

Ten Considerations for Reaching Skeptics and Seekers

1. We sometimes forget how odd, different and challenging the Bible actually is.
2. Newcomers (in a post-Christendom era) may be coming from an agnostic, atheist, or “agnostic” point of view and bring with them loads of challenging questions. It behooves the preacher to befriend people of this background whether or not they eventually join the church.
3. The Inquirers’ Class is often convenient, abbreviated, and mostly aimed at “Lutherans by transfer.” Seekers, skeptics, and new believers require holy, unhurried *time* with seasoned, mature Christians (e.g. catechumenal process).
4. New people often encounter a liturgy (essentially learning a second language) alone and without accompaniment or hospitality.
5. We push towards “membership” too quickly without the honesty and cost of discipleship. Seekers are often initially looking for Jesus (and often not a church community). Jesus is never coercive, but clear and invitational.
6. Time is never taken to engage in honest and caring dialogue concerning a seeker’s previous absence from church life or the reasons for possible return.
7. There may be unresolved bits of our own pastoral theology that feel threatened by a skeptic’s honesty. There is more honest doubt in the pew each week than pastors sometimes acknowledge.
8. Perhaps unintentionally, members may suggest to newcomers a sense that their personal faith is forever settled and static. (“Everyone was saying the creed with an absolutely straight face”).
9. There may be a “disconnect” between the proclaimed and studied words of Jesus and the actual, visible discipleship of the gathered community.
10. Sermons may seem didactic and always tied up with a neat bow, aimed at people who are already part of the community.

Discussion:

1. Briefly describe a seeker (someone very new to the faith) of your acquaintance who has started attending worship at your home congregation.
2. Of the six elements of Christian conversion listed below, which element seems to draw most of your time and imagination? Why?

Belief/Intellectual
Repentance/Penitential
Commitment/Volitional

Baptism/Sacramental
Gifts/Charismatic
Community/Corporate

“Even though a theological case may surely be made that each of these elements is a gift from God and we are able to think theologically, act on guilt and remorse, and radically shift allegiances only as a result of God’s giftedness, it can also be argued that God relinquishes control of these areas to human decision and volition because God is not interested in our wooden, robotic response. Love that is forced and programmed is hardly love at all...The preacher makes Sunday forays into the lives of listeners in areas where God may not, by God’s own design, hold all-powerful sway...There can be no arm-twisting in any process of authentic evangelism. A listener is allowed to accept or reject the truth of the gospel.”

Frank G. Honeycutt

--from *Preaching for Adult Conversion and Commitment* (2003)