

## Tools for missionaries

By [Diane Roth](#)

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Recently I had a conversation with one of the young parents in my congregation. We were having a far-reaching discussion that included Sunday School, next summer's Vacation Bible School Program, and the changing nature of our culture and church attendance. When I offered the idea that "going to church" is not as culturally normal now as it was when I was growing up, she replied, "That's right! I think we are the only ones who go to church among all of our friends." She continued that she knew that her friends had a wide variety of opinions and emotions regarding faith, from some who clearly were not interested, to others who were more ambivalent.

I blurted out, "So, you're sort of like missionaries to your friends."

I immediately regretted the statement. In my experience, the word "missionary" can have several negative connotations. The rigid, judgmental missionary of James Michener's Hawaii comes to mind, along with images of people who pass out tracts on street corners, coerce people to conform to Western standards of behavior, and fail to learn cultural languages. I was a missionary myself, once (long ago), so I know all of the stereotypes. They have sometimes been deserved.

But instead of recoiling, this parent responded, "yes, we are sort of like missionaries," which made me wonder if we are equipping the people in our congregations to be missionaries, in the best sense of the word.

I thought about the missionaries I knew, long ago. They were passionate that people know Jesus, certainly, but they were also passionate about justice. They immersed themselves in another culture and learned another language. They talked about transforming lives, but their own lives had been transformed by the people they met and by the experiences they had.

What would it mean for us to do faith formation in our churches as if we knew that all of the people in our congregation were missionaries, in the best sense of the word? What sort of practices would we teach, or engage in? What would we do differently if we believed we were teaching people to be missionaries?\*

1. We would teach people how to listen first. Listening evangelism, that's what I'd call it. Teach people to listen, truly be curious, ask good questions about their friends and their friends' lives. Teach parents to listen to children, children to parents. Teach people to listen to the strangers who visit our congregation, to their neighbors and coworkers and the immigrants who move in across the street, to the spiritual but not religious friends.

2. We would teach people that they each have a faith story, and help them learn to tell it. The story has something to do with grace, something to do with love, something to do with forgiveness, everything to do with God. It might be big and dramatic or small and ordinary. I will always remember hearing Lauren Winner (author of "Girl Meets God") say that she had a hard time writing her memoir, until she realized that the main character was really God.

3. We would teach people that they don't have to know everything to know something about the love of God. They don't have to defend, just invite. Teach people to be gracious inviters, able to deal with both a "yes" and a "no".

4. We would create safe places of invitation in our churches, whether that is a Sunday worship, a day of service, a shared meal or a time of fellowship. What would you be proud to invite a friend or neighbor to participate in with you?

Tools for missionaries. Here are just a few. What are some other tools that you think modern-day "missionaries" should have?

*\*if you can think of a better word than "missionary", please feel free to tell me. I won't be offended.*

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