

IDEAS FOR CHURCH GROWTH SUCCESS

# CHURCH TRENDS FROM THE TOP 100

**OUTREACH<sup>®</sup>**  
SHARE GOD'S LOVE

# THE SECRET TO A FAST- GROWING CHURCH

“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.” 1 Corinthians 3:6

The Apostle Paul said it like it is: God causes the Church to grow. But He also uses men and women as His messengers—to be a flesh-and-blood reminder of Christ’s redeeming work in our world.

For the past several years, *Outreach* magazine has had the privilege to recognize the Top 100 Fastest-Growing Churches in America. In 2015, the Outreach team conducted in-depth interviews with sixty-five pastors from America’s Top 100 Fastest-Growing Churches to ask what they are doing, what they are thinking, where the need is, and how they are meeting it. They provided far more insights than we ever expected because, like you, they desire to share Christ with as many as possible. We have combed through their insights and broken them down into five major trends:

- Knowing and Serving Your Community
- Doing Simple Church
- Creating an Invite Culture
- Assimilating Guests and New Believers
- Creating Business and Employment Opportunities in Your Community

These growth trends are not limited to large churches. Each idea is scalable and repeatable for churches of all sizes. We have included insights, ideas, and examples from churches that are actively involved in ministry, so you can see the trends in action and adapt them for your church as you continue to grow.

# 1

**KNOWING AND  
SERVING YOUR  
COMMUNITY**



Today's fastest-growing churches are finding new ways to know and serve their community. In the process, they are gaining a reputation as problem solvers and resource providers—working alongside local governments and nonprofit leaders. As their influence grows, they earn the trust of local leaders, build bridges to neighborhoods, and open hearts to the Gospel.

## WHY SHOULD YOU GET TO KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY?

In the interviews with the Top 100 pastors, a recurring question kept coming up: If our church disappeared tomorrow, would anyone in the community miss us? Their answers led to three basic conclusions:

1. If no one knows the local church exists, no one will come to hear the Gospel.
2. The church should move from an inward focus to an outward reach.
3. People have traditionally seen the church seeking funding and attendance. Now they need to see the church giving back to the community.

Shifting the focus to the local community has opened the door to incarnational ministry. Like Christ, the Church puts on skin, goes out into the dirt and dust of the world, and brings a tangible message of healing, redemption, and the Good News.

## WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Churches that seek to know and serve their community follow a similar model:

- Each begins its work with the question, “If our church disappeared tomorrow, would anyone notice?”
- Churches talk with local leaders—mayors, city councils, police chiefs, and educators—to identify the greatest needs/pain points in the community.
- Church leaders come back to their congregation, present the needs, and organize a response.
- Churches take action and build long-term relationships with those in need.
- Churches seek feedback about the work and refine their outreach.

## WHAT ARE THE RESULTS?

Churches that seek to know and serve their communities see four specific results:

1. The church receives positive visibility in the community.
2. The church takes the lead in social issues such as poverty, economic disparity, and education.
3. The church sees an increase in attendance as the community sees the church in action.
4. Church members develop a passion for evangelism and outreach.

## LEARNINGS

If your church is considering a knowing/serving approach to the local community, here are some tips to help you succeed:

- Serve with no strings attached.
- Commit to the long term. Knowing/Serving takes time.
- Share the vision and workload with lay leaders and small group leaders.
- Ensure church volunteers are properly trained for the work.

## TYPES OF KNOWING/SERVING OUTREACHES

### ***Develop Community Church Leaders***

The Avenue Church, Waxahachie, TX/Pastor David Brown

Not only is The Avenue Church involved in community service projects, it is also influencing local organizations by placing members on the boards of nonprofit agencies that provide specialized help to members of the community.

### ***Sports-Driven Ministry***

Elevate Life Church, Orange Park, FL/Pastor Tim Staier

Pastor Staier serves as the chaplain to local high school sports teams. Many local coaches and teachers also attend the church, giving Elevate Life the opportunity to reach out to the local community via the high school system.

### ***Adopt a High-Crime Area***

First Baptist Church, Palmetto, FL/Pastor Phillip Hamm

After a meeting with the local police chief, First Baptist was asked to adopt a high-crime, high-poverty area. Nearly 60 percent of crimes in the city of Palmetto happen in that neighborhood. Pastor Hamm and his congregation started by working with families, holding neighborhood cleanup projects, and providing clothing. First Baptist has now planted a Spanish-speaking church in the neighborhood and hosts a twice-a-month pancake breakfast for kids and families.

### ***Serving Breakfast, Buying Gas***

Destination Church, Hopewell, VA/Pastor Bryan Briggs

Destination Church doesn't believe in reinventing the wheel. Instead, they support existing organizations that are already serving the community. The church stocks the local food bank, assists with victims of domestic violence, and loans their church bus to the YMCA. Church members buy gas for needy families. And the church is also known for providing a regular breakfast for students in three local schools.

### ***Religion, Repentance, and Revitalization***

Emmanuel Bible Chapel, Berwick, PA/Pastor Scott Fetterolf

"We repented of being inward-focused and angry." Pastor Scott Fetterolf is surprisingly candid about how his church rebuilt its reputation in the community. Repentance meant that the church doors were now open to everyone in Berwick. Local schools and government teams were invited to use the building for events. The church has hosted football banquets and civic meetings.

Corporate repentance transformed Emmanuel Bible into a church that loves the people in the local community. "We do not play to an internal audience," Pastor Fetterolf says. "We've got to be willing to speak to others." The church speaks through its actions, giving away \$50,000 a year in benevolence. They also work with local fire and police departments to host free carnivals for families in trailer parks and low-income areas, where the church provides carnival rides and food at no cost. "It makes a great statement to underserved families and gets our people out of their circles and hugging on kids who aren't doing as well as their families are."

## ***Shoes for Schools***

NewSpring Church, Anderson, SC/Pastor Perry Noble

Everybody owns a pair of shoes. But Pastor Perry Noble and NewSpring Church discovered there's a difference between owning a pair of shoes . . . and owning a pair of shoes that fits. "Every Christmas, we pick a school close to a church campus and give every child a brand-new pair of shoes," Pastor Noble says.

