



Lewis Center
for Church Leadership

Leading Ideas

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Deliberate Outreach Strategy Leads to Growth by Rudy Guess

Worship attendance at Gardendale-Mt. Vernon United Methodist Church in Gardendale, Alabama, has increased more than 5 percent each year since 1999. One reason for the increase is three different worship experiences with one common message. We often begin the year with a series of messages designed with the unchurched in mind. For example, this year we began with a message series "Narnia and the Gospel" that was promoted in the newspaper and with door hangers.

New residents to the area are visited by our Welcome Wagon Team and given an information/gift packet. First-time worship guests are visited on the Sunday afternoon of their first visit and given a welcome packet. During the first 14 weeks after a person's initial visit in worship, a plan of follow up is implemented that includes regular contacts through telephone or visitation. Each month, a letter with an evaluation sheet is sent to all who visited during that month, asking them to rate how we welcomed them and asking for suggestions on what we could do better. At the same time, we are intentional about following up on our church family when they are absent. Everyone who misses worship three and five consecutive weeks is contacted by staff or their flock leader.

Throughout the year we offer outreach events. Examples include: a community Easter egg hunt with worship at the park, a community service day, Bring-A-Friend Sunday, supper with Santa, a Christmas pageant, and our annual August Camp Meeting Month. One of the key outreach ministries is our Child Enrichment Center. Many of our first-time worship guests first experience our church through the Child Enrichment Center.

We have also found a common spiritual growth emphasis, where morning worship and discipleship groups study a common theme, is very powerful. For example, our fall spiritual growth campaign in a recent year was *Managing Life*. It included the morning messages, daily devotional material, Sunday school material, and small group material.

Dr. Cooper R. (Rudy) Guess is senior pastor of Gardendale-Mt. Vernon UMC in Gardendale, Alabama. This article appears on the congregational development webpage of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church (www.northalabamaumc.org.) and is used with their permission.