

FROM RED LETTER LIVING

# GROWING YOUR CHURCH CHALLENGE

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10 Ideas to Grow Your Church for  
Little to No Money



ZACH ZEHNDER



# **Growing Your Church Challenge: 10 Ideas to Grow Your church for Little to No Money**

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Quotes, research, and statistics are hyperlinked directly in the ebook.

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Special thanks to my family of faith-filled, big-thinking followers of Jesus Christ at theCross in Mount Dora, FL. Thank you for allowing me to lead you and for so passionately sharing Jesus with others.

Also, I want to give credit where it is due. Much of the research in this ebook I have learned from other church leaders.

Here's two that I listen to, quote, and reference often throughout this project:

Rich Birch: His online course [Church Growth Flywheel](#) was outstanding. This would be a great resource for your church staff to complete.

[Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast](#): Simply put, this is my go-to podcast. So much has been learned from Carey's interviews with top church and business leaders.



GROWING YOUR CHURCH

# INTRODUCTION

## WHY DOES CHURCH GROWTH MATTER?

If there's a couple of things I have learned from pastors is that they have a mutual desire to grow their church and to be wise stewards of their finances. As more and more churches will be emphasizing getting back to worship in the church building after over a year of disruption from the global pandemic, I wanted to share 10 practical ideas to help you grow your church. What's even better is these ideas won't break the bank for you. In addition, each idea will also issue a challenge, or practical next step, to complete.

This content was originally posted as a series of blogs written to church leaders. The content has been updated, and now reformatted into this ebook. For more pastor-to-pastor resources, be sure to [subscribe here](#) to our blog.

My purpose in writing this is to help pastors and church leaders grow their respective churches. I believe this ebook is best read together as a church staff, leadership team, or with the entire board of directors. While the lead pastor is vital for church growth, many ideas require more than just the pastor. Consider leading your staff, leadership team, or board of directors through this material at an offsite retreat for a weekend or in a series of meetings in a short-time frame.

Here's my promise to you: these ideas will be clear and practical, not vague things like "care more" and "be nicer" and "preach better." While those things certainly help, I'm going to assume you already do those things.

But before we dive into the ideas, first let's answer this question:

### Why is church growth important?

We are called to remain faithful to the Gospel, but we also have a call as God's church to be fruitful. God is passionate about growing His kingdom and He uses the local church to be His expression in this world. **Church expressions can and should take many forms, but every expression of Jesus should be pursuing both faithfulness and fruitfulness.** God has called us to be faithful, but there are also many commands from God calling us to be fruitful. This is not an either/or, it's a both/and.

Many pastors claim that they want an "Acts 2" church. If that's true, one of the most often-overlooked qualities about this church was their ability to grow and pivot rapidly.

Just look at the statistics of this church:

- [Acts 1:15](#): Prior to Pentecost, it started with 120 people
- [Acts 2:47](#): They added 3000 and also were adding daily those who were being saved.
- [Acts 4:4](#): The number of men alone grew to 5000. Where there are 5000 men there are likely 10000 more women and children.
- [Acts 5:14](#): A multitude was added. At this point, they couldn't even count.
- [Acts 21-22](#): Tens of thousands of Jews believed from Jerusalem.

By the end of the book, in a period of about 20 years, there were an estimated more than 100,000 people that were a part of the early church.

Church growth sometimes has a stigma attached to it. Get rid of the stigma and begin pursuing church growth. Every single number is a person who has a story and God cares about every person and every number. [1 Timothy 2:4 says: God desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.](#)

[In an interview with Rich Birch, CEO of Lifeway Resources, Thom Rainier, shared some interesting statistics from a 2016 study.](#) The study found that the majority of the churches that are actually growing aren't growing faster than the communities they are in.

- 94% of all churches in North America are losing ground.
- Only 6% of churches are growing faster than their communities.
- A church that grows by 3% is considered breaking even.
- 80% of churches are plateaued or declining.

All of these statistics show that over time, the message and influence of Christ has been losing ground. **It is time for the church, the physical representation of Jesus in this world, to take back God's ground.**

Often, stalled churches push back on the idea that growth should be a priority for pastors.

Obviously, growth isn't the only sign of a healthy church – there can be fast growing churches that aren't healthy. The challenge for any size church whose numbers are at a standstill – is to refrain from criticizing the growing churches around you. Don't write off the fact that there are some practical, simple things you could do that would allow you to share the gospel with more people.

Every church's context is different, but I also believe that too many of us in decline will look to place blame elsewhere. We will blame our context, or our demographics, or the people on our leadership teams, or something else, when the reality is all church leaders need to look inward and ask, "Is there something that I can do, that our church can do, to grow our church?"

Church priorities can't only be about increasing numbers, but leaders should absolutely be thinking about that growth. At the end of the day, churches who are passionate about spreading the message of Christ should want to proactively do more to reach people.

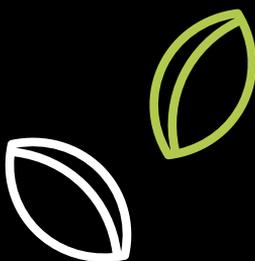
I am passionate about churches playing offense, not defense. **Growing a church requires action.** Yes, God is at work, and we trust in His power, but the fast-growing churches have lead pastors and staffs that are action-oriented.

Especially in light of the coronavirus pandemic, which has seen estimates of [20-40% of practicing Christians stop attending worship](#), either in-person or online, **the mission field has never been as large as it is right now.** Rather than focusing on that obstacle, churches that play offense understand that we are living in an incredible opportunity right now!

We cannot just sit back and let status quo continue. We have the greatest news in the world and God has called us to share this news with others. It's time.

Most of the ideas I will be sharing with you are to help you get guests through the "front door" of your church and a couple of ideas to help you make those guests stick. Many other books and resources abound to how to help you close the "back door," but this ebook primarily consists of helping you get more people into your church community.





GROWING YOUR CHURCH

# IDEA ONE

## **BUILD A GUEST-FRIENDLY HOMEPAGE**

Out of all the practical ideas I will share with you, this first one could have the greatest financial cost, but it's pennies to the dollar for how important it is.

In light of the global pandemic, many churches began to rethink about their online expression. Rather than taking away people from the in-person gathering, a solid online expression can actually lead to a growing in-person gathering. Therefore, the first three ideas are all focused on helping your church thrive in the digital world that we are living in.

