

# Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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## Add Side Doors to Your Church

The front doors of America's churches are closing. Your church's "front doors" are those people who visit your worship service, education classes, or special events. They are the primary way that most churches identify their prospective members.

However, in the past twenty years not only has the *number* of visitors been declining, but also the *percentage* of visitors in relation to churches' total

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— Charles Arn

attendance. To survive, let alone thrive, churches need to build "side-doors" to create connections with the people in their community who will find faith.

### What Are Side Doors?

A *Side-door* is a church-sponsored program, group, or activity in which a non-member can become comfortably involved on a regular basis. It is an ongoing function in which a non-member can develop meaningful and valued relationships with people in the church.

The purpose of a side-door is to provide an opportunity for these group participants (church members and non-members) to develop friendships around something important they share in common. And, as we now know, relationships are the key to effective evangelism. It is through relationships that the Gospel has primarily spread throughout the centuries, as well as today.

Here are just a few examples of actual side-doors that churches have created where members and non-members are developing friendships around common interests. There are side-doors in churches for people who: *ride motorcycles, have children in the military, own RVs, are recent widowers, are newlyweds, enjoy reading books, are unemployed, suffer from chronic pain, have husbands in jail, are nominal Jews, have spouses who are not believers, are fishermen, are single mothers, want to get in better physical condition, wish to help homeless families, play softball, are interested in end-times, have a bed-ridden parent, are raising grandchildren, are moms with teenage daughters, ... and that's just a start!*

**Check out Dr. McIntosh's new website for additional articles.**

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# Provide opportunities for friendships to develop.

Ten percent of churches in the USA are side-door churches.

Why are side-doors necessary today for churches to effectively reach out and evangelize? It is because the longer a person has been a Christian, the fewer friends he/she has who are *not* Christians. Eventually, many long-term Christians have no real friends outside their church and/or faith. Put another way, the outreach potential (and thus the growth potential) of a church that is comprised of mostly long-term Christians is quite limited compared to a church with many new believers. If your church is made up mostly of people who have been Christians for over five years, you need to build at least two side-doors each year where people can develop new friendships with those outside the church.

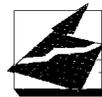
So, how does a church begin creating side doors—new groups, new classes, new activities—where members and non-members can build friendships? Here are some guidelines for starting new side-doors:

*Find the Passion.* Everyone in your church cares deeply about something; sometimes it's a number of things. Such passion generally falls into one of two categories: "Recreational" or "Developmental". The first relates to how people like to spend their free time. The second category, Developmental, relates to major life issues.

*Hold an "exploratory" meeting.* Invite three or more people who share the same passion to a brainstorming session to discuss the idea of your church starting a new ministry for people who --- -- [the area of passion]. Explain that one of the purposes is to build friendships with non-members through connecting around a common interest. If there is any enthusiasm, take the next step.

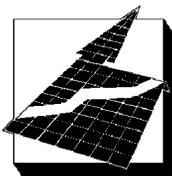
*Research other churches.* Chances are good that there are churches that have already developed a creative ministry in the area you are considering. Search out any other churches that might have a ministry for people with that particular interest. Then compare notes with others who have done similar research.

*Dream.* At your next brainstorming meeting, discuss what such a ministry might look like in your church five years from today. If there are at least three people willing to help birth a new ministry (side-door) in your church, work on a timeline with dates and events for the next year. Agree that in one year the activities will be evaluated as to whether there is a possible future for this new ministry idea. There is, of course, much involved in creating a fully-functioning side-door ministry. But a majority of effective, growing churches today have a wonderful variety of such ministries that grew out of the passion of one or more members, and has become a well-traveled entry-path to life in Christ and that church.



Adapted from the forthcoming book *What Every Pastor Should Know: 101 Indispensable Rules of Thumb for Leading Your Church* (Baker Books March 2013) by Gary L. McIntosh and Charles Arn.

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