

# Turning Around An Invisible Church

## *7 Marks of a Growing Church - Visibility (1<sup>st</sup> in the Series)*

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(words 1,100)

**Before we begin to turnaround a church, we need to know what we are turning it toward.**

The best source for what a healthy and growing church looks like is Hartford Seminary's exhaustive and reliable: "American Congregations Study" (available free at [www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org](http://www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org)). I will explain how to address each of what I call "The 7 Marks of a Growing Church" in this series.

### **The First is Visibility.**

We must first understand how to overcome the average church's invisibility. Plateaued churches don't change very much and as a result they often get ignored and overlooked by non-churchgoers. I found that even newly planted churches start becoming invisible to the community after about 18 months.

Visibility can be remedied by being in a visible location in a growing community. But, what if you aren't in a growing community? What if you aren't in a visible location?

I have helped hundreds of churches become visible again, even when they were not in a growing community. To make a church visible again in any community involves three areas: physical visibility, social media visibility, member visibility.

### **Physical Visibility**

Physical visibility means the community sees the physical assets and structures of the church. We have long known that churches in visible locations grow faster and larger than churches in less visible locales. When people over and over again notice a church structure, signage, steeple, etc. it can remind them of their spiritual need. And, when a spiritual need pulls them towards a church, they are most likely to attend the one they've noticed. This can be challenging in a turnaround scenario. However, I have helped many, many churches increase their physical visibility and here are some options to consider.

*Merging with a more visible church:* By joining together with a church in a more visible location you can address the invisibility threat. Read Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird's book "Better Together" to see how to make mergers work.

*Moving to a different location and selling your current facility.* My experience has been that this often results in the church having a less usable facility. There may be fewer Sunday School rooms, less sanctuary space and even less parking. But if the trade-off is that the church has a greater visibility in the community, then the church can begin to grow toward health.

*Building a new facility.* Though challenging in revitalization situations, new facilities are cheaper to build than their traditional and Medieval-looking forerunners. When turnaround churches have money to build they usually consider erecting a gymnasium or a fellowship hall to reach out. But, it may be better to build a smaller multipurpose facility in a more visible location.

### **Social Media Visibility.**

In 25+ years consulting churches, I have found that in all churches there are positive things going on that only people going to the church know about. Thus, you want to create social media opportunities for congregants to share with their friends, acquaintances and non-churchgoers some of the exciting things going on.

In the past, churches advertised largely in the Yellow Pages and newspapers. Though Yellow Pages have disappeared (and newspapers may not be far behind) in their place have risen other media channels through which you should be advertising.

*Website:* It doesn't need to be professional, but it does need to be informative and geared toward non-churchgoers. WordPress and others offer free templates through which an inexperienced creator can make an informative website. Previously the church secretary was in charge of the weekly bulletins and perhaps a regular newsletter. In the turnaround church, that person learns new skills to communicate via a web presence.

*Facebook page:* Another requisite media presence, your members can share about the positive things going on in the church.

*Twitter, etc:* Telling about positive things going on in a church via a Twitter account with "hash tags" (#) identifying your church, allows people to easily find postings about the life of a congregation. A church Instagram account can give opportunities for members to share pictures about the positive things happening at congregational life. Other media avenues are sure to arise and mature Christian leaders should pray about and discuss the usefulness of each.

*Email:* Because there's so much spam filling email boxes today, it's best to steer

away from emailing people in the community. Emailing congregants to keep them aware of what is going on is fine, but a general blast to the community doesn't work.

*Get the Church a Personalized Web Address, \_\_\_\_\_(church name)\_\_\_\_\_.church:* A little-known fact is that you can purchase the extension “.church” and add your church name for an easy to remember web address. The extension “.church” can be purchased through any online Domain Service (but once they're gone, it's forever gone so check today).

### **Member Visibility:**

*Encourage congregants to be proud of what God has accomplished through their church and let people know they are a member.* When your congregants are cited in community events, awards, etc. be sure to ask them to include that they are a member of the church. Explain that this is a way to let their light shine, because the community of Christ is a part of their spiritual formation and community impact. Shirts with the church's name on them, bumper stickers, vinyl decals, etc. have always been a way to increase congregant visibility. However, it's always important to remind congregants they should at all times be Christlike, forgiving and humble (and never more so than when displaying something that boldly mentions Christ's family).

*Let the community see the church in worship, praise and service.* A YouTube channel of church events can help non-churchgoers see the community of Christ in action. And, a video of worship and ministry should be a primary feature on your website, giving a 30-second glimpse of the excitement of being part of Christ's community.

*Invite the community to participate in praise/worship and food in a neutral location.* This can be in a park or in a neutral auditorium. When we take our worship and praise to neutral locations, we give non-churchgoers an opportunity to see the life and anointing of Christ's body in a familiar environment. While being careful not to invade their space, we also foster communication when a meal is open to all. Jesus' example of table fellowship broke down walls between his detractors and his disciples, and serves as a model for increasing church visibility today.

Yes, there are ways to help make a church visible again. And, these suggestions are just the tip-of-the-iceberg. For more on the “7 Marks of a Growing Church” and how to make churches visible again, attend my once-a-year consultant training at the Nov. 1, Renovate '16 Pre-conference in Orlando.

In the next article in this series, I will delve into ideas that foster the second mark of a growing church as revealed in Hartford Seminary's "American Congregations Study."

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