

Editorial: Inviting diverse and disconnected people to follow Jesus together

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If you're too happy, read the comments sections of religion websites. That'll bring you down a notch or two.



Marv Knox Of course, comments sections aren't what researchers call "statistically valid." They only represent people who care to read about religion. (Ironically, that includes a lot of people who haul around truckloads of animosity toward God and God-followers.) And, beyond that, they reflect people who care enough—and take enough time—to respond to the articles. So, they tend to attract extremists.

But still. Mostly depressing.

As you might imagine, I do this for a living. Part of my job is keeping up with trends and current thinking about faith and all things "religion." So, when a survey comes out or a conference focuses on a cutting-edge issue, I'm drawn to the coverage like an ant to a picnic. Then, unfortunately, I'm drawn to the comments like a moth to a flame.

The comments tend to be nasty. That goes for both sides—the people of faith and the people of anti-faith. I read what they write with ambivalence.

The comments almost always hurt my heart and wound my soul. Yet I learn from them, even the most vicious ones. As a Christian who cares about unbelievers, I need to know what they think.

Renewed interest

Although I've traveled in this sloggy section of the cyberworld a long time, I've viewed what happens there with renewed interest the last year or so. Our church has been trying to live up to our new mission statement: "Inviting diverse and disconnected people to passionately follow Jesus together."

We've been thinking deeply about what "diverse and disconnected" means.

We know it has an internal meaning for our church. We live in the middle of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex and reflect all kinds of racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds, education, jobs, political viewpoints, you name it. And we're busy, distracted, stressed and every other way pulled toward disconnection.

But "diverse and disconnected" has an external meaning. For example, I played a new game over burgers with the seventh-grader I mentor. He attends a middle school a long stone's throw from our church. He said, "I've got one for ya: I'll tell you the names of my friends, and you guess where they come from." This went on about 15 minutes. He'd say a name I couldn't pronounce, and I'd guess a country. The answers—almost all of which I missed—included Korea, Peru, Singapore, India, Mexico and all over Latin America, and more. These kids go to school 100 yards from our church; their families come from 200 countries.

Diverse and disconnected, indeed.

Leaving the church ...

That same day, I read stories on the latest survey conducted jointly by the [Public Religion Research Institute](#) and [Religion News Service](#) on why Americans are leaving religion (“they just ‘stop believing’”) and why they’re unlikely to come back. I didn’t need to read the comments sections to feel dispirited.

Now, my community may be more diverse than yours; it’s one of the most cosmopolitan in the country. But our towns and cities are growing more diverse—if not racially and ethnically (and for most of us, they are)—then according to ideology and core beliefs.

How to do it

How do we invite our neighbors to follow Jesus with us?

- *Out-arguing them isn’t going to work.*

We live in a pluralistic world. Most people think beliefs are relative. “You believe what you want, and I’ll believe what I want.” Many churches are teaching apologetics, but that’s more for insurance—to educate Christians so they aren’t persuaded to follow other faiths.

- *Beating them over the head with the Bible is useless.*

Other faiths follow their own scriptures. People of no faith see the Bible as a book of moral teachings, at best. We need Scripture imbedded in our own hearts and minds to guide our lives, but we can’t expect many people to change because we shout, “The Bible says,”

- *Entertaining them won’t cut it.*

Some Christians go all in for big shows. Hot praise bands. Special events. Unusual spectacles. Maybe that will get some folks through the door. But if that’s the reason they show up, they’ll leave when they hear about a bigger, better show.

- *Shaming them will only make things worse.*

Shaming runs people away. The reason so many people think they hate God is because they're sure people who wave God's banner hate them. Here's an interesting observation: More people hate God than hate Jesus. With "God," they get all the bloodshed and judgment of the Old Testament. With "Christ," they get the complicated/often-misunderstood teachings of the epistles. With "Jesus," they get the divine-human sacrificial, redemptive Savior of the Gospels. Which leads us to ...

- *The only answer is love.*

Loving acts of self-sacrifice, compassion, understanding and uncommon-yet-everyday kindness are the hope for turning people toward Jesus. When they experience through us the love we've found in Jesus, they can't argue with it, demean it, ignore it.

So, every day and week-in and week-out, we must figure out how to help the diverse and disconnected people all around us know without a doubt they are loved by Jesus because they receive that love from us.

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