While we still have much to learn about the long-term effect of online ministry, one of my convictions is that the answer for doing online church well in the future is definitely more and not less. Quite simply, this is where people “live” today and we have to “live” there as well even if we don't understand the full ramifications yet.

Brady Shearer, church and technology guru says many visitors will check out your website first before they check out your church in person. **Your church's website is the frontline for your entire ministry. It's your most important marketing tool.** It's where first impressions are formed, where you get discovered, and where new visitors are introduced to you.

Church growth starts with a great first impression. Decisions are made about your church based entirely on your website. And once a poor first impression is made, it takes considerable effort to undo it.

Sadly, most church websites make miserable first impressions. To make a point, Brady's team conducted an extensive case study that analyzed more than 1000+ church websites from 30+ different countries. All 50 states are represented. [For more on Brady's study and accompanying statistics, visit here.](#)<sup>1</sup>

The homepage is very important because it is typically the first page a potential guest will visit. If the homepage isn't right, the guest could go away quickly. Based on his study results, his team concluded that there are 5 simple elements that a homepage of a website needs to pass.

- A primary focal point.
- Responsive design.
- Reasonably quick load times.
- Zero stock photos of people's faces.
- Easily accessible new visitor info.

Based on that, **96.2% (970 out of 1008) of church websites fail the first impression test.**

8 out of 10 failed more than one of those 5 things.

Let's look at each one of those five elements:

### **1. 76% (765 out of 1008) of church websites failed the primary focal point.**

What is a primary focal point? **A primary focal point is the part of a website that you see first.** It's where your eye is drawn when you see a website for the very first time. According to a study from Google, website designs with "low visual complexity" were found to be most appealing to users.

"The feel" of the website is the main driver of first impressions. In fact, researchers have found that 94% of people when talking about "feel" is the design of the site and not the actual content. You can have great content but if it doesn't feel right, you're likely going to fail. By the way, according to the study we are referencing, **the primary focal point of a church that wants to grow should be an "I'm new" button.**

### **2. 40% (603 out of 1008) of church websites did not have responsive design.**

In 2017, worldwide mobile traffic accounted for 52.64% of all Internet traffic. If your church's website isn't responsive (meaning it doesn't adjust its size and structure based on the dimensions of the device it's being viewed with), you're creating a frustrating experience for the majority of the people visiting your site.

According to Adobe, **nearly 8 in 10 consumers stop engaging with content that doesn't display well on their device.**

### **3. 38% (386 out of 1008) of church websites fail the speed test.**

If your website loads in 3 seconds instead of 2 seconds, 2 times as many people will leave your site without visiting another page. As if that's not enough, mobile

<sup>1</sup> All of the statistics quoted that are not hyperlinked in "Idea 1" were found in Brady's study.

pages that are 1 second faster experience up to 27% increases in conversion rates. And if you still don't think it's important in July 2018 Google announced they that page speed will be a ranking factor for mobile searches. This means that if your site loads slowly it will impact where you rank on Google searches negatively.

For 9 quick tips on how to improve your website speed, visit [here](#).

#### **4. 32% (320 out of 1008) of church websites contain stock photos**

Photography is an amazing way to introduce your church to a potential new visitor and make a good first impression. On the other hand, using stock photos that include the faces of real people that do not attend your church is disingenuous and deceptive.

It's like a restaurant putting up pictures of another restaurant's food.

Along with this idea, did you know that **the second most visited site on a church webpage is the staff page?** When people visit your site, they want to know who you are. They're looking to get to know the faces that make up your church — the people who will be welcoming them in when they show up on Sunday morning. They want to literally know who the people representing your church on staff actually are! A page devoted to highlighting the who of your church staff is essential. It should feature big, vibrant pictures that are engaging. Why is this important? Because knowing the names and faces of the people who represent your church helps make a visitor more comfortable.

Your website, especially your homepage and your staff page, should be an extension of who you are. The look and feel of your homepage should be consistent with what they would find if they were to attend in person.

#### **5. 62% (622 out of 1008) of church websites do not have easy to find new visitor information.**

Most websites didn't make any effort to acknowledge potential new visitors on their homepage. Attending a new church for the first time can be uncomfortable and unfamiliar. To make things easier, dedicate a portion of your church's homepage (ideally, a very prominent portion) to acknowledging and welcoming potential new visitors.

When was the last time you thought about your website from the perspective of a first-time guest?

**Many people will check out a church online long before they check out a church in real life.**

Here's a basic question.

**Did you build your website mostly for your attenders, or for your first-time guests?**

If it's only for your attenders, why?

**CHALLENGE:**

Take some time to analyze your homepage according to these 5 elements. Locate which one of the five elements needs the most attention and write out three clear, precise, action steps with due dates that you can take to improve.

[Click to see Pro Church Tools' Best Church Website of 2020.](#)



GROWING YOUR CHURCH

## IDEA TWO

### PURSUE 5-STAR REVIEWS

Just about everyone is using Google. Research shows that it accounts for 94% of mobile searches and 70% of desktop searches. In addition, 97% of consumers search for local organizations online. 46% of all searches on Google are local. 88% of searches on a mobile device call or visit the business within 24 hours.

Knowing these statistics, then, it would be wise for churches to position themselves as high in the Google rankings as possible.

How do we do this?

When a person is searching for a church on Google, right below your church name is a place for a visitor to read reviews about your church. In Google's algorithm, the businesses, industries, and even churches with the most reviews usually rise to the top.

In past research of guests who visited our church, somewhere between 15-20% of our first-time visitors first heard about us not from a friend, or in the community, but from a Google search!

Here's a snapshot for us of a month prior to coronavirus of what was happening on Google alone.

- 2891 people found us on Google
- 96 asked for directions

- 510 visited our website
- 51 called us

If people are using this platform and if reviews are important to rising to the top, **it is poor stewardship to not invest in pursuing 5-star reviews.**

Why in the world would we not put some time and intentionality into our Google page, the reviews, the pictures, etc.?

Do you think that it's unbiblical and consumeristic and a little bit weird to have people rate and review churches in the same way they would rate and review the burger at the local burger joint? So do I. My advice is to get over it. It's happening, whether you like it or not, and you might as well use it for your advantage.

Not only is this a low-money investment (it's free) but it's also one of the lowest time-investment ideas as well that you will find in this ebook.