The project began at the request of a local government leader. Noble was surprised by the need. "This is America. Everybody has shoes, right?" He soon realized that need knows no boundaries. "We'd go into schools, take old shoes off, and give kids a pair of socks and new shoes. But when we got to one girl, we couldn't get her shoes to fit. The girl's form said she wore a size 4." But when the new shoes wouldn't fit, Pastor Noble discovered the girl really wore a size 8. "Don't the shoes make your feet hurt?" he asked. "Yeah," the little girl responded. "But I don't know why." It turns out that she was wearing her sister's old shoes. "It's all her sister had," Noble explained. NewSpring now delivers shoes to eleven schools. It's just one of the many ways the church is serving its community.

## ***"Love Works"***

Rockford First, Rockford, IL/Pastor Taka Iguchi

When Rockford First began airing a twenty-two-minute teaching program on local TV, they chose the time slot just after Jimmy Kimmel's show—on purpose. Who watches TV that late at night? The kind of people Rockford First wanted to reach with the Gospel. "We heard that people at the bar saw the TV program, and the bartender turned up the volume so they could watch! People came to church still smelling like beer!" How's that for targeted marketing?

Rockford First is not a new plant. It's been in Rockford, Illinois, for years. And that was part of the problem. The church gained a reputation as "that" church. Taka Iguchi and the team needed to change the church image if they were ever to have an impact in the community.

They started with the television program. The majority of church visitors came as a result of the broadcast. Then Rockford First broadened its outreach. Three years ago, the church began a "Love Works" outreach. Members of the congregation performed service projects in the area—10,000 hours of volunteer work the first year, 15,000 hours the next year. This year, they're hoping to add even more hours.

Youth and young adults also volunteer for Earth Beat—an eight-hour project dedicated to mulching local playgrounds, staining fences, and cleaning slides and pools at the local water park. Their work was recognized and they earned the Environmental Heroism Award, presented by the state Lieutenant Governor.

Community involvement is just one of the many ways Rockford First has gone from “that church” to a church that welcomes those in need.

### ***Unique Outreach Opportunities***

Rockford First works with the Rockford Visitors Bureau to promote a Christmas initiative that welcomes guests to the city for a downtown “Christmas Stroll.” In the first year, 30,000 people attended. Last year, that number doubled. Rockford First plans to continue the partnership.

### ***Good for the County . . . Good for the Soul***

Mountain Christian Church, Joppa, MD/Pastor Rob Kastens

Rob Kastens wanted Mountain Christian Church to make a difference in its community. So he went straight to the top and asked a county executive, “How can we serve?” The answer involved working in an area of the city with the highest crime rates, worst socioeconomic outlook, and toughest family problems. “And would you focus on young people?” the executive asked. Mountain Christian Church accepted the challenge. Outreach efforts include a Serve Fest and Second Saturday Serve projects to help in the problem area. Mountain Christian also built a community center and Internet cafe for the neighborhood. “We have an executive director and provide job skills training, AA groups, and addiction recovery ministries,” Kastens says. “We also ran an after-school program called The Zone. Eighty students participated.” The church then launched a six-week summer camp with a school-type curriculum that focused on science and music.

Community leaders recognize the value that Mountain Christian Church brings to the community. “We’ve become the county’s church,” Kastens says about his congregation. “When the county government needs something, we’re the church that gets called. But we earned that right by serving with no strings attached.” For Kastens and Mountain Christian, church makes an impact when it asks the simple question, “How can we serve?”



## KNOWING/SERVING PROFILE:

***Fountain Springs Church, Rapid City, SD/Pastor David Kinnan***

“My heart is about getting influence rather than giving information.” Pastor David Kinnan challenges his congregation to become the Church of Irresistible Influence. Fountain Springs Church in Rapid City, South Dakota, is rapidly fulfilling that vision through an unusual outreach in local schools.

South Dakota schools frequently rank among the worst school systems in the nation. Policies, teacher recruitment, and low graduation rates plague the system and have resulted in low teacher morale . . . and, in turn, low-performing students. But where the community saw failure, Fountain Springs Church saw an opportunity to minister.

The church approached principals and asked to help with physical projects—specifically, renovating teachers’ lounges. No strings attached. “We don’t go in and leave tracts, cards, or T-shirts. No marketing,” Pastor Kinnan explains. “We just say, ‘I love you.’” Out of twenty-five schools in the city, only two welcomed the church. Pastor Kinnan was undeterred, and the church repainted, redecorated, and stocked the teachers’ lounges in these two schools with microwaves, cabinets, coffeemakers, tables, and chairs. And the word spread. The next year, seven schools accepted the offer, and today, Fountain Springs is working in eighteen of the twenty-five schools. “We don’t force our way in. Principals get around one e-mail a year saying, ‘Can we come and serve you?’”

The community is noticing the difference. Fountain Springs Church is growing. “The agenda is not to grow the church. It’s been a by-product of this.” Pastor Kinnan’s vision has influenced people for Christ. “We have teachers and administrators going to our church. We have people who were anti-church . . . who thought that the church was self-serving. But they come because this place is different.”

Fountain Springs Church will continue to invest dollars and volunteers. “Here in South Dakota, schools need help, so we’re doing all we can to help the school system,” Kinnan explains. His vision for irresistible influence is paying off, but he’s quick to admit that someone else is behind Fountain Springs’ success: “God has allowed us to have great influence. He’s given us favor.”

## APPLY IT TO YOUR CHURCH

- Do you know local leaders? Local needs? If not, can you schedule a time to meet with leaders to determine the needs in your local community?
- Has God placed your church in a low-income neighborhood? What are your neighbors' three greatest needs? Can your church address one of them?
- Is God calling someone in your congregation to take the lead in a church outreach project? How can you mentor them and help them start reaching out to your community?



2

**DOING  
SIMPLE  
CHURCH**

“Simple Church” isn’t a “thing” or a denomination. It’s a choice, a mind-set. Simple churches often ask, “What is the most basic thing we should be doing to point people to Jesus?” Simple Church strips away extra programs and processes that another local organization may do better. The result is that the church staff can focus on “keeping the main thing the main thing,” whatever that may be.

- Less competition of church programs simplifies the schedule for members and families.
- Keeping things simple prevents the church from being an inch deep and a mile wide.
- Partnering with other organizations in town who can do it better (i.e., a food pantry) is better stewardship and builds a stronger community.

## WHAT ARE THE RESULTS?

- Churches can do less . . . but do it better. “It’s better to do simple really well than complicated really badly.” —Pastor Brian Edwards, Blessed Hope Church, Halifax, VA
- Simple Church teaches members that the goal is better, not bigger.
- By doing fewer events, the church can focus more attention and energy on big events.

