



Learning to Be Some Things to Some People

When one morning I visited Perimeter Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, I thought I had found *the* model of effective evangelism. That afternoon I visited Paulding Baptist on the other side of town. I left bewildered. It, too, modeled effective evangelism, but there the similarity ended.

Perimeter has a large, modern facility with sharp lines and soft colors; it's surrounded by a freshly paved, lined, and landscaped parking lot. Everything is in superb condition. Paulding is housed in a former Harley-Davidson motorcycle warehouse adjacent to a junk yard. The interior is clean but merely

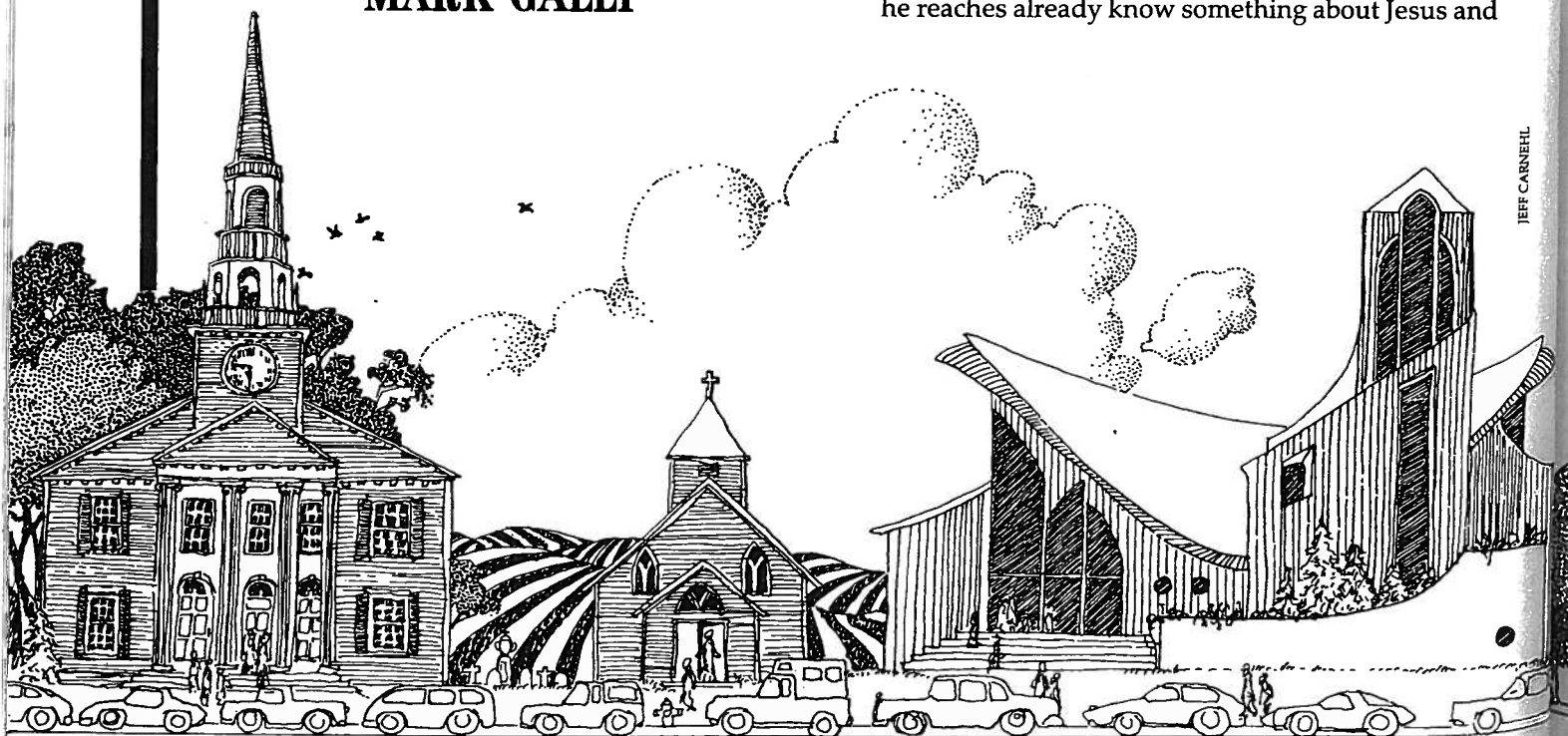
functional. The parking lot is unpaved and has potholes.

