

Good news: Sharing the gospel is easier than you think

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Only 15 percent of American congregations have grown by even one person in the last five years, according to the *Parish Paper* newsletter. There are no doubt many demographic explanations for why congregations' memberships decline or plateau, but it's also true that some congregations don't know how to grow or don't really want to grow. Research by Wade Clark Roof in the mid-'90s, for example, indicated that only 26 percent of United Methodist clergy and lay leaders would put evangelism on their congregations' agenda.

For many people in mainline circles, the term evangelism evokes unpleasant images of aggressive tactics deployed by people insecure about their own faith, and anxious for others to believe and behave the way they do in order to make their own faith more plausible. As humorist Dave Barry once said, the people who are most interested in telling you about their religion don't want to hear about yours. But the existence of bad evangelism is no reason to opt for no evangelism.

Church consultant Christopher A. Schwartz, German founder of the Institute for Natural Church Development, has called attention to the powerful evangelistic witness that is possible on Sunday morning simply by paying attention to what visitors experience. Will they experience warm hospitality? Will they get a palpable sense of the presence of God?

Based on data from 1,000 congregations in 32 countries, Schwartz has concluded that all growing congregations have eight traits in common: leaders who empower others to do ministry; ministry tasks distributed according to the gifts of members; a passionate spirituality marked by prayer and putting faith into practice; organizational structures that promote ministry; inspiring worship services; small groups in which the loving and healing power of fellowship is experienced; need-oriented evangelism that meets the needs of people the church is trying to reach; and loving relationships among the members of the church. If all eight of these

characteristics are present, Schwartz maintains, congregations will grow naturally and organically, without organizing an evangelistic program.

Some Christians imagine that the task of sharing the gospel is harder than it is. After all, there is much God talk these days, or at least interest in spirituality, which can serve as preparation for evangelism. Ben Campbell Johnson, professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary, has suggested asking persons outside the church, “When has God seemed near to you?” He claims most people are able to answer that question (*Speaking of God: Evangelism as Initial Spiritual Guidance*). This approach is nonjudgmental, it starts with where people are, and it takes their experience seriously.

Christians who can't or won't share their faith with others may be in a crisis of faith of their own. The question is whether they believe in the efficacy of the gospel—the gospel which justifies so that we don't need to earn our status before God or vie for position with others; the gospel which gives shape and purpose to life, making us other-directed rather than self-centered; the gospel of peace which reconciles broken relationships and builds community; the gospel of justice which advocates for the poor and the marginalized. This is good news. So how can one keep from sharing it?