

National Back to Church Sunday Taps Social Media Channels

Thousands of churches across the country are using social media, electronic invitations and “bounce houses”—and some are even overcoming great loss—as they gear up to draw family, friends, neighbors and co-workers to National Back To Church Sunday on Sept. 18.

More than 7,300 churches representing 34 denominations are participating in this third annual nationwide effort to reach out to the unchurched in their communities. Congregations have extended more than 1 million invitations.

“This cross-denominational outreach is about reigniting the power of personal invitation,” says Philip Nation, national spokesman for National Back To Church Sunday. “We’re delighted to see the number of churches participating has nearly doubled compared with last year. We anticipate more Americans than ever will rediscover the joy of churchgoing through this grassroots movement.”

More churches than ever are using their own Facebook pages, as well as videos posted to YouTube and Vimeo, to open doors and encourage newcomers. Organizers also are exchanging ideas on the National Back To Church Sunday Facebook page, while the event’s website gives individuals an opportunity to extend electronic invitations to friends, relatives and colleagues.

Some churches are staging carnivals, picnics and concerts during the big day. “We canceled services to have CHURCH!” said one Facebook user, whose church is having a “fun day” featuring “bounce houses,” games and a message of hope. Many churches also are planning Bible studies and other “comeback events” soon after National Back To Church Sunday, to keep

visitors returning.

Sweet Rest Church of Christ, a Holiness church in Pearl, Miss., has seen its congregation grow 33 percent over the past two years, and Pastor Joe Pridgen credits National Back To Church Sunday. "This is probably the single best way to get church members mobilized to invite people to church," he says. "Back To Church Sunday has been one of the best things to happen to Sweet Rest Church in the 14 years I've been here!"

Pridgen helps prepare his church for the event by challenging parishioners of all ages to invite at least 10 people and bring at least two. Young people use their social networks to invite their friends by creating Facebook events, tweeting about it and blogging. Members distribute door hangers in their neighborhoods and invitation cards to store customers, colleagues and others.

National Back To Church Sunday also led to growth for Victory Christian Church in Livermore, Maine. Pastor Will Kahkonen says overall attendance over the past six months has increased by 35 percent. But that's not the only way he measures the success of National Back To Church Sunday.

"It ignited a passion in our people," he says. Weeks before the event, he challenged members to create "cardboard testimonies"—their "before" story printed on one side of a piece of cardboard, then flipping it to reveal their "after" story of how God changed them

"I told them, 'Give these invitations to your friends because YOU are going to be sharing your story that day,'" Kahkonen says. "And they grabbed onto that concept. They are the ones who invited people, made calls, got them rides to church. They realized they didn't need to wait for the church to do something—they had the power to make a difference with their own lives." Twenty-five people shared their cardboard testimonies with newcomers on the big day.

Since the initiative began in 2009, National Back To Church Sunday has seen increased success, with church members last year inviting more than 3.5 million family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers to special services. Some 3,800 churches participated in 2010, reporting an average 26 percent increase in weekly attendance.