

REACH

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

-Mathew 9:36-38

A FULL VIEW OF REACH

Four key points of mission

- A holy people, 1 Peter 2:9-10, in order "that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."
- The light of the world, Matt 5:14-16, "let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."
- The fullness of mission, words and deeds, Luke 4:18-19
- A Spirit empowered mission, Acts 2:17-21

Acts 2:42–47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Be in no doubt that ALL Christian community is supposed to grow. The NT church built people up and then sent them out. Those people would then build their own church and send out more people. Contact was not lost with their original church though as they continued to report back, pray for each other and offer assistance when necessary. Small groups are our first sending out from the church. Then the aim is to send out the members of our groups and follow their progress with eager interest and passionate prayer. It might seem a long way away. This training is intended to make this seem less daunting.

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A HISTORY OF REACH IN MANY CHURCHES

Common church mindset to reaching the lost

We invite people IN to the church. “Come to this service!” we say. “Come and join this group, hear this speaker, do this course”. These are not bad things but if this is our only emphasis then we will miss a large percentage of the population because:

- The church as a whole has burnt a lot of people to the point they will not go near a church building.
- Religion and the church building are seen as old and outdated and that no people of interest can be found there.
- Some people are busy on Sundays.
- Much of what we run at church is heavily christianised. This might sound like a good thing but it refers to the jargon and traditions we use rather than the actions of the people there. Alpha and playgroups are perhaps the stand out exceptions.

Debate

1. Why is inviting someone to a Sunday service the best way to introduce someone to Christianity and a Christian community?

2. Why is inviting someone to small group the best way to introduce someone to Christianity and a Christian community?

It is the suggestion of this training that the key qualities of Small Groups - a far more relaxed and less intimidating atmosphere, a place to ask questions – have been neglected when it comes to thinking about how we do evangelism. This is not to say that a Sunday service cannot be a method of reaching, it simply cannot be the only way.

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History of Reach in small groups:

NOTE: These comments are very generalised and may not be totally applicable to your church.

Most groups have an attitude that bringing your friends along is encouraged. They might even have an invite a friend night and most groups would pray for evangelism every now and then. However a lot of small groups grow through welcoming in existing Christians who are looking for a new church (this is a totally legitimate thing to do by the way) but when it come to non-Christians most groups have struggled to include them in their mindset.

We can be sure that God wants to do work through our groups. He wants them to grow in quality and numbers. This is a guarantee. The great commission is clear as to our role on this earth. We need to make sure we are not doing things to restrict the way God can work in our groups. Let's not box him into some traditional idea of what a "small group" has to be. God can break down any walls we put up but he also respects our decisions and allows us to grow and learn from mistakes and experience. So let's learn from history and make some changes to try and shake things up a bit.

There are not many more exciting things in life than seeing a friend or family member become a Christian and seeing their life transformed forever. Every small group will get excited if they see the person sitting in their lounge room getting to know Jesus for the first time. The group's idea of its purpose and function may be radically challenged. If people complain there are too many new people interested in a relationship with God – they need to take a good hard look at themselves. Seriously.

DOING REACH IN SMALL GROUPS

A helpful test:

A good way to get a clear indication of where your group stands with the whole idea of Reach is to ask these two questions.

1. Would I feel comfortable inviting my closest non-Christian friend to this group?
2. How would the group feel about me bringing that friend?

A lot of people will answer no to these questions. Here are some common reasons:

The argument against Reach in small groups

There are legitimate and understandable concerns about small groups being open to anyone joining the group on any given occasion. Small groups are often seen as a safe place where Christians can work out their faith in the knowledge that they are surrounded by people who are on the same page as them and with whom they have built long-term trusting relationships. In such an environment a

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new person – possibly a non-believer – may restrict the openness of group members and the depth of the conversation (both theologically and personal disclosure).

This training does not want to suggest that small groups should not be a place like the one described above. However part of being a mature Christian is reaching out to others and sharing the good news we hold at the centre of our lives. Think of Jesus commandments: Love God and love your Neighbor. Evangelism is central to our purpose on earth. If small groups are an expression of church then they can never be closed. In this training we would like to suggest ways you can include new people into a loving and caring small group that has depth of discussion and relationships.