Perimeter reaches business executives, teachers, administrators, and lawyers. Paulding reaches both rich and poor, blacks and whites, most of whom work as mechanics, clerks, and repairmen — although some members count themselves teachers, administrators, or businesspeople.

The Perimeter pastor, Randy Pope, spoke about the need to take down religious barriers and avoid religious language to reach his post-Christian, secular community, much of which is indifferent or hostile to the Christian faith.

The Paulding pastor, Toby Frost, said the people he reaches already know something about Jesus and

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have respect for religion, albeit from afar. Still, says Frost, "These people really want to hear about Jesus."

Pope says his church doesn't make visits into people's homes: "People won't come to church if they know they'll be visited the following week."

Frost believes home visitation is one of the keys to the church's effective evangelism. So after introducing themselves at the door, a home visitation team will often politely invite themselves into people's homes: "May we come in and talk for a bit?"

The problem is both churches are growing, each reaching people for Christ.

Of course, reaching people for Christ is not a problem, but as I talked with dozens of pastors and church staff of evangelistically effective churches, the problem became identifying any clear principles. The more churches I talked to, the more muddy the principles became. Putting a high priority on evangelism is clearly important. But other than that, churches are able to evangelize effectively in a variety of ways.

Niche Is the Key

In the baffling variety, however, lies at least one principle: each church I examined has decided that it cannot be all things to all people. In one way or another, each has determined its unique identity as well as whom it is able to reach.

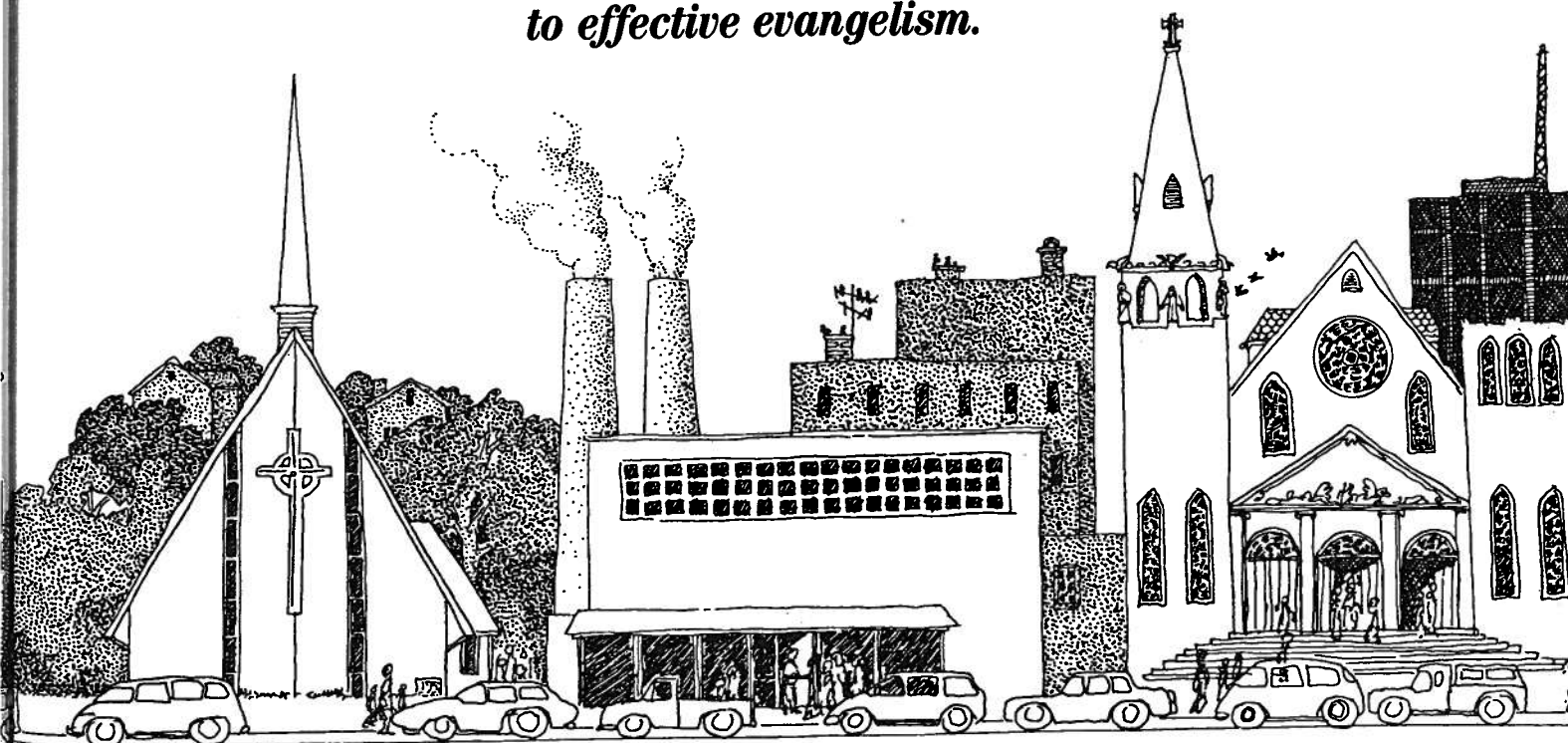
Lyle Schaller, writing in *Clergy Journal*, expresses a truth about effective downtown churches that applies to other churches as well: "Instead of pretending they exist to serve everyone, these churches have carved out a specialized niche in ministry and seek to excel in that specialized role."

