparency and humility than to someone who comes across as super-smart, strong or “together.”

3. Bless Them.

Years ago as part of a spiritual training workshop, a friend and I got assigned to accomplish a task in a distant city where we knew no one. Our instructions were simple: Leave all your money, checks and credit cards at home, go and try to be a blessing to as many people as necessary until you can tell by their response that you got through to at least one, spend the night, then return and tell the group what you experienced. We weren’t under any pressure to sell or persuade anyone of anything. All we had to do was put up our antenna, ask God to make us aware of someone who needed us/Him, and be willing to do whatever the situation called for.

Of course, we didn’t have a clue how we were going to succeed when we embarked. How do you approach strangers, deflect their initial reluctance and suspicion, and say or do something that will touch their heart? We decided that we would begin by telling people we were from a distant city and had recently come to the realization that God had taken care of all our needs. So we had decided

¹ Lk. 10:6.

to devote a day to doing nothing more than trying to serve or help others. We would then ask them if there was anything they needed.

People started off responding by looking at us oddly, then by asking us for all sorts of things we couldn't help with (like changing a flat on a motor home, loaning them money and fixing a washing machine). But once we politely declined those requests and they saw we really meant it, they started telling us all kinds of personal things we never expected to hear. A man in a parking lot told us about an impending divorce and deep anxiety over a child's illness. We learned from a tearful young woman smoking a cigarette on the curb that her husband had left three days before. It was mind-boggling to learn what people were willing to tell us when all we said was something like, "Looks like you might be having a hard day. My name is Bob. I know we haven't met, but I'm a good listener."

As the afternoon continued we started asking a question when someone appeared to be opening up: "If God arrived right now and offered to help you with any one need or concern, what would you ask Him to do?" One lady asked us to pray that she would be a better parent, then confessed she was an addict on her way to sell her body so she could score some drugs. A middle aged man told me he was a Christian but had deserted his family months before and wondered what he could do to make things right.

Around dusk my training partner and I located a homeless shelter and climbed the steps in hopes of finding somewhere to sleep instead of our car. The fellow handling check-ins took a look at us and asked, "Are you guys the volunteers?" I replied, "Uh, yeah," and he told us where to report. We spent six hours having soulful conversations with needy men and other helpers.

By the time we set-out for home after our 20-hour experiment, we counted 17 times that God had enabled us to touch someone's heart. Two of them prayed to receive Christ and one to re-commit himself to a godly lifestyle. Several sought our spiritual counsel and asked us to pray for them.

Remember now: we didn't go to preach, just to bless. But once people understood this, that we were interested in them and what they cared about, they often *immediately* dropped their guard and wanted to talk about what really mattered to them. We were strangers to them, but they trusted us and treated us like angels sent from God.

That experience forever changed the way I think and feel about "evangelism." We are not first called to preach but to care. The Great Commandments precede the Great Commission:

Lk. 10:27 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Our God wants us to be both truth-tellers and do-gooders, but not particularly in that order.

Mt. 5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

The possibilities for do-gooding are as varied as your imagination. What might you (and others in your church) do *soon* in a calculated effort to bless someone in Jesus' name?

4. Lure Them.

Relational evangelism is very little like swatting at fish with a paddle and a lot like dangling bits of bait on a very fine leader. What we're waiting for is someone to notice and take interest in what we have to offer.

Being a blessing draws people to *us*, but not necessarily to *Jesus*. Somewhere along the line we need to help them recognize that we're about *Him*. It rarely attracts people to Him when we cluck over sin, quote Scripture, sermonize or extol the virtues of our church/pastor. But it can be very attractive when we make small, personal comments about our faith and occasionally ask them about theirs. Just make a point to stop talking well-before they wish they could *make* you.

For example, when I noticed that my next-door neighbor's girlfriend had moved out, I mentioned that I hadn't seen her in awhile. He told me why and I listened sympathetically. I had no idea about his religious background, but when he expressed his sadness over the loss, I felt free to ask, "How's your faith holding up?" In many similar forms, that is a great question. It shows our concern, allows them an easy escape if they want one and takes the conversation six levels lower if they're willing to go there. It also gives us a chance to offer to pray for them and check back with them later on. Only rarely do people turn that down.