My suggestion would be to reach out first to your staff, then to your key leaders and volunteers, then to your regular attenders, and ask them to write a 5-star review for your church. While you ask them, ensure them the reasoning behind this is because we want to reach more people for the purpose of glorifying God. Make it easy for them by providing links for them to go directly and write their 5-star review. The whole process should take a person between 1-10 minutes.

Also, I would keep a close eye on your staff. If a staff member has an issue with writing a 5-star review for your church, that could open up some really needed and candid conversations. And why stop at Google? Ask for Facebook reviews, Yelp reviews, and anywhere else your church might be found online.

#### **CHALLENGE:**

Find out how many reviews your church has on Google. Make a goal to double this in one week and act on it.



GROWING YOUR CHURCH

## IDEA THREE

### EXCEL ON ONE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

If you are like me, then you probably have a love/hate relationship with social media. I love the fact that it's a tool that we can use, but I hate how addicting it can become. I also hate how divisive conversations can get. While we all, individually and collectively, should have appropriate boundaries when it comes to social media, I am convinced that the answer is not total abandonment from the church.

There is so much darkness spread through social media, which means never more has shining the light of Jesus been needed. The apostles, especially Paul, would often go into secular marketplaces and have discussions which would give him the opportunity to present the Gospel. Today, social media is that marketplace for us to shine the light of Jesus.

Ed Stetzer says, **"If churches truly want to see the Gospel impact and influence a community, they should go to the place where the most significant conversation is actually taking place right now. Today, that's on social media."**

69% of adults use Facebook, according to a Pew Research Report. That's up from 2012 when it was at 54%. With the exception of YouTube—the video-sharing platform that is used by 73% of adults — no other major social media platform comes close to Facebook in terms of usage. Around 4 in 10 adults say they use Instagram, while smaller shares say they use Pinterest, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

Social media is important for these reasons:

- It helps get the word out.
- It shows your audience that you are relevant.
- It is a great place to highlight what you do well.
- You get to control what goes out to the public.
- You can further engage with your people throughout the week.

One other major reason why it's important to use social media is because **it is FREE**, unless, of course, that you purchase ads, boost posts, etc.

**My suggestion, if social media feels overwhelming, is to excel in one.** And if you are going to choose one, choose the one where most people are. That is Facebook.

[Among adults that use Facebook, 74% visit the site on a daily basis.](#)

An exception to this is young adult and student ministry leaders should probably consider YouTube and Instagram, and potentially even Snapchat, as a higher percentage of teenagers are using those platforms.

Social media is important, simply because it reaches people.

During one month on our Facebook page not long ago, we had a reach of over 1000 people on Monday-Saturday, meaning our content from our Page was in front of them on their screen. On each Sunday during that month we had close to 7000 reach that day alone. Through one month we had more than 32,000 total reach on our Facebook page alone.

Diving deeper into the data I found out that of all the people who like, or follow, our page about 80% of them are within a 25-mile radius of our church. While we are really excited to stream our services to the world, what's amazing is that most of the content we sent out is largely reaching people that have a chance to one day walk into the doors of our church and be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit working through our church family.

We have leveraged Facebook for the church for many years now. The amount of people who like our church Facebook page is anywhere from 10-15x our average Sunday attendance. We encourage our people to check in on Facebook during the middle of our Sunday services. It gives our attendees a great chance to tag the friends that they are with and to let their other friends know where they are on a Sunday morning. In addition, it gives them a chance to invite their friends, to say something great about our God, or maybe even to brag on their church. By having them tag friends and check-in it puts your church's name on a lot of news feeds of people who currently may not like your page. Again, it's about reaching as many people as we can.

You say, "Zach, numbers, numbers, numbers, so what." **Each of those numbers**

**represents a person who is loved by God and that He desires to be in relationship with.**

We have seen that **reaching people leads to engaging with people.**

As we broke down the influence social media has had on our growth, we were blown away. Over the course of a year that we studied, we looked at every “Connection Card” that was filled out by a first-time guest, and we found out that 64 people came to church because they first heard about us on Facebook. If each card represents 2 people, then that means 128 new people came into our church because of the impact we had on our social media. Also, we know that not everyone fills out a card, so the number could be well north of 250 in one single year because of how our church stewarded Facebook.

We had one particular family that came to church because they saw us on Facebook. Three weeks after attending I had the chance to baptize their daughter. Two weeks after that opportunity, I heard her father stand up in a room full of about 40 men after we had discussed pride. He said that he had left his relationship with God due to pride over 3 decades ago, but thank God that recently he heard about our church through Facebook, because now he is back where he needs to be. He was excited about discovering more about Jesus, rekindling his faith that he once had, and helping lead his family in a godlier way.

**What you do on social media today can impact the kingdom of God for eternity!**

#### **CHALLENGE:**

Look into the analytics on your preferred social media site. Make a goal of increasing your reach and engagement in the next 60 days.

Need help? Consider reading [this article](#) to help you build your church’s social media strategy. Additionally consider joining these three incredible Facebook Groups: [Church Marketing University](#), [Lutheran Communicators](#), and [Church Communications](#).



GROWING YOUR CHURCH

## IDEA FOUR

### INVENT BIG SUNDAYS

On average, according to Thom Rainier, Former President of [Lifeway Research](#), 2% of attenders will promote their church to an unchurched person in a year. 2%! For those that aren't great with mathematics, that's 1 in 50 people.

Imagine if this number went from 2% to 20%. Imagine the growth that would take place in your church. How do we increase the total number of people that invite their friends, so that their friends get connected to the church, and ultimately get connected with the life-giving message of Jesus?

According to Rich Birch, author of [Church Growth Flywheel](#), the number one key to a growing church is invitability. While this may be a made-up word (thanks Rich!), I'm in full agreement. How many times do you give the people in your church a chance to invite, to share, and to brag about your church? How do we increase the total number of people that invite their friends, so that their friends get connected to the church, and ultimately get connected with the life-giving message of Jesus?

And while the nation is becoming more and more post-Christian, that doesn't necessarily mean that people aren't open to attending church. One of the most encouraging statistics that I think I have found is also from Lifeway Research. 82% of people who don't attend church on a regular basis would attend a church if a friend invited them. That's incredible news. And it's a good reminder of how important it is for us to continue to plant seeds.