## LEARNINGS

- Simple doesn’t mean inward-focused or uninvolved. Many Simple Churches are highly involved in their communities—stocking food pantries, throwing festivals and fairs, and planning large-scale community service projects.
- Simple Churches are constantly evaluating programs and outreaches to make sure they are effective. If the church outgrows a project—or the project is no longer accomplishing its objectives—leaders are willing to make the hard choice to discontinue it.

- “Simple” means less competition among church programs. Congregations have less to choose from but can devote more time and energy toward programs they are involved in.

## TYPES OF SIMPLE CHURCH OUTREACHES

### ***“In-N-Out Burger Church”***

North Coast Church, Vista, CA/Pastor Larry Osborne

“You go to In-N-Out and there are only three things on the menu.” Pastor Larry Osborne uses the burger chain as an example to explain his approach to church, offering only a few things to choose from. “We have weekends, small groups, and community service. It’s very niche, very consistent.”

North Coast’s Simple Church menu means that friendships have time to develop. “We use groups to ‘close the back door,’” Osborne explains. Closely knit small groups adopt community service projects. In addition, the church dedicates an entire weekend to service projects every eighteen to twenty-four months. During the forty-eight-hour period, more than 9,000 people contribute over \$2 million worth of service and labor to their community.

### ***One-for-One***

Rock City Church, Columbus, OH/Pastor Chad Fisher

“We’re constantly looking for people and organizations in our city. We find it absolutely exhilarating to help fund them, resource them, and stock them with volunteers.” Pastor Chad Fisher and Rock City Church have found a way to simplify mission projects and partner with nonprofit agencies in the Columbus area.

It starts as soon as a person steps inside the building. “For every person who walks through the doors of our church, on every campus, we set aside \$1 to meet a local or global need.” It’s that simple. And yet, it’s powerful.

Not only is the church helping the community, but individuals see that by simply showing up, they are making a tangible difference. Local and national agencies benefit from Rock City Church’s generosity, and the church expands its ministry influence

without creating additional projects or bureaucracy. The dollar-a-person outreach has been part of Rock City's ministry since the church began. Initially, the church raised a couple hundred dollars each week, and church members shared the results from the pulpit.

Today, Rock City Church sets aside roughly \$2,000 a week. And now the community sees the benefits of attending church. "We get to bring someone in from the community and present a check. The church can see generosity being modeled," Pastor Fisher says. Rock City Church has found a way to channel people's innate sense of generosity into a means of sharing the Gospel and encouraging others to come to church.

## **SIMPLE CHURCH PROFILE:**

***Blessed Hope Church, Halifax, VA/Pastor Brian Edwards***

Ask anyone who's ever lived in a small town and they'll tell you: you can't keep secrets. Everybody knows what's going on. And if you pretend to be someone you're not, they'll see right through you—especially when it comes to church. Pastor Brian Edwards knows this well. Generations of people in rural America have been wounded by the Church. That's why Blessed Hope Church sticks to simple things: love and community. "In small communities, people watch and they listen. They also talk. If there's division, people in the community know it. If there's success, they hear about it."

Blessed Hope Church is working to change the conversation in Halifax, Virginia. The congregation is involved in a variety of community projects—everything from food banks and festivals to craft fairs and homeless outreaches. More than ninety families a month are helped through benevolence programs. One family in particular receives extra help—the mom is paralyzed, and four kids live at home. Church volunteers come in regularly and clean her house, mow the lawn, and spend time with the mom so she knows that her friends care. But it's not just church members doing all the work. Pastor Edwards also makes house calls. When he visits shut-ins during Christmastime, he brings a guitar and sings carols, reads the Christmas story, and shares communion.

Although Blessed Hope Church serves small-town America, there is no such thing as a small-time ministry. Changing the conversation and touching lives require a big commitment. And they require consistency. "A couple of large events draw a crowd, but they don't draw people," Pastor Edwards says. "We want to lavish love on the people around us and do it consistently so that outreach isn't momentary, but ongoing."

Consistency brings transparency. As the local community sees the church is there to help—not to advance a hidden agenda—doors are opened to the Gospel. Pastor Edwards shares a conversation with a local businessman to illustrate the point: “The wealthiest businessman in our area was at his company talking recently and said, ‘I know I need to get saved. I hope I get saved before I die. But when it’s time, I’ll get saved at Blessed Hope because Brian Edwards is the only real pastor I’ve ever met.’”

It’s a compliment to Pastor Edwards and explains why the church keeps its simple focus on church and community. “Go in and start to serve in ways that make Jesus look great,” Edwards says. “After all, this is small-town America. People don’t need to see big, fancy programs. They need to see the church for what it is: people who love Jesus and love others in the community. It’s simple. It’s basic.” But Pastor Brian Edwards knows that simplicity works: “It’s not about trying to look like everybody else or be everybody else. It’s about being authentic in your community.”

## APPLY IT TO YOUR CHURCH

- Is God asking your church to focus on fewer programs in exchange for building deeper relationships with your congregation and community?
- Are there organizations in your community that have a proven track record of reaching the very people you are trying to help—and may be able to do it better than you ever could? Would your church consider supporting those organizations rather than trying to start its own work?
- Do you have a system in place for evaluating whether new programs enhance or inhibit your “main thing” in church ministry?

# 3

**CREATING  
AN  
INVITE  
CULTURE**





Christianity is faith in motion. We are called to follow, grow, make disciples. Christ Himself commissioned us to go out and carry the Good News to the ends of the earth. While His call retains its first-century urgency today, our culture has shifted dramatically. Many churches in the Outreach Top 100 are finding new ways to engage their community while still representing Jesus Christ in this dark world.

## WHAT IS AN INVITE CULTURE?

Churches that create an “Invite Culture” focus on equipping members to be inviters. These churches provide strong weekend experiences along with “invitable” events to build bridges between the church and the community.

## WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

- Church members feel equipped to invite and welcome guests.
- Church attendees will always be your number-one source of bringing new people to your church.
- Church members are challenged to find new ways to connect with the community and bring Christ to those who may have never considered coming to church.
- Church members receive the teaching and tools they need to invite others. The pastor teaches the congregation how to begin discussions about church and gives members invite cards or handouts to share with friends and family.

## LEARNINGS

- Invite Culture churches provide a variety of promotional resources for their people. These resources may include personal invitation cards (handouts the size of a business card with the church address and service times on it), shareable videos on the church Facebook page, or even T-shirts with the church name and logo. As people wear the church T-shirt, it provides an easy conversation starter.

