

RESEARCH REFLECTION

A Publication of the Center for Missional Research, North American Mission Board

Going Door-to-Door: A Look at the Numbers

Ed Stetzer

February 2007

Going Door-to-Door: A Look at the Numbers

Ed Stetzer

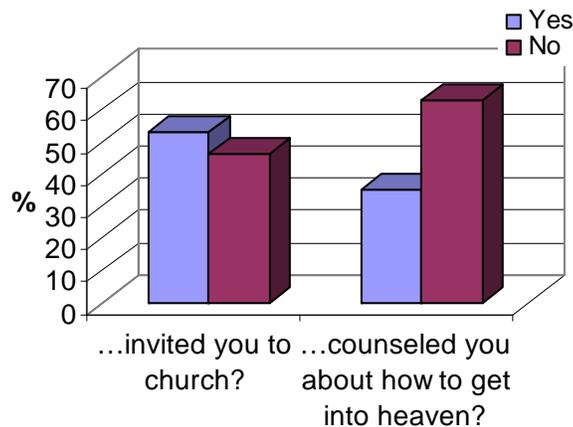
Every Saturday morning at First Church, dedicated church members meet to do something both their parents and grandparents did before them—door-to-door visitation. They visit people in the neighborhood who might be new church prospects with the hope they'll begin personal relationships with Christ either that morning or the next Sunday at church. Recently there has been a growing debate among those assembling for outreach as to how to approach their task. Some on the team want to share the gospel with every person they come in contact with—or they believe they're putting the person's eternal destiny at risk. Others suggest that the team should simply invite people to hear their biblically faithful, gospel-preaching pastor tell them about Jesus during his Sunday message.

Who's right?

We (the North American Mission Board's Center for Missional Research) decided to find out. By partnering with a polling firm¹ to ask 1,200 random Americans we discovered that the answer just might be—"both."

When you knock on a stranger's door, more people are open to a church invitation than a gospel presentation—but a significant minority are open to both. According to the survey, Americans are far more open to people coming to their door with that simple invitation than trying to tell them how to get into heaven (53 to 35%). The only exception to this trend is among African Americans, nearly half of whom are okay with someone coming to their door with an evangelistic message—15 percent more than any other ethnic group surveyed.

Would it be OK if someone came to your door and...



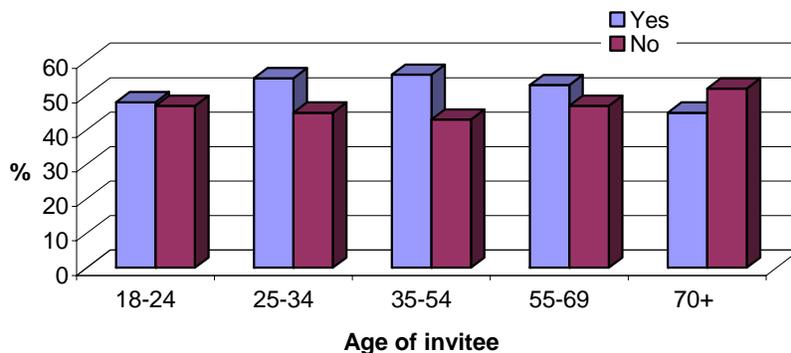
¹ Zogby International, Utica, New York.

These stats tell an important story—many people are open to an invitation to your church and some are open to hearing about heaven. Even 40 percent of the most unchurched are open to an invitation to your church, which is something that the whole church can do—something that’s much less scary for the typical believer and takes less training. It is helpful to know that many people are open to a church event invitation where, perhaps, they can hear the gospel in an understandable way. Imagine how many more houses your church group could visit if every person could be convinced to make one visit and one simple invitation.

Many people, including me, were surprised that the negative reaction was not more pronounced. But, the numbers are here and, surprisingly, more people are open than we think—particularly if they are approached in a respectful manner.

This survey also contradicts the long-held belief that young people would outright reject church groups coming to their door. In fact, despite being known as one of the most difficult to reach demographics in the country, people between the ages of 25 to 34 were virtually just as likely as their next elders (ages 35 to 54) and considerably more likely than the 70+ crowd to appreciate someone coming to the door and inviting them to church. As you’ll see in the chart below, it’s only those on the low and high ends of the age spectrum that will generally shun a door-to-door invitation to church more often than not.

Openness to Door-to-Door Church Invitations, by Age



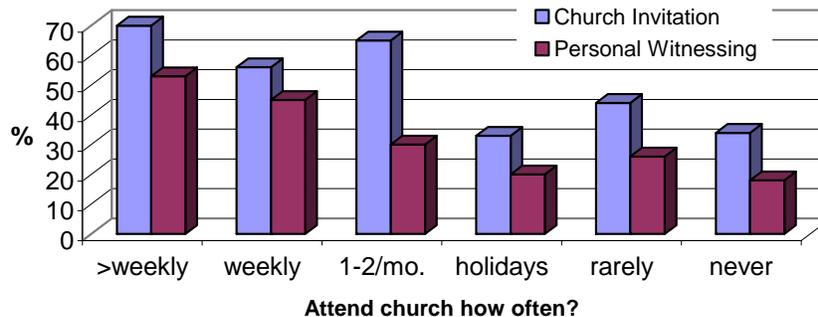
Ideological and socio-economic factors also play a part in how open people are to door-to-door church invitations. More than two-thirds of those who call themselves conservative would likely listen to your church invitation, should you come to the door. But churches in “blue states” should take note—only a little more than half of self-described liberals would do so.

In fact, as you put together different components of the research, you begin to see a clear picture of the type of community where door-to-door church invitations could be most successful. If you were picking such a place, you’d probably settle on a poor to working class community that’s ideologically conservative with a high number of Protestants. All three of these demographic groups recorded higher than average openness to church

invitations through the door-to-door method—all were above 60 percent. Conversely, it’s not as well received in a liberal, well-to-do or middle class, non-Protestant community.

Yet any good news about door-to-door church invitations can only be limited as we look at the study. The fact remains the unchurched are far less interested in being invited to church by someone they don’t know knocking on their door. Only 39 percent of those surveyed who attend church rarely, on holidays, or never would be okay with someone coming to their door and inviting them to church, according to the survey. The numbers are consistently worse when asked about “counseling” for “heaven,” or what we would call personal witnessing. In other words, the very people we say we want to get into our churches the most are the people least likely to be impacted by one of our favorite outreach strategies.

Percent of Those Open to Door-to-Door Church Invitations or Witnessing, by Church Attendance Patterns



Now more than ever, we need to look toward new methods to get the unchurched into our churches. Some people will be reached through door-to-door methods. Others will not. While more than half of Americans would listen cordially as a stranger at their door invited them to church, more than 60 percent of the unchurched might tune us out before the invitation left our mouths. Now, the cross is always a stumbling block, but we also want to be sure that our methods are less so.

The message of the gospel is too important to be spread through just one strategy—and if God leads you and your church to a certain strategy, you should use it. Door-to-door methods can be and are used to reach people. At my own church plant, we went door-to-door passing out flyers and free popcorn to invite people to our preview service. This method can still be an important part of our evangelism strategies, but our study shows that not everyone is open to such an approach. Let us ask God to show us additional ways to reach the unchurched—through relationships, service, ministry, and invitations to visit. Remember, God wants to see the unchurched connected to a family of faith even more than we do.

–Ed Stetzer is the Missiologist and Senior Director of NAMB’s Center for Missional Research.