Simply put: **a church grows when its people talk about it.**

The Apostle Paul reminds us in [1 Corinthians 3](#) that [while we can plant and water the seed, God will ultimately make it grow](#). While we cannot make God move, we can make room for God to move. Creating moments and experiences for people to invite their friends so that God can do His work is of utmost importance.

The next several ideas will help you create experiences that will help those in your church family to invite others.

In January 2019, we were in the middle of a 3-week series called “Hearing the Voice of God.” For whatever reason, God stirred my heart to do something different for the service that upcoming Sunday. It felt as if God downloaded an entire beautiful service structure to me that Monday morning while I was on the elliptical. Rather than dismissing it or pushing it off or making excuses as to why it wouldn’t work, I talked immediately to our other campus pastor. We then clued in our director of music that same Monday morning. Finally, all of our staff met that Tuesday morning and we ran through the service as a team.

As we were sitting in that staff meeting, we just knew that God was up to something special. Because of this, I challenged each of them to invite their friends and share on social media. I urged them to talk about why they were excited and why others should come. Some posted on Instagram, some texted their friends, and a few did Facebook Live videos.

Each of the staff got busy inviting others. Organically, others in our church, without knowing all the details, helped us build excitement. They were re-sharing, reposting, and inviting their networks. Sunday came and we jumped in attendance that random Sunday by more than 100 people than we had the previous Sunday. You can watch the experience [here](#). This whole effort took work and action, but proved to be valuable in getting new people through the front door of our church.

As we reflected on this Sunday experience next week as a staff we realized that we sort of “invented” a big Sunday out of nowhere.

Every year we know there are two major church days on the calendar: Easter and Christmas. Churches across the nation see a spike in energy, excitement, and attendance. Our prayer becomes that some of those people would then further connect in coming weeks. But why should we just stop at two big services a year? **Are there other Sunday’s that you could turn into celebratory Sundays?**

When I’ve looked back at our attendance trends, we found other Sunday’s that we naturally saw a higher attendance:

- Mother’s Day
- The 2nd Sunday in January
- The 1st Sunday after the new school year begins

- The Sunday after Labor Day
- The Sunday after daylight savings when you get an extra hour of sleep

Knowing that these Sundays are typically higher attended Sundays should allow us to leverage these days into special experiences.

On top of the ones that will come naturally on the calendar each year, growing churches also understand the importance of celebrating special Sundays as well. Other types of celebrations that could fall into the church planning calendar could be any of the following:

- Baptism Sundays
- Anniversary Sundays
- Back-to-School Sunday
- Vision Sunday

Do you have any of these on your current church calendar?

Baptisms are such a great tool and witness to bring people into the church.

I remember early on someone was having a baptism for their daughter and invited her friend. Her friend came the very next day and she was hungover. Ministry is messy, right? She said the only reason she was there was to support her friend. She heard something she needed to hear that day, because she came back again, and again, and again, and we actually had the chance to baptize her a few months later. Over the following 18 months, then, I had the privilege to baptize her son, her granddaughter, and her mom. 4 generations.

9 years later and she's still a faithful attender of our church.

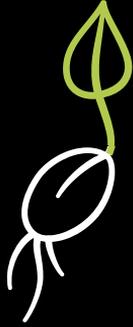
Some friends would not be inclined to attend on a normal Sunday, but they will attend and support a friend being baptized.

**Growing churches should be thinking about how to have 8-10 special Sunday's a year.**

Every Sunday is important, but use these big Sunday's to do extra special things.

#### **CHALLENGE:**

Map out the next 12 months of your church calendar and identify 8-10 Sunday's that could be "Big" Sundays for your church.



GROWING YOUR CHURCH

## IDEA FIVE

### SEEK PUBLICITY FROM THE PRESS

When I look back at what made our church the fastest growing church in our denomination for a few years, it's easy to see where the growth really spiked. It was in 2014. This was a year, by the way, in which we were severely understaffed and our church building was not conducive to growth. So what was the secret to our growth that year?

That particular year we had two different stories that went viral thanks to the local press.

In March, as I was preaching chronologically through the book of 1 Corinthians, I got to the section on food sacrificed to idols. This was an issue that some in the Corinthian church were making black/white that Paul decided to leave gray. As I was trying to be practical for what this meant for our church I looked at issues that some in the church today make black/white that likely are meant to be gray. One of those issues is tattoos.

Sarcastically, being a new church plant, I said if anyone would like to get a tattoo of our church logo on their body, that I would pay for it. I was joking, but sure enough, some took it seriously, and I so ended up having to pay up. Altogether, we had 23 people that got tattooed with our church logo and the story went everywhere. This story made the front page of [Yahoo](#), [Huffington Post](#), and many other top news organizations around the world. It also created quite a controversy leading me to write this blog entitled "[The Theology of Tattoos](#)."

Later in that year, in November 2014, I had this crazy idea to break a Guinness World Record by preaching the longest sermon of all time, which turned into the Longest Speech Ever. As I preached for 53 hours and 18 minutes and broke a Guinness World Record, we raised more than \$100,000 to open up a men's recovery home for a new non-profit ministry that we started called [Hand in Hand. Today, their ministry has three recovery homes for both men and women.](#) The story caught on and made it to [NPR](#), [Huffington Post](#), [Fox News](#), and even made the top of the Drudge Report.

Of course, we know that God is the one truly at work, but these events got our name literally everywhere. Everyone in our community knew about our church because we were dropping so many seeds. The attenders of our church were proud of their church and happy to invite others and share all the amazing things that were happening. **When you are a church that is accomplishing great things and making a difference in the community, it turns out the people in your church love to talk about you.**

So what can you do to get the press to cover you? Well, you can buy tattoos, break world records, and open men's recovery homes, but most of you won't go that route.

Are there other ways?

**Many of the fastest growing churches resonate towards very large service events.**

Large service events are great opportunities to seek publicity from the press. Remember, the local press is looking for stories to tell. That is their job.

A great strategy I learned from Rich Birch's [Church Growth Flywheel Online course](#) is that you can look up past events that the press has covered and even find the writer in your community that has written previously. If you approach them at the right time and if you have everything presented to them well, they will likely cover it again. Many times, the real reason a church doesn't get covered is not because the press is negative towards us, but we don't organize our materials and send out press releases to make it as easy as possible for them to cover your event.

