

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



5 Needs

**Guests are Attempting to Meet
When They Come to Your Church**

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Why do people come to church?

When you think about it from a broader, cultural context, it's sort of an unusual behavior. Especially when it seems like the new studies on church attendance that come out every week all point to the national decline in church attendance.

Still, in spite of the statistics, I have regular conversations with church leaders who see new first-time guests every week. In fact, **I hear from church leaders on a regular basis that they're consistently seeing unchurched people come to church for the very first time or returning to church for the first time in decades.**

But why?

In an age when attending church is becoming a fringe behavior in our culture, why do people decide to attend?

A recent Pew Forum research study explored the reasons why people attend church on a regular basis. [ref] The results also provide some insight into why guests come to your church. **It's important for us to understand these internal motivations so we can design experiences that will ultimately connect with the broader culture.** If you're a church leader who's investing time in reading this article, then I imagine you want to see the message of Jesus impact your community.

While we don't necessarily want to build a ministry program solely based on the reasons that people visit churches, we do need to be aware of those motivations as we design the experiences our churches provide. Here are five needs that people are attempting to meet when they come to your church:

Exploring their faith

It might seem obvious, but when people arrive at your church, they are there because of spiritual questions.

There can be a cheap "straw man argument" that some churches attempt to scratch people's ears by simply offering pop psychology or hosting some kind of Tony-Robbins-like motivational talk to get people to attend. However, we're finding that this is just not the case when you actually listen to what growing churches talk about on any given weekend.

It goes without saying that people come to your church because they want to grow in their faith; the important nuance to remember is that they're arriving with questions about their faith. For some reason, there's something about what you do at your church that they want to understand and possibly connect with. First-time guests want to learn how your community and your approach might connect with what they believe. They're wondering if the experience of coming to your church can help them grow. There's a lot of evidence to show that at the core of growing, thriving churches is teaching that does two things:

- **Connects with Scripture** // In a related study, Gallup found that the kind of teaching people look for in church is teaching related to Scripture. People are looking for a transcendent connection to an ancient text. [ref]
- **Teaching that's relevant to their life** // People are asking, "How do I apply this lesson to my life on Monday morning?" They aren't looking to acquire trivia or learn how to say fancy Greek words—they want to know what difference the text will make in their lives as they go about daily life.

Raising their kids

Raising children is one of the most universal human experiences.

In fact, 89% of all adults will be a parent at some point in their lives. [ref] It's one of the most common yet difficult life experiences that humans wrestle with. It turns out that a part of the reason why people come to church is because they look at the children they have been charged with raising, wonder what it takes to raise a well-rounded adult, and come to an instinctive conclusion that faith is a part of the equation.



Thriving and impactful churches that understand this implicit human need should go out of their way not just to provide a children's ministry but also to equip those that raise children. One of the simplest ways that most churches could connect with the needs of their community is by doubling down on their investment in the next generation.

Healing their wounds

People come to God in times of personal crisis. [ref]

This pattern emerges time and again when you talk to people who come to your church for the first time and share why they decided to visit. Often, they find themselves dealing with major life transitions, anything from moving to a new town to starting a new job or becoming a parent for the first time. They could very well be experiencing marital stress or some kind of self-realization around hurt from years ago.

Is your church positioning itself to help people with the habits, hurts, and hang-ups that they bring to the table? We all experience different levels of pain in different seasons of our lives, but if we consistently ignore the pain that people bring, our church won't be the kind of church that thrives and grows.

Improving themselves

People want to be better.

They're looking to improve the way they interact with the world around them. They're looking for support and guidance in becoming kinder, gentler people who make a difference in the lives of others. There's this weird paradox within our society that pushes us towards a self-centered approach to life, but humans have an intrinsic understanding that the way to a fulfilling life is through caring for other people.

People come to your church because they want to help others. **This is critically important, particularly as we see increasingly effective churches find ways to get people out of their seats and into the streets to make a difference in their communities.** This is a need that people have, and fulfilling that need is one way to connect with your broader community.

Expanding their friendships

People are experiencing loneliness at epidemic levels. More than twice as many people self-identify as lonely than a generation ago. [ref]



People do lie awake at night and wonder if they have any true connections or community. **One irony emerging from the digitalization of social relationships is that we have increased connection with those at the fringe of our social networks, yet we have a decreasing number of high-quality, intimate friendships because of the amount of time and effort we invest in social media.**

People look at the church as a place to make connections, to get to know other people, and to find friends. If your church appears cold and distant, it won't be the kind of place where people will want to build meaningful connections. People want to attend churches that are warm and engaging.

Your church needs to fulfill the needs of the people in your community.

In some ways, I think we need to get beyond the attractional church discussion. It's a straw man because it suggests that there is a segment of churches that are frankly just asking the question, "What does our community need and how do we fulfill those needs?" as if it were a marketing trick. The reality is that Jesus consistently started with people's needs and then drew them closer to himself, pointing them to a faith that would make a difference.

What elements of your ministry do you need to change to help fulfill these five needs? Is there something going on in your ministry that doesn't meet the real needs of people in your community? I'd love to hear your comments [here](#).

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