

Nine Principles of Relational Evangelism

And all of them great items for discussion in your group.

Randall Neighbour

Note: this article has been adapted from The Naked Truth About Small-Group Ministry, by Randall Neighbour.

The concept of relationship evangelism is easily understood, along with the principles listed below—but they are not always easy to practice. Some of the principles found below do not come naturally to those who have grown up in the church or are immersed in a church's subculture.

I recommend that you read one principle aloud to your small-group members each week for the next few weeks, and then ask the discussion questions. Keep talking about the principles of relational evangelism in and out of meetings with your members until it becomes second nature; practice the principles yourself and share what you're learning with your group.

1. Focus on Building Deep Friendships

What your unbelieving or unchurched friend is desperately searching for is God's unconditional love, flowing through someone just like you, in the context of a friendship. The world in which we live is strong on communication and weak on deep relationships. Be a friend that cares and your lost friend will see Christ in you, even if you don't consider yourself a spiritual giant.

Discussion question: What are the names of unchurched people in your life that consider you a close or best friend? (*Note: this question is not asking about how you regard the person, but how they regard you.*)

2. Be the Kind of Christian Unchurched People Have Never Met Before

Most Christians are willing to serve the lost, but would never ask the lost to serve them in some way in order to build a genuine friendship; this is because of pride. Real friends show their weaknesses and are humble enough to ask others for help.

Show people that you want a genuine friendship—one that is characterized by "bi-directional" servanthood. Ask them to teach you something, get a task accomplished around your house, or help you work on a weak area in your life.

Discussion questions for your group:

- How easy is it for you to ask others for help in an important area of your life?
- What is the last thing you asked an unbeliever to help you learn, do, or get accomplished?

3. Cross-Pollinate Your Unchurched Friends with Your Fellow Group Members

When Jesus said, "I will make you fishers of men," he was referring to believers working nets as a team, not fishing alone with a rod and reel. Cross-pollinate your friendship with unbelievers with everyone in your group, and watch God work through community.

God has placed other believers in your life to show your unchurched friends different aspects of Christ's love.

Discussion questions:

- Let's go around the room and everyone should share an interest, hobby, area of expertise, or current need.
- Now open it up for brainstorming. Whose unbelieving friend has that same common interest, hobby, area of expertise or need?
- Wrap up by inviting group members to make plans to get together and introduce one another based on what is discovered.

4. Avoid Duplicity

It's important that you speak to your Christian and pre-Christian friends about the same things and in the same way. Some Christians share deep spiritual things with other Christians, but not with their unchurched or unbelieving friends. They think, "My lost friend just wouldn't understand, so I won't talk about my spiritual struggles or victories around them." This may sound like common sense, but it does not draw lost people to Christ through you!

To see a friend come to Christ, you must speak to the person about what God is saying to you and what you are talking to God about each day. When you openly share how you and God relate to one another, your lost friend will quickly see a spiritual contrast between their perception of God and your relationship with God through Christ.

Discussion questions:

- Do you find yourself guilty of withholding spiritual struggles or challenges you face from your unchurched friends?
- Do you see the power in sharing the same things with unbelievers, even if they don't initially understand what you're talking about?

5. Give *and* Take Refrigerator Rights with Unchurched Friends

Many Christians claim to have friendships with the lost, but they rarely have the person in their home or spend time in the home of the lost person. If you want to legitimize a friendship, invite your lost friends to your house frequently enough for them to freely take "refrigerator rights" and grab a can of pop out of your fridge without feeling like a guest.

When they reciprocate, you have reached a level of relationship that few unrelated people achieve in our world. This is the depth of friendship required to reach someone

for Christ with relational evangelism. (If group members say they are too busy for this, challenge them to rethink their priorities. Being too busy to relate to others is not Christ-like. Jesus spent a lot of quality time with people!)

Discussion questions:

- If we were to look at your refrigerator door, would we find an unchurched friend's fingerprints on the handle?
- Are your fingerprints on his or her fridge door?

6. Pray for Yourself

When you pray, don't spend all your time asking God to bring conviction to your lost friends. It's just as powerful to petition God to show you how he sees your lost friends so you can treat them differently.

Discussion questions:

- How often do you pray for yourself as it pertains to being shaped by God to see people the way he sees people? (*If the answer is overwhelmingly "not enough!" then stop and pray this way in groups of three right now.*)
- Challenge the group members to pray for themselves daily, asking God to show them how he sees the people all around them instead of how they view them.

7. Refuse to Engage in Gossip

Christians are often heard saying things about others such as, "We really need to pray for Frank's salvation. He's an alcoholic and is just plain nasty to the support staff in my office." Think about that for a minute. If I were in your small group, and you told me this about Frank, why would I want to get to know him and make him my friend?

When you talk about your lost friends, *brag* about their accomplishments, interests, hobbies, goals, and areas of expertise. Sharing attributes of a potential friend will attract others. Sharing negative things pushes people away. Plus, if anyone meets Frank, they can say, "Your friend has told us so many great things about you!"

Discussion questions:

- Have you been guilty of gossiping for the sake of a prayer request in the past?
- Let's all share one or two things we love about an unchurched friend to practice edification.

8. Share a Relevant Message

If your lost friend is minutes away from death or fearful of his or her afterlife, talking about going to heaven by accepting Christ is *definitely* relevant. However, if this is not the case, your lost friend will probably be more interested in knowing how your relationship with God through Christ consistently gives you hope, a passion for life, strong purpose and direction, and an inner peace and joy that nothing on earth can provide.

Discussion questions:

- What do you typically share when you tell others about God and what he's done for you—and what he can do for them?
- Or do you not share anything at all because you have little hope, passion for life, strong purpose, or inner peace?

9. Invite, Invite, Invite!

It takes six to eight invitations before an unchurched person will actually join you for a congregational service or small-group meeting. Don't grow weary when they say they aren't interested or can't make it. Just keep up the prayer, friendship building, cross-pollinating, and sharing your heart about what God is doing in you and through you.

Discussion questions:

- Do you give up after one or two invitations?
- Share the name of someone you've invited in the past and share something you love about them so other members of the group can participate in loving that person.

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<https://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2011/nine-principles-of-relational-evangelism.html>

Disclaimer: This article originates from outside the Lutheran tradition. Some of the language reflects decision theology. Lutherans believe God decided to love us and be gracious to us. The goal of evangelism is not to move people to a “decision for Jesus”, but to move people to see Jesus in the world and in their lives and know God’s loving grace.