The goal should be to create a few press-ready, social-media events each year. Here's 4 quick examples of press-ready, social media events that churches have done:

- Helicopter Easter Egg Drop
- Trunk 'R Treat
- Night to Shine
- Packing Large Quantities of Meals for Charity

All of these events create amazing visuals that is important when the press is considering covering an event. But even if the press doesn't come, you create

incredible opportunities for your attendees to post pictures on their social media accounts and invite their friends to come. Over time, you can help teach your attendees to not only post about the event, but to also post a next step to join them at your church in the future.

Now, if everything you ever do is with the intention to get the press to show up, you may need to ask what your real motivation is. But most churches are trying their best to make a difference in the world, and it's important your community knows that you are here for them. The truth is that hosting, organizing, and leading press-ready events is a lot of work. But it's work that pays great dividends.

Large community events are a great way for people in your community to engage with your church family. In fact, when we launched an internship program we asked for people to tell us why they attended theCross. There were several of them that mentioned the first time they ever heard about theCross. There were many answers but included in was each one of these responses:

- The Tattoo Story
- The World Record Speech
- Easter Egg Helicopter Drop
- Community Trunk 'R Treat

Typically, after attending one of these events, a guest wouldn't show up to church right away. We often didn't see the fruits of our labor until months after some of these events. But eventually a good number would come, and the more they kept coming, the more they experienced relationship with Jesus. And now, they were ready to go deeper into learning some deep theology and practical applications about how to be leaders in our church.

I learned this truth: **Sometimes people won't come to a God thing, but they will come to a good thing.** These events are good things that can ultimately be a bridge to a God thing.

Some people have said things like the world record speech and dropping eggs from a helicopter are gimmicks. Truthfully, I didn't care and I still don't care. Jesus said it's our responsibility to let our light shine for the world. And, if, through these "gimmicks," I can preach the Good News of Jesus for 53 hours with the promise that every time His Word goes out it doesn't return void, and if, on top of this, we can raise money for charity, and if we can provide a great family event in a time of great disconnection, and ultimately through it all, if more people get people connected to our church and to Jesus, then sign me up for more gimmicks.

#### CHALLENGE:

Plan 3 large service events in your calendar for the next 12 months that you will invite the press to attend.



GROWING YOUR CHURCH

## IDEA SIX

### SUPPLY LOTS OF INVITE CARDS

You might think with all of the creative ways we've come up with already that this one is kind of boring and old-fashioned. But **in a hyper-digital, saturated screen age, a physical invite card can stand out now more than ever.**

If inevitability is the key determining factor then supplying invite cards to give to your people is a must.

I was listening to [Carey Nieuwhof's podcast, and he was interviewing Rich Birch](#). Rich had interviewed hundreds of pastors of fast-growing churches and one of the churches he interviewed had seen explosive growth, one of the fastest in the country. And Rich asked him, "What did you do?" And he said, "It's a little embarrassing, what we did this year was every week, we put invite cards on every seat in our auditorium for the entire year. We got aggressive with getting invite cards out in front of people."

What percentage of invite cards actually end up in the hands of guests? Probably not a lot, but when you bring an invite card home, most of the time you will stash it in a little nook or place where random things go. Typically, if you are like me, this nook is a place that you pass by often. Seeing this invite card constantly reminds me of church, which makes me more apt to visit, and even more obliged to give it to someone else as well.

A lot of churches typically will do invite cards for their big Sunday's (Christmas and Easter) but why not every Sunday? If you preach a new sermon series, why not every single sermon series? The key is to help your people invite others.

**If church growth is about how many invites are given, then let's do our best to supply them with the seeds to throw.**

Strategically, it would be wise to think of at least four different physical invite cards to print out:

- Christmas and Easter
- Major Church Events
- Every New Sermon Series
- Sit with Me Cards: Invite to come any Sunday

In addition, we can get creative around other ideas too. For instance, if someone is going to have a baptism, that's an amazing step in a person's faith journey. Maximize this opportunity by giving them tools to make the invite easy for their networks. Here's a few ideas:

- Give special invite cards that they can pass out
- Supply the person a ready-made email that they can tailor
- Show them practical steps on how they can make their baptism a Facebook event

One other effective invite card could be what's called an "Acts of Kindness" card. I first heard about this from "Church of the Highlands." They have a website [here](#) devoted to this that gives tons of incredible ways to use these cards. The idea behind these "Acts of Kindness" cards is that as you are being the people of God and doing kind acts in the world that you drop this card with it. The card that Church of the Highlands uses has a nice personal message on one side, "Just something to show you God loves you" that you could copy. Then on the back you can supply a link to your website, an invite to come to your church, or whatever other important information you would like to get out into the community.

By supplying invite cards regularly, you are not only resourcing your people well, but you are also reinforcing the fact that invitation is a common practice in the life of a follower of Jesus.

**CHALLENGE:**

Create an invite card for your next sermon series to give to your church attendees.



GROWING YOUR CHURCH  
**IDEA SEVEN**

## **LEAD A CHURCHWIDE 40-DAY CHALLENGE**

Over the past few years our team at Red Letter Living have become experts in the 40-day challenge field. We have discovered incredible power behind an all-in church challenge centered on the life, words, and habits of Jesus. **Many churches we talk to strategically add an all-in church series like this once or twice in each calendar year.**

How does an all-in turnkey 40-day help grow the church?

Here's 5 reasons we've discovered:

### **1. Challenges Bring Tangible Excitement in the Gathering**

I remember in Seminary there were some classes that I looked forward to and some that I dreaded going to. The difference in how I approached the class typically was a direct correlation to how prepared I was for the class. In Seminary, as in most graduate programs, there is a good bit of reading. I will confess to you that there were many reading assignments that I did not do. Those that know me aren't shocked by that statement! But, on the days when I had previously read and understood the reading, I was excited to go to class and join the conversation!

When it comes to church, I have found that how deeply I connected with God during the week still has a direct impact on my attitude in coming to church that Sunday. The weeks where I had been more lackluster or apathetic in my devotion for God were weeks that were often times harder to connect to God

and to others. The weeks where I felt stronger in my devotions towards God would typically produce more excitement, passion, and energy in my worship and response on the following Sunday.

**How do you get an entire church to not just attend Sundays but to come with energy and excitement? It will happen as they read and take steps towards Jesus Monday-Saturday.**

Attendance in most churches is a shadow of what it was just over a year ago. But the expression is still true: “Nothing draws a crowd like a crowd.” Having an energetic and excited room (spiritually speaking, a room that is Spirit-filled) is a key ingredient that will help draw others back into your church building.