Doing this gently introduces God into the conversation, and their responses give us information on how open and interested they are. It may also plant the idea in their mind that they have a real, live Christian on their hands, someone they can ask a question or safely turn to in a time of need.

5. Invite Them.

Once we have taken some time to establish friendly connections and begun to reveal what we're about, at some point we will need to take the bold step of "propositioning" them to join us in some kind of a discussion or study. I usually try to think of what I want to say *before* I say it so I can be crisp and clear. Of course there are times when the invitation-opportunity will plop itself into your lap before you have a chance to think. In those cases a quick, Nehemiah-like prayer will suffice.²

I've approached several people at recovery meetings after observing how inspirational or influential they were, then spent awhile getting to know them. My invitation went something like this: "I've noticed that people really listen when you speak, because you have a lot of insightful things to say. They look to you as a leader. I've been thinking about this for awhile and would like to make you an offer. I believe you'd make an even deeper impact on people if you understood the Bible better. Would you be interested in meeting with me (and maybe a few others) to see what it has to say about recovery?"

On one occasion a guy I knew was a lapsed Christian told me his wife had challenged him to read the entire book of Proverbs, one day at a time. I responded, "That's a great idea. I'll bet you'd get even more out of it if you did it *with* somebody. Would you mind if I join you?" His reply was, "Sure, why not?" My reply was, "When do you want to get together?" We've been meeting ever since.

Another time I met with a group of my mom's friends who had a variety of religious backgrounds. They came to have lunch together and discuss the possibility of forming a spiritual discovery group. I mentioned how common it is for people to be open to the idea of talking about their beliefs with others. But many of us don't do so because it doesn't feel safe. We want very much to avoid being preached at or getting drawn into an argument. "So," I asked them, "if we could create a safe place here and ensure that no one would dominate or get pushy, would you be interested in discussing some spiritual topics with each other?"

When they all answered "Yes!," I asked them to write down their answers to the same question I asked on my "Be a blessing" road trip: "If God showed up right now and offered to answer any question you have, what would you ask Him?" I collected and read aloud their fascinating

² Check out Neh. 2:1-5.

questions, then suggested that we use them as our curriculum and tackle one each time we met. They were ecstatic, and no less so when I volunteered to bring a passage of Scripture each time to help stimulate the mix of ideas.³

Inviting people to do something specific with me has opened the door to starting more spiritually sensitive discussions and groups than I can count. For a time something was going on every night of my week. Usually the only time things got sour was when a knowledgeable believer showed up. They almost always talked too much, answered questions too quickly and spoke in religious code. For the most part, I stopped inviting them. When they asked to come anyway, I took them aside and carefully explained what our agenda was and the best way to conduct themselves. You may need to do the same so your invitations to unbelievers don't get spoiled.

6. Connect Them (with Each Other).

Sometimes people enter a group and quickly discover that they don't know anyone there. Even if they find the discussion interesting, they often won't come back unless they get a chance to connect with the *people*. That's why I almost always make sure to include some kind of ice-breaker in the form of brief interviews and questions that everyone can have some fun with.

7. Focus Them (on Jesus).

Surprise, surprise: Most people have read very little, if any, of the Bible. And yet most are *very* interested to do so as long as they feel confident no one will make them feel stupid or pressure them in any way.

I like to start them in one of the four Gospels so they can get a solid introduction to Jesus. He is very able to hold people's attention and provoke them to think deeply. They just need a little guidance with knowing where to read and how to understand.

In many cases I follow Neil Cole's advice and begin with an interactive study of the seven miracle stories in John. (There are eight if you count the resurrection.) The parable of the Prodigal Son, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sermon on the Mount are also powerful "introductory" passages to explore together.

One of the best compliments I ever received came from a lady who participated with me in two dozen group discussions on various parts of the Gospels. One day she told me, "Before I started these Bible studies I already felt I had reconnected with God. But because of what we've been doing together here, I now feel reconnected with Jesus." Mission accomplished.

³ To read more about this great approach to leading spiritual discussion groups, see Garry Poole's great book, *Seeker Small Groups*.