

# 8 Ways Your Church Can Ignite Outreach



## **Pastors discuss the tools their churches are using to share the Gospel effectively**

What are some of the most effective methods and resources God is using in churches today to reach people with the Gospel? We asked pastors across the country to share their concrete, evangelistic ideas that have been field-tested and proved effective in their contexts. We heard from smaller churches and larger churches everywhere from Alaska to North Carolina that have found evangelism success with specialized tools and curricula, outreach events, relational evangelism and more. Here's what's working for them. We want to hear from you too. Sign in or register and tell your story.

### **(1) Alpha USA**

*A weekly, 10-session course that gives participants a chance to explore the meaning of life and spiritual questions in a "relaxed, friendly setting"*

#### **Sharing Life Stories in West Des Moines, Iowa**

Helping church members understand they can share their stories as a part of their normal relationships at work, home, school or neighborhood is a huge key to effective evangelism, says Caroline Boehnke-Becker, teaching pastor at [Lutheran Church of Hope](#) in West Des Moines, Iowa, a congregation of more than 8,000 people.

“Street preachers just aren’t effective because they have no relationship with the people they’re preaching at,” she says—a stark contrast to a regular person who can “preach a sermon every single day” through outward actions. “Too often we forget others are watching us closely to see if our actions match our words.”

The [Alpha](#) course helps learners open up about their own spiritual experiences, and they, in turn, can more readily enter into dialogue with others about spiritual topics, Boehnke-Becker says. The main points are for people to describe what life was like before a relationship with Jesus, how they came into a relationship with Jesus, and what life is like now, she says.

“I explain that their stories should be no longer than three minutes—to hit the high points and don’t bore people because attention spans are short,” she says. “And that they need to practice and be very honest.”

## **(2) Community Outreach**

*Simple acts of meeting needs and serving the community in different capacities*

### **Focusing Outward in Monterey, Calif.**

With 2,000 weekly attendees, [Shoreline Community Church](#) in Monterey, Calif., has found that a variety of special events to help the surrounding community have built bridges for the church to share the Gospel with others.

Lead Pastor Kevin Harney says the church recently organized a free training and job fair for people looking for work. Harney led participants in prayer before the day commenced and let them know that they could receive prayer or just talk about their situations at designated spots. “People were sharing their stories and being prayed for through the entire day,” Harney says.

Shoreline also provides backpacks to students from struggling families each year. The backpacks are filled with school supplies, a small Bible and a letter to students that shares God’s love and lets them know church members are praying for them.

Harney says churches also need to shift the focus of what they do for believers a couple of degrees to include people from the community as well. Doing so helps churches build “all kinds of relational and evangelistic bridges,” Harney adds.

### **Hosting Events and Serving Schools in Thompson’s Station, Tenn.**

A big focus for [Thompson Station Church](#) in Thompson’s Station, Tenn., is

having an impact on schools for Christ. One of the best inroads has been food donation—specifically hot dogs and hamburgers given to area middle and high schools that they can sell at sporting events (and keep the money).

“This gives us a good working relationship with the schools,” says Stephen Witt, the evangelism and discipleship pastor at the 2,000-attendee congregation. He adds that he helps coach at one of the local high schools, which gives him closer relationships with non-Christian teens on campus.

Thompson Station Church also hosts a number of community events throughout the year, including a fall festival and an Easter egg hunt, which each attract more than a thousand kids—and such activities lead to “pleasant dialogue” with parents—and then evangelistic opportunities. “When you love on the community, especially their kids, they are much more likely to talk with you,” Witt says, “and then we can share why we do this—because of Christ.”

Other ways the church serves the community include opening its doors as a voting place, as municipal meeting spots, and even for “Zumba” exercise classes. The key, Witt says, is learning your neighbors’ needs and meeting them—adding that a great way to find out is through surveys.

### **Encouraging Community Involvement in Malden, Mo.**

“One of our priorities is to be visible in the community,” says Dan Hargrave, minister of 140-attendee [Stokelan Drive Christian Church](#) in Malden, Mo. “As a smaller church, we’ve tried to partner with existing community events rather than start from scratch.” Like the annual Car Show and Chili Cook-Off in the fall: “We don’t have the resources to do this on our own,” he notes, “so volunteers from our congregation organize the parking and traffic-control portion of the event. We run our shuttle buses for those who have to park their vehicles a distance from the event as a service to those attending.”