Not only this, but **our resources have proven to grow small groups by 40% in just 40 days.** Much of these blogs are written to help us be “fruitful” in numbers, but the reason I love small group growth is because those are the relationships, times, and discussions that can help us also learn and grow in being “faithful.” At the root of it all, pastors want churches that not only are growing numerically, but are becoming healthier as well.

## **2. Challenges Bring Unity Especially in Distanced Times**

The year 2020 brought incredible division not only to our nation, but to our churches. Having to deal with a global pandemic, racial tension escalating, and a political election all at the same time, sadly, [only 9% of churches said that they did not experience any division within their church.](#)

Amazingly, however, the #1 positive trait that we have heard consistently about our 40-day challenges during the global pandemic is the word unity. Why do these resources bring unity?

a. Culture divides. Jesus unites.

When the entire church is reading, learning, and being challenged daily to take steps to follow Jesus, incredible unity abounds. **In a culture that has become extremely divided, nothing brings unity back to the church like Jesus.**

b. Every person is included.

All-in church challenges include opportunity for every age (kids, students, and all adults) to be learning the same principles. Not only this, but it can be a great bridge between the online church and in-person church.

c. Daily challenges give more opportunity to stick together.

Attending church on a weekly basis is an incredible keystone habit in a believer’s life. Leveraging your church’s social media and/or website on a daily basis, however, will give people opportunity to check in, engage, share, and feel like they are part of a movement during the week as well.

### **3. Challenges provide a turnkey resource allowing the staff more time to focus on other areas of ministry**

I know what it's like to lead a church and to be exhausted. One of the hardest pieces about church growth, especially for the medium-sized church, is making the change as leaders from generalists to specialists. In many cases, as churches are growing, the staff are called to do multiple things and can quickly burn-out. Sometimes the most exhausting thing of all is just coming up with new ideas from scratch. Creating a space in the church calendar where you don't have to start anything from scratch is extremely freeing.

By having ready-made materials for 40 days, it allows the staff to take the bones of what's already there and tailor-make it to their context without feeling overwhelmed. We provide churches with sermon manuscripts and videos, weekly kids curriculum, ready-made graphics for in-house and social media, and small group guides and videos. By providing all of these extra resources, it gives the staff confidence in the 40-day series. This confidence then allows them the permission to spend ample time tending to the other needs in the church that can build up over time.

### **4. Challenges are “Invite-a-Friend” Friendly**

We have already mentioned the key to church growth is “invitability.”

Launching a 40-day church-wide challenge is an “invariable” opportunity on many levels!

We've seen many churches give away our 40-day books for FREE with an invite card to attend on the opening Sunday of the Challenge. In every case that this has been done, the church has been overwhelmed with the response they've seen.

In addition, by having a resource and a system that helps grow small groups, we challenge our small group leaders and facilitators to invite not just people in the church already, but their neighbors, co-workers, and friends who are not a part of the church to attend as well.

Many of our Challenges also provide a great opportunity for a church to host a larger event or serving challenge that could benefit the community. Doing a church-wide Challenge creates yet another invitation opportunity.

When you add a 40-day Challenge into your church calendar, you are building in many different invitations for others to join your church.

### **5. Challenges Activate New People**

**I often wonder how much growth the church loses out on simply because we don't ask or challenge our people enough.** Many pastors are skilled at proclaiming the justification of Jesus, but fewer are skilled at challenging their

people towards a life of sanctification. **It's a fine call to ask someone to believe in Jesus; it's a deeper call to challenge someone to follow Jesus.**

The perennial call that Jesus gave to His disciples is "Come, follow me." Jesus was inviting all of us to enter His kingdom right here and now. To participate with Him in bringing heaven to earth. Until we preach the Kingdom of God and challenge our people to step into that calling, we will always be scratching our heads wondering why our people are not stepping up to the commands of Jesus. **We should never abandon the invitation to believe in Jesus, but we certainly should always be challenging our people to truly follow Jesus.**

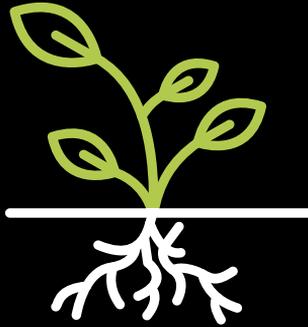
What I have found over and over and over again is that when you challenge your church, there are people that come out of the cracks that you would have never thought.

Simply by challenging people to lead a small group you will find new small group leaders. By challenging people to join a small group for 40 days you will have more people join a small group. By challenging people to open up their Bible, some will. When you challenge people to fast for a day, some will. When you challenge people to tithe, some will. If you challenge everyone to invite a friend to next Sunday's service, some will. Let's not be afraid to challenge people and call them to something deeper. Watch and see who God works through. It just may surprise you!

#### CHALLENGE:

Look at your church calendar and find a strategic time to insert a 40-day challenge.

Our team would love to help you launch a 40-day church challenge. Simply put, it's what we do. If you want more information, [here's a blog on everything you need to know about launching a 40-day challenge](#). If you are more visual, here's [a series of 10 short training videos](#) to help you implement a 40-day challenge and see incredible results. If you are a pastor and would like to receive a FREE 40-Day Challenge book, fill out [this form here](#). Finally, if you need more information, click the links for [Red Letter Challenge](#) or [Being Challenge](#) or email us at [hello@redletterchallenge.com](mailto:hello@redletterchallenge.com) to learn about our newest *Forgiving Challenge* available in select churches in the Fall of 2021.



GROWING YOUR CHURCH  
**IDEA EIGHT**

**BLESS CHARITIES WITH YOUR CONNECTION CARDS**

It's an incredible blessing to see someone new in church. However, I noticed early on that many new people that were coming to our church would not fill out a connection card. Only a small percentage would be willing to give us their contact information. By not collecting their information, it was virtually impossible to follow up with them and get them plugged in.

In most of our churches, we work really hard to get new people to attend our church. **It is poor stewardship to not also invest the time, resources, and energy to do everything that we can to collect a guest's information when they attend.**

Sitting down with our leadership team, we started tackling the question, "How can we get more of our new guests to fill out a connection card?"

This question becomes even more vital to ask with the acceleration of online church.