- Invite Culture churches look at weekly services as “weekend experiences” and work to create an environment that church members want to share with others.

## EXAMPLES OF CHURCHES WITH AN INVITE CULTURE

### ***Be a Bringer***

Freedom Church, Acworth, GA/Pastor J.R. Lee

“Create great environments for people to come and experience Jesus on their level.” Pastor J.R. Lee consistently reminds his congregation to “be a bringer” and extend a “bringvitation” to friends and families. What is a “bringvitation?” It’s more than inviting a friend. Pastor Lee explains it as a “spiritual decision to bring people.” Freedom Church focuses on creating a welcoming culture and creating great weekend experiences so the congregation finds it easy to invite someone. Pastor Lee also equips his flock with Invite Cards—handouts the size of a business card with information about the church or an upcoming sermon series. Lee even encourages children to get involved. “Every kid is encouraged to have two or three friends spend Saturday night at their house, then bring their friends to church.” Parents can stop by the church to pick up their kids. The kids have fun, and the parents have a reason to visit the church.

But whether encouraging his people to practice a “bringvitation” or to find other ways to be visible in the community, Pastor Lee’s goal for his church is to expose as many people to the Gospel as possible: “Life is too short for us to turn this thing into a country club of sorts, where it is for members only. It’s not just about reaching the needs of the people here. It’s about bringing the people for whom Freedom Church is not even on the radar yet.”

Freedom Church uses a variety of promotional resources:

- T-Shirts—Visitors receive a free T-shirt. “Bringers” also receive a free T-shirt.
- Branded Apparel—The church has developed a “Freedom Apparel” line that includes shirts, hats, and sweatshirts.
- Car Decals—Decals are printed with the church logo.
- [Invite Cards](#)—Sometimes the cards are specific to a sermon series. Or they share basic info about the church.

### ***Unique Outreach Approach***

Freedom Church partners with city events. Rather than create a competing Easter event, the church worked with city leaders to promote an Easter Egg Drop and Easter Bunny Parachute. “We had a hand-in-hand partnership,” Pastor Lee says. “We earned favor with city employees and the community.”

### ***IHateMyMarriage.com***

NewSpring Church, Anderson, SC/Pastor Perry Noble

Churches are supposed to say good things about marriage, right? So why did NewSpring Church post a series of billboards with the web address IHateMyMarriage.com? The web address was tied to a sermon series about marriage . . . and people responded. The billboards drove a massive response to the church website.

While billboards have been successful, NewSpring Church also uses a variety of promotional tools to reach the community. Among them:

- T-Shirts—NewSpring Church gave out 43,000 T-shirts during its recent [“I Love My Church”](#) campaign.
- [Signage/Banners/Flags](#)—NewSpring uses banners and flags to direct people to parking spaces and buildings.

### ***Unique Outreach Approach***

NewSpring Church is highly involved in the local community. (See Trend 1: Knowing/Serving.) The church hosts a backpack drive for local students. At the beginning of each school year, local students are given a backpack stuffed with school supplies. This, along with other outreach events, offers church members the chance to serve others and invite them to church.

### ***We Only Exist Five Hours a Week***

Epic Church, Philadelphia, PA/Pastor Kent Jacobs

“We only exist for five hours on Sunday morning at each of our three locations.” But don’t worry; Epic Church isn’t an imaginary place. Kent Jacobs pastors a very real

congregation and has a very real outreach to young professionals in Philadelphia. It's just that the church meets in a movie theater on Sunday mornings. In just five hours, Epic Church holds services and hosts small groups. After that, the theater takes over and it's time for popcorn and superhero flicks.

Jacobs' decision to meet in a movie theater is intentional. "Someone who's never come to church will come to a movie theater. People know what to expect in a movie theater."

So how does a "homeless" church keep people coming back? "We have no sign. Our 'sign' is the postcards that we send out three times a year." And that's not all: "We give out invite cards every week. We give out cards at the door so people can hand them out to their friends and bring them to church." Pastor Jacobs also teaches his congregation how and where to use the cards. "We teach on inviting and try to create a 'come and see' environment. We're very intentional about connecting."

In addition to postcards, Epic Church uses a variety of invite resources:

- [Invite Cards](#)—Available each week. Pastor Jacobs encourages the congregation to take and hand them out to friends. He also teaches the church how to use the card.
- T-Shirts—Epic Church gives away branded T-shirts at one service each year. Attendees can only get the shirt on that day.

### ***Unique Outreach Approach***

"Big Days"—Epic Church plans a final "push" at the end of annual growth seasons. "We invite everyone who calls Epic home to be at the church on that day, and then make it an epic day for someone else," says Pastor Jacobs. Members are encouraged to invite a friend to church, and then take them to lunch. The church also provides a fun giveaway to celebrate the event. Recently, the church gave away "Epic" sunglasses and asked people to take selfies and post them on their social media pages.

### ***It's a Sign!***

Next Level Church, Somersworth, NH/Pastor Josh Gagnon

Pastor Josh Gagnon and his team at Next Level Church face a huge challenge. According to researcher Ed Stetzer, fewer than 15 percent of New Englanders attend

church services at least once a week (State of New England Churches, Ed Stetzer/Lifeway Research, March 2013). “There are not a lot of ‘been-in-church-their-whole-lives’ types in Somersworth.” Pastor Gagnon describes the typical person who walks into his church: “This person has never touched a Bible before. How are we going to get them to know where Genesis is?”

But there’s an even more basic question that Gagnon must address: How do people even know there’s a church in their community? Next Level Church solved that problem with an inexpensive, low-tech tool that has proven surprisingly successful. “Our secret sauce is yard signs,” Pastor Gagnon explains. “We plaster the community with yard signs.” Signs include the church website—and people are responding. “We placed 1,200 signs and 400 people showed up because they saw it.”

Placement is the key. Gagnon and his team want people to see the signs. “We put signs at busy intersections. We put signs at the end of a Wal-Mart. People saw it.” The yard signs have been so successful that Next Level acquired a second church just months after starting. “We acquired a seventy-person church. People saw the yard signs and contacted us.”

In addition to the yard signs, Next Level uses additional promotional tools to create awareness in the community:

- Postcards—Like the yard signs, the postcards share a simple message about the church and include the church website.
- Branded Apparel/Shirts and Hats—Next Level Church brands high-quality clothing with its web address: NLC.TV.
- T-Shirts—The church uses T-shirts in connection with local events. When the New England Patriots went to the Super Bowl, Next Level Church made shirts with the Patriots’ “Do Your Job” slogan.

