

CHAPTER 5

ELEVATING
A CULTURE OF HOPE

BUILDING A BRIDGE OF HOPE

As a teenager, James found excitement in alcohol, drugs, and a life of crime in the inner city. As his life spiraled out of control, he knew that he needed to go to church, but was hurt when the pastoral leadership changed.

James lived a few houses down from members at Bridge. This family intentionally hosted block parties and hung out with the kids on the block. When they invited James and his wife to church, James agreed, knowing his own life lacked a deeper connection to God and people.

Shocked, James couldn't believe what he found at Bridge. Instead of a weekly fashion show he'd known at church, joy lined the faces of the greeters he encountered. He couldn't believe how many people were genuinely glad to see him. Before James even got to his seat, he felt like family with all the high fives and hugs he received. James couldn't wait to invite his wife to experience this *different church* where people got excited you came. His only warning to her: they like to hug a lot.

Not only did James's wife join him the following week, the couple now attends Bridge every week where they are leaders committed to making other new people feel just as welcomed.

Would a nonbelieving guest at your church feel like an outsider? Do guests need a translator to understand the jargon? Do we strive to develop a welcoming culture where genuine relationships form, and visitors feel like part of the family?

Christians are called to be peacemakers and bridge-builders, reconciling a broken, confused and lost world to Christ. If we're not careful, we often take one of two approaches to our surrounding culture. We can either get caught up in the flow and become pro-cultural, pursuing the American dream, or we become anti-cultural, angry, bitter and protesting the evils of society.

Neither approach mirrors God's heart and God's hope for a broken world.

Christians should become **counter-cultural**. We are *in* this world, but not *of* this world, so we promote God's kingdom culture instead of conforming to popular culture or becoming bitter about the ills of society. Rather than

assimilate, we *infiltrate* the culture with the good news of Jesus. When we love people, they see we have something significantly more powerful than their current reality. (John 18:36; 1 Peter 2:11-12)

If Christians are going to make an eternal difference, we must build a positive, joy-filled kingdom culture. Rather than concentrate on our personal preferences, we must use our gifts and unique calling to identify with the unchurched in our community.

Why don't more people walk through the doors of our churches?

Many unchurched people describe church as boring and churched people as unfriendly and cliquish. They often feel judged and unwelcomed. Thom Rainer, in his blog *Growing Healthy Churches Together*, refers to this cliquish mentality as the *Holy Huddle Syndrome*. "Church members naturally gravitate to people they know when they go to a worship service. They already have relational connections. The members thus perceive they are friendly because they are friendly to each other. Unfortunately, guests are not included."¹¹

If we want to partner with Christ in building a church that reaches the lost, we need to take hospitality to a whole new level. Identify leaders who have the gift of hospitality and encouragement, then train them to be hope agents who up the friendly factor. Intentionally focus on engagement with visitors. Only then can we begin to build a bridge of hope between our church culture and the culture of the unchurched.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Elevating hope in our church services is a powerful way to assimilate the lost into our church culture. Our outreaches can be effective, but if we forget to elevate and inspire hope on a Sunday morning, the lost will struggle to connect.

How can we help the unchurched come to faith in Christ? Is the jump from a love outreach to attending Sunday morning services too much if we aren't intentional about elevating hope?

First impressions are huge. When guests walk into a church, the first few minutes dramatically influence their return rate. Churches must be

welcoming, or we risk losing an opportunity to impact the unchurched with the love of Christ. Building a culture of hope is critical to serving the unchurched. It has become one of the metrics on our scorecard that tells us how we're doing. Without hope—the connection between love and faith—the unchurched won't take the next spiritual step.

Elaine Storkey, president of Tearfund, a leading Christian relief and development charity, observed that a lot of people would be unsure what to expect if they did visit church. “The church, for a lot of people, is a very strange place these days. They're not familiar with what's going on inside the building, with the form of service, with the way people gather, with what they say, how they pray.” She went on to explain that pastors and church leaders have “got to wake up to the reality that there is this big cultural gap between church and non-church.”¹²

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LIVING A “JOY-NORMOUS” LIFESTYLE

Fear is the number one emotion non-Christians experience when they visit a church for the first time.¹³ Visitors are usually anxious and uncomfortable because they don't know what to expect. *What will people think? Where do I go? What are they going to do? What will they expect of me?*

Creating an atmosphere of hope and joy helps alleviate fear. People want to be happy. As Christians, we have more than happiness; we have joy that fills us, despite our circumstances. To engage with the unchurched, we need to make sure that our countenance and church services don't appear sullen, somber or even unfriendly to visitors. We need to be mindful of our nonverbal communication. Even if we're having a bad day, we need to reflect our joy. If we would simply *look happy*, unchurched people would take notice and be drawn to us.