"The list of examples range from the self-identified charismatic downtown church, to the racially integrated congregation, to the white parish made up of a growing number of mature adults, to the church that schedules five different worship services in five different languages every weekend, to the cosmopolitan congregation that includes members born in three dozen or more different countries, to the downtown church that is organized around enlisting volunteers and mobilizing other resources for a variety of social welfare ministries, to the church that reaches thirty or forty thousand viewers every week via television, to the theologically conservative church in a theologically liberal denomination that has a monopoly on that end of its denomination's theological spectrum, to the congregation organized around the support of worldwide missions, to the role as the leading prophetic ministry in the city, to the operation of a Christian day school."

In a recent conversation he added, "Evangelism in the nineties is niche. You pick out a segment, a slice of the market you want to try to reach, and develop a ministry for that slice."

Picking out that segment is no small task. It in-

Finding your church's niche seems to be one key to effective evangelism.



volves making a number of choices, some of the most important being the following:

Pagans or Prodigals?

Which is true?

— Our culture is more secular than ever, essentially a pagan society.

— Our culture is as religious as ever, with great interest in spiritual things.

Churches have to decide which of those statements — both of which can be documented — describe their situation and will guide their ministry.

● *Our culture is secular.* Religion, let alone Christianity, is rarely portrayed sympathetically on television or in the movies. Religion and religious ethics increasingly have been edged out of curriculum and discussion of the public schools. Colleges and universities often seem hostile to Christianity. More and more, religious symbols are eliminated from local and national government seals, signs, and documents. "In God we trust" on currency is about all that is left, and some say, in light of the rampant materialism of our culture, that it's becoming increasingly ambiguous as to who the "God" is: the Lord or Mammon.

In addition, the number of self-proclaimed agnostics and atheists has quadrupled in the last sixty years (from 2 percent to more than 8 percent of the population). And many pastors report how biblically illiterate are the people to whom they reach out.

More and more people, especially baby boomers, seem to live purely secular lives, without a thought given to God or the church.

In some pockets, this version of America is powerfully incarnated. Steve Green, assistant pastor of Columbia Presbyterian Church in Columbia, Maryland, is trying to minister in a planned community of some 80,000 people. The problem is the company that manages the community property restricts the number of religious centers in the area, even requiring that the ones that are constructed house multiple religious groups. Independent single congregations are not permitted.