## INVITE CULTURE PROFILE:

### *Embrace Church, Sioux Falls, SD/Pastor Adam Weber*

“Movie night is insane . . . it’s the greatest outreach event ever.” Pastor Adam Weber’s church follows a very simple model: “We do worship, small group serving, and very little extra. So when we do a ‘very little extra’ thing, we go crazy with it.” Church movie night is their “very little extra” thing of choice. “We’ll have concessions where everything is a dollar or less.” And then there’s the movie. Pastor Weber secured a license to show *The Lego Movie*. Embrace Church shows the film at both of its

locations and invites families to come and have fun. “We’ll have Lego prizes given out during the night. Emmet from *The Lego Movie* is going to show up. He’s showing up during announcements this Sunday too—the Sunday before. So when he comes up, the ‘Everything Is Awesome’ music is going to be playing in the background.” Weber and his team encourage church members to invite others to the big event. When the night comes, it’s showtime. Weber begins the evening with a quick prayer and closes with an invitation to visit church.

### ***Unique Outreach Approach***

In addition to movie nights, Embrace Church hosts outdoor events for the community. Once a year, the church takes its services outside and invites everyone to come for food and fun. “The Party”—as it’s come to be known—also doubles as a carnival. The church rents inflatables for kids to play on. The idea began as a small outdoor service at a local park and eventually grew to the point that Embrace Church had to bring it back onto its own property in order to provide parking for all the families.

### ***Social Media***

#### **A Power Tool for Embrace Church**

“We’ve begun to focus more on Twitter than on Facebook.” Pastor Weber explains his social media strategy: “With the algorithm changing on Facebook, it seems like it’s hard to reach people. With Twitter, you still have that ability without having to pay to get your audience.”

Weber first experienced the power of social media by attending tweet-up events as Embrace Church was just getting started. “Early on, I would just put myself out there. Instead of trying to create an event, I went to a lot of events. When Twitter first got started, local businessmen would do tweet-ups. You’d go and mingle and find out who everybody is. I’d just come dressed normally . . . and when conversations turned to ‘Hey, what do you do for a living?’ I’d just say, ‘I’m a pastor.’ And then afterward, I followed every single person I met and told them it was great to meet them.”

Weber follows the same pattern with Embrace Church. “Our marketing and outreach tries to get people to our website, not even to a worship service. And we hope that our website will make someone want to come to our service. And maybe they’ll see something they’ll connect with.”

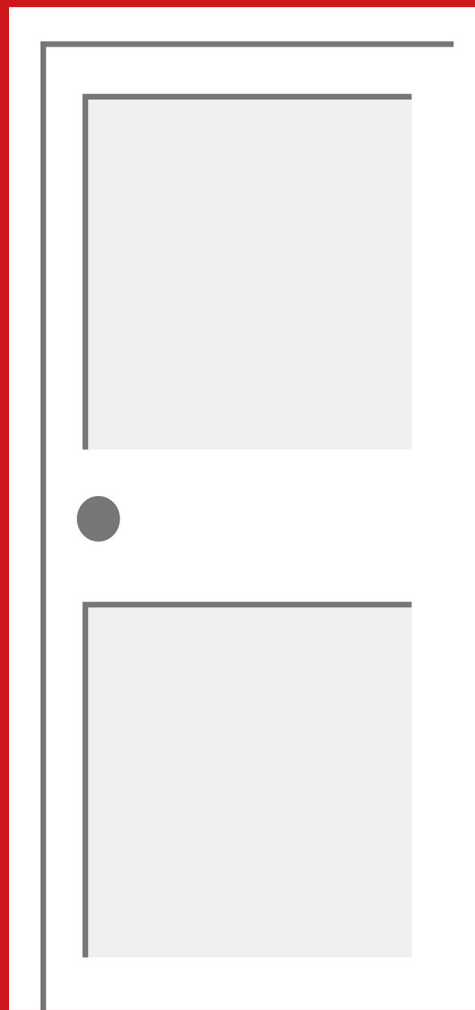
Pastor Weber says the key to making social media work is to be strategic. Know what you want to say and who you want to talk to. Pastor Weber says people will notice: “Someone from Twitter called us and said, ‘Your marketing this time has worked better than all nonprofits, and even a lot of high-end customers that we have.’” For Adam Weber and Embrace Church, it’s an affirmation that building bridges through social media and personal invitations really does connect with today’s culture.

## APPLY IT TO YOUR CHURCH

- What tools are you using to invite your community to church? Invite cards? Postcard mailings? Signage? T-shirts and hats? What other items can your church use?
- Does your congregation know how to invite a friend or family member to church? If not, what are some simple ways to teach them?
- Is your congregation promoting the church via Facebook, Twitter, or word of mouth? What resources or messaging can your leadership team develop for church members?
- Is your church website a good representation of your church?

# 4

## **ASSIMILATING GUESTS AND NEW BELIEVERS**





How do you transition first-time guests into regular church attendees? How soon should a new church member get involved in a ministry? What about small group attendance? No two churches have the same assimilation process, but each church in the Outreach Top 100 is making an intentional effort to engage newcomers and help them find their place in the church family.

## WHAT IS ASSIMILATION?

Assimilation is the intentional process of transitioning a first-time guest from a visitor to an active, thriving church member. Assimilation includes welcoming guests, helping them build a connection to the church, regularly following up with guests, and shepherding them into a mature faith that replicates the Church's commission to "go and make disciples."

## WHY SHOULD YOU DO IT?

According to the Barna Group, 1.2 million people will leave church this year—most say they don't feel connected. Assimilation changes the equation:

- A visitor usually decides within three to eight minutes whether they'll come back to your church (7 Habits of a Visitor-Friendly Church, Dr. Tom Clegg, Church Growth Institute). The entire experience—from signage when someone pulls into the church to encountering a friendly greeter—makes an impact.
- Assimilation puts a name to the face and starts a chain reaction of interaction with guests.
- Intentional connection creates a "sticky church" environment that draws people back week after week.
- Multiple connection efforts for visitors are effective—from door greeters and connection cards to phone calls, e-mail follow-ups, and handwritten letters.