Walls go up when people are afraid. No matter how good the sermon, visitors won't hear what is said if they feel uncomfortable. Oftentimes people don't

remember what is said. They do, however, remember how they felt. With this in mind, we must help guests feel at ease and welcomed. Today, more than ever, the unchurched are looking for a friendly culture of hope and joy that will facilitate their pursuit of Christ.

ELEVATING HOPE

Imbedded traditions cannot dictate how we live and move forward in our future. It's easy to get stuck in our routines and rituals, accepting the comfortable rather than choosing to be stretched. Church leaders must intentionally commit to changing their scorecard, both personally and for their church, and develop a meaningful and relevant culture that engages with the unchurched—while always maintaining the integrity of the gospel.

We build a culture of hope when we intentionally elevate the following:

- **Attitude.** Outward expressions of joy are uplifting, contagious and hopeful.
- **Activities.** Meaningful and engaging activities impact both the churched and unchurched.
- **Language.** As Christ-followers, our language must communicate encouragement, value and hope.
- **Atmosphere & Environment.** When people walk into our churches, we want them to encounter the dynamic and powerful presence of Jesus.

Everything from the parking lot and greeting team to music and preaching must be examined through the eyes of a first-time guest. Choose to elevate energy and enthusiasm, and watch—a culture of hope will build.

THE CULTURAL VALUE OF ENERGY AND ENTHUSIASM

People love to have fun. Being happy and having fun is attractive to others. If the *joy of the Lord* is truly our strength, then joy is powerful when we express it to others. (Nehemiah 8:10 NIV) Joy and hope are contagious.

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Our staff and volunteers make up several dynamic teams, including the wave team, the parking lot team, the usher team, and the music team. These volunteers are trained to consider themselves as the *first impressions* team and encouraged to have lots of fun as they welcome and serve people who are arriving. Every team member is a carrier of this hope-filled culture; each is critical in setting the tone, atmosphere and climate of the church service.

At Bridge, we start with celebration. Our pre-service party begins in the parking lot. A DJ plays up-beat music while kids are often found shooting hoops or tossing around a football—even building snowmen during the winter months. Many times, people driving by Bridge stop out of curiosity because our wave team stands along the main street waving and smiling to those driving by the church. We’ve even had an individual stop his car, roll down his window and hand us a donation because our expressions of joy and kindness encouraged him. When it rains, we have our teams in the parking lot with umbrellas. People are strategically placed in and around our campus to greet guests and make people feel a sense of hope and excitement.

Team members practice the **six “H’s.”** **High fives, handshakes, heartfelt conversations, and side hugs** are part of our regular routine as we greet visitors. We are positioned to lend a **helping hand** whenever needed and always **handoff** guests by introducing them to others, so they continue to feel connected.

The **three-minute rule** is also a powerful way to engage visitors. For three minutes before and after the church service, our team cannot talk to anyone they know. They must find guests and be available to help in any way possible. This rule has become such a part of our church culture, the time has naturally expanded, so we now lovingly call it the “thirty-minute rule.”

Deena, a member of Bridge, resisted the idea of engaging others. “That’s not me,” she confided, so I challenged her to see this as an opportunity to impact someone’s life for Christ. A decade later, Deena not only engages guests

regularly at Bridge, she disciples unchurched young women. She never would have done this without being stretched to engage others on Sunday mornings.

She has found her sweet spot as she follows the call to make disciples.

Remember God looks at people as more than volunteers. He created each of us to carry his fullness into the world. To authentically connect with others and do it repeatedly, our people, like Deena, need to be in their sweet spot—and not simply filling an empty slot.

Elevating hope through authentic energy and uncontrived enthusiasm opens doors for the unchurched to encounter Christ. A sense of excitement and enthusiasm is powerful as people connect at church for the first time. When people sense something is happening at church, they are more likely to connect. They see our hope is worth pursuing.

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Many pastors are intrigued by the love-hope-faith revelation when they hear me speak at conferences. Curious, they fly to Omaha to experience the energy at our love outreaches and hope-filled Sunday morning services. Pastors leave inspired to implement the same principles of love-hope-faith into their churches back home.

Creating a culture of hope is an important game changer in the church that is committed to reaching people far from Christ