The management company thought it was making a place for religion by designating the number and

structure of religious centers, but it has inadvertently curtailed religious interest. Churches can't develop an identity. So, in this community only one out of ten people attend religious services on the weekends. It is a disturbing symbol of secular America.

Some churches, Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, being the most famous, have given themselves to reaching this America. And they have shaped their worship, education, preaching, teaching, and advertisements as if the world is pervasively secular.

● *Americans are religious.* In fact, if anything, they are slightly more religious than a generation ago.

According to Gallup polls, in a typical week 42 percent of Americans attend church or synagogue, up 1 percent from 1937. And between 1954 and 1982, biblical knowledge increased: previously only 34 percent of Americans could name the person who delivered the Sermon on the Mount and only 35 percent could name all four Gospels. By 1982 those figures stood at 42 percent and 46 percent respectively.

"The most appropriate word to use to describe the religious character of the nation as a whole over the last half century is 'stable,'" write George Gallup and Jim Castelli (*The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's*, 1989). "Basic religious beliefs, and even religious practice, today differ relatively little from levels recorded fifty years ago. In fact, the nation in some respects has remained remarkably orthodox — even fundamentalist in its beliefs."

They cite as examples the following facts:

— Nine Americans in ten say they have never doubted the existence of God.

— Eight Americans in ten say they believe they will be called before God on judgment day to answer for their sins.

— Eight Americans in ten believe God still works miracles.

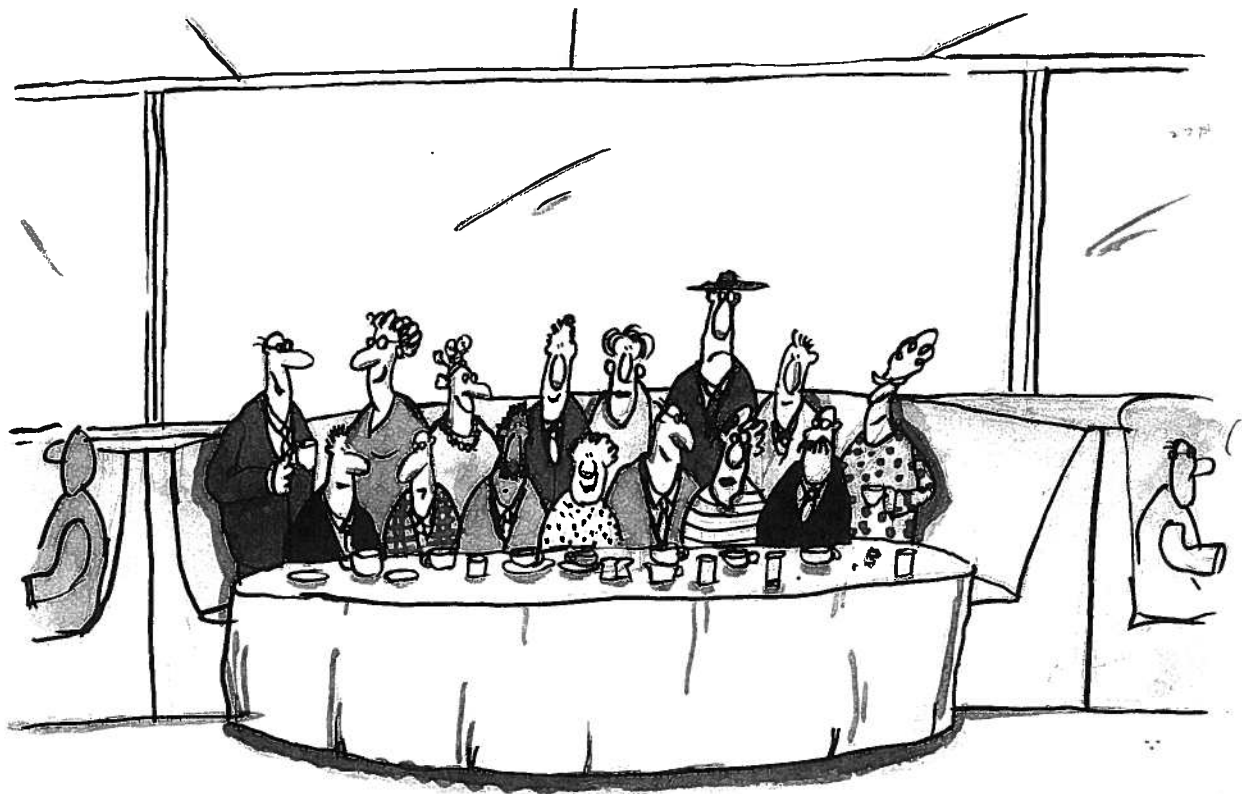
It's to this segment of America — those with a religious outlook — to whom many churches give themselves.

