

## A Most Advantageous Position: Strategies for Outreach

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Strategy is an interesting and effective word to use when asking how your congregation can be motivated and organized for outreach. According to Webster's Dictionary,<sup>1</sup> strategy is defined as, "The science of planning and directing large-scale military operations, specifically of maneuvering forces into the most advantageous position prior to actual engagement with the enemy. A plan or action based on this."

Preparation to be in the most advantageous position is an important focus for congregations that desire to reach lost people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 3:15 tells us, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." Mission work and evangelism involves engagement with the enemy, Satan. Preparation through prayer and God's Word, along with thoughtful planning, will certainly give God's people the advantage over their enemy. And, as the definition of strategy indicates, such preparation is done with the expectation of action in mind.

Through the great teachers of trial and error, we have found some strategies that work to motivate, prepare and move the people of our congregation, New Life Lutheran of Ft. Wayne, Indiana, into effective outreach. Perhaps other congregations will benefit from these strategies as well.

### Mission and Outreach Starts With the Pastor

Motivation for outreach starts with the pastor of the congregation. This is essential. Congregations have to be shown how important evangelism and missions is. If you do not have a pastor who is mission-minded, you rarely have a congregation that is concerned about the lost, those who don't know about Jesus' saving grace. If the pastor shows this concern for lost people in all that he says and does, if he preaches it from the pulpit, teaches it, and makes the members constantly aware that Jesus "came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19: 10), that message can't help but touch the hearts and lives of the members.

Our pastor, Rev. Larry Merino, after first preaching a clear gospel message and pointing each of us back to the cross, reminds us every week of our call to tell others the good news of salvation. This helps us to have an outreach focus that is motivated by grace and not by guilt. We want to share with others simply because Jesus asks us to. Outreach is our loving response to Christ's indescribable gifts of forgiveness and mercy.

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*This is Jeanne Burger's winning entry from the 1999 Lutheran Society for Missiology essay contest. She is a nurse in Fort Wayne, IN, and a member of New Life Lutheran Church.*

<sup>1</sup>Webster's Dictionary of the English Language. Unabridged, Encyclopedic Edition. New York: Webster's Press, 1977, 1799.

It helps if the teaching is very practical. For example, during our weekly Bible study our pastor will often have us practice saying to each other what we might say in certain situations to lead people to Jesus. Some of the questions we have practiced include, "What does Jesus mean to you?" and, "If you only had a few minutes to talk to someone and you wanted to explain the plan of salvation, how would you explain it?" More than once our members have reported that in the week following such practice they have found themselves using nearly the exact words they used during that practice to witness to a friend, co-worker, classmate or neighbor.

#### **Have an Identified Biblical Model for Your Mission Vision**

Identifying the Bible verses that guide your congregation's outreach will provide a clear and solid base for all that you do. When you face decisions about which activities to engage in, what needs to be taught, or what new directions you might take as a congregation, you can refer to these verses for guidance and clarification.

Acts 1:8 gives our congregation a model that reminds us to embrace missions locally, nationally and world-wide. Just as the Lord told his disciples they would be His witnesses in "Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth," we also look for opportunities in similar areas.

For example, we have a number of overseas missionaries for whom we pray regularly, and our pastor and several other members have made short-term mission trips. But we also reach out to the neighborhood surrounding our church through a free weekly meal that is followed by Bible study. Members are also encouraged to share and to pray for one another about opportunities to witness where they work or go to school. As we share God's Word face-to-face in our daily lives, the concept of mission becomes real and personal, which helps us to understand what our missionaries are doing in other parts of the world.

Luke 19:10 is a good verse to encourage people to fill their hearts with the same passion that Jesus had "to seek and save lost people." Luke 15:7 can remind a congregation to celebrate outreach successes as they realize that, "there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents...."

Identifying such verses can help to keep a congregation's priorities straight. For example, our church board made a decision to have our pastor and other members give their reports first during our monthly meeting, before our budget report. This helps us acknowledge our priorities. We talk about our mission outreach first. If we have a question about starting a new ministry we ask, "Is this something God wants us to be a part of?" And if the answer is "yes," then we pray for a way to do it. Limited resources don't hold us back, but rather, we seek to develop a trust and reliance on God to provide both the people and the money for the work to which He has led us.

A clear biblical vision may also lead a congregation to let go of some programs. We actually gave up some programs at our church because they weren't focused on our priorities for outreach and were, in fact, draining energy away from it.

### **Simple and Doable**

The best programs are simple and doable. One of our most successful mission outreach strategies has been our Moment in Mission (MIM). This is only a brief part of every worship service at our church, but it may be one of the most significant factors in encouraging members to go and share the gospel. During MIM each Sunday, one of our members shares a message about a specific ministry related to the church, a thought about evangelism and missions in general, a new outreach the congregation is considering, or a concern from a specific missionary, and then leads the congregation in prayer for that ministry. Whenever possible, we hear from the person directly involved in the work.

Including MIM in the worship service involves every member and acknowledges that evangelism flows from the joy of salvation we have experienced while gathered together. It also inspires and teaches members of all ages to share the gospel both personally and through the work of the church. It makes mission outreach seem real and possible for every person there.

Though two members share the responsibility for the weekly moments, many different members are involved in the presentations, and others often volunteer information they have about a particular ministry. The presentation usually takes about three to five minutes during the service. Closing each moment with prayer reminds people to place the work in God's hands.

