



# How to ...

## Build a culture of invitation

### Research on Invitation

Michael Harvey, one of the people behind 'Back to Church Sunday', has conducted twelve years of research asking just one question: "Why don't we invite our friends to take a closer look at Christ and his church?" On all of those occasions no one ever told him that it was a stupid question. They just went on to tell him the reasons that were hindering them from invitation.

Harvey found nestling below the distorted truths was the fear of rejection. He believes if we ignore the emotion of fear, mission will be hindered. Fear drives us to avoid the thing we fear, and so we may never learn the truth – that it is not as threatening as we thought. For more details on fear of rejection and other research findings [www.unlockingthegrowth.com/book/](http://www.unlockingthegrowth.com/book/)

### Best Practice on Invitation

Much of the invitation process is completely invisible and therefore we do not notice it. And what we don't notice we won't change. A church leader announces a future event and asks congregation members to invite someone. The next thing to get noticed in the process is the event itself, and whether any guests have actually been invited by the congregation. Based on this evidence alone we make decisions about the effectiveness of mission! We fail to notice if anyone has asked God, or whether people have been prompted to invite someone, whether someone has the courage to invite, or what happens during the invitation itself.

Therefore let me introduce you to the acronym ACORN. I have chosen this word because, for an oak tree to live, the acorn must be buried in the ground and die. For an invitation to take place, we must take our fear with us and invite someone, and as we invite them that fear dies.

**ACORN** will help us to track invitation and give us some new metrics to make us more aware of the activity of God in the life of the church.

### A is for Ask

When it comes to inviting, asking is the beginning of receiving. Receiving is not the problem – it is our failure to ask. We make plans to invite like an adult and believe in our invitation like a child. You won't get everything you want in asking. Nothing in life works like that.

### C is for the Call of God

So who is God calling you to invite? Is there a name or a face that pops into your mind as you read this question?

#### *The invitational cross*

We can ask ourselves this question in an act of worship, as we seek to hear his call. One way that has proved effective is to write the initials of the person God is asking you to invite on a piece of paper, and then pin it on to a cross. When everyone has done this we can see God's unique mission field right across the congregation.



*Invitation cross first used in the Anglican chaplaincy in Limeuil, France.*

I have seen unique mission fields created using names written on paper – from sunflower leaves to stick-on starfish on a beach.

### **O is for Obey**

Currently in the life of the church we recognize and reward success rather than obedience. So, when I ask church leaders around the world how they know what's happening with invitation, they tell me that they judge by how many new faces they see on a Sunday morning. I might call these the invitations that resulted in a yes. The invitations that resulted in a no, but were also prompted by God, remain invisible. Congregation members who get a no are therefore not given the same accolade as those who get a yes. This means we are rewarding success rather than obedience.

### **R is for reporting results**

We allow perceived failure to deflate us. We suddenly lose confidence and become dispirited. Results need to be shared – even when we think they reflect badly on us. In invitation we often focus on the invited person, but we must not forget the inviter. This is the one who plays a vital role in the invitation process by assisting with an invite. So also in invitation we need to start reporting the results from the inviter as well as the invited person.

### **N is for Numinous**

The numinous is an almost tangible sense of the presence of God. So in the asking and the call within ACORN, did you hear the call of God? Did you feel the presence of God as you obeyed? Can you see the work of God in the results? Is the fruit of the Spirit visible in the report? The more we can help Christians to find God's presence in the activity of mission, the more I believe we will seek the presence of God.

## **Redefining the Response**

### **The invitation clock**

This is a way of looking at what is happening to the person we are inviting. It helps us to recalibrate success and re-establish faithfulness.

Imagine a clock face and think of both hands pointing at twelve. At twelve o'clock whatever you say to people they will say 'yes' to your invitation. You might have said, "You won't want to come to my church, it's a bit rubbish, and I don't know why I go, but do you want to come?" And they will say yes, because they are at twelve o'clock in their relationship with God. God has already got there before you. They are just one hundred per cent ready for an invitation.

At three o'clock on the clock face, whatever you say to the person you meet they will completely reject you, and God, and probably say something like, "You must be joking... *me* go to church? Are you mad?" But now you know that they are at three o'clock in their present relationship with God.

At six o'clock when you invite them they will say to you, "I have thought about this.... but you are all hypocrites." They have a very high standard for their Christianity, and they are currently thinking about it. You have probably struck a nerve by allowing them to take the lid off their internal conversation with God. But at least now you know they are at six o'clock in their relationship with God.

When you invite the person at nine o'clock on the clock face, they will ask you something concrete, like "When does the service start?" But when you reply, they will say, "Unfortunately we are busy." They are not against an invitation, they are not against God, they are merely at that stage of life when they are busy.

Then there are those people who are at eleven o'clock on the clock face. They are so close to accepting an invitation, but not quite yet: "No, I don't think so... but feel free to ask me again some other time."

As you go inviting you will meet all these people along the clock face, and variations along the way, but your invitation will move them along the clock face towards a relationship with God. No invitation returns void – even if that is not always obvious. Sometimes we may think someone has moved backwards round the clock, anti-clockwise, but we can rely on God to be challenging them in their relationship with him.

For more information on how to practice invitation see the Season of Invitation website <http://seasonofinvitation.co.uk/>

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