As a result, Hargrave says, those who regularly attend the event now “look” for Stokelan Drive to provide this service. “Often we are the first faces those attending see,” he says. “They know [we’re] going to be there. It’s an attitude we want to cultivate in the minds of our town’s residents.”

In fact, he says, one neighbor told Hargrave that Stokelan Drive was encouraging other churches in town to be more active in the community. “I was very pleased to hear those words,” he says. “It told me we’re on the right track.”

And in a culture (including a church culture) that craves success, Hargrave has a different take. “Too often we’re more concerned with success than we are with obedience,” he says. “I remind my congregation from time to time that the Great Commission was directed to every believer. Therefore, it is directed to every

church, as well. It's OK to start small. The important thing is to do something."

Still, he recognizes the importance of evangelism effectiveness, and Hargrave says it all hinges on leading nonbelievers to Christ—that's "preeminent," he notes.

### **(3) Discipleship**

*Investing in, building and equipping regular church attendees to be Christ followers*

#### **Training Disciples in San Diego**

"The best way we are reaching people is through investing in the people we have, teaching them to evangelize their friends and families," says Matt Smith, lead pastor of [Barabbas Road Church](#) in San Diego, which has about 200 attendees each weekend. "So often the focus is on the outside, but we have found that by really equipping the people we have, we see more people come to Christ and our church. The idea is that a real disciple of Christ begets another disciple of Christ."

One way this is accomplished is by emphasizing to church members the importance of personally responding to the sermons—most notably encouragement via Facebook and other social media—to ensure that "God's story is being shared as it plays out" in church members' lives. And rather than holding multiple teaching events during the week, Smith says, "We want to move the whole church as a unit in applying the sermons."

Smith says he can detect deeper walks among church members to this end by their collective increased interest in and commitment to prayer: "We're seeing God answer prayers," he says. "It increases the faith of the whole body and we rely more on Him."

Signs cover the interior of the Barabbas Road sanctuary that hammer home the five crucial steps believers in Christ are called to take:

*Step one: Invest your life in Christ.*

*Step two: Invest your life in the Bible.*

*Step three: Invest your life in others.*

*Step four: Invest your life in worship.*

*Step five: Invest your life in disciple making.*

*What step do you need to take?*

Smith isn't big on traditional metrics as far as evangelism effectiveness goes. He

does look at how many people are involved in small groups, but other than that, he keeps the rest of the stats “pretty low-key.” Instead, Smith says, “I want stories from my people of what God is doing.”

#### **(4) *How to Share Your Faith***

*A four-session curriculum that covers how to present the Gospel, what to say when someone is not ready to accept Christ and more*

##### **Equipping Attendees in Fontana, Calif.**

The [\*How to Share Your Faith\*](#) evangelism training has been “life changing” and “transformational” for the people of 6,000-attendee [Water of Life Church](#) in Fontana, Calif., says Danny Carroll, the church’s senior pastor.

The church has made *How to Share Your Faith* part of its School of Ministry, which 350 to 400 people go through at a time. Office staff and other personnel have taken the course, so they are able to share their faith more effectively with people with needs and hurts who walk through the doors, Carroll says.

“We saw people getting saved, giving their lives to Jesus in a gigantically transformational way,” Carroll says.

Carroll encourages other churches to offer the training as a core class for their congregations too, so they can see “supernatural things” take place.

“When we go away and hear, ‘Wow! Unreal!’ or ‘It changed my life!’ or ‘I surrendered to Jesus,’ that’s a win,” he says. “A transformed life is demonstrated by passion for God and compassion for people.”

#### **(5) Lifetree Café**

*Public locations open once a week for an hour to anyone wanting to explore life and faith. Some of the topics (called “episodes”) include family, money, materialism, health and heaven.*

##### **Opening Doors in Rochester, N.Y.**

[Lifetree Café](#) is “being blessed enormously here at Hope,” says David Hurlbutt, director of music and outreach at [Hope Church](#) in Rochester, N.Y. “Since we began seven months ago, we’ve seen more than 200 people who are brand-new to Hope—many of whom I know would not have come any other way.”

One Lifetree episode, “The Witch Next Door,” attracted “at least seven pagans or Wiccans—two of whom returned last week for the episode on reincarnation,” Hurlbutt says. “You tell me what other ministry opens doors to people with such different worldviews or faith systems. Incredible!”

Many of these new friends have become involved in Sunday worship; “some have even become active members in our congregation,” Hurlbutt says. “And then last night in our Lifetree Café, a newer friend who’s come about six times gave her life to Christ following the episode. It doesn’t get better than that this side of heaven!”

