Top 7 Ways to Close the Back Door

by Rob Overton

It is incredibly easy for a growing church to appear healthy, while leaving bruised and battered people in their wake. This is because if you subtract a 20% back-door rate from a 40% visitor connection rate, you are left with a 20% growth rate which appears healthy! I think it's tragic. Just so I won't be picking on the growing churches, I have seen just as many churches who have had the same attendance for years, but the faces are constantly changing. Where did they all go? I would like to think that just found another church that "met their needs". Unfortunately, I am scared to ponder how many have not just left a church, but have left Christianity altogether.

As a point of clarification, when I refer to the back door, I am talking about people who made an initial connection, assimilated into one of main areas of emphasis of the church and made church a part of their normal routine. I am not talking about people who have never connected into the life of the church. If a person never successfully connects, then they just turn around and go out the same way they came in, through the front door. Initial visitor connection requires its own proactive process and has a different set of dynamics.

People stop coming to a church for many reasons, but the biggest factors are the lack of *close* relationships and the lack of *meaningful* service. This situation opens the door to a perception among unconnected people that the leaders are apathetic towards their situation. Identifying the factors is the easy part. Doing something about it is a bit harder.

In this post, I would like to share what I believe to be the **top 7 ways to close the back door of the church**. I want this list to be practical, so in order to set the stage, I want to talk a little bit about attendance. Every church I have worked with of substantial size has lamented the inability to capture worship attendance. They are right. It is virtually impossible to get accurate individual attendance of worship services. We're not talking head counts, but attendance that shows who was or was not present. That does not stop churches from trying! I just don't see inaccurate attendance as good stewardship. If you can't trust your attendance numbers so that you can confidently follow up with absentees, then it is a waste of time.

1. *Measure* what is Measurable
While worship attendance is hard to capture, adult small groups classes are relatively simple. Children's activities are the simplest of all since security issues require us to keep accurate records anyway. So, measure what you can measure. Yes, you will get push-back from some of your established groups, but if you give them some context, you will get their support. By context, I mean that they have to understand that the issue is bigger than their group. If you show them that you are trying to be good stewards of these people who are your responsibility, they will usually get on board. *Ask them to help you* be faithful with your responsibility.

2. Catch people *on their way out* of the back door.
One of the fundamental mistakes that I see churches make is to focus on what has happened in the past. It is not that looking back is not of value, it just won't help you get anyone back! Gone is gone! Think of it this way. If someone gets upset and you recognize that they are about to

leave, you can intervene and smooth the situation. But if that person leaves, gets home and settles into their favorite chair in front of the TV, what are the odds of getting them to come back? Not very good are they? It takes a person about 4 weeks to move from "I don't *think* the church cares about me" to "I *know* the church does not care about me". Catch them on the way out and this can be prevented.

3. Know who you expect to attend.
In order to know who was not in attendance, you have to know who was supposed to be in attendance. This sounds simple but it is often counter to the way that churches have kept their records for years. This means that you are going to have to do some work to keep class rosters clean enough to know the difference. For example, a list of 100 kids who missed the past three classes is too large for you to effectively contact. In reality, there might only be 5 kids in that list of 100 who have been attending in the past few months. *These 5 kids represent the 5 families that are on their way out the back door!* This is the information that you desperately need to know, and it is so often buried in the attendance reports of the church

4. Use the *right people* to reach out to them.
In a group setting, sometimes the problem is a disconnect between the group itself and the person who is leaving. In this situation, the group leader is not in a position to help the situation. This where the church staff can be very effective by helping people find a place where they fit better or acting as an intermediary to rectify a dispute. *Make sure to offer a graceful way back in.* I think that people don't want to hurt anyone's feelings and think that the easiest way to solve a problem is to just leave. If they are assured that it is OK to try a new group or a new volunteer position, that might make all the difference.

5. Focus on *Families.*
For the most part, children do not attend church on their own. So, if little Johnny has not been to his 4 year old Sunday school class in 3 weeks, it is a very safe assumption that Mom and Dad have not been there either. Since it is much easier to track children and students, use that information to prompt your efforts toward the families of those kids. This is particularly true of a family where the parents are not active in any other area than worship. Let the ministry area try to reconnect the individual, but treat a 3rd or 4th time absentee as an opportunity to connect a family.

6. Build retention *mechanisms* and *processes*.
Mechanisms are just ways to find out who is leaving. This can be in the form of reports from your attendance records. It can also be from feedback from people in the church. You have to establish some policies on what kind of attendance pattern will trigger your retention processes. In some churches, this might be 3 absences in a row, while others might use 4 or 5. Just make sure to stick to what is *happening* rather than what *happened*! Your **processes** are the methods you put in place to make sure that those who are identified are contacted and assisted. This might include phone calls, e-mails, letters, texts, Facebook notes or any other method of communication that would be effective. These contacts have to be personal. No matter the form of communication used, sincerity and authenticity will be of the utmost importance. If people in the church trust that you have good processes to follow up with people, I have found that they are much more willing to share information with church leaders. They will not share information with you if they don't think it will make any difference.

7. Build processes for the major emphasis areas of the church.
The difference between good intentions and success is often determined by the presence of a logical process. Constructed correctly, no one should ever slip through the cracks once they are identified. This is the same thing that must be done in an assimilation process for a newcomer to the church. The only difference is that it has to be handled a bit differently. The processes you build will be logical steps that will lead to participation in that particular area of your church. This might be connection groups, serving opportunities, leadership roles, spiritual formation steps or any other activity that you consider to be part of your "church core".

I have spent thousands of hours helping churches build connection, assimilation and retention processes. As every church is unique, the processes are always slightly different. The most important element is an acknowledgment that it is critically important to guard the back door of the church. Church management systems (ChMS) today offer many ways to facilitate these processes, but they still require careful configuration and a very intentional approach to be effective. I have a good deal of experience in these systems, and it is important to choose one that fits your needs and is flexible enough to work the way that you need it to work.

I encourage you to step back and critically look at the situation at your church. If possible, bring in an objective third party to help you see what you can't see because of your proximity. As I have worked with churches across the country, I have found that I can see both problems and possibilities in a situation just because I am a little removed from the day to day ministry of that particular church. I have been told many times by Pastors that their stress level was lowered considerably when they established good processes of connection, care and retention. This is *not* one of those problems for which there is no answer. I believe that any church can guard their back door if they are serious about it.