Lyle Schaller says, "Every study that I've seen shows that most numerically growing churches are not reaching the hardcore unchurched people. There are some, and Willow Creek is one of those, but for the most part, rapidly growing Baptist or Independent or Methodist or Lutheran or whatever, are drawing people who went through an initiatory rite, whether baptism or confirmation or joining the church, earlier in their lives."

That's not to say those people don't need to be evangelized. Religious beliefs and practices may remain stable, but the vitality of faith has dropped. Again according to Gallup polls, in 1954, 75 percent of Americans considered religion a "very important"



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Valley Church choir sometimes had trouble letting down after the service.



part of their lives. By 1987, the figure had dropped to 54 percent.

Some churches, then, have essentially been evangelizing the 45 percent who say religion is only "fairly important" or "not very important," showing them that Jesus Christ is not one element of a balanced life but the center from which an abundant life grows.

In any case, churches effective at evangelism seem to reach one group or the other but rarely both. This is perhaps the most important evangelistic decision a church has to make, because in making it, the church begins to decide how it will shape nearly every detail of its life and outreach.

Distinctive or Generic Christianity?

When the unchurched are asked what would encourage them to attend a church, they usually include such things as practical preaching, inspiring music, people to become friends with, and something for the kids to do. A number of churches have taken to heart these answers and have reached thousands of unchurched as a result. Robert Schuller's ministry in Garden Grove, California is

perhaps the most well known at taking this approach.

Today a number of "How to Plant a Church" seminars and programs rely on the same formula: downplay denominational distinctives and appeal to people's generic religious needs. Telemarketing campaigns, like *The Phone's for You*, aim their outreach in just this way. And they've learned that if you phone 20,000 people with a generic appeal and contact 2,000 unchurched, you can expect 200 to visit your church. Since February 1986, *The Phone's for You* program has helped plant or grow almost 7,000 churches.

Such outreach has its limitations though. Sandy Brown, pastor of a newly planted Presbyterian church in Moreno Valley in Southern California, says, "We used *The Phone's for You* a couple of years ago. As part of the program, we were to send mailings composed as per the manual. The day I went to pick up our mailing from the printer, I noticed a huge stack of letters with an identical message and look, except the logo on the letters was of the local Church of the Nazarene!

"We found ourselves making our phone calls the exact week this Nazarene congregation did. And

since we each took our message word for word out of the manual, we were each telephoning people with the same speech. We were saying the same things about ourselves as was the Church of the Nazarene.

"I respect the Nazarene tradition. But excuse me; Presbyterians are different."

As a result, Sandy got to thinking about what it was, in fact, that made his church different. Eventually he and the officers came up with some statements about who they are, but they began with denominational identity: "Moreno Valley Presbyterian Church is a growing family committed to wholeness in Christ."

Following that they've included ten statements about who they are. Says Sandy, "We had to accept the fact that we are Presbyterians, and that that makes a difference to us. For a local fair we created some flyers that talk about who Presbyterians are. We threw in a couple of paragraphs from a couple of individuals from our church, and at the end we said, 'Who knows? You may discover you're a Presbyterian too.'"

Sandy knows that this approach will limit his outreach to those who will find something engaging about the Presbyterian tradition — most likely people with some religious memory. Then again, he's found he's reached some people for whom a non-denominational approach remained unattractive.

Worship: Relevant or Transcendent?

A few years ago an apocryphal story about Ronald and Nancy Reagan made the rounds in Washington churches. Supposedly they were attending the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., an Episcopal parish. The President did not know what to do during Communion, having never attended an Episcopal church. So Nancy told him, "Just follow what I do."

