

Keys to Reaching Secular People

The early church was highly evangelistic, bring the good news of Jesus Christ to those near them, and eventually spreading the gospel throughout the world. We are a faith that seeks to grow, baptizing new believers. At the same time, in the United States, our culture has become increasingly secularized and church membership has dropped. As a society we no longer have any expectation that people will automatically attend church. In fact, only about 40 percent of the country does. While this has caused a crisis in many mainline denominations due to lost membership and declining financial strength, it also presents a new opportunity for evangelism. Evangelism today means speaking to a culture that is increasingly secular. This article seeks to identify keys to reaching secular people, or rather, God's children, living in a secular culture, waiting to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

1. Bring the gospel to the culture. Do not expect the culture to understand the gospel.

We Christians enjoy our little world. In church, we are surrounded by people who believe as we do and share our vocabulary. Even those on opposite ends of the political spectrum in the church can both enjoy singing the same hymn! It is not so with those who have no church background. For someone not brought up in church, words like "lectionary", "stewardship", "theology" and "diocese" have little if no meaning. More and more, individuals are completely unaware of even the basics of the gospel message. This leaves us with a choice. We can hope that these people come to our churches, willing to learn our language and our customs. On the other hand, we can start with what they know and understand and help them learn about what we know and love.

A church I attended on a vacation did this wonderfully. A sermon title for one Sunday was, "What would Jesus say to the World Wrestling Federation?" This church knew something. They knew that secular people, unfortunately, know much more about professional wrestling than they do about Jesus Christ. This church decided to start with the culture and move to Jesus. In my opinion, preachers should know at least a little about Brittany Spears, Jerry Springer, the Super Bowl, the TV show "Survivor", MTV, video games and whatever else is popular in the culture. That can be a start to

move people towards Jesus. We cannot transform the culture if we have no understanding of it.

2. Be Ready to Educate

As a pastor at churches that have consistently attracted lapsed or unchurched people, I have had to make major readjustments in my assumptions about peoples' knowledge of Christian basics. We must assume that people have almost no knowledge of Christianity or church customs.

In our teaching, we must be ready to explain the basics of the gospel message. I personally use my Christmas and Easter sermons to present a simple three step outline of the gospel targeted at those who only attend on these occasions. For those who join our churches, we should be ready to teach doctrines such as the Trinity, sin and redemption, resurrection, etc. in very basic terms.

In our worship, we should be as "user-friendly" (to use a secular term) as possible. Permanent pamphlets in the pews explaining the worship service will reduce anxiety. Explanations of events such as baptism and communion help people to feel more comfortable. In my own church I removed Latin words common in Episcopal worship and changed "Sanctus" to "Holy, Holy, Holy". Latin for someone with no church background is simply one more barrier to participation.

3. Present the Deep Meaning Inherent in the Christian World View

Since the 1600s, Rationalism has gripped the Western world, emphasizing science and a rational approach to the universe. Things like faith have tended to be subjected to subtle ridicule, or at best made to seem irrelevant in the "real world". While science has brought us many benefits, it has not answered such basic questions humans have always asked. Science does not tell us how the world came to be, who created us or what will happen after we die.

Secular people, like many Christians, view the world in rational scientific terms. However, secular people do not experience the answers to "the big questions" of life, and this produces anxiety in many. Many of those who come to our churches are seeking answers to deeper questions they have for their life.

There is a great opportunity for Christians if we can understand and respect the scientific world view, and yet be aware of its limitations. At the same time, we should be articulate enough to assert the Christian world view. We have answers that modern science simply cannot provide.

4. Christian Community – a Precious Commodity

As technology has advanced, community has declined. People in our culture have become busier, and many have ironically become more lonely at the same time. As the earliest chapters of Genesis tell us, it is not good for humans to be alone. Chat rooms on the internet are a sad substitute for connecting with a community that loves us and cares for us.

Churches have within their midst a precious commodity: community. Events where people can get together, make friends and deepen relationships are rare in our culture. Churches have always specialized in this. Do not underestimate the power that even simple community events can have.. Potluck suppers, spaghetti dinners and cookouts can provide life-changing connections for lonely people.

5. Meet the Community in Non-Church Settings

Some people will attend a church, even if they have never been, or have not attended in many years. Others simply will not attend a regular church service. However, there are possibilities for meeting such people “halfway”.

Consider holding “non-church” church events. A good example of what I mean by this is the service of the Blessing of the Animals. This is a religious ceremony, but is usually held outside, not in the church building. Secular people who attend can get a taste of what church is like, but in a much safer environment. My own parish is experimenting with a “Clown Fest” event, held in church, but on a Sunday afternoon, with little formality.

It is my hope that this article will provide some helpful suggestions for reaching secular people in our world. We have a great opportunity as Christians to reach those who do not yet know God’s love, but we must take steps to ensure that they feel comfortable and safe as they enter our communities