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The Goal of Evangelism

by Dr. James T. Reutler, Grace UMC, Denver, Colorado

The Goal: Discipleship

Discipleship, not membership or even attendance, is the goal of evangelism; and yet, we frequently aim at growing our membership or increasing our attendance. We somehow hope that if people get on the roll or in the door, they will automatically become disciples. It does not work that easily. We have to aim at forming disciples.

Lessons to be Learned

One of the congregations that I served intentionally received members only once a year. It was a fairly new congregation at the time, and one might expect such a congregation to aim at growing its membership as quickly as possible. It wanted to get off of annual conference support, and new members were needed to help fund the growing budget. When that congregation was about five years old, it had 120 members; but it had a regular attendance of 180. We started taking new members in on a more regular basis, and soon our attendance was less than our membership.

What is the lesson to be learned here? The goal of evangelism should never be membership growth or attendance increases. Membership and attendance will grow automatically when the goal is discipleship. Giving will also grow automatically when discipleship is the goal. In the early days, the above-mentioned congregation had no financial difficulties at all. It did not even have an annual stewardship drive. It did not need one.

Discipleship Requires Effort

Once a congregation has focused on membership growth and attendance increases, it had increasing difficulty focusing on discipleship. Although none of us would dare admit that we are leaving discipleship out of the mix, many of us are soft on it. We truly believe that if we can get people into the congregation, somehow they will become disciples. Like any other discipline, discipleship requires a concerted effort.

The primary focus must be placed on discipleship; and if new people are not ready for discipleship, perhaps they should not join the church yet. After all, Jesus let people walk away who were not ready to commit themselves fully. The prime example is the rich young ruler, but there are many more examples in the gospels.¹ Jesus was not satisfied with lukewarm Christians, and neither should we be. After all, a lukewarm Christian has no claim to being a Christian at all.²

Assimilating New Disciples

How, then, do we proceed? We are now paying the price for a kind of evangelism that focused on membership and attendance without requiring discipleship. That has to change. The primary focus should be on discipleship, and all new members should be willing to involve themselves in discipleship formation.

We have plenty of programs available, such as *Disciple, Witness, Companions in Christ, the Walk to Emmaus, and Covenant Discipleship* — to mention a few. Any one of these programs would help assimilate new members quickly. However, none of the programs should be made up of just new members. It is within these programs that new members should be given the opportunity to work alongside longtime members, fulfilling their discipleship, not only inside the church, but also out there in the world. Even after new members have finished courses such as *Disciple, Witness, or Companions in Christ*, there are the ongoing opportunities offered by *Walk to Emmaus Reunion Groups and Covenant Discipleship Groups* that hold people accountable for fulfilling a commitment and balance in their discipleship.

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¹See Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31; and Luke 18:18-30. For other examples, see Matthew 8:18-22 and Luke 9:57-62. The examples in which Jesus calls for total commitment are too numerous to mention. These are but a few examples.

²See Revelation 3:15-16. Also see Bruce Metzger's video *Breaking the Code*, in which he cites William Barclay's view on the "lukewarm Christian." Note Metzger's concluding remarks to John's letters to the seven churches.

James T. Reuteler, Ph.D., is the Pastor of Christian Discipleship at Grace United Methodist Church in Denver, Colorado.

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