

HOW DO PEOPLE COME TO CHURCH?

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Some years ago John Finney wrote a highly significant report, *Finding Faith Today: how does it happen?* (Bible Society 1992) in which he drew attention to the important role family and friends play in people becoming Christians. Of the 500 people he interviewed, the influence of the family was mentioned as a main factor by 27%, and a supporting factor by about half of the participants. As for friends, 15% of men and 24% of women said this was the main factor; and 39% of men and 40% of women said it was a supporting factor.

Precisely because of the important role that family and friends play, like many other ministers I have preached on the words of Jesus after he had restored the Gadarene demoniac to his right mind: “Go back to your ‘own’ (i.e. to your family and friends) and tell them how much the Lord has done for you” (Mark 5.19), and have spoken about the need for Christians to develop their network of relationships – and so use them to draw their family and friends into the kingdom.

Recently I did an analysis of what had caused people to start to attend the church which I serve. Yes, there were a number of people who had come as a result of friends. Astonishingly I discovered that of the people who have brought along their friends in the past twelve months, not one of them I would have viewed as a ‘natural’ evangelist: furthermore, not one of them is an ‘extrovert’. As a natural extrovert myself I find that quite disconcerting.

A good number of people have come to us as a result of Alpha. Although some of these have been brought along by friends, others have just walked in off the street. They have perhaps seen the banner outside our church, or picked up an Alpha leaflet when they have dropped into our Oasis café. Of the guests on our present Alpha course, three at the maximum are there because of family or friends.

To my surprise, others have come to us because of our web-site. True, the people in question have already been Christians – but, two of them were finding their way back to church after a gap of five or more years. In talking to others, I find that our experience is not unusual. Indeed, one of the churches in our town claims to have large numbers of people attending their present Alpha course because of the prominence they have given to Alpha on their web-site. Somewhat belatedly, we as a church are beginning to wake up to the importance of our web-site. At the moment we have a fairly good ‘static’ site (www.centralbaptist.co.uk). However, we are moving over to an interactive site (www.centralbaptistchelmsford.org.uk) – partly for the sake of the convenience of church members, but above all for the sake of reaching out to others surfing the web. The Apostle Paul would be surprised to discover what ‘By all means save some’ (1 Cor 9.22) can imply today!

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