

CHAPTER 6

IMPLEMENTING A CULTURE OF HOPE

BUILDING AN EARLY ADOPTER TEAM

Changing the prevailing church culture to one that elevates and inspires hope can be difficult. At Bridge we started small. To begin elevating hope on Sunday mornings, we built an early adopter team.

I took our team through a series of challenging questions regarding our ability to reach nonbelievers. Sadly, we were not influencing unbelievers at the level we desired.

“How many times have we shared our faith and led someone to Christ in the last year?” I asked my team of twelve leaders.

Combined, we remembered three occasions over an entire year.

Yikes!

Our core team considered ourselves mission-driven, and yet, nothing was further from the truth. We simply did not live with a sense of urgency as Ephesians 5:16 describes. We had somehow ignored what our hearts knew Christ wanted for our lives. Instead of joining God in His invitation to witness to unbelievers (Acts 1:8), we had been busy working only with believers. We did a lot of ministry activity, but we missed God’s heart for *lost people*.

I asked our team to participate in a simple exercise.

- If God wants to rescue and save people, does he want to use you? If so, then write down how many people you think God wants you to impact this week in your circle of influence—people you connect with through your neighborhood, work, school, hobbies, social group, family network, etc.

Between the 12 of us, we came up with nearly 50 people. Our spiritual concern for others elevated, we left the meeting expecting God to show up. The following week we shared so many stories, our meeting went for hours.

I shared how I sensed God leading me to Aisle 4 at the grocery store when I asked him to show me who to encourage. A woman started to cry when I told her I didn’t know the challenges she faced, but felt God wanted her to know

everything would be all right. She explained how her husband had left her, and she had no clue what to do. We prayed, and she left with a newfound assurance that God cared for her.

Others shared stories of how they invited people to church while others talked to neighbors they had never met. This same group who could only remember sharing their faith three times the entire previous year came back with nearly four dozen stories of how God used them just over the previous week.

Our antennas went up; we discovered how God worked all around us and how he wanted to use us. Not only did each of us get excited about how God used us as individuals, hearing the stories of others increased our faith.

As you build your early adopter team, repeat this activity for several weeks until this becomes an integral part of the culture of your leaders, and they begin to see themselves as everyday missionaries “sent” to carry the fullness of Jesus to our unique circles of influence. To keep the vision at the forefront of your team, revisit the exercise at least monthly.

We can't expect our congregation to change without leaders who see the need to change their scorecard, cast a vision to multiply disciples and then model how to be agents of hope to the lost. Building an early adopter team is essential to forming leaders who act as thermostats, not thermometers. We want to cultivate hero makers who intentionally *set* the climate and atmosphere in our church rather than simply accept the temperature and follow imbedded cultural traditions.

As your team follows the call to make disciples and is used powerfully by Christ, celebrate these God-sized stories with your congregation. When communicated from the pulpit, a vision is cast. Momentum will begin to build as personal stories are shared, and we engage in consistent love outreaches as a church. People will begin to catch the vision: God is up to something, and he wants the entire church to be part of multiplying disciples.

THE CULTURAL VALUE OF EXPECTATION

Apathy had always been an issue in my earlier church plants. Many people showed up to church on Sunday but never really got engaged. I wanted every person in my congregation to arrive with an expectation that God would show up and do something powerful. Changing the mindset, attitudes and actions of my congregation wasn't easy, but well worth the effort.

The early adopter team members became the catalyst—the essential ingredient—toward cultivating a hope-filled culture. Training the early adopter team to be sensitive to the unchurched and to see themselves as everyday missionaries who are critical to the success of seeing unbelievers enjoy service and then return.

When Sunday morning is more than going through the motions, the church family comes together and experiences the power and presence of God. My leadership team needs to set an expectation that Jesus is going to show up, meet us right where we are, and take us higher. Our staff and volunteers make a commitment to gather one hour before Sunday service for pre-service TIP time: **training, inspiration** and **prayer**.

TIP Time

- **T**rainning our team with appropriate hope-filled language, social interaction, hospitality, and greeting skills builds a powerful culture that connects with, values and relates with unchurched and churched visitors. TIP time is only 10-15 minutes in length before leaders position themselves to greet guests. This training time powerfully reinforces the culture we are building at Bridge.
- **I**nspiration fills us with a powerful level of expectation and excitement for what God is going to do during our time together. Our leadership shares inspiring stories, scripture and encouragement to elevate our team with expectations of what Christ will do in the service.
- **P**rayer binds us together and centers everything we do in Christ and His plan for our service. The power of prayer, combined with our obedience to live-out a hope-filled culture while serving others, is a winning combination to impact a lost and broken world.

During TIP time, we set the tone in building a hope-filled atmosphere. We communicate expectations that the day will be filled with God's wonder and presence as we become the hands and feet of Jesus to guests who attend our Sunday morning service.

FAITH IT 'TIL YOU FEEL IT

Life has many ups and downs. People don't feel hope-filled every day. So how do leaders inspire hope on Sunday mornings when they're having a bad day?