When she received the bread, she held it, and so did he. When the cup was passed, she dipped the bread in the wine and then ate it, a method called intincture. Apparently, he didn't see all that she did, and he took his wafer and dropped it in the cup!



"I had a wonderful visit, Pastor, and may I say that I found your church every bit as relevant, inspirational, meaningful, caring, and fun as your newspaper ad promised it would be."

This story illustrates, among other things, the awkwardness that newcomers feel attending a worship service, especially in more liturgical churches. Yet worship is the central activity for congregations. Churches that want to evangelize effectively have to decide how to shape the event newcomers are most likely to visit.

Some churches, of course, believe that to attract the unchurched, a church must, as much as possible, feel like the world from which the unchurched come. For these churches the Doxology, hymns, organs, robes, and passing the plate are replaced with songs with a contemporary beat, synthesizers, electric bass, casual dress, and no offering.

Then again, some unchurched are attracted to a church and make commitments of faith primarily because they have been moved by a more traditional and transcendent style of worship. It is the power and glory of God that they find most compelling, and it's in that type of worship where they find a profound encounter with Christ, even if the service is unfamiliar at points.

Keith Johnson, a young Chicago businessman, had abandoned church since high school. He had gotten on the fast track, making lots of money, marrying quickly and then divorcing. He was thoroughly immersed in yuppie mores and lifestyle when he met Mimi. As they dated and began getting serious, they agreed to start attending church together. After a visit to a user-friendly church with, among other things, guitars for instruments, Keith was shocked.

"That wasn't church. That isn't the way you worship God," he told Mimi. Eventually they found an Episcopal church and made it their church home.

It's not just that Keith found a church home that reminded him of the church of his youth. He said there was something about the colors, symbols, and the grandeur of the hymns that made him aware of the presence of a powerful God, and that gradually drew him to a commitment to Christ.

Sandy Brown notes, "I've had visitors come up to me after worship and say, 'Oh, you sing the Doxology here, I'm so glad.' And many stay precisely because the worship, although not stuffy, incorporates a number of traditional elements (hymns, Christian symbols, and the like) that signal to them something of the transcendence of God."

It's probably not a matter of right and wrong. Still, a church's decision about worship will affect whom it is able to reach effectively. As Gary Demarest, associate director of evangelism for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) notes, "In my tenure as pastor at La Canada Presbyterian Church in Southern California, we had people come to us because they liked the 'dignity' of our worship. Others, however, left us

precisely because they found that dignity stifling, and they moved on to more user-friendly churches."

Which Boomers?

"You do not have to target baby boomers in order to be effective in evangelism in the nineties," says Herb Miller, executive director of the National Evangelistic Association. And demographics seem to make his case. In fact, two-thirds of Americans don't fit the description of "baby boomer," and that two-thirds needs to hear the gospel as much as do boomers.

Also, in some communities it would be counter-productive to aim for boomers: retirement communities, aging neighborhoods, inner cities. Some churches, in fact, want less to be full of young adults and more to be a family, where young and old mix with one another.

Having made that point, though, Miller continues: "Still you have to be good, or a section of your ministry has to be good at relating to the baby boom generation. One cannot go blissfully along as if this 32 percent of the 248 million Americans were not around."

In fact, it's been critical in every generation to reach the younger people, says Miller. "It was true in the 1920s, in the 1950s, and it's true today."

But if churches interested in evangelism don't have much choice about whether to reach baby boomers or not, they still are faced with a critical decision: Which boomers will they reach? Not all baby boomers are alike.

Miller notes, "Different baby boomers are looking for different things, for example, in a worship service. Some are looking for a liturgical service. And if you provide that, along with some of the other things they want (quality nursery care and the like), they'll come.

"Then there's another segment that's looking for a charismatic experience. And some are looking for a pepped up mainline service, similar to the one that they experienced when they grew up. Then there's that segment that won't go anywhere except to a Willow Creek. And each of these segments is fairly small."

So churches must do more than simply decide to reach the younger generation. They have to decide which segment of baby boomers they can best evangelize.

To Visit or Not to Visit?