Lifetree Café has seemed to have filled a large need to let people be who they are, where they are, in a safe place. “It just takes people with hearts for the lost and openness to do things a little out-of-the-box,” Hurlbutt says.

### **Accepting and Valuing People in Fort Wayne, Ind.**

At 550-attendee [Aldersgate United Methodist Church](#)'s Lifetree Café in Fort Wayne, Ind., during an episode focusing on the bestselling book *The Shack*, a second-time attendee began questioning why God wasn’t letting him come out of his depression and suicidal thinking.

“The room became electric with many people responding to him in love and with caring comments,” the church’s local pastor, Don Wismer, recalls, adding that one woman—also there for her second time—walked over to the man, sat next to him, put her arm around him, and quietly lifted him in prayer.

Wismer notes that while Scripture and Christian thought aren’t hidden from the discussion, participants are “accepted for who they are and where they are on life’s journey.” Many are feeling valued and heard for the first time, and that frequently opens the door to deeper dialogue about spiritual matters, Wismer says.

Wismer adds that his Lifetree Café also collects clothing and other items for the homeless and eyeglasses for [OneSight.org](#) and receives funds for ministries that fight child sex slavery. Those efforts prime the pump for evangelistic conversations. “These kinds of activities always interest caring people whether they are believers or not,” he notes.

He champions Lifetree Cafe ministry as an effective “turnkey concept” that a church can implement easily; volunteers can manage the roles of leadership, for example. Lead pastors needn’t add another obligation to their ministry plates.

For some, Wismer says, Lifetree Café is where they are most comfortable; they

may not decide to become involved with a church in the traditional way—and that’s OK. “In my view, if we’re helping people enter into deeper relationships with Jesus, we’re doing what we’re called to do,” he says.

Wisner determines Lifetree’s evangelistic success mainly by the number of deep spiritual conversations that are happening among people not involved on a regular basis with the church. “The personal stories we hear from our participants as they sense God moving in their lives are wonderful,” he says. “The ways we have seen God orchestrate conversations and relational connection with one another is amazing.”

## **(6) Relational Evangelism**

*Living your faith and building relationships through which spiritual conversations naturally occur*

### **Making Friends in Austin, Texas**

The single most effective evangelism tool Keith Tooley has seen is Christians building friendships with non-Christians—a method that doesn’t require much training, if any.

“Loving on them, meeting their needs, meeting them where they are without judging them, doing life with them” are the steps Tooley, the missions and evangelism pastor at [Church at Canyon Creek](#) in Austin, Texas, encourages believers to take with non-Christians.

“We have seen several people outside our church come to faith through individuals reaching out to [them] at work, their kids’ activities.”

To get church members specifically trained in evangelism, Tooley encourages churchwide evangelism campaigns “to help the entire congregation get involved and catch the vision to reach the community.” Developing a heart for the community and its needs, Tooley says, is a major step toward church members’ active engagement with their neighbors—and that can get ignited by something as simple as a “Friendship Sunday” in which church members commit to invite at least one non-Christian friend to the church service. (And of course, he says, “be known as a church that loves and serves people.”)

“We can’t determine the number of salvations—that is up to God,” he notes. “But we do want to know that our congregation is reaching out to unbelievers, engaging in spiritual conversations, and sharing the Gospel.”

## **Inviting Friends to Events in Louisville, Ky.**

“We continue to see that our most effective outreach efforts ultimately have a relational foundation,” says Kyle Idleman, teaching minister of [Southeast Christian Church](#) in Louisville, Ky., which has about 20,000 attendees. “We may provide special events to make an invite easier, but when our members are reaching out to those in their circles of influence, it makes all the difference.” He adds that service projects are just as effective—if not more so—in terms of reaching others for Christ.

Another key is always looking to leverage what people naturally have on their minds (e.g., a special 9/11 memorial service for the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks).

How Southeast Christian Church measures success is determined by the purpose of the event, Idleman reveals. For example, if the church invites a special speaker not immediately known for faith (but is a committed Christian), the goal is to reach those who’re completely unconnected to church. “If we do a family event, we’re more likely to measure by finding out how many of our members brought another family member.”

Ultimately he says Southeast wants to be “a praying church, seeking and following the Spirit’s lead in reaching people for Christ.” Also he says the church is trying to be much more intentional at not just celebrating stories of people who come to Christ, but also the stories of people who were key in others coming to Christ.

