

# 7 characteristics of effective

## Churches that are successfully reaching people for Christ know the

Our research of churches in North America has been an ongoing project of more than nine years. More than 4,000 churches have been studied in varying degrees. We have utilized the data and interviews in these churches for numerous research projects.

Let's step back and look at the big picture of all the research we have done.

Several years ago we decided upon numerical criteria that would define effective evangelistic churches. First, we determined that a church must have at least 26 conversions per year. We defined a conversion as a non-believing person becoming a Christian and becoming a faithful member of the church in question.

Second, we developed a conversion ratio that asks the question, "How many people in your church does it take to reach one person for Christ in a year?" The ratio was calculated by dividing the church's membership or average worship attendance (whichever is higher) by the total conversions in a year. The number had to be less than 20:1 for the church to qualify.

Churches had to meet both criteria to be deemed an effective evangelistic church. They had to have at least 26 conversions in the year measured and a conversion ratio of less than 20:1.

Only 3.5 percent of churches in America qualify.

While no one on our research teams knows precise details of all the churches studied, we have come to some definitive conclusions about the characteristics of the churches as a whole. Our team is in unanimity on the following seven characteristics.

### **Clarity, conviction of doctrine**

Young people across America are going to churches that are clear and convictional in what they believe. They are indeed reclaiming orthodoxy. Our research affirms the thesis of my book, *Surprising Insights From The Unchurched*. In our studies of churches and unchurched persons, the theme of doctrinal conviction is clear and pervasive.

Carolyn F. (last names were not used for study

participants) is a new Christian from the Sacramento area. She accepted Christ after attending a nondenominational church "that did not compromise the Scripture at all."

She continued, "When I was searching for hope, I started attending churches where you couldn't tell what they believed or if they believed anything. I finally found this church that preached and taught the Word without compromise. I accepted Christ only two months after attending here."

### **The pulpit is primary**

It did not matter whether we spoke to the pastors and ministers of the effective evangelistic churches, or to the people who joined and attended these churches. One theme was common: The role of preaching had an enormous impact on the evangelistic ministry of the church.

The pastors and ministers of these churches had similar convictions. They spent four times the hours in sermon preparation compared to their peers in the churches that were not as evangelistic.

The people in the church probably did not know that their pastors were devoting so much time to sermon preparation, but they were aware that something was different about these ministers.

Words such as "anointed," "powerful" and "convicting" were often used to describe the preaching ministry of these pastors.

### **Evangelism is intentional**

One of the reasons most churches in America are not highly effective in evangelism is, quite simply, they are not attempting to reach people for Christ. If such a statement seems to state the obvious, most churches do not do the obvious.

Effective evangelistic churches attempt to do evangelistic tasks. They are not always successful in the sense that conversions result directly from the endeavors. But the leaders of the churches are persistent in seeking other ways to reach people with the Gospel.

We must be careful in our assumption that lost persons

By Thom S. Rainer

# evangelistic churches

are truths and principles that are non-negotiable

will always be drawn to our dynamic worship services. Some unchurched people obviously have and others obviously will. But how much more effective can these churches be if they are fiercely obedient to Christ's command to go?

The Great Commission to spread the Gospel to all people is not an option. Evangelistic churches are persistently intentional about doing evangelism.

## Prayer is pervasive

Churches that are effective evangelistically are ever cognizant of the power of prayer.

Our research shows that the pulpit, prayer and small groups — particularly Sunday school — were the three most common instruments used by evangelistic churches.

The leaders of the evangelistic churches were not content to have corporate prayer limited to a brief prayer time for those with physical needs. They had times of prayer for all of the churches' ministries, for the spiritual needs of the members and, consistently, for the salvation of lost persons.

Rick Warren, in his 1995 paradigm book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, focuses on five purposes of the church: worship, evangelism, ministry, discipleship, and fellowship. Pastors and ministers of effective evangelistic churches insist that Acts 2:42 clearly delineates a sixth purpose: prayer.

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## Expectations are high

Membership in many churches today means little.

The requisite for good-standing membership may be little more than signing a card or walking an aisle. Effective evangelistic churches recognize that meaningful membership will result in members committed to obedience to Christ, including obedience to evangelize.

High-expectation churches may expect persons to complete a membership class prior to receiving official entry into the church. They may expect their members to be involved in ministry. Or they may clearly expect members to be faithful givers to the church, even tithers and beyond.

The research is clear. Churches that expect much receive much. And the members of high-expectation churches are much more likely to be involved in personal evangelism.

## Emphasis on small groups

Our studies show that a new member who gets involved in a Sunday school class is five times more likely to be an active church member five years later than one who attends worship services only.

Our research on other small groups is limited, but we suspect that some of the same issues are present.

Evangelistic churches are disciple-making churches. They believe that the evangelistic process is not complete until a believer becomes a fruit-bearing disciple in the local church. And leaders in these churches seek to conserve their evangelistic gains by seeking to incorporate the new believers into a small group, most typically the Sunday school.

## Receptivity to change

Most healthy churches in America did not become healthy overnight. God used many instruments in bringing these churches to health, and one of the key instruments was a people willing to change.

The key issue in change is church members who desire what is best for the church and the Kingdom, rather than insisting the church meet their needs and preferences. In many ways this "other-than-self" mentality is not only an indication of a church willing to change; it is a sign of revival itself.

The Boomer generation brought the consumer mentality into the church to a large degree. Thankfully, it looks like the Gen X and Bridger generations are rejecting this self-serving mindset. If so, the churches that they influence may be the leading churches in the next 10 to 15 years.

## What the future holds

The church in America is not very healthy if only 3.5 percent of all churches meet the evangelistic criteria noted in this article. But we on the research team at Church Central see reasons for optimism.

The younger generations are indeed rejecting the "me-focus" of their Boomer parents. They are coming to our churches with an attitude of sacrifice and costly discipleship. At this point it is too early to determine how many of the younger adults will enter and impact the church.

Our optimism stems from the fact that it will not take many of these young people to make a significant difference.

We wait with anticipation.

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Thom S. Rainer is dean of the Billy Graham School at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. The author of 14 books, he also serves as president of the Rainer Group and Church Central Associates. Recently, he was elected to become the ninth president of LifeWay Christian Resources, Nashville, TN.

