



The Local Church (and ABF) In Flight - Reaching the Unchurched - April 05

Think of an outreach-oriented church (or ABF) in terms of a two-winged airplane (is there any other kind?). The one wing represents all of the great events, programs and services the church provides on its campus. This year, every church will (and should!) put a lot of effort into making sure the music is top-notch, the sermons are clear, kids programs are fun, adult fellowships are welcoming, lighting is just right, guest relations are in order, etc, etc. Of course, such excellence in every way is a God-honoring thing. Its also a hope that guests from the outside (unbelievers) will be drawn to what is offered at the church...and eventually drawn to the Good News.

But, there is a problem. More and more people on Sunday morning are thinking that bed is not such a bad place to be. The Sunday paper is preferable over a thick, hard-to-understand Bible. And, surround-sound jazz beats a hymn-singing choir any day. Barna Reseach Group says that the number of unchurched on our continent has almost doubled since 1991.

"What can we do to get people to come to our church?" is not the best question. Rather, "Who is going to draw near to the unchurched?" leads us to where we need to be.

If the first wing is all about "come here", the other wing is "go there and live among". Paul's explosive, reproductive ministry in Thessalonica seems to hang on one simple phrase, "I lived among you for your sake." (1Th 1:5) It needs to be our driving mindset as well. Every ABF/local church attendee has been strategically placed by God where they live, work and play. We are not simply church attendees, we are the church.; the church distributed, the church living as "insiders" out there....situated by God to draw near to those who don't see church as an option. [check out Petersen's awesome book on this, *The Insider* (NavPress)].

Sure, we want people to come to our church or ABF. But, the guiding principle is this....we must begin where people are, not where we want them to be.

Embrace both wings...and take flight.

Here are some practical ideas for representing Christ and the Good News out there....

1. Every Monday night, one of our ABFs goes to the streets of downtown Akron and hands out Bologna sandwiches and blankets to the homeless....and then offers a weekly Bible study downtown for those who are willing.
2. Our ABFs are consistently challenged to pray for those in their God-given networks. Members are given a card called "My Circle of 3" which is a guide for praying for at least three people in their lives (Col 4:2-6). ("Give me an open door, boldness, clarity")
3. Rather new, ABF attendees are being encouraged to start iGroups ("...investigating God and the Bible in small groups...") where they live, work and play. iGroups are a way to expose the unchurched and unbelievers to the Bible in a casual setting. (We use Discussion questions on the Gospel of John and/or Luke, plus some groups use Willow Creeks Tough Questions Series)

- Jay Halley, Pastor of Discipleship at The Chapel, Akron, Ohio