Simple and doable should not necessarily be interpreted as weak. Though prayer is a simple and doable way to "be in the most advantageous position prior to engagement with the enemy" it is a mighty thing in the work of outreach. James 5:16 tells us, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

After hearing some moving stories about the difficulties faced by persecuted Christians around the world during one particular MIM, we began to pray every week asking the Lord to somehow use us to be an encouragement to persecuted Christians. One Sunday a Lutheran minister from Sudan who was studying in our country was able to visit our congregation. He shared some firsthand stories about the starvation and sufferings of our Christian brothers and sisters in his homeland. During the following week he sent a message to our pastor saying how touched he was by our prayers and how he could truly feel our love for persecuted Christians. He shared how this had strengthened him and how he planned to share this with his people, so they would know they are not alone as they hold on to and share their faith despite persecutions.

### **More than Mission-Minded**

Mission-minded implies thinking and talking about missions, a good place for a congregation to start. This is the time when strategies are planned to gain the advantage over the enemy, Satan. Mission-active is the next step.

Being mission-active doesn't have to be complicated, but it does require action. Many times people don't realize that they are participating in outreach. Bringing neighbors, classmates, or co-workers to church is action. So is making the cookies and

coffee for the people going on evangelism calls. Writing a letter to a missionary and sharing the response is another way. Even the person who clears the snow from the parking lot so people can attend church with their invited guests has a part too. Simply identifying to people that the use of their God-given gifts has an impact on reaching lost people, even if it is indirect, will encourage more outreach activity.

Mission-active means looking for and using the opportunities God gives for ministry and not being afraid to try new things. It also means not being afraid to risk failure. Several years ago our church was given an empty house. We used the house to open a shelter for homeless women and children. Though we did touch the lives of several families in a meaningful way, we found that our congregation did not have the gifts to sustain this ministry and had to close the shelter for a while. But we learned from our mistakes and built on them, and now the house is home to seven formerly homeless men, who are turning their lives around through God's Word.

Recently one of our teenagers gave a great witness of how she is mission-active. During a MIM she was asked, "What sorts of things do you say to other teenagers to interest them in knowing about Jesus?" She answered, "I tell them what we did in our last youth Bible study. Like one day we played 'telephone' with verses from the Bible to see how messed up gossip became. That was really cool. I think that interested them. When I share things like that, almost all my close friends want to come with me to church. And once they come they almost always want to come back. The Holy Spirit gets to work right away."

### **Expect Great Things**

Limited financial resources do not have to create a limited vision for outreach. Limited resources create a reliance on the Lord's unlimited resources, and an expectation of great things that are beyond a congregation's obvious means. By sharing the needs through prayer we have been able to see God at work through our congregation in ways that would be impossible through our own resources. This reminds us to give God the credit and the glory.

An example of the power of prayer is our Wednesday evening fellowship meal. There were times that our budget was so limited that we had to carefully distribute the bit of soup and bread we were able to afford. But we knew that the Bible study following the meal had great potential for outreach in our lower-income neighborhood. God gave us a surprising and delightful answer to our prayers for provision. A wise man in our church decided to stop one day at a local banquet hall run by some fellow Lutherans. He asked if they ever had any leftovers that we might use. These friends were more than generous, and the result is that we now have delicious meals "catered" every week for free, just from the leftovers of their week's business. Our soup has been replaced by chicken, vegetables, potatoes and even on occasion, filet mignon. And since we have had such nice meals our attendance has more than doubled, giving us twice as many opportunities to share God's Word!

### **Celebrate the Blessings**

Perhaps nothing is more motivating than remembering the joys of successful outreach. A woman in our congregation shared, "I will never forget one time when another woman was asked how she became a Christian. She didn't say a word, but she turned around and pointed to me. That was very meaningful. God used me through the power of the Holy Spirit to reach her!"

New believers bring a sense of joy and eagerness that motivates a zeal for outreach in a congregation. Regular prayers for God to bring new believers to your congregation will keep the desire for outreach alive. New believers often lead the way in evangelism. Their excitement about their new faith can permeate a congregation and their deep appreciation for that faith will often renew other people's desire to seek and save the lost.

It is good for a congregation to remember and celebrate God's work through us. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that actually does the converting. But it is exciting to think about how God uses us to share the gospel with lost people. He could have done it some other way, but he chose to make it our responsibility to get the message out. Recognizing times when God has worked through His people gives us cause to celebrate and inspires us to continue to get the message out.

One Sunday Pastor Merino was preparing to baptize a woman and he said to her, "Now, I didn't bring you to this church. I am going to baptize you, but how did you end up here today desiring baptism?" The woman answered by pointing to a man in the middle of the congregation. Our pastor then asked that man to stand and said to him, "How was it that you came to this church and to be baptized?" That man pointed to another man across the aisle. That man pointed to another. This went on for three or four people, until the last one pointed to the pastor. That was a very moving moment in our church. We certainly had the advantage over the enemy that day! And lots of reasons to celebrate.

A mission-minded pastor, a biblical model, simple and doable programs, being mission-active, expecting great things, and celebrating the blessings of successful outreach are all potential strategies to prepare congregations to be in a most advantageous position to reach lost people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.