New research in May 2021 from Carey Nieuwhof shows that, "[Only 35% of churches have a process to capture the personal information of people online.](#)" Not only should we be pursuing information from our in-house connection cards, but also our digital connection cards as well.

We decided to first look at what happened in our past year. We found out that the previous year our church averaged 10 connection cards per Sunday. In our context that meant that we had 500 cards, and if each card represents 2-2.5 people we had somewhere between 1000-1250 new people represented by the

connection cards.

According to Rich Birch's *Church Growth Flywheel*, **the average church gets 1 visitor per attendee for the year.**

If your average worship attendance is 250, you the average church would see 250 visitors in a year. If you are seeing less than this, the previous 7 points should be seriously considered.

We set a goal in our church to increase the number of new visitors filling out a connection card. We decided to do three things:

### **1. Make the Process to Fill Out a Card Simple**

We looked at our card and simplified it by taking out any “insider” language and also removing any information that we truly didn’t need to collect. By keeping it clear and quick, this would be helpful. We decided that the only things that were vital to ask for included their name(s), their email, their phone number, and how they heard about us. Things like mailing address, date of birth, etc. could be important for your church, but wasn’t for our purposes.

### **2. Make Filling out the Card a Priority on Stage**

We pointed them to filling out the connection card every service, strategically as much as 5 times:

- In our pre-service slides
- During the welcome at the beginning of the service
- During the offering towards the middle of the service
- At the closing of the service
- In our post-service slides

In those slides or announcements, it should be very clear, as well, where to turn in or submit the connection card. These same principles can, and should, apply online as well.

But where we really saw incredible growth was this third idea:

### **3. Give a gift to the guest AND use their card to bless a local charity**

When a new guest filled out and turned in a connection card we decided that not only would we give a specific gift to the guest but we would also give a gift on their behalf to one of our local charity partners as well.

Here’s a tip when employing this strategy: be specific on what will happen if they turn in a card.

When we promised to give a gift to someone when they turned the card in,

rather than keeping it vague, tell them what the gift is. Personally, I'd like to know what the gift is, and so would nearly everyone else on the planet. People don't sign up for things that are vague or not well thought out. So whether it's a mug, a pair of sunglasses, a book, or a chance at a FREE trip to Hawaii, tell them what it is. If you are embarrassed to say what the FREE gift is, it's probably not the best gift to giveaway.

It is also wise to be specific on which charity will be receiving money and how much money per card turned in.

For our context, we started with a \$10 donation and increased it to a \$20 donation per card. We would change the charity every month and invite the leader of that charity to come up after their month. Not only would we present them with a check, but we would also give them an opportunity to tell us about their charity. They would also have the chance to invite people to join them in their great work of being the hands and feet of God in the community in which we live. Finally, we would pray for the charity.

Not only was this a "win" for people to see this, but people could tell we were being transparent. It also was an accelerator for some people jumping into long-term serving opportunities with some great non-profit partners.

After moving to this strategy, we measured the next two months and we went from 10 cards in a week to 25-30 in a week. On one instance, on just a common Sunday, we saw more than 40 cards!

You might think that \$10-\$20 each card adds up to a lot of money. The truth is that not only has God called your church to be generous, but if you are constantly bringing in new people through your doors, God will supply your church with more than enough to carry out His mission. It is important to be generous to those who are being the hands and feet of Jesus in your community.

Collecting information from new guests is vital to growing your church. Being generous and strategic about your connection cards could lead to maximum growth.

#### **CHALLENGE:**

Eliminate insider language and unnecessary info requests on your connection cards (in-person and digital). Choose a charity to bless for at least a one-month period.



GROWING YOUR CHURCH

## IDEA NINE

### **GET FEEDBACK FROM A “SECRET WORSHIPPER”**

You have likely heard the term “secret shopper” before. These shoppers go in undercover into stores to observe, interact, and report on their overall customer experience. After their experience, they deliver feedback (positive and negative) to management in order to help an organization achieve their mission more effectively in the future.

A few years ago, I asked the pastor of a neighboring church, (they happened to be one of the fastest growing churches in our nation) if they would be willing to send somebody to our church for a weekend to worship with us and to report his feedback to me. I wanted this to be as normal of an experience as possible and so nobody else on the church staff even knew that he was coming. I wanted to keep it quite because if we know someone is watching, we might change what we do. In addition to this, I also mentioned to the “secret worshipper” that I was particularly interested in how effective our church was in reaching first-time guests.

This “secret worshipper” helped point out a few things that we had overlooked. The major takeaway point is that he felt a little bit lost in our church as a first-time guest. Not only did we not address him much, but we also lacked a clear next step for guests. In addition, our connection cards, as well as the language that we engaged with our people, he deemed to be “insider language.” In other words, the members of the church knew what it meant, but likely, it was foreign to first-time guests. Finally, he recommended that our church create a better “New Here” experience.

When I asked him about this, he said that his church has signage as you enter their parking lot that says “For a ‘New Here’ experience, turn your hazards on.” If the hazards are on, from the moment that vehicle arrives on campus, that person has identified as a “New Here” person. This means they are likely ready to connect. His church also had a process in place, then, to welcome these people in their own portion of the parking lot, to point them in the right direction, to usher them to meet the kid’s directors (if needed), and ultimately to tell them about the church and help them find a place to sit in the worship center.

I said “But what if they don’t want to be identified as “New Here” and want to be anonymous?” He answered, “They just don’t put their hazards on. This way they can be anonymous and really comfortable in our environment.” The more I reflected on this strategy, I realized it was brilliant. Not only do they go to effective measures to get people to attend their worship experiences, but they have also created a way for “new here” people to identify themselves so they can truly give them a VIP experience.

As I look back on the “secret worshipper” experience, not only did I learn a lot about what we were doing right and wrong, but it gave me an opportunity to also learn from another church who was excelling in church growth.

Looking back, there were at least three reasons why this feedback from a “secret worshipper” was helpful:

1. As you and I are so entrenched in the way in which we do church, there are likely blind spots that we can’t see anymore. Getting a fresh perspective can illuminate some of those blind spots that need attention.
2. When you are armed with feedback from a third party, the feedback feels more objective and less subjective. For whatever reason, people tend to listen and respect third party feedback more. Sometimes even if you are right, because your feelings are subjective they don’t get heard like they ought to.
3. Going to measures like this shows your staff, key leadership, and church that you care about your guest’s experience and you are willing to make changes necessary to reach your guests.