## WHAT ARE THE RESULTS?

- Assimilation and relationship building close the back door of church attrition. People are less likely to leave if they have established personal connections in the church.
- Assimilation connects visitors and new attendees to ministries within the church and invites them to participate in outreach projects.
- Assimilation teaches visitors the “next steps” of church—salvation, baptism, membership, service, and leadership.

## LEARNINGS

- Assimilation requires a committed, ongoing investment in the lives of new attendees.
- In order to be successful, an assimilation plan needs to contain clear, simple steps that can be used over and over.
- A typical assimilation strategy consists of:
  1. Signage and branding.
  2. An initial greeting and introduction. Some churches begin at the car door and escort guests to a welcome area.
  3. Helpful direction to nursery and children’s areas.
  4. An info-gathering mechanism—usually a connection card filled out and dropped in the offering plate.
  5. Intentional follow-up from church leaders: an e-mail and handwritten card/note from the pastor, a phone call from a church leader or lay person, or a secondary mailing. Some churches offer gifts to first-, second-, and third-time guests.

## TYPES OF ASSIMILATION PROGRAMS

### ***Take a Tour***

Real Life Church, Valencia, CA/Pastor Rusty George

You don't have to be a tour guide to attend Real Life Church, but it might come in handy if you work on the welcome team. Pastor Rusty George offers an in-depth introductory course as part of Real Life Church's assimilation track.

Every Sunday morning, Pastor George welcomes guests from the stage and invites them to stop and pick up a free gift on their way out of church. Visitors fill out a connection card, which starts a series of follow-ups from church.

The Monday after the service, the guest receives an e-mail from Pastor George. On Thursday, they receive a gift card for a free cup of coffee at the church. At the end of the current month, guests will receive a second letter that includes a weekend sermon on CD. Real Life Church also keeps the visitor names on a master list so that guests receive invitations for big events like Christmas and Easter.

Guests who return to Real Life are funneled into a five-week introductory class, "First Step with Rusty." Pastor George talks about the church and encourages guests to get involved in a church ministry. As part of the course, guests are taken on a personal behind-the-scenes tour of the church so that visitors and new attendees can see the church in motion.

### ***Persistence Pays Off***

Epic Church, Philadelphia, PA/Pastor Kent Jacobs

"We are tenacious about getting info. Everyone fills out an info card every week." Kent Jacobs and Epic Church ask everyone in the congregation to fill out an information card each week. On the back of each card is a check box so visitors can indicate whether they would like a guest kit with information about the church. Visitors also receive an e-mail with a link to a video welcome from Pastor Jacobs. As an added benefit, the church always gets up-to-date member information for its database.

When a new name comes in from the info-gathering card, the guest receives both an e-mail and a handwritten thank-you note from the church. Second-time guests receive an invitation to fill out a feedback survey via e-mail. They also get a handwritten note that includes a \$5 Starbucks card. Guests who visit once but don't come back are sent

a “we missed you” card after a month has passed. Epic Church also sends a three-month and six-month follow-up card via snail mail. If guests choose not to return, Pastor Jacobs asks how the church can improve, then addresses those issues with his staff.

### ***How to Make a Big Church Feel Small***

NewSpring Church, Anderson, SC/Pastor Perry Noble

Perry Noble realizes that New Spring Church faces a huge challenge: its size. But there are ways to make a big church feel small, and it starts when a guest visits for the first time. “We’ve created an environment for first-timers called the ‘Green Room,’” Pastor Noble says. “People can swing by and get refreshments. Staff and volunteers answer questions.” By coming to the Green Room, guests self-identify and indicate that they want follow-up. Guests who visit the Green Room receive a handwritten letter and a phone call from a church leader.

When a visitor decides to make NewSpring Church their spiritual home, they are invited to an ownership class. Noble explains the difference between a typical membership class and NewSprings’ ownership class. “Members have rights, but owners have responsibilities,” he says. During ownership class, attendees are encouraged to serve in the church and make personal connections with other attendees.

### ***Assimilation Begins in the Parking Lot***

The Avenue Church, Waxahachie, TX/Pastor David Brown

When first-time guests drive into the parking lot of The Avenue Church, they see a sign inviting them to turn on their four-way flashers and be directed to VIP parking. Once guests park, they are met at the car and directed to a greeter tent outside the church. A greeter connects with the visitor, helps them bring their children to the nursery or kids’ area, and shows them to the auditorium. Guests receive a gift for their first, second, and third visit. Each gift builds in value.

Pastor Brown explains why The Avenue Church is intentional about connecting people to classes and activities. “If you’re worshipping, grouping, and serving, then you’re stuck. Our retention rate for those who do these things is high.”

## ***Going Overboard for Guests***

Freedom Church, Acworth, GA/Pastor J.R. Lee

Pastor J.R. Lee admits that Freedom Church loves its guests. “We go overboard. For every first-time guest, we have a person meet them at the car and carry everything for them. If they have kids, we bring them to the kids’ area. If it’s not freezing or raining, they get their first-time stuff at a tent.” And when it’s raining, greeters provide even more quality service. “We meet people at the car with umbrellas. Guest teams love it. The guest walks under the umbrella while the host walks in the rain.”

Once guests are checked in, Pastor Lee explains the next step: “For VIP guests, we give a free T-shirt to them and to the person who brought them.” And the overall goal of Freedom Church’s guest service is to provide families with a personal touch. “We’re moving toward giving every first-time guest a host for the day,” Pastor Lee says. By graciously welcoming guests and inviting them to return the next Sunday, Freedom Church sees a return on the investment. People feel the difference. “Go over and above in the area of honoring people,” Pastor Lee recommends. “Do the smallest thing. It becomes a big thing.”

## **ASSIMILATION PROGRAM PROFILE**

***Graystone Church, Loganville, GA/Pastor Jonathan Howes***

Graystone Church wanted to try a different approach to church assimilation. Where most churches start with a personal touch, Pastor Jonathan Howes decided to add a financial incentive to get visitors to return. “We used to give coffee mugs and CDs from the church band.” Now, Pastor Howes takes a different approach to assimilation and info gathering: “The unique thing that gets people to fill out the communications card is orphan care. If you’re a first-time guest and fill out the card, then we’ll make a \$5 donation to orphan care in your name.” Guests receive a thank-you card from the orphan care ministry, showing that the donation was made.

The church also follows up with first-time visitors. Follow-up includes an e-mail with a thank-you note and a survey. Guests are asked to give feedback about the service they attended. Secondary follow-up includes a personal phone call from a church staff member.