The potential good that comes from running an open, reaching group far outweigh the potential bad. The negatives can also be smoothed out with a little bit of effort outside of your weekly meeting.

THE BENEFITS OF REACH

Sharing you faith with others can boost your faith.

Our love for people is tested when they disagree with us or hold moral views that clash with our own. As they ask questions we are challenged to think through the big issues and do some further learning ourselves in order to offer some potential answers. The more God is included in our conversations outside of church the more we get familiar with the name of Jesus entering every area of our lives. We are better able to see what God is doing in the lives of people around us and respond to his lead. In short, reaching out to people can invigorate our faith.

Some possible setbacks

Now it can also feel like a negative experience when things go wrong. People may become more aggressive toward Christianity rather than more open. You may receive abuse or persecution for your faith. These are not pleasant experiences. However such reactions are consistent with what the bible says we can expect. Jesus said that some people would accept his word with open hearts but others would have hard hearts. At least when we see a disappointing outcome from evangelism we can still hold hopes for the future. You will still be moved to learn more, pray and love in ways you wouldn't have otherwise.

Perhaps someone might visit your small group for a few weeks and then stop coming because of a personality clash or lack of interest or something like that. Don't see that as a failure of the group. God will work through our weaknesses and he is everywhere so will continue working on people even when they are not in the group.

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STRATEGIES

The Body of Christ

Sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking evangelism is a solo mission. This is illogical and puts far too much emphasis on one person. Evangelism is always done in partnership with the Holy Spirit, without him nothing of consequence will happen. Also, let's take advantage of the body of Christ. By that we mean using different people and their gifts to do evangelism. Get your friends involved. Think about people in your small group who might be able to assist you in effectively reaching your friends.

Eg. You might have a friend who is asking lots of questions about how science and Christianity seem to conflict with each other. You feel unable to even begin to answer most of these questions however there are one or two people in your group who have done lots of thinking about these very issues and can answer many of your friend's questions.

Eg. Your friend has gone through a very traumatic experience, which you struggle to understand and talk to them about. It's amazing how often someone in your group has gone through something very similar and is now able to help out your friend in a way you never could have.

You can make these connections either on a small group night or on a separate occasion if your friend is unable or unwilling to attend the bigger meeting. You don't even have to create a reason other than a social catch-up. Simply put the people in the same room and see what happens!

Models of outreach: Invitational and Incarnational

Jesus in his ministry went out to the lost. He tells the parable of a shepherd, who leaves the 99 sheep, and goes looking for the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-10). Sometimes we as a church, forget this, and base our outreach purely on an invitational level, waiting for people to come to us.

The strengths of being incarnational (meaning- going into the world, and existing alongside others) include:

- Not just inviting people to a new place, but living in their world
- Following Jesus' commission to "go and make disciples"
- It enables more evangelistic opportunities, as we are interacting more with non-believers.

This model works well when a group is *intentional*. However, there is still a need to create a space for prayer and discipleship, and there will still need to be invitations.

The suggestion of this training is that we are to use both models. I suggest we seek to engage with the world, by living in the world as Christians, *and* that we invite people into an open Christian community.

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Mission Units

One practical way of engaging the world is by forming mission units. That is, a group of Christians who are committed to doing mission together. A mission unit can include groups that meet in the workplace, at school, at uni, among friends... and means a group of people geared at making disciples.

“Reach” means seeing your small group as a mission unit. How can your group work together to making disciples?

You could try a process over a couple of weeks in your group, in which you do a discussion and Bible study on “reach”, and pray for your friends. You could then ask God to give your group good ideas, and have a discussion on how you can welcome non-Christians into your community. Decide on an idea, pray about it, and have a go the following week.

Other suggestions

- A testimony and dinner night.
- A group outing.
- Regular prayer for your friends.
- Get to know each other’s friends in your daily lives. Go to a movie together, or a footy match, or for coffee, or to the pub. This will make it more natural for a friend to come to your group, as your friend will already know a few people.
- Strive to be a community that exists in the world not out of the world.

