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**8 KEYS TO OVERCOMING APATHY TOWARDS GROWTH**

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105

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Nothing zaps ministry efforts towards growth more than apathy among church members. Nothing energizes those efforts more than genuine interest and enthusiasm in growing the church. How can we turn apathy into enthusiasm? The answer is not as difficult as we might think. Using an acrostic for the word OVERCOME, let's examine eight keys to turning apathy into vibrant excitement towards growth.

**\* open hearts and minds afresh to the mandates of the great commission**

Our congregations drift aimlessly when they lose sight of Christ's last words to His disciples. "Go therefore" is neither a suggestion nor a proposal that we may want to consider doing. It is a mandate that has characterized His church through the centuries.

Focus is paramount. Captured hearts and minds happen as evangelism becomes a focal point from the pulpit to the pew. It becomes an unquenchable fire.

"It is easy to determine when something is aflame. It ignites other material.

Any fire that does not spread will eventually go out. A church without evangelism is a contradiction in terms, just as a fire that does not burn is a contradiction.”<sup>1</sup>

A pastor who talks evangelism peaks interest. A pastor who talks and does evangelism ignites an army of followers. It only takes a few people winning others to Christ for new life to be breathed into a dead congregation.

An equal companion in the Great Commission to evangelism is “teaching them to obey.” As a person comes to Christ, he begins a journey toward maturity. Most churches fail to have a systematic way to move members through stages of spiritual growth. Begin to unlock spiritual nuggets of truth while celebrating the progress, and you will see morale begin to soar. It won’t happen overnight, but it will happen.

**\* vary the kinds of growth projects offered to match the passions and skills of members.**

106

People’s skills vary; so should the ways they use those abilities. Most church members do not know their spiritual gifts. Identify these and begin putting them into practice. Unleash their passions. Generally, in what they are passionate for and gifted to do, they excel.

Offer projects that particularly target their gifts. Mercy and service gifts are used best in recovery ministries, food pantries, and disaster relief. Administration or leading gifts impact ministries requiring minute details or visionary leadership such as: crusades, school of fine arts, massive outreach efforts, new building oversight, major change in programming, or any other ministry that requires uniting many groups or individuals for a single purpose.

Look for individuals who have succeeded in the workplace but haven’t found their niche at church. Allow experimentation with a number of ministries until they get plugged in to passionate service.

**\* enlist members in taking short term mission projects.**

Mission trips tend to help participants view their world from a different perspective. They naturally encourage looking beyond one’s self into hurting humanity. Going on such trips nurtures having eyes of compassion.

Most denominational headquarters have access to mission opportunities across the country and around the world. If they can’t help you directly, they can steer you toward churches and/or para church groups who offer such trips.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, *Christian Theology in Plain Language* (Word Books, 1985), 162.

Enlistment may not come easily at first. “A one-legged school teacher from Scotland came to J. Hudson Taylor to offer himself for service in China. ‘With only one leg, why do you think of going as a missionary?’ asked Taylor. ‘I do not see those with two legs going,’ replied George Scott. He was accepted.”<sup>2</sup> Use whoever may volunteer. Over time, the number and quality of volunteers will increase.

**\* reach new members yourself through personal evangelism—setting the example for the congregation.**

Charlie epitomized this key to overcoming indifference. As my pastor, he modeled the sharing of his faith. Needless to say, our church doubled during his ministry.

Pastors do this best when they are constantly developing relationships. Involvement in community organizations touches lives. Staying in a church office stifles personal evangelism because that is not where the people gather.

Systematically plan to share your faith. In your day-timer, write down names of people you will go see for the specific purpose of sharing Christ. If you are like me, what you plan to do you do. When you go, take someone with you. More is caught than taught.

Witnessing someone come to know Christ as personal Lord and Savior is the greatest joy one can experience next to one’s own personal salvation experience. Over time such joy will spill over into the congregation.

**\* complete four big events (one a quarter) that help members see the potential.**

Part of our dilemma in moving beyond apathy centers on faulty thinking related to available unreached people in the area. This is particularly true of the south where churches exist on every corner.

Four big events visually present the potential for growth. These events may include a wild game weekend, a Christian power team weightlifting event, a fishing rodeo, or a Fourth of July fireworks display. Any such events, if they are heavily promoted in the community, will turn out people in droves—even people who are non-churched.

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<sup>2</sup> *Pillar of Fire* (January, 1983).

**\* offer inspiration through video, testimony, and creative worship.**

People come to our churches first to our worship. Stale, cold, and unmoving worship sends newcomers running. We are a visual generation. Anything that fails to engage the senses is prone to be ignored, dismissed, and rejected.

Use videos that tell stories of God working in people's lives. Congregants long to see visual evidence of God working. Testimonies in video and by members of the congregation testify to God's involvement with His people.

Evaluate your worship style. Is it one to which the masses can relate? Are needs being met in the choices of music, prayers, readings, and sermons? If not, make those changes to address needs.

Is your worship creative? Does it make use of dramatic elements, lights, video, and tempo? Is your congregation open to interpretive movement or dance? Keep your congregation in suspense as to what worship elements will confront them. If you have been doing things the same way for a long time, you can expect the same results. God in our lives is one of freshness, newness, and change. No one can encounter Almighty God and remain the same. Our worship should assist people in meeting God.

108

**\* make evangelism a priority through "program evangelistic saturation."**

I did this through youth ministry, but it is just as effective church wide. I made a decision that everything I did with our youth that year would have an evangelistic focus. I lived, talked, and slept evangelism. The result culminated with 115 enrolled in Bible study (up from 60) to 36 teenagers coming to Christ on profession of faith.

I deliberately chose to take them to events where I knew they would be confronted with the Gospel. Whether to youth camp, a Christian alternative to Halloween, or singing an evangelistic youth musical, I knew lives would be changed.

Churches who grasp this concept will not waste time on a variety of "good" programs only to find out they did not impact numerical or spiritual growth.

**\* equip leaders on how to disciple others.**

Discipling happens one person at a time. Begin to train leaders to disciple others. Lead them to firmly grasp the importance of a personal quiet time. Stress the significance of Bible study, prayer, meditation, and Scripture memory. Equally emphasize their need for corporate worship and sharing their faith.

Give one on one disciplers the tools to equip the new disciple. Strive to get beyond the “milk of the Word” (salvation, faith, God’s love, etc.) to the “meat of the Word” (abiding in Christ, sanctification, and dying to self).

The deeper you move the congregation in their faith, the greater they will embrace God’s leadership, change, and reaching a lost world with the Gospel message.

Individually, these eight keys to overcoming apathy towards growth are limited in scope. But done collectively, they rev up ministry potential and lock in a contagious spirit for growth—a combination worth pursuing.

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This article previously appeared in July/August 2008 issue of The Clergy Journal. Danny Von Kanel is a freelance writer, minister, and church growth consultant from Franklinton, Louisiana. Danny is a graduate of William Carey College, Hattiesburg, Ms (1977) and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (1983). He has two books published that are church growth related: *Built by the Owner’s Design (The Positive Approach to Building Your Church God’s Way)*, 2003 and *Building Sunday School by the Owner’s Design (100 Tools for Successful Kingdom Growth)*, 2005.