## **Discerning Who Is Ready to Hear in Rolling Meadows, Ill.**

Senior Pastor James MacDonald of 13,000-attendee [Harvest Bible Chapel](#) in Rolling Meadows, Ill., says the church doesn’t have evangelistic services, but attendees are encouraged to bring their nonbelieving friends.

“We believe, as 1 Corinthians 14 says, that there is evangelistic power in ... a person ripe to the Gospel, who observes sincere, Spirit-filled, passionate worship,” MacDonald says. “That is a powerful evangelistic message. We see the proclamation portion of the service as part of the worship.”

MacDonald says he remembers hearing the old youth ministry adage, “If you want to win the high school to Christ, win a quarterback on the football team, win the head of the cheerleaders; when you’ve won them, you’ve won everybody.”

“Well, that’s sociology,” he says. “That’s not the kingdom of Christ. Jesus wouldn’t go into a high school and win the famous people. ... Christ would go into a high school and look for the kid sitting in the corner of the cafeteria with the

tape on his glasses and the pocket protector because he knows this kid's 'thing' is not working."

In addition, MacDonald says he believes a lot of modern evangelism's emphasis is really making friends with people who aren't ripe for hearing the Gospel and waiting for them to ripen.

"Meanwhile, living one more door past my evangelistic project is a person whose marriage is falling apart," he says, "and he just went through a bankruptcy in his business. He's ready to hear something. All around us are hurting people desperately looking for something else, people whom God has ripened to the Gospel."

MacDonald says Harvest teaches its members to "go out into the world and look for the people God is ripening to the Gospel"—an overriding principle emphasized in ministries throughout the church. And evangelism technique isn't the point—indeed, Harvest's website states that the power of the Gospel isn't in the "persuasion or the culturalization of the messenger," but in the message itself. In the end, again, the key is who is being evangelized.

"So when you're out for dinner with your green-apple project, and you break away from the table to go into the bathroom, and there's a lady crumpled up in the corner crying, you immediately think, *I've got my person*," he says. "We could be seeing far more conversions if we skipped the dog-and-pony show and just went straight to the heart of the matter, which is reaching people whom God's trying to reach with a bold proclamation of truth."

## **(7) Testimony Books**

*The faith stories of seven people from a local church compiled in a book that church members distribute through various evangelism methods (door-to-door, friendship, etc.)*

### **Offering Hope in Wasilla, Alaska**

David Pepper, the lead pastor of 1,500-attendee [Church on the Rock](#) in Wasilla, Alaska, is a big believer in the effectiveness of testimony books produced by [Good Catch Publishing](#), which he says he's seen successfully employed for evangelistic purposes.

"When a testimony is given, it brings hope for those who listen to it or read about it," Pepper says—hope that spiritual change can happen in their lives, too.

For instance, one of Church on the Rock's ministries, Fresh Start, helps people

process the issues of their hearts and receive wholeness. A key element of the outreach is a testimony from someone who God saved and healed from brokenness and destructive sin. “So much of the blessing, salvations and growth of our faith community has happened because the testimonies of the body of Christ were unleashed [on listeners],” Pepper says. “The testimony books can be effective on so many levels—and for years to come, as a book can be read numerous times.”

Pepper says Church on the Rock tracks and follows up with guests. “Every week we see people who come to faith in Christ and who are coming back to faith,” he says.

## **(8) Weekend Worship Services**

*Church gatherings, especially on holidays like Christmas and Easter, to which non-Christians are invited and where they will be exposed to the Gospel*

### **Building Excitement in Charlotte, N.C.**

One of the main evangelism strategies at 9,500-attende [Elevation Church](#) in Charlotte, N.C. is harnessing the dates when church members are most likely to bring to services friends and family who don’t know Christ—and when nonbelievers are most likely to show up at church on their own, says John Bishop, the pastor of Elevation’s Matthews, N.C., campus. Those dates, of course, are Christmas and Easter.

Bishop says Elevation helps get church members excited about inviting people to services by giving them visually compelling invitations they can place in others’ hands.

And while Elevation attendees are offered the chance to respond to the Gospel and place their faith in Christ at every service, Bishop says some services are geared entirely toward evangelism, and “we are very intentional about letting our people know so that they can get excited about inviting their friends.”

Bishop says Elevation determines its evangelistic success by “how diligently we work to prepare the way for people to respond to the Gospel.”

“We don’t think we have any control over the mystery of a person’s conversion; instead we focus on pointing the way toward salvation and clearing the path that leads to Christ,” Bishop says. “And we see ourselves as partners as they begin their journeys toward a life in Christ.”