

FRONT DOOR

VS.

BACK DOOR

Which Challenge is Your Church Facing?

THE UNSTUCK GROUP[®]

— WE HELP CHURCHES GET UNSTUCK. —

OPENING THOUGHTS:

Connecting with people and keeping them connected are two of the largest challenges churches face. Our team consistently sees churches face these “front door” and “back door” challenges. In case you haven’t heard it phrased this way before, here’s what those terms mean:

The front door is the means by which you bring more people into the local church. Simply put, when there aren’t first-time guests showing up, you have a front door problem. On the opposite end, the back door stays closed when you help people stay engaged and growing long-term. When people start slipping through the cracks, or attendance starts to decline, you may have a back door problem.

This raises some important questions:

How do we know if our challenges are front door or back door issues? We regularly see churches who think they have a back door issue but are actually struggling to get new people to show up in the first place. So how can we be sure which challenge we are facing?

How can we keep people connected? What is the best way to make sure people don’t slip out the back door unnoticed? Keeping people’s needs at the forefront is crucial to a church’s success.

What are the best practices for getting new people to show up? As you know, your church isn’t going to grow without new people... so how can we create an environment that is compelling and that our congregation can be proud of?

How we answer these questions will determine the success of our churches in reaching new people and engaging them for the long run.

Here are some thoughts from our team on this topic.

PART 1:

The #1 Reason Your Front Door is Closed

by Amy Anderson

When my husband and I walked through the doors of Eagle Brook Church back in 1998, we hadn't been to church in many years. We came with low expectations based on our church backgrounds. But from the moment we arrived, we knew this place was different.

We were greeted by genuine people, they used language that made us feel both welcome and comfortable. We heard great music that was relevant and heard a message from the Bible that spoke to us and applied to our lives. After the service, the Children's Pastor came up to us and introduced herself. Our 3 little kids, ages 1, 2 and 4 years old, probably caught her eye as they spilled donut sprinkles all over the carpet.

Bottom line, the staff and volunteers created an experience that was irresistible.

They were ready for us. They created an experience that drew us in, and all of our lives were changed forever in the days and years going forward. Their front door and the weekend experience were welcoming, warm and just what this tired, spiritually-disconnected family needed.

However, if I take a step back, what they really did right, is what I believe is the biggest barrier to the front doors of our churches. **They raised up a congregation that cared about people far from God.**

If I back up our story a few months, the real reason we walked through those doors in 1998 was because I had a co-worker that became my friend first. We shared many lunches together, getting to know one another. She and her husband offered to babysit our firstborn when my husband and I were exhausted and needed a night out. She empathized when we had an unexpected third child, knowing our young marriage was already struggling. She knew me. So, when she invited me to her church, I was open. And, although I told her all the reasons why we weren't interested, she would just gently respond explaining we should just give it a try and that she and her husband would go with us. We felt so loved and supported by her and her husband that eventually we accepted the invitation (and the rest is history).

I remembered our story more clearly when I was with a group of pastors at one of [The Unstuck Group's](#) recent [Coaching Network](#) gatherings. One of the pastors shared a story from his church. He said,

"One of our attenders had been inviting a friend to church for years and he always said 'no.' Finally, after another invitation, his friend said to him,

'You keep inviting me to your church. You never invite me to your house.'"

All these years I thought our church had it right because our church's "front door" was so welcoming, real and ready. But, we never would have agreed to go if our friends weren't so welcoming, real and ready.

The church had cast a vision to its attendees that being the hands and feet of Jesus to those around them was the first step.

The church does need to be ready when people do decide to come. Our churches need to pay attention to the guest experience, what we say, the music we play, the messages we teach. But more importantly, we need to raise up the people in our church to care about people far from God. We need to challenge them to get outside their Christian bubbles so they can notice and care for the people God has placed around them. Each of us needs to do our part, and the church needs to do their part, if we are going to effectively reach our friends and family members for Jesus.

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

When a church tries to reach everyone, they rarely connect with anyone effectively. When they get focused on who they are trying to reach, they can be intentional and effective in reaching that person – and they will reach others in the process.

But too often churches become insider-focused over time. They become more worried about the people inside their church than those who haven't yet been reached for Jesus. And here's the reality: it's impossible to make new disciples when you're not reaching new people.

Resources to help your church understand your customer:

[Leadership Unstuck Podcast | Do You Know Your Customer?](#)

[Why People Like Starbucks More Than Your Church](#)

[4 Reasons Why Churches Become Insider-Focused](#)

[Churches Do Not Want to Reach New Customers](#)

PART 2:

Does Your Church Have a Front Door or Back Door Challenge?

by Tony Morgan

First of all, let me share some data from [What Every Pastor Should Know: 101 Indispensable Rules of Thumb for Leading Your Church](#), a book written by Gary McIntosh and Charles Arn. These are some key metrics you can track to determine whether or not you have a healthy front door:

- If the church is growing, you'll need more guests each year than you have people in your total average attendance. In other words, a growing church of 500 will need more than 500 guests in a year.
- The typical growing church sees 20% of first-time guests become part of the church.
- Growing churches see nearly 40% of second-time guests become part of the church.
- Close to 60% of people will become part of the church after their third visit.