How to make the invitational model can work better – the 3 B’s

Traditionally church has behaved along these lines. First you *Behave* (this means that you fit into the culture of the church you attend, you do similar things, you speak the same way and you conform to the same principles) then you *Belong* (people accept that you are a part of their community and will include you in all its activities) and after that you might end up saying that you *Believe* (buying into the teaching and traditions of the church). This model is flawed and not what Jesus would have done.

Here is a better way: *Belong* comes first. God’s grace is available to every single person without exception. The church is also called to love everyone – even their enemies – so just as God loves everyone, so should we.

Believe then follows. Once a person feels welcome and able to be a part of the Christian community they have been visiting they can then convert to Christian beliefs and accept Jesus as their savior and Lord. A great time.

Only then can we expect people to *Behave*. Once a person belongs to the community and believes in its doctrine then we can expect a change in behavior. A turning away from sin and an out flowing of faith into every part of their life.

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WHAT ABOUT MATURITY?

Many small groups have a variety of different people with a variety of different backgrounds. How do we approach a group that has non-Christians, new Christians, experienced Christians and experienced Christians who still struggle with their faith? It's an interesting mixing pot that can be difficult to juggle.

Awareness and explanation: We suggest you always target the least experienced group member (the non-Christian or new Christian). This does not mean that all the questions are addressed to those people. Rather it is an awareness that a lot of "Christian talk" can go over their heads. Some simple things to avoid this are...

No jargon: If someone starts spouting on about atonement, evangelism or eschatology, stop them and ask for an explanation of the words they've used.

Simple introductions: Use everyday examples to demonstrate theological concepts. When Jesus calls himself the lamb of God – explain why he would use that sort of imagery.

Consistent checking in with the group: As the conversation gets more complex take a quick time-out to ask if people are understanding things so far. Things may need some clarification or further explanation.

Lots of Application: Everyone will be able to relate when it comes to talking about their own lives – it's everyone's favorite topic.

Lots of questions: Talking about people's questions is a key purpose of a study. Two basic questions for you to ask: 1. What do you think? 2. How do you feel?

Avoid being judgmental: Particularly with non-Christians in the group. Do not assume everyone holds the same moral standards as you on drinking or sex or whatever. Don't condone it but avoiding boxing someone as "evil" simply by being ignorant.

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DEALING WITH CHANGE

Embracing Reach as a key value may require a significant culture change for your small group. St. Hilary's is still grappling with this issue but here are some suggestions for moving your group into a place where they are excited about the Reach possibilities - not resistant.

Gifted Evangelists

Hopefully most groups will have someone who is constantly doing evangelism. These people come in a variety of different personality types – they are not all super-outgoing people. DO NOT leave these people to do it alone. It is not acceptable to rely on one or two people to do all the reaching on behalf of your group/church. Instead see them as a precious resource. Learn from their experiences and advice. Think of ways they can assist others in Reaching out to their friends and family. Above all support these people and encourage them in their evangelism at every turn.

Getting spiritually geared for Reach

Get focused on God. He is the one who will place people in your path and ultimately bring them to faith. Praying, thinking and listening to God is very, very important. Be on the lookout for what God is doing in every situation and be praying all the time for the friends and family of each member of your group.

The Bible

This training is not teaching anything new! It's all in the scriptures. Do some studies on evangelism. Examine your group's core values and compare them with the core values of the NT church. Ask what would it look like if your group embraced Reach 100%? Then prepare an action plan.

RELEVANT PASSAGES

- Mathew 5:14-16, 9:36-38, 28:16-20
- Luke 4:16-30 (cf. v18-19), Luke 15:1-10
- Acts 2:42-47
- 1 Peter 2:9-10
- Amos 5

WORTH READING

- The Acts of the Apostles by Dr Luke
- Home Cell Explosion by Joel Comiskey
- How to run a great Cell Group by Joel Comiskey
- Power Evangelism by John Wimber