

20,000 Churches Pledge to Participate in 'National Back to Church Sunday'

Event organizers announced Wednesday more than 20,000 churches will participate in National Back to Church Sunday, achieving the ambitious target set for this year, doubling the goal of last year's event.

Even during the Labor Day weekend, churches continued to sign up on the live online roster, crossing over the 20,000 target late on Saturday night.

The target of 20,000 churches was not only reached, but achieved with two weeks to spare, with thousands more churches still expected to sign up and join in on the September 15 event. In August, the number grew by the hour as more than 120 churches signed up each day on the free roster at .

Organizers emphasize that reaching the target on the live online roster isn't the real goal; it's the significance of the people who will be attending church all over the nation, all on one day, as more than 20,000 churches make special efforts to welcome people back to church.

"Like any target, it's exciting to hit the number, but the number is the symbol for the real purpose of the goal," said Scott Evans, founder and CEO of Outreach, Inc., the nation's leading provider of church communications resources that helped launch the initiative.

"We believe there are millions of Americans who would welcome an invitation to come back to church, or who might be a bit curious about attending church for the first time," Evans continued. "Whether most Americans believe in God and have an interest in spiritual things isn't in question. The question

is what are they going to do about their beliefs and what are believers going to do to make people feel welcome.”

Citing research that about 80 percent of people would visit a church if someone they knew invited them, National Back to Church Sunday organizers started the event five years ago. It has grown exponentially since then as many churches who participate make it an annual event because of its impact on their congregations and communities.

Organizers set the 2013 participation goal at 20,000—twice the goal they set for last year, and a big step up from the nearly 14,000 churches that pledged to participate in 2012. With representation of all 50 states and the District of Columbia, most provinces in Canada, as well as many other countries, on Sept. 15, millions of people will attend special church services designed to be welcoming to their communities, and will invite others to join them.

“Churches are eager to welcome people back to church, whether it’s back to church after a summer of travel or back to church after a lifetime,” Evans said.

At , visitors to the site who are looking for a church to attend can check the roster to see what churches in their community are participating. Those considering locating a church to visit might also want to check out the Back to Church You Tube Channel and the Facebook page, which has garnered 60,000 likes in about seven weeks.

Church leaders may also want to check the website for resources to help them promote the day in their communities. The site features videos produced to help promote and celebrate the day as well as free publicity materials and tips for using social media.

Other publicity resources are also available on the site to order as a download or print.

National Back to Church Sunday is the largest annual community-based church outreach effort in the nation, when thousands of churches share the simple message and mission of inviting everyone in America Back to Church. The campaign empowers churches and church members with the tools they need to welcome their neighbors, friends and loved ones back to church, while providing an easy way for everyone in the community to find a welcoming church.