

Go forth and knock. Don't be afraid to evangelize. You really can spread the good news about your church, your community, and the welcoming love of God.

Go Forth and Knock

SUSAN LEO



TWO FOR A NICKEL, three for a dime!" When I was a kid growing up in a small town in Ohio, I sold zucchini and tomatoes door-to-door. I'd fill my peck basket from the bushels on my red wagon, walk up to a stranger's house, and ring the bell. I had my sales pitch. I had a good product. I sold a lot of vegetables.

But in May of 2000 at a New Church Development conference when Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer, Evangelism Ministry Team Minister for Local Church Development and Renewal, suggested cold calling in our church neighborhood, I was taken aback. What? Knock on doors? Why?

At the time, it made no sense. My congregation rented a room in a downtown Portland office building on Sunday mornings. There were no doors to knock on, no houses, no neighbors to speak of at all. Knock on doors—what a joke!

Well, as God often has it, just a month later, the joke was on me.

My congregation was growing—and outgrowing our worship space. We began looking for a better, perhaps even permanent location. In November of 1999, we spotted an abandoned church building in a neighborhood not served by a mainline denomination, but much to our disappointment, the building owner put off any discussion of rental considerations. Then suddenly, days after I got back from Cleveland, the owner offered us the building. We were ecstatic. Here was this lovely little church building, in a real neighborhood, houses all around. We cleaned madly, tore out green shag carpeting, fixed the numerous broken windows and celebrated our first service there on Pentecost. The summer stretched out before us like a red carpet.

The building had quite a history. Built by Mormons in 1931, it had been used by a number of denominations and congregations over the years.

Each day, the mail would bring envelopes addressed to a different community, long gone. We sure weren't those folks. And we sure weren't the independent megachurch down the street whose parishioners parked throughout the neighborhood blocking driveways and making noise all week long. We knew we weren't any of them, but I realized that no one in the neighborhood would know the difference if we didn't tell them. Furthermore, how could they know that Bridgeport might be the kind of church they'd like to attend if they didn't know who we were? And who are they? Who lives in this neighborhood anyway? Is it really a neighborhood or do people just live here?

The hostess in me was beginning to stir, but what could I do? I thought of Nancy's admonition to go forth and knock. And then I remembered three of my childhood's favorite summertime words: Ice Cream Social. The congregation thought it was a great idea. We picked a date, got ice cream donated, and organized scoopers and a clean up crew. Two weeks before the event, I revised our church brochure to be both an introduction and an invitation, in addition to being informational.

Then one idyllic summer evening, with no small amount of fear and trembling, I approached my first door. I knocked and stood up straight, trying to hide my nerves while looking friendly and open. I thought, "Two for a nickel, three for a dime?" It's not zucchini, but free ice cream and a great congregation ain't a bad deal. The door cracked open. "Hi!" I said. "I'm Susan Leo. I'm the pastor of Bridgeport Community United Church of Christ, we moved into that little white church building last month. I just wanted to introduce myself and let you know who we are and invite you to an ice cream social next Sunday at 3 o'clock." Much to my amazement, the door swung open. I went on quick-

ly, “Here’s some information about us. Do you attend a church in the neighborhood?” The screen door opened, a hand took the flyer, and conversation began. Her tone was friendly. We talked for a few minutes about the neighborhood and the other churches. I told her we were a distinct church alternative and we were planning on being good neighbors. I said that she would be welcome on any Sunday morning she wanted to drop in – and we had good coffee.

She smiled and said that I was the first minister who’d ever knocked on her door. I mentioned the ice cream social again and told her I hoped she’d stop by. We shook hands and I walked down the street almost in shock. That wasn’t so hard. She even seemed happy to talk to me! Wow!

Over the next few nights, I knocked on almost one hundred doors in a three-block radius around the church. My biggest fear—that I’d get a door slammed in my face—never materialized, although two people did say “No thanks” after I introduced myself. Some folks really wanted to talk about religion, and a few gave me an earful about other congregations, but the great majority of people were civil and warmly polite, if not downright friendly.

A week later, about a dozen folks from the neighborhood dropped by for ice cream and a tour of the church. While none have become members yet, my evening stroll around the neighborhood has had other tangible results. People wave and smile as they drive by. One man, a “dedicated pantheist,” (this is Oregon don’t forget) stops to chat when he bikes by. The neighborhood kids enjoy the basketball hoop I put up in the parking lot. And we’ve not had another broken window.

Why knock?

- Build church identity
- Strengthen community
- Welcome potential members

How now?

- Be not afraid!
- Create an eye-catching handout
- Know what you’re going to say—practice your opening lines
- If possible, invite folks to a non-worship event at the church
- Keep the conversation friendly and short
- Map your route
- Take notes for future reference, especially of nearby neighbors
- Consider doing it every year or two.

SUSAN LEO is the pastor of Bridgeport Community UCC, a new church that got its start in May of 1998. After a year of meeting just once or twice a month, in June of 1999, Bridgeport began receiving UCC leadership support and went full time. Now more than 130 adults and children call Bridgeport home and the church hopes to outgrow its building very soon.



To discover the hidden joys of cold calling in your neighborhood, contact:

Evangelism Ministry Team:
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