



EQUIPPER

The monthly e-zine from the U.S. Church Administration and Development (CAD) team of Grace Communion International.

June 2015

Volume 10, Issue 6

www.gci.org/equipper

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1 The importance of Identifying your focus group
- 2 A suggested focus group strategy
- 3 More about focus groups

Dear pastoral leaders:

What factors do Americans prioritize when choosing a church? In a survey last February, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) asked this question of several church leaders. Respondents (including GCI president Joseph Tkach) noted several factors: friendliness, children's programs, music, sermons, the pastor, community outreach, demographics (are the members like me?), location, vibrancy, quality of programs, denominational affiliation and theology. Here are some of their related comments:

We are trying to pay more and more attention to our *connectivity*... with a focus on welcome and warmth (William Bohline, pastor in Minnesota).

Without a friendly, attractive and energetic first impression, [people] will usually not return for a second impression (Greg Johnson, Standing Together president).

The choice of which church to attend has a basis in the needs of the family. If there are children, then such programs are in the top three [factors]. If a person is single, he or she will look at how many singles are in attendance. In all cases, the pastor and the church service are primary in consideration (Joseph Tkach, GCI president).

Some people think that prioritizing these factors means using an *attractional ministry* model that can be less than genuine. Well, I'm certainly not for gimmicks, and in GCI we're committed to authentic (from the heart), Spirit-led participation in Jesus' ongoing *incarnational ministry*. But it's not an *either/or* situation. Jesus' ministry is *both* incarnational *and* attractional. As we are able, we are to be living expressions of God's love for *all* people. But at the same time, we must be smart (see Matt. 10:16), giving attention to the factors (like those noted in the survey) that are important in sharing God's love with a *particular* group of unchurched people (a *focus group*). Why be focused? Because as NAE president Leif Anderson noted in commenting on the survey, "People choose churches for very different reasons.... No one church is going to be attractive to everyone."

God does not call individual churches to reach *everyone*, but he does call them to reach *someone*. But how does a church identify that "someone"? The answer is that they first gather in prayer, then they enter the community and serve the people they encounter. As they do, God shows them both their focus group and the factors that this group considers important in choosing a church. With that information in hand, they then take steps to put those factors into place. If they are unable to do so, it may be that they have identified the wrong group and need to reconsider or redeploy. In taking such steps, I encourage our congregations to be flexible and creative, for it's not "one size fits all."

I ask our pastors and other church leaders to give prayerful thought to this important aspect of congregational life. Many are doing so already, and I commend them. I pray that this letter and the articles on pages two and three of this issue will be of help.

On mission with Jesus and with you,

Greg Williams, director of GCI-USA Church Administration and Development



Have you identified your focus group?

Public domain picture
via Wikimedia Commons

Equipping all kinds of churches for all kinds of people in all kinds of places.

A suggested *focus group* strategy

This page is adapted from material drawn from Rick Warren's book, "The Purpose Driven Church" and from Graham Buxton's book, "Dancing in the Dark, the privilege of participating in the ministry of Christ." For some hands-on, practical help on this important topic, CAD recommends Nelson Searcy's book, "Fusion."

It's not uncommon for a church of any size to flounder in reaching beyond its walls to connect with and disciple unchurched (and de-churched) people. No matter the size of the congregation, if they want to join Jesus in connecting redemptively with these people, they must determine which particular group to focus on (we call it a *focus group*). Rather than reaching out randomly, churches of any size benefit from giving prayerful thought to the following issues

1. Look to God

Go to God as a congregation in sustained prayer, asking him to reveal the group he is leading you as a congregation to connect with in order to share with them the gospel of God's grace. Ask him to do any "heart surgery" on you that may be needed.

2. Look at yourself

An important aspect of a church identifying its focus group is for that church to look at itself. Where do the members (particularly the leaders) live and what unchurched people live there? If the leaders and the potential focus group don't live where the church is currently meeting, you might consider moving.

3. Look at your neighbors

What kind of church would likely reach your neighbors, including their kids and their friends? Where would they be willing to go to worship?