By going with a donation-based model, Graystone Church leaves a distinct impression: First-time guests see that the church cares for the world beyond its walls. It’s a powerful message to those who may have never seen the difference Christ’s body can make in our world.

## APPLY IT TO YOUR CHURCH

- If you were to visit your church for the first time, what would your impression be? From the time you pull into the parking lot, walk through the front doors, and reach your seat in the sanctuary, would you have decided if you would return? What can you do to make this initial impression better?
- Does your church have an intentional plan to follow up with first-time visitors? If not, can you start one?
- Do guests know the “next steps” to get involved in your church? Do you give them information about small groups or Sunday school classes?
- Do you include small group leaders or lay leaders in your follow-up/assimilation programs?

# 5

## **CREATING BUSINESS AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN YOUR COMMUNITY**



Nowhere in Scripture is the Christian Church commanded to become the economic engine of a local community. We are commanded by Christ to preach the Gospel and make disciples. However, as we follow Christ's example, we see Him healing and restoring others. A handful of churches in the Outreach Top 100 choose to bring economic healing to their community. And by creating employment opportunities for their financially challenged communities, they have provided a tangible expression of redemption. Now those who could not see past their daily needs are able to see the One who will meet their deepest need.

## WHY SHOULD YOU DO IT?

- Creating business opportunities shows that the church is invested in the long-term health of the community.
- Churches can use business profits to fund additional community programs and ministries.
- Churches can offer tailor-made solutions to needs in their community.

## WHAT ARE THE RESULTS?

- Churches that own a business are able to provide employment to people who need a job, such as Celebrate Recovery graduates. Some of these churches own thrift stores, which allow needy families to purchase low-cost goods.
- Churches that own movie theaters can offer family-friendly alternatives to today's often godless entertainment or can show select first-run films that are carefully screened and selected for family audiences.

## LEARNINGS

- Churches with an entrepreneurial focus start businesses based on the needs of the community.
- Many entrepreneurial-focused churches work hand-in-hand with community leadership.



- While the new business is of benefit to the church, the greater benefit is to the community. Job creation, skills training, and community care become the primary reasons for the business. The church benefits from the increased exposure, long-term commitment, and economic growth in the region.

## EXAMPLES OF CREATING BUSINESS AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

### ***Now Showing . . . Church!***

Destination Church, Hopewell, VA/Pastor Bryan Briggs

“I love business and business people.” Pastor Bryan Briggs wanted to connect with small businesses in his community. He also wanted the church to own a small business. “If we did a business, what would it be? A lot of churches have coffee houses.” But the coffee house idea didn’t seem to fit. Destination Church rented meeting space in a local movie theater. While the church enjoyed a good relationship with the cinema and the church loved its identity as the “movie theater church,” Pastor Briggs wanted to move the church into a space of its own. That’s when he asked himself the question, “What if we owned the theater?” Destination Church could have a permanent meeting space, open its doors to the community, and advertise in the lobby and on the big screen.

It seemed like a long shot—a five-year plan at best—until Destination Church began looking to purchase space for a second campus. Their realtor knew of an out-of-use movie theater near a military base. Bryan Briggs and his team decided it was worth checking out. But it wasn’t quite what they expected. “It was a disaster,” he says. “It looked bad. Smelled bad. And we fell in love with it.”

Destination Church bought the building, renovated the lobby and restrooms, and held services. Nine months later, the church raised \$200,000 to renovate the rest of the facility. “It’s got all the bells and whistles of a major theater,” Briggs explains. “We show modern movies, but we have a value system.” At the time of the interview, the theater was showing *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water* and *American Sniper*.

The movie theater church benefits the community—a newly renovated theater, entertainment for families, and jobs. It also benefits Destination Church. The church hangs signage and shows ads before each movie showing. And it fulfills Pastor Briggs’ vision to connect with small business in his community.

### ***Family Fitness Factory***

242 Community Church, Brighton, MI/Pastor David Dummitt

We normally go to church to strengthen our faith. At 242 Community Church, you can also strengthen your biceps. Pastor David Dummitt and his congregation started as a set-up/tear-down church but realized they could better minister to their community if they had a building they could open to everyone.

When a local tennis club went out of business, 242 Community Church bought the building and Pastor Dummitt put a sign in front that read: “Coming soon . . . You Decide.” The community responded and 242 Community built a community center and sports facility. “There’s no YMCA here,” Dummitt says the church built something even better. A multi-use sports center, gym, and cafe. “The auditorium lobby is a soccer field—an indoor soccer field. There was a real need for that when we opened this building,” Pastor Dummitt explains. “We have a crossfit gym. We have a three-story playscape—like McDonald’s has—with slides and tubes. The church has rooms for birthday parties. And a local preschool meets in the facility. It’s just been tremendous to watch the wall between church and community come down here.” Dummitt also reflects on how the community center outreach has changed his view of ministry. “I don’t think I’ll ever build a ‘church building’ again. For me, it didn’t make sense to spend this amount of money on a building that’s going to be used three or four hours on a Sunday morning. We spent the little bit of extra money and it’s being used every day.”

### ***Batting a Thousand***

Westover Hills Assembly of God, San Antonio, TX/Pastor Jim Rion

“Every night on the evening news, there is a section of the news called ‘sports.’ And in the newspaper, sports. What’s a driving part of our culture? Sports.” Pastor Jim Rion and Westover Hills Assembly of God have channeled San Antonio’s passion for sports into a community outreach. That outreach is about more than improving batting averages. It’s about making an impact. “We realized that a coach can tell a youth everything a youth pastor would tell him: ‘Make good decisions. Work together. Your decisions influence others.’ A coach can do this over a season, and a youth pastor gets one shot in a message. You have to twist a kid’s arm or promise an iPad to come to church . . . but they’ll stand in line and pay a fee to be on your team,” Pastor Rion says.

Now, Westover Hills isn’t calling for the end of church youth groups. Instead, they’re building new connections with kids and families who might never set foot on church

property. Westover Hills is building a sports complex as the result of a prayer. “Holy Spirit, take us to the drawing board,” Pastor Rion prayed. “Let the community need be the driver.”

Westover Hills already owns a gymnasium built for basketball and indoor volleyball. Now they’re adding more. The Westover Hills sports complex is being built on ten acres of land the church owns. When finished, it will include a softball field and two soccer fields. Everyone from T-ball teams to city leagues will be invited to practice or play on the fields. “We want this to be community friendly . . . family friendly.” And Rion sees the sports complex as the first opportunity to welcome those families to church. “I don’t know that right away I’ll have somebody in church, but I think it will pay off.” Growth takes time. Pastor Rion and Westover Hills are committed to taking the time to build long-term relationships and invest in the spiritual welfare of their city.

