

Small Church Evangelism Report
The Top Ten Reasons Small Churches Grow...through Conversion

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The Billy Graham Center, in partnership with Lifeway Research, the Caskey Center for Church Excellence and eleven other denominations recently completed a study of small churches (attendance up to 250) to find out the key factors that predict growth through conversion.¹ In total, 1500 small churches were surveyed, and here are the top ten reasons,² from least predictive to most predictive, for why they grow through conversion from our survey data.³

TEN | The pastor more frequently blocks out time in the calendar for the purpose of sharing the gospel with non-Christians. If the pastor is to lead evangelism in the church, the pastor must first personally live out the evangelism call.

NINE | People more frequently join the church who come from other churches when compared to churches that do not grow very well through conversion. In other words, transfer and conversion growth tend to go together for small churches.

EIGHT | The church more regularly engages in ministry outside the church in order to share the gospel with the unchurched. The churches that grow through conversion also tend to be the churches that are making a difference in their communities!

SEVEN | The pastor more regularly receives feedback indicating a strength in communicating with unchurched people in the weekly worship services. This factor does not mean the services are *for* unchurched people, but only that pastors translate what is going on and what they are teaching for unchurched people so that they feel included.

SIX | The pastor hears more regular reports that the people in the church are reaching out and sharing their faith. That the people are reaching out and sharing their faith is more predictive than that the pastor is reaching out and sharing faith. The church does not need superstar pastors who share their faith while everybody in the church cheers them on from the sidelines. The more important factor is that the people catch the contagion that the pastor models! We found this factor to be important for larger churches too in a recent survey we did for every size church.

¹ These factors together predict 20% of the variance between churches. That means that there are other factors as well that have not yet been identified. What's more, churches can pursue the factors on the list and still not achieve all they hope in growing through conversion. The factors are not a way to control the result. After all, conversion, new commitments to Jesus as Savior, are in the end in the hands of God. But pursuing these factors can significantly increase the likelihood of a small church growing through conversion.

² These are the top ten reasons from twenty-nine factors that were included in the survey. The list is not exhaustive, and there may be other factors we could test for in the future. But these factors were shown by statistical analysis to be *predictive* for churches experiencing more retained new commitments to Jesus as Savior in churches of 250 or less.

³ This article focuses on predictors of new commitments retained per attendee which means that we are emphasizing people who commit to Jesus as Savior *and* who become involved in the church. So, these factors are predictive of growth through conversion and of people that make a new commitment and then are likely to grow as a disciple because the people stick. There are also factors that predict new commitments per attendee whether or not they stick. But the focus of this report is identifying predictive factors for growth through conversion.

FIVE| A higher percentage of the church budget is given for evangelism and mission. These churches put their money where their mouth is... and it shows up in reaching unchurched people who commit to Christ and their church.

FOUR| The pastor more frequently asks people to commit after sharing the gospel. The ability and practice of “popping the question” and making an invitation to commit to Jesus as Savior predicts that more people will commit to Christ and more people will stick.

THREE| The pastor more often attends a class or conference to learn personal evangelism skills. If the pastor is a learner and stays inspired and growing in the area of evangelism, that pastor’s church will reach more people who commit to Christ and who stick.

TWO| The pastor more often offers a class for new attenders. Whether that class is intentionally evangelistic, or more oriented on helping people better understand the church, having that next step predicts people will come to Christ more often and stick with the church.

And the winner for the top reason churches grow through conversion is...

ONE|The church attracts and keeps a higher percentage of unchurched attendees. These churches are places of invitation, welcome, and involvement for the unchurched. So, the unchurched stick around in greater numbers. And they come to Christ and get committed to the church in greater numbers.

These are the top reasons churches grow through conversion. And it is a challenge for every small church in America to become a place of hospitality and connection for the unchurched people all around us.

Here are a few final encouragements from our survey. You can’t necessarily pursue these factors; they are givens. But if you fit, you have an edge that can encourage you:

- 1) Smaller churches (150 and less) have a little easier time growing through conversion than larger churches (151 to 250). So, small church pastors take heart!
- 2) The church being made up of predominately Hispanic attenders is also an advantage. Apparently, some ethnic groups are better at growing through conversion than others.
- 3) Native American pastors are a little better at growing through conversion than pastors of other ethnicities. That is good news... for some of us who are Native American pastors and for all of us who want to see Native Americans reached!

Study Details: The Small Church Evangelism research project set out to explore the practices of small churches (up to 250 attendees) that are predictive of rates of new commitments to Christ and the retention of these new commitments within congregations. Data was gathered through a randomized phone survey of 1000 senior pastors, ministers, or priests among all Evangelical and Black Protestant churches, along with an oversample (weighted to fit the rest of the sample) of pastors of 500 small Southern Baptist churches (up to 250 attendees). The survey was designed to yield data that among other things helps to identify various predictors of facilitating new commitments and retaining these newly committed.

The research was conducted by Lifeway Research in partnership with the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College and the Caskey Center for Church Excellence. A diverse, inter-denominational group

of sponsors also contributed to the research, including Assemblies of God, Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Church of the Nazarene, Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, Converge Worldwide, Evangelical Covenant Church, Evangelical Free Church in America, The Foursquare Church, Missionary Church, Southern Baptist Convention, Vineyard USA, and The Wesleyan Church.