4. Look at the demographics

Is there a particular group that God is calling you to connect with? One of a particular generation, or ethnic or socio-economic background? What style of worship, meeting space, kids' ministries, etc. would best connect with this group? In thinking this through, note that (typically) the further you get away from the core culture of your existing members, the more challenging this outreach to unchurched people becomes. Why? Because of the cultural disconnects (barriers). In other words, the more a church tries to be "cross-cultural" in its outreach, the more it will need to have a special "missionary gifting." If your goal as a congregation is to be "multi-cultural," your core leaders need to reflect that diversity.

5. Exegete your focus group

Once you have gone through the focus group selection process above, narrow down your evaluation to that particular group, asking these questions: What do they have in common with you and what is unique to them? What do they need (actual and felt needs)? Which felt needs can you most effectively meet? (Think about their needs with respect to their kids, community, marriage, and other relationships).

6. Evaluate and restructure

Ask these questions: Can we share Christ with the people in our focus group through our existing ministries? If so, can we then use those ministries to connect them with our worship service where they can more deeply connect with Christ and with other believers in our congregation? How can we then offer "next steps" by which they can be helped to grow (discipled) in Christ?

More about focus groups

This page is adapted from material in the Church Next Training provided by GCI Church Multiplication Ministries (CMM).

Though the gospel is for all people, no church can reach everyone. Therefore, a church must focus on connecting with a specific *focus group*--the unchurched people group or community that the congregation will engage and serve with the intent of sharing the gospel of Jesus and making disciples. A focus group may be defined in terms of ethnicity, geography, generational composition, and/or socioeconomic factors. The following principles help churches identify and then connect with a particular focus group. As they grow and gain experience and resources, they can diversify.

Understand the focus group

Churches need to understand the lifestyle characteristics and preferences of their focus group. People generally find it easiest to make life changes when they don't have to cross racial, social, or economic barriers. It follows that churches are most effective in developing relationships with unchurched people when their church culture aligns with that of the focus group. Initial outreach efforts, therefore, should focus on those with whom the church has the most in common.

Contextualizing the gospel

Churches must reach out within the context of the culture of their focus group. To do that they must understand and appreciate their focus group's core values and worldview. And though each culture has its undesirable elements, not all elements are undesirable. At the same time, church forms and functions do not always reflect universal, biblical absolutes—churches must learn to live and share the gospel using practices that come from and are compatible with the surrounding culture while continuing to reflect timeless Christian truths and values. The meanings behind Christian practices should be emphasized and, when needed and possible, church practices can be altered so that the only objection to the gospel is the cross of Christ itself. Missionaries often spend years studying the language, customs, and culture of the people they are preparing to reach. In like manner, Churches must carefully exegete the culture of their focus group. The increasing diversity of American culture, and the cultural gap between unchurched and church people, necessitates that church leaders develop cross-cultural ministry skills.

Needs Considerations

Every focus group has physical, emotional and spiritual needs unique to their context. By becoming familiar with those needs, churches position themselves to serve their focus groups with relevant ministries. Of course, no church can meet every need, but every church can meet some. Church leaders should focus resources on meeting only a few community needs. Addressing felt needs with loving concern and practical service provides opportunities to address the spiritual needs of people. A strategic ministry plan includes processes for developing practical ministries, culturally relevant worship services, and effective administrative structures which will serve a focus group.

Spiritual Considerations

Churches need to learn about the spiritual climate of their focus group. They can do so by learning about the group's history, its general attitudes toward Christianity, and the spiritual questions the members of the group are asking. As church members connect with the focus group (usually on their "turf"), they need to remain alert to the level of spiritual receptivity and spend time with those who show openness to the gospel.

Gathering Information

While taking time to observe people within their cultural context is valuable, there is no substitute for personal contact with people. By asking carefully worded questions, much can be learned about their lifestyle, needs, problems, and values. Talking with a cross section of residents, community leaders, school officials, and youths provides invaluable information. Local publications also provide a wealth of information. It's also helpful to check with professional organizations to find demographic and psychographic information, including census data and economic profiles.