Based on that information, your primary goal for first-time guests should be to get them to come back.

You don't need them to jump all-in by connecting them to a group or a serving team or a Bible study after their first visit. The odds of them making those connections substantially increase, though, after a second or third visit.

How do you measure first-time guests?

I encourage churches to be proactively engaging guests as soon as they walk up to the building before services. Many churches have kiosks set up at their main entrances with signage that simply asks, "First time here?" That makes it obvious for first-time guests that they should start at the kiosk, which creates an opportunity to help point them in the right direction, and track the number of guests showing up.

Additionally, you can track guests by encouraging them to submit a connection card. Savvy churches will offer gifts in exchange for guests submitting a card. You can also track guests through kid's check-in, giving, event sign-ups, etc. Simply thank them for taking that step and ask, *When did you first connect with the church?*

If that's too difficult or too intrusive, at a minimum, start tracking new people in your database each month that make some sort of next step beyond your email list.

Is it really a back door problem?

Again, you want the total numbers of guests (including kids) over 12 months to exceed your weekly average attendance. If you can only get an adult count, you can estimate your total guest count by adding a percentage for kids and/or students that reflects your weekly average.

I can tell you that I've worked with many churches that complain that they have a back door problem. They see new people every Sunday, and they assume people are coming to worship but they're not taking next steps and they're not sticking. Therefore, they assume they have a back door problem.

The reality, in many of these instances, is that their number of first-time guests as a percentage of total attendance is very low.

The reason why the church isn't growing is because it has a front door problem. There aren't enough first-time guests.

Are people inviting their friends?

Here's another important statistic to remember: the number one reason people give for showing up to a church service for the first time is because a friend invited them. In fact, when I've done the research, I've found that between 75 and 80 percent of people visit a church for the first time because of an invitation from a friend.

If your first-time guest numbers are lower than they should be, the obvious question you need to ask is this: Why have people stopped inviting their friends?

The easy thing to do, of course, would be to point the finger at people in your church and blame them for not being intentional about developing relationship and inviting friends to worship. What I've found, though, is that invitations happen naturally in churches that are very intentional about their weekend services. They create environments with teaching that produces life-change, engaging worship, creative service elements, intentional guest services, captivating children's ministry and more. These churches couldn't stop people from inviting friends if they tried.

If your church has plateaued or declined in attendance, do you know if you have a front door or back door problem? If your first-time guest numbers are much higher than your overall attendance but your attendance is still not growing, that's a great indication that you have a back door challenge. If that's the case, your first step is to consider [your discipleship path](#). If you have a front door challenge, though, it's time to focus on creating service environments that compel people to invite their friends.

PART 3:

2 Strategies for Closing the Back Door

by Tammy Kelley

Do a Google search on the phrase *back door* and you will get lots of options for purchasing or fixing the back door of your house. Add the word *church* to your search and you suddenly get lots of articles about why people are leaving our churches.

Some articles say “Don’t worry about it – it’s God’s problem to fill the church.” Others suggest our churches may collapse if people continue to mysteriously escape our church through the back door. The reality is, in my 30 years in church leadership, I don’t remember meeting one church leader who didn’t care about both expanding the Kingdom by bringing more people into the local church (front door) *and* helping them stay engaged and growing long-term (back door).

What are some indicators that your church may have back door issues?

Declining weekend worship attendance numbers; lots of new families registering in kids ministry but overall attendance staying flat; and number of giving units and/or per capita giving decreasing – just to name a few.

But what’s the root cause of the issue? Here are a few I’ve seen throughout the years, along with some suggestions for addressing them.

1) You can’t solve the back door problem until you really know who’s using it.

Focus groups are my personal favorite way to gather feedback from your congregation. Start by listing the demographic groups in your congregation. Here a few to start your thinking:

- People exploring faith (do you have an Alpha type class?)
- New members (specifically those who have joined in the past year)
- College age
- Members of 5 years or more
- Young parents
- Strong financial contributors

For each of these groups, create an individual focus group. Invite 8 – 10 people to a 45-minute session. Host the focus group at a convenient time (I like doing these around the weekend service when people are already on site). Make the invite to the focus group simple and nonthreatening.

For instance, say something like “We want to get to know our attendees better and gather some ideas from you.”

Select a facilitator from within your congregation who is people-savvy and friendly. In addition to the facilitator, have someone in the room to casually take notes.

Ask questions like:

- How long have you been attending?
- What brought you here?
- What do you like best about our church?
- Is there anything that is confusing about our church?
- Is there anything that you hope will change or be different about our church in the next 6 months to a year?
- Anything else? Anything I didn't ask about that you would like to say?

The idea is to keep the questions open ended. As you hold multiple focus groups, you are looking for themes and patterns. This will give leadership a benchmark for the current reality.

Focus groups almost always surface unique insights – many positive themes that you will want to celebrate but also areas in your church that you can improve in efforts to better serve people and close the back door.

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

What if small groups were the front door of your church?