#### CHALLENGE:

Partner with another local church and swap “secret worshippers” for a weekend.

If possible, it would be wise to choose a church that is growing quickly. After the weekend experience, come together and share your findings with one another.



GROWING YOUR CHURCH

## IDEA TEN

### **FOLLOW-UP WITH GUESTS FAST AND WELL**

Did you know [the average church sees 6-10% of its first-time guests return?](#) If you can get 2 out of 10 to come back you will be well above average and if somehow you could get 3 in 10 you could start to see explosive growth. That is why I believe the **lowest hanging fruit when it comes to church growth is how well you follow up with those who give you their contact information.**

Imagine this. You get a new person, or family, to come to church. You then get them to connect and fill out a card and give you their information. Now what? Sadly, for most churches, this is where we miss out. We don't follow up well. We don't thank them for coming. For most churches, those cards sit in a stack, and every once in a while, in a non-systematic way, they will be reached out to. Maybe they will be entered into a database where they just become another name. Maybe their email address gets added to our newsletter. Isn't there something we can do to reach out to our guests that is more intentional?

At my church, we sent them a personal note in the mail, we emailed them, and we called them. The point in those interactions was to thank them for coming, and to invite them into taking a clear next step. But, even still, as I examined the process, I realize it wasn't perfect. Our process was largely run by volunteers, which is a great blessing in many respects, but something this important definitely needs staff oversight. When we looked into our "system" we found that sometimes guests would get called on a Monday, sometimes it could be on a Thursday. We also found out, that if a key volunteer happened to be on vacation, likely, the guest wouldn't get reached out to until the following week, 8 to 13 days later. There has to be a better way.

The truth is that it is really hard and a lot of work to get new people to come to church. But if you've succeeded in actually getting them there and also in having them fill out a card, why would we ever let these cards sit in a stack or simply just mindlessly enter them into a database? If we are passionate about church growth, this is the group we should really lean into with everything that we can.

Because of privacy issues and how organizations have wrongly shared information in the past, I think **many churches are hesitant to over-contact people. But I believe the risk is much greater on the other end, that churches don't contact them enough.**

[Rich Birch says, when someone is filling out a card with their information, I want you to see them as raising their hand saying, "Please contact me."](#) If we don't contact them there is a level of letdown for many of them. The question we should be asking is how should we reach out to them and what does it look like? What is scalable? There's nothing too big we shouldn't think about.

On the [Carey Nieuwhof Podcast](#), Carey will regularly host some of the pastors of the fastest-growing churches and ask them to give us the reasons behind their church growth. Twice in 2017, he talked with pastors of the fastest growing churches in our nation. And surprisingly, both pastors had something in common: their church visited the guests who filled a card out that Sunday at their home later that day. Keep in mind, these are churches that are in the thousands for attendance, and they have found a way to make this a priority.

How? One of the pastors said his church trains their small group leaders to go and welcome these people, thank them for coming, invite them to take a clear next step. In addition, they deliver some fresh-baked cookies and a \$5 gift card to Starbucks. Again, they do this on the same Sunday that the connection card is filled out.

The argument that is expressed a lot today is that people don't want to be bothered. Amazingly, both of these pastors said they had received zero pushback whatsoever. Instead of pushback, guests feel loved, special, and it gets them excited to want to be a part of a church that cares.

This approach may be old school, but it's relational. I believe this is smart offense. **Churches that put so much effort to get new people to visit should ensure they throw enough effort at following up well with those who do come.**

Not only this, but as guests take first steps outside of just attending worship, other systems should be put in place to follow-up and thank them well. Here's a few other potential systems to put in place:

- If they come back a second time, a handwritten note with a small gift card
- If attenders opt in to receive emails, an invitation to attend a new members style class and any current events happening on campus.

- If someone gives for the first time, a handwritten note to thank them

Finally, if a guest doesn't come back, it's entirely appropriate to invite them back again. If a family doesn't return in a few weeks, consider mailing a hand stamped and addressed letter with incentive to return (example: coupon for a free book).

Following up fast and well is work, but if this is the lowest hanging fruit, let's be on the offensive and do our best to get them connected, and engaged in our churches.

#### **CHALLENGE:**

Examine your current plan to follow up with guests who submit connection cards. Make changes if needed to ensure that guests are being followed up with in a way that shows them how important they are.



GROWING YOUR CHURCH  
**CONCLUSION**

### **PLAY OFFENSE**

Over the past 12 months momentum for the overall church has decelerated like we've never seen before. I firmly believe, however, that a shift is happening right now. It's the churches that don't play prevent defense, but instead, play offense and act with urgency that will see great dividends.

While not all of these ideas may work for you and your church, I hope that at least one or two are ideas you can act on. And if they work for your church, praise God! And if these ideas don't work for your church, I would just plead with you to try something else. Just try something.

**This Jesus that we love and worship is too good for us to simply accept the status quo of declining church attendance, declining engagement, and declining devotion.** We cannot sit back any longer. We must act now.

The last thing I'll leave you with is this: **Don't ever apologize for making it easy to encounter Jesus.** If there are people who don't understand why you would involve the press, leverage or make up big days, include helicopters when you drop Easter eggs, do things outside of the box, strategize to get 5-star reviews online, or do anything else creatively to bring people to your church, just keep moving. Do whatever you can, anything short of sinning, to reach people for Jesus.

God bless you, and thank you, for so bravely leading the best expression of Jesus that you can be.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zach Zehnder is a 4th-generation Lutheran pastor. In 2010, Zach, along with his wife Allison, planted theCross in Mount Dora, FL. For many years, Zach was creatively and passionately leading the fastest growing church in his denomination. Under his leadership, theCross grew in 7 years from just his family to more than 800 in average weekly worship attendance.

In 2017, Zach published his first bestseller book Red Letter Challenge. Now, Zach and Allison continue to write more books that help people of all ages follow Jesus. In addition, Zach began serving in June 2021 as a Preaching Pastor at King of Kings in Omaha, NE. Zach is a highly sought-after speaker. If you are interested in having Zach speak at your church, conference, event, etc. please email [hello@redletterchallenge.com](mailto:hello@redletterchallenge.com) or go to [www.redletterchallenge.com/zach](http://www.redletterchallenge.com/zach).

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