At Bridge, we adopted a motto: "Faith it 'til you feel it." Knowing that we may not always feel upbeat, we have faith that God is going to show up. Because of this, we faith our attitude and actions until we feel hope. As Christians, we choose to see the glass as half full and getting fuller. Training our leaders to "faith it 'til you feel it" is critical if we want to create a culture of hope. We don't fake it; we faith it. (Hebrews 11:1)

When members of Bridge admit that our hope-filled culture doesn't always feel natural, our response is one of expectation. If we can get excited over sporting events, why can't we get excited about what God is doing through our local church? As leaders, we don't have the luxury of following. People look to us to set the tone and temperature of the church.

Does that mean we can't have bad days? No. We realize that serving is not about us—it's about others. While we do not deny the reality of what we're facing, we do, in Jesus' name, deny the finality of our circumstances. "We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:18 NIV) When we're focused on the eternal, we can soar on wings like eagles. (Isaiah 40:31) Our hope allows us to rise above life's storms. When we radiate joy, our hope becomes contagious. This sets the tone of our culture.

MUSIC AND PREACHING

Understanding how to best utilize music is critical when engaging unbelievers. *If our focus includes unbelievers, what role should music play? Can we expect non-Christians to worship the same as Christians?*

Music was a point of discussion with my worship director when Bridge first started. As I flipped through the pages of the worship book he'd used for years, song after song had a similar emphasis in reflection and adoration. After almost an hour of discussion, only 6 of the 309 songs seemed best suited to relate to an unchurched person.

Introspective music helps believers express their adoration but lacks meaning for unbelievers. While people have different tastes, congregations focused on the unchurched understand the power of celebratory, up-beat music. While this shift might seem minimal, music plays a big role in creating a culture of hope for the unchurched.

Like music, communicating the good news of Jesus begins with our audience, not us. Our culture today prefers interactive and experience-oriented learning. People want to hear about relevant issues, so communicators need to avoid church jargon and explain scriptural references with familiar language.

Joy and humor also play a powerful role as we relate with unbelievers in ways that are authentic, genuine and disarming. In a stressed-out society, light-hearted and funny communicators bring hope and enjoyment while engaging people in ways that are insightful and helpful.

Music and preaching can make or break the experience for a first-time guest. Churches that focus on reaching unbelievers are sensitive to the powerful roles that music and preaching play.

CELEBRATING LIFE-CHANGE

The Bible makes it very clear that we are all sinners in need of a savior. (Romans 3:23) We were all once lost before Jesus found us (Luke 15:24) and blind before Jesus gave us sight. (John 9:25) Like the apostle Paul, every Christ-follower experiences a Damascus Road conversion where God radically turns our world upside down and leads us into a radical life change. (Romans 2:4 MSG)

I have some friends who met Jesus in prison. When they surrendered to Jesus, they repented of their criminal life choices and began a new life in Christ. My conversion story, however, looked different. I thought growing up in

church meant I was a Christian. Until college, I didn't understand my faith was actually the faith of my parents. I considered myself a good person when I compared myself to others. Until I recognized my brokenness and sinful nature, I didn't know the depth of my own depravity. Jesus was *important* to my life, but radical change happened when he became the **center** of my life. I shifted from building my life around my plans to building my life around his plans. I began to focus on building his kingdom versus building my own empire.

When people have a conversion experience, they surrender control and let Jesus direct their everyday lives. No longer the boss, they're under new management. Sharing conversion stories with the entire congregation is a powerful reminder that God still transforms lives.

I like the BE-DO-GO framework that Exponential has developed: Every Christian is called to (BE) a disciple, who makes disciples (DO) wherever they GO! He not only transforms us; He wants to use our story to encourage transformation in others.

Telling current faith stories and sharing how God has used us (BE-DO-GO) inspires and elevates growth in our congregation to reach others for Christ. When congregation members regularly share how they prayed with a waitress or encouraged someone at the gym or invited a neighbor to church, everyone is inspired to step up their game and be mobilized for Christ's vision and mission. Celebrating these ongoing faith stories and being intentional about how we mobilize God's people act as a catalyst to produce growth in the congregation and help us relate and empathize with those who are without hope.

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in our congregation to reach others for Christ.

Having regular baptisms is equally important. Baptisms are a public declaration of the inward transformation of Christ's power in our lives. When conversions are celebrated regularly through baptism, the congregation is reminded that lost people are God's priority. Baptisms testify to God's

transforming work in our personal lives, reacquainting us with the incredible love, joy and peace we received when Jesus forgave our sins and set us free.

Leaders fan the flame of passion for lost people in our congregations by sharing conversion and ongoing faith stories. When people are continually processing and practicing these stories, they live with a level of hope that overflows in conversation and relationships with others.

As we roll up our sleeves together as a congregation, commit to telling conversion and ongoing faith stories on a regular basis. Brag on God. What you celebrate and elevate, you reproduce.