Most church leaders would agree that small groups help close the back door of the church. It is important that people in our church get connected in community, but we're missing a critical evangelism opportunity if that's our only plan for small groups.

Small group connection events within the church have proven to be the best strategy for getting church members into a small group, but if we are going to make a serious dent in our communities, small groups have to become a new entry point for the church.

[>> Click here to read the rest of the article <<](#)

2) You can't solve the back door problem without more accountability.

For staff and volunteers, that is.

It's a story I've seen too often: An attender sincerely wants to get connected somewhere in the church; they sign up for a class, a small group, or a serving opportunity, and then — no one calls them back.

We staffers spend a lot of time marketing our church activities to draw people in. We fight for the announcement slot to get our ministries advertised, and yet way too often we drop the ball in actually making the connection between the person and the activity they became interested in.

Churches that do a great job at connection have created a complete system that follows a person from the time they sign up all the way through an acknowledgement that the person did actually get connected AND an acknowledgement that this is the right connection for the person.

So what does this system of connection look like? There is generally a point person (often a staff member), a team of Connection volunteers and a computer database.

Your system of accountability is key.

Here's one I've seen work well:

When an attender wants to serve in Children's Ministry, the Connection Team enters the person's name in the database and ensures Children's Ministry receives it. The Children's Ministry team contacts the new volunteer and communicates back to the Connection Team to signal this step has occurred.

A few weeks later the Connection Team follows up with the attender to make sure they actually did get started and that they are enjoying serving in Children's Ministry. If Children's Ministry dropped the ball on connecting the person, the Connection Team can circle back with the ministry for a second try.

This system may sound complex at first, but once you get it in place, it won't take a lot of time. And I have seen these strategies work well in all sizes of churches — from 300 to 10,000+.

PART 4:

Beyond the Mug: Connecting with Guests Coming in Your Front Door

by Ryan Stigile

I have a friend who recently moved to a major city. In his quest to find a church home, he stumbled upon something else in the process: an incredible church mug collection!

Not surprisingly, nearly every church he visited offered him a coffee mug in exchange for completing a Connection Card. I should give credit to a few of the more relevant churches in his town. They've really broken the norm, offering plastic water bottles over the traditional handled mug.

As church leaders, it's easy to forget what it's like to be a real "church guest;" especially someone with little church experience. So imagine this:

You just walked into a new store where you've never shopped. The clerk smiles politely and says, "In exchange for phone number, email, and street address, we would like to offer you an *incredible, brand new, store-branded.....coffee mug.*"

Would you really trade access to your inbox and cell phone for a small gift?! You might give them an email you never check and the receptionist's landline at your office. But that's far from making a personal connection with the organization. It's simply a small, impersonal exchange.

Is it possible that in our attempts to connect with guests, we actually push people away by feeling corporate and transactional?

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for following up personally with as many people as possible. But the way we go about it sets the tone for our relationships with them. Simply asking for contact info and sending some one-way scripted messages (even on a phone call) is far from making a connection.

So how can you truly connect with guests and engage them in the life of your church? Here are four ideas to consider with your team:

1) Serve Before Soliciting

Rather than leading with a request for personal information, go above and beyond to make guests feel comfortable from the moment they arrive. Set up "First-Time Here" stations just outside your front doors. Make yourself readily available to help them navigate a new building, check-in their kids, and find a seat. When you serve first, you'll earn trust and prove you're an organization worth connecting with.

2) Focus More on Getting Guests to Come Back

It is safe to say that many people won't complete a Connection Card on their first visit. That's ok; in fact, it's normal. Give guests the option to complete a card but don't push it too hard. What's most important is that they enjoy the experience enough to return next Sunday. Once they feel "at home," they'll let you know they are there.

3) Make Your First Step Smaller

I see more and more churches asking guests to attend an "orientation" that will last for several weeks. That's a big commitment for someone who is just visiting. Instead, create a quick place and time for them to connect with a staff member, ask any questions, and learn about a few of the ways they can further connect when they're ready. The smaller you make your first step, the more likely people will be to take it.

4) Follow-Up with Kids

You likely ask for information every time you check a child into your kids' environment for the first time. What if that new child's small group leader sent him or her a personal postcard the following week? It's a small ask of leaders that makes a big difference to families. I've had parents tell me they decided to truly connect with the church after they saw their child cared for so personally.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against coffee mugs, water bottles, or any other gift that communicates, "We're so glad you're here." But it is important to be sure that in the process of connection, we go above and beyond to be as personal as possible. As we do, more people will feel comfortable enough to engage true relationships that could impact their lives forever.

We hope each of these insights were helpful and thought-provoking. However, to truly discover the health of your church, the issues are going to lie deeper than the front door and back door of your church. Regardless of uniqueness, every church has the potential to go through a very similar life cycle. Find out where your church sits in its life cycle so you can make intentional steps toward sustained health. Click below to take the assessment:

Where Is Your Church In Its Life Cycle?

Over time, most organizations start, grow, thrive, decline, and eventually end.

But that's not God's plan for the Church.

[Assess your church](#)