## **BUSINESS AND EMPLOYMENT PROFILE**

### ***The Crossing, Quincy, IL/Pastor Jerry Harris***

Pastor Jerry Harris has been known to break the rules of church planting. “You’re supposed to go to a growing community. We go to struggling communities. Economically depressed. People are moving out—not in.”

Harris’s strategy is intentional. Rural communities in the Midwest are struggling. People leave small towns and move to cities for economic opportunities and better services. Those left behind struggle to find jobs as businesses shut down. Fewer people means lower income. No business can continue to run when people have no money to support it. This is Harris’s mission field. And The Crossing has become a source of life—spiritually and economically—in Illinois.

### ***A Long-Term Solution***

“We invest money and staff in our communities.” Pastor Harris says that when The Crossing plants a new church, it is typically a million-dollar start-up. “The community knows we’re invested. City council doesn’t fight because we’re going in and trying to revitalize the area. We’ll pick a building that they’re trying to figure out what to do with. In Macomb, Illinois, we bought a grocery store about a half mile from Western Illinois University so we could minister to the school.” Their new building was far from pristine. “It had been abandoned six years,” Pastor Harris remembers. “The walls were covered in four inches of black mold. But it was on the main street.” The Crossing went to work and rehabilitated 43,000 square feet of the 56,000 square-foot building. Today, 1,200 people attend services in the building.

The story repeats itself in Quincy, Illinois. The Crossing purchased an old church, hoping to convert it into a drug rehab facility. Plans changed, and the building was restored as a house of worship. Now, 500 people meet in a facility that seats just 130. Multiple services are held to accommodate the overflow.

Twenty minutes north of Quincy is a small farming community that 125 people call home. For several years, two congregations held services in the town. As the population dwindled, the churches merged into one facility. When that facility was destroyed by a tornado, the church built a \$1 million sanctuary with the insurance settlement. There was one problem: the building was too big. The congregation consisted of just thirty people. The congregation eventually gave the new facility—cost free—to The Crossing. The new congregation now outnumbers the entire town. Two hundred people attend church in a town of 125 residents.

### ***Ministry Through Retail***

The Crossing sees economic revitalization as a key to reaching hearts for Jesus Christ. The church has developed a business model that creates jobs and gives back to the community. In each city where it has a church, The Crossing has started a thrift store. “We employ about sixty people. A lot of the hires are from Celebrate Recovery. They can’t get a job elsewhere, so we help them re-acclimate.” Thrift stores are stocked with low-cost items. “Everything in the store is a dollar or two,” Harris says. All the profits go back into the community. Funds are used to help families with rent and heating bills. It also goes to education. “Our thrift stores fund scholarship programs for preschools. We see our preschools as a major evangelistic tool, because instead of getting kids for an hour and a half on a Sunday or a Saturday . . . now you’re getting them for most of the week.” Harris also explains that the church runs an after-school program in conjunction with local elementary schools.

The Crossing also provides educational opportunities for adults. Harris says the church runs a “Jobs for Life” program. “We teach people how to write resumes and have an interview.”

Today, Pastor Jerry Harris and The Crossing operate churches in nine different locations. Seven thousand people across rural Illinois worship together via multi-site connections. Their influence in local communities continues to grow. “If you look on the map, our ministry is about 165 miles wide. If you drive into the sphere of community, it will take three hours to drive out.” And Pastor Harris sees even more opportunities for church growth. Other communities need economic and spiritual revitalization. If anyone can do it, it’s Harris and The Crossing.

## APPLY IT TO YOUR CHURCH

- Is your church in an economically depressed community? If so, what are the needs?
- Can your church develop a local business or partner with local businesses to jump-start economic growth?
- If your church is not called to start a business, can you help members of your congregation find jobs? How about bringing in a resume/job skills professional for a seminar? What other opportunities exist to help your community develop a strong economy?

# CLOSING THOUGHTS

Time and again through the course of these interviews, pastors told us, “This works for us . . . but it might not work everywhere.”

Their humble admission echoes the Apostle Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 3:6, “but God has been making it grow.”

Our prayer is that you’ll see these pastors’ stories for what they really are: testimonies that God can use any church of any size to do His work. That includes your church. The same God who is working in Acworth, Georgia; San Antonio, Texas; and Rapid City, South Dakota; is working in your church. He is fully invested in you, your family, your congregation, and your community.

Use these stories as idea starters. Reflect on them. Adapt them to your church’s needs. Build off of them. These ideas are not exclusive to any one church or congregation. Each pastor shared secret recipes and lessons learned so that as you try new ministries, you will be aware of what’s involved.

As you work through these ideas, please feel free to call us. Outreach, Inc. offers free coaching and church consultation. We’re here to equip you to reach others for Jesus Christ. It’s a pleasure to serve you.

Thank you for your faithful service. You are doing a great work. The Church is still alive and well, hearts are still open to the Gospel, and God is not done using you and your church. He is in charge of the harvest, and He knows each of His workers by name. That includes you.

***Be encouraged!***

# A Special Thank You

to all the churches who participated

Cherry Hills Community Church  
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Rock City Church  
The Crossing  
Faith Promise Church  
Immanuel Baptist Church  
The Avenue Church  
Hope Fellowship  
The Journey  
Cross Pointe  
Valley Creek Church  
Parkway Fellowship  
Destination Church  
Christ Fellowship  
Bayside Community Church  
Real Life Church  
Epic Church  
Mount Zion Baptist Church  
Savannah Christian Church  
Mariners Church  
Turning Point Church  
Elevate Life Church

LifePoint Church  
Eagle Brook Church  
Sunnybrook Community Church  
South Hills Church  
Friendship Community Church  
The Church of Eleven22  
Embrace Church  
Westover Hills Assembly of God  
Flatirons Community Church  
Mountain Christian Church  
Rockford First  
First Baptist Church  
Heritage Church  
Graystone Church  
Next Level Church  
Blessed Hope  
First Baptist Church  
Church of the Open Door  
Victory Life Church  
Emmanuel Bible Chapel  
Element Church  
North Coast Church  
Summit Christian Church  
Christ's Church of the Valley  
Experience Life  
The Summit Church  
Watermark Community Church  
LowCountry Community Church  
First Free Church  
Eastside Christian Church