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FOLLOW-UP

It takes 28 days to create a new habit. While church attendance may be familiar and normal for church members, the unchurched are undertaking a completely new venture when they walk into a church. No matter how much they enjoyed a service, getting out of bed on Sunday mornings can be a challenge as they are creating new habits in their life.

Follow-up is extremely critical to nonbelievers returning to church. When guests feel encouraged after a service, a positive follow-up experience within 24 hours shows they are valued. At Bridge, every guest receives a phone call follow-up. These phone calls consist of a relaxed conversation about their week, their thoughts about the service, and an invitation to return the following Sunday.

Follow-up has proven critical in helping nonbelievers create new faith habits. There is a direct correlation between unbelievers coming back to church and their potential for a life-changing relationship with Jesus and His church family.

People are looking for happiness, meaningful relationships and purpose. To address the search for happiness, we intentionally create a Sunday morning celebration where people can be inspired, uplifted and experience the joy

of the Lord. Small groups focus on the need for meaningful relationships by connecting people in a more intimate family environment where depth of relationship is built. Finally, our consistent serving opportunities act as a catalyst in helping people see themselves as everyday missionaries and develop a sense of purpose through giving of themselves to benefit the larger community.

Research shows that getting people involved within the first six months is key to retention.¹⁴ Whether new attendees serve during an outreach event or on Sunday morning, they are more likely to stay connected with the church. But again, don't just plug them into a slot. Commit to helping people discover and live out their primary and unique callings. This consistent interaction dramatically helps unchurched people discover their sweet spot and become Christ-followers and members in a church family.

SENSITIVITY VERSUS COMPROMISE

Lives are messy. Guests who haven't experienced church may not meet our expectations of behavior in a typical church setting. As they wrestle with new ideas and beliefs, the unchurched may say things that contradict our Christian beliefs.

So how do we extend grace to the unchurched and give them time to form healthy relationships and authentically consider the claims of Christ?

People can *belong* to Bridge before they ever *believe*.

Jude 1:22-23 says, "Go easy on those who hesitate in the faith. Go after those who take the wrong way. Be tender with sinners, but not soft on sin." (MSG) What would it look like to go *easy on* and *go after* unbelievers who took the wrong way? Being sensitive to the unchurched doesn't mean compromising our beliefs. Rather, to engage the unchurched, we must rethink our approach to those disconnected from church. We can't change unbelievers, but we can love people and let the Holy Spirit work on their hearts.

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As Christians, we can't react in shock or judgment. Arguing won't move unbelievers to change. Our job is to love. When differences arise, we give space and grace to allow the Holy Spirit to do the convicting and changing. Jacob wrestled with God before he had a change of heart. Likewise, unbelievers need time to wrestle with God and the truth of scripture before their behavior and beliefs align with his heart.

Jesus showed sensitivity and kindness to unbelievers. Shouldn't we do the same?

SUNDAY MORNING CELEBRATION

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The Reveal Study, a survey of over 1,000 churches conducted by the Willow Creek Association, concluded that Sunday morning church service is best suited for those exploring Christ and early believers growing in Christ.¹⁵ Even Paul recognized his need to start with the basics to reach his worldly audience. (1 Corinthians 3:2) While mature believers need solid food, early believers thrive on milk. (1 Peter 2:2)

At Bridge, our transition to a Sunday morning hope-filled culture of celebration, hospitality and joy powerfully connects us to unbelievers. We don't water down the gospel, but we present more solid food in small groups and specific discipleship classes.

By implementing a culture of hope, a friendly, more welcoming church is better prepared to attract conversion growth. Hope-inspiring churches celebrate God's goodness and powerfully engage with the lost—opening a doorway for unbelievers to embrace faith. Creating a culture of hope is

possibly the most profound way churches can connect with the unchurched on a Sunday morning.

Section II: INSPIRE HOPE

Key Concept: When unchurched people show up on Sunday morning, we need to be ready to receive them. Adding a few simple, guest-friendly strategies can elevate and inspire hope on a Sunday morning.

Commitments:

1. Up the friendly factor with the 6 H's: high fives, handshakes, heartfelt conversations, side hugs, lending a helping hand and handing off guests by introducing them to others.
2. Build an early adopter team, challenging them to see themselves as everyday missionaries who regularly reach out to the unchurched.
3. Implement TIP time and create a culture of energy, enthusiasm and expectation.
4. Regularly share conversion and ongoing faith stories.
5. Celebrate regular baptisms.
6. Be sensitive to the unchurched in the selection of worship music and language used in preaching.

Questions:

1. Why is it important to distinguish between the two types of compassion?
2. Evaluate your current outreach strategy. Do you need to be more intentional in making good works God's work?

3. What is the number one emotion non-Christians experience when they visit a church for the first time?
4. How can your church be more happy, friendly and welcoming to guests?
5. What strategies can you adopt to build a culture of hope and expectation?
6. How does the church change its scorecard and become a thermostat setting the temperature and affecting the culture rather than a thermometer only reflecting the temperature?
7. How can we celebrate conversion and ongoing faith stories as a congregation?
8. How can we increase retention after guests visit?