David Rice of Bell Shoals Baptist Church in Brandon, Florida, uses a subscription service to find new residents in his community. Some of those new

residents are then put on a list and assigned to a visitation team from the church.

David Beatty of Reynolda Presbyterian in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, goes to the city offices and finds out whose water and electricity has been turned on recently and uses those lists to determine the calls his church makes.

John Russell of Morrison Heights Baptist Church in Clinton, Mississippi, has been using a telephone computer questionnaire to phone and contact people in his community and surrounding communities to create calls for his Evangelism Explosion program.

Churches seriously interested in evangelism visit. Well, at least most do. As mentioned in the introduction, Perimeter Presbyterian doesn't — and still it attracts 1,200 people in worship. And Ken Travilla, associate pastor of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie (which averages 2,400 in worship), says that 95 percent of the people who visit his church say they *don't* want a visit when they are asked.

"In fact," he says, "a nearby Presbyterian church was encouraged by a well-known church consultant to visit visitors. A pastor was hired to that end. But two years into the job, the pastor told my wife, 'I'm losing my job. People don't want personal visits.' We're finding the same thing."

Some people want to attend church anonymously. They fear being pestered after visiting.

Then again, Herb Miller notes, "You won't find many examples of churches that are growing that don't visit people. In a small handful of churches, it doesn't work, especially in some pockets of metropolitan areas with a large number of yuppies."

So how do you know which procedure will be more effective for your church's outreach?

"Experiment," says Miller. "I urge a church to be methodical. I tell them, 'Take twenty first-time worship visitors and visit each of them within thirty-six hours of their attending worship. Note how many of them come back and find out what percentage eventually join.' (In most instances, about 85 percent will come back and about 20 or 30 percent will become members.)"

"Then I tell them, 'Take twenty other first-time worship visitors and simply telephone them, saying how much you appreciate their having visited you. Then follow that up with a letter from the pastor. Finally count the number who return and the number who eventually become members.'"

"After a church has done that, it will have a clear idea about whether visiting is appropriate in their situation."

The First Choice

It was while attending an evangelism conference

in Atlanta, a conference sponsored by Leighton Ford Ministries, that I had the opportunity to visit Perimeter Presbyterian and Paulding Baptist. The variety in evangelistic churches did not stop there. We also saw a Pentecostal church of 10,000 that offers every conceivable ministry, especially counseling and support groups; a black Methodist congregation with 2,500 in worship that formerly had been all white; a Southern Baptist church whose Sunday evening services have been abandoned in favor of small groups; and a new Episcopal church with 300 in worship, whose offices are located in a shopping center and whose rector is an Egyptian from Australia with a gift for ministering to entrepreneurs!

Each church has found a unique niche in which to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Each church had made its unique choices, except of course for one: the choice to share the faith at every opportunity. It's a choice that transcends church programs and evangelistic principles; it's a way of thinking and a way of life that was demonstrated to me on the first day of the conference:

On the way from the airport to the conference hotel, a thin and stylishly dressed woman found herself seated in a van next to a man in a business suit. She mentioned something about the weather, and he replied politely. In a few minutes, she commented about the Atlanta skyline as the bus passed downtown Atlanta. Soon they were talking about her travels and then his. That was when she discovered he was an Episcopal priest.

Immediately she began talking about her grown sons — one a Methodist, the other a Roman Catholic. She was happy, she said, that they both had found some religion, but she regretted she hadn't taken religion more seriously when they were growing up. The fact is, she said, being married to a Jewish husband made it difficult to pursue explicitly Christian religious training for herself or her children.

The Episcopal priest — who was conference participant Stephen Abbott — listened intently for the most part. But he managed to explain briefly the difference between religion and faith in Christ, and he mentioned that it is never too late to meet Christ.

The woman tilted her head and widened her eyes. She said that recently another person had told her exactly those two things.

"Perhaps someone is trying to tell me something," she said. Abbott agreed.

The bus pulled up to the hotel. They exchanged goodbyes and business cards.

Such is the spirit of effective evangelism, and such is the choice that undergirds all the other choices: to speak of the hope that lies within us whenever the opportunity arises. □