

People on the Fringes

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A characteristic that often impacts our ability to reach people in leisure settings and lifestyles is our tendency to focus on people and areas of life that are familiar to us. We may intellectually be aware of the existence of people whose lifestyles and backgrounds are different from our own. However, as emotional beings we tend only to readily see and accept those approaches to life that are similar to ours. We operate on the assumption that everyone shares our interests, goals, hopes, dreams, preferences, and attitudes. So we have difficulty realizing that our particular approach to life is not one shared by everyone around us.

Even in the large masses of people found in many leisure settings, we have a tendency to only see those folks who are like us—those with whom we share common interests and attitudes. So we often miss those people whose lives differ in some way from ours, those people who are outside the mainstream of our worldview—the people on the fringes.

Who are they?

Since people on the fringes are outside the center of our scope of awareness, they could be described as not being our kind of people. People on the fringes also include those people who we miss, overlook, pass up, or can't reach with our usual ways of doing ministry and outreach. This sometimes means that people whom we thought were included in our target group are placed on the fringe of our ministry's focus. The sizes of our fringe areas are directly determined by the extent of our vision, awareness, and sensitivity.

Some of the people in leisure settings who might be on the fringes are:

“back to nature” folks: in the mountains, on farms, on the water

“flophouse” occupants

airline personnel

apartment/condo dwellers

artists, craftsmen

avid hobbyists: birders, computer hackers, et cetera.

bikers, punks, gangs

cab drivers, tour guides

carnival people

celebrities

conventioners

counterculture types: hold-over hippies, New Age movement, the underground economy

cultists, other religions

down-and-outers

drifters, nomads, hoboes

drug dealers/users/abusers

eccentrics

Emergency Medical Technicians and rescue squads

executive management of resort/leisure businesses

ex-prisoners

firefighters

formerly marrieds
fraternal/social groups: American Legion, Elks, Masons, and so forth
functional illiterates
gamblers/casino personnel
halfway-house residents
handicapped: deaf, blind, mentally impaired, learning disabled, physically impaired, or deformed
hedonists, bar crowds
homebound
homeless poor
homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals
hunters, fishermen, other outdoors people
jail inmates
law enforcement personnel
live-ins (unmarried couples)
merchants, salespersons
musicians, actors, performers, entertainers
night workers
non-WASP's
older persons, retirees
phobia victims
political activists
professional athletes
prostitutes, pimps
racists
recent arrivals
religious burnouts
runaways
secularists
semipro recreators and sportsmen
service personnel: housekeeping staff, waitresses, parking attendants, bus boys, cashiers
single parents
singles
street people
street vendors/performers
survivalists
swingers
the wealthy up-and-outers (especially in closed communities)
traveling business people
truckers, bus drivers
VIPs
water folk

Where are they?

All around us—consider the relatively small percentage of the population (permanent and temporary) of most leisure settings that are active participants of any Christian congregation. People on the fringes may even be on the church's membership roll.

Why are they there?

By choice—either theirs or ours:

Throughout the United States and Canada, locations with a leisure orientation appeal to people because these settings provide a cultural environment that is by its nature secular, urban, mobile, affluent, with great opportunity for anonymity. This makes them choice locations for people seeking to escape being the center of focus in a more traditional environment. And added to this, we as Christians sometimes avoid acknowledging that a particular situation or group exists because we either don't know how to deal with it, or we simply prefer not having anything to do with them.

By chance or circumstance:

Like darkened ships passing in the night, the church and some people on the fringes go their separate ways seemingly unaware of the other's existence. When the influence and impact of Christian ministry is too narrow in focus, it is very easy not to be in the right place at the right time.

Why look for them?

The inclusive message of the Great Commission, as given and lived out by Jesus, and as underscored by 2 Peter 3:9, should be reason enough for us to look to the fringes around us.

We should be prepared to demonstrate the love of Christ and show the limitless realm of God's concern for all people. We need to build relationships through which the love of God can be communicated, as well as meet human needs and personal aspirations with appropriate services and activities. We need to establish an identity as people who truly care about others, even those on the fringes.

And we need to seek out "fringe people" to broaden and enhance the *koinonia* of our Christian community. With them, we can become what God would have us to be as His expanded family.

How do you find them?

Stop—Look—Listen:

Find out what is happening at all levels of your community or area. For example, go to a shopping area or mall, and sit, watch, and listen to people. Spend some time and make a listing of all the types of people you see and hear.

Examine your list both for those groups of people you were surprised to see and for those you expected to see and didn't.

Look for other survey techniques that can increase your awareness of additional areas in your community. Don't limit yourself to only one or two ways of examining your area. If, for example, you only use door-to-door surveys, you will miss people without doors—those living behind gates with guards, as well as those living under bridges in boxes.

When we seek out people on the fringes using our eyes and ears in a truly sensitive way, we may often discover that they will try to find us.

What do we do now?

Pray—Plan—Practice

Pray for a real sensitivity to people as individuals and not just as parts of some fringe group. With this increased sensitivity, learn all you can about the concerns and priorities of these new additions to your expanded world. Now broaden your ministry planning to include the concerns and issues that are brought to your attention.

Reaching out to new groups of persons often means doing things in new ways and directions. And since the only way we become comfortable with new approaches is through experience, we must be willing to put into practice what our prayers and planning have led us to—even if this means writing the how-to manual as we go.

Based on a seminar by Sam Schlegel at the National Recreation and Resort Missions Conference, Paris Landing State Park, Tennessee, 1987.