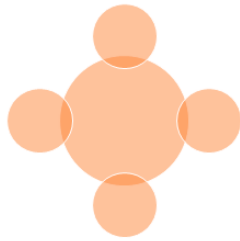


Reaching the Fringe



This resource is designed for kirk sessions to think strategically about how to reach people on the 'fringe' of the congregation.

The PowerPoint acts as a handout – print it three slides per page. Notes for each slide are in this PDF. Speech marks are used to indicate what you might say as the facilitator of this resource.

“We’re going to think strategically about reaching people on the fringe of our congregation. Hopefully out of this presentation and our discussions there will be one or two initiatives for us to implement as a kirk session.”

Who are the fringe?

- **‘Insurance policy’ members** – pay in but rarely if ever attend.
- **Lapsed members** – don’t pay in but have some prior connection.
- **Involved fringe** – not members or Sunday attenders but go to an organisation, e.g. Parents & Toddlers
- **Parental fringe** – not members but children attend holiday Bible club or uniformed organisations
- **Crisis fringe** – not members but come into contact (often through the minister) because of a crisis

“Before we think about reaching the fringe we need to consider who the fringe are – here are five general categories [*Read from slide – note that ‘insurance policy’ members obviously doesn’t include people who would attend if they could but are housebound, in a nursing home, away because of work, etc.*].”

“These categories show us that the opportunity of the fringe is probably bigger than we may have thought. They also show us that a different approach is useful for each – and of course, within the categories, individual people will be different too.”

Working out your fringe membership

1. What is your overall membership?
2. How many attend on a Sunday?
3. Use the answers to the first two questions to work out the size of your fringe membership.
4. For elders who have districts – what proportion of people in your district don’t attend or rarely attend?

Note to facilitator – it will be useful to have some statistics ready beforehand for this exercise.

“Let’s do a short exercise in working out how many people fall into the category of ‘fringe’ – especially those who are members of the congregation, at least on paper.”

Use the questions to facilitate this discussion – it’s not necessary to spend a long time on this exercise. The main purpose is simply to illustrate that there is a fringe to be reached.

Working out the non-member fringe

1. What percentage of children who attend organisations or events like holiday Bible club do not attend church?
2. What percentage of adults who attend organisations that meet in the church building don't attend church?

Note to facilitator – it is useful to ask leaders of organisations in advance what proportion of those who attend are also members of the congregation.

“Let's do another exercise in working out roughly how many people fall into the other categories of fringe – those who are not members of the congregation.”

Again don't spend too long over this. Some children who attend congregational organisations may attend another church – so what you are really interested in is the proportion who don't attend any church.

Working out the 'fringe beyond the fringe'

1. What proportion of members live near the church?
2. What does the census data say about people in the local area – population and those who identify as Protestant?
3. What size are other congregations in the local area?

Note to facilitator: look at census data in advance. For Northern Ireland it can be found by entering the post code of the church building at:

<http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Home.aspx>
Very roughly, about half of Protestants will identify as Presbyterian. Use a tool like mapcustomizer.com to plot addresses of congregational members to answer question one or make an informed guess.

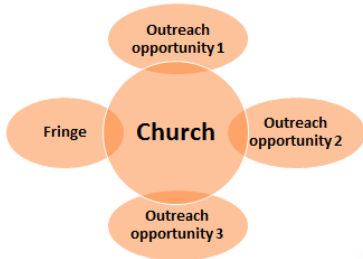
“There is also a 'fringe beyond the fringe' of people who identify as Protestant or Presbyterian but who don't attend any other church in the area.”

Again don't spend too long over this. The last question is simply to highlight that even if people in the area have other options for church, there are probably still many who don't attend anywhere and yet who identify as Protestant or even Presbyterian. Of course, some of the involved, parental and crisis fringe may not be Presbyterian or Protestant.

Hopefully at this point the facilitator can say:

“From all three of these exercises, we can see that there is a great outreach opportunity.” *It may be that the exercises highlight a particular opportunity. A discussion on managing the membership list may arise from the first exercise – save this administrative task for another time because the focus here is on the opportunity for outreach (some kirk sessions put fringe members on a separate 'outreach list').*

What groups don't fall into the category of 'fringe'?
Have you thought about how to reach them?



“This is not a discussion for now but it’s important to remember that the fringe are not the only outreach opportunity. Sometimes we are so focussed on fringe people in our districts, we forget the other opportunities that exist. If we spend all our time and energy on fringe people in our districts, we’re probably neglecting other people who we should reach out to with the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

If time permits, spend a few minutes on these questions but keep further discussion for another kirk session meeting. Examples might be: unchurched people, people in their 20’s or 30’s who have become disconnected from church even if their parents or grandparents were involved, immigrants and people of other religions. For further discussion see the new outreach resource from PCI coming in March 2019.

Adjusting our expectations...

We used to think that:

- Younger people will return to church when they have children.
- People will turn to God when a crisis comes.
- When people have spiritual needs they will look to the church.

But this is no longer the world we live in.

“Although we shouldn’t adjust the balance of our efforts to completely give up on fringe members, we do need to adjust our expectations. In the past we may have seen younger people return to the church when they have children or people looking to God when a crisis comes. We may have seen people with spiritual needs coming to church. But this is no longer the world we live in. These things still happen but less often because people have more options.”

“The more detached younger people become from church the less likely they will come back. For them, Sunday may be a day for sport or just space for the family in a busy week. We should make our church services more engaging. We should work on being a more welcoming fellowship. The problem with the fringe is that they are not here to experience that. People in a crisis much more often go to counselling now or rely on their family. There are also endless options for self-help spirituality which don’t carry the same demands as Christianity.”

“So we need to turn to the heart of why we should reach the fringe – and that is because they are on God’s radar. He has called us to seek the lost and to welcome back the prodigal.”

A biblical approach

1. Seeking the lost (Luke 15:1-7)
2. Welcoming back the prodigal (Luke 15:11-24)
3. Knowing when to persevere (Psalm 126:5-6)
4. ...but also knowing when to take a step back (Matthew 7:6)

“Very briefly let’s think about four Bible passages or verses which help inform us about reaching the fringe. We all know the parable in Luke 15 of the woman searching for the lost coin. God seeks and saves the lost and we play a part in that. But not everyone comes to Christ, even those who have had or still have some connection to the church. This parable is about God not us – God knows who are his and who he has called and we merely play our part in that. Bear that in mind when we think of initiatives to bring people back to church – we shouldn’t expect everyone to respond to our invitation but we hope and pray some will as God works in their lives.”

“The second half of Luke 15 is the well-known story of the prodigal son. Some on the fringe are people who have a Christian faith but for whatever reason, have gone away and need to be brought back – it may be because of sin like it was for the prodigal son or it may be because of some hurt they have experienced – sometimes even being hurt by people in the church.”

“With some people it’s important that we persevere – Psalm 126 verses 5 and 6 say: ‘Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.’ With some people, keeping the relationship alive and praying for them will ultimately yield fruit.”

“With others we may need to take a step back – Matthew 7 verse 6 reminds us not to cast our pearls before pigs. If our efforts are falling on deaf ears, it might be wiser to take a step back, especially if we only sense apathy and indifference. However, if there is hostility, we might be best to find out why in case there is some hurt which is causing the reaction rather than outright resistance to Christ. Even if we take a step back, we should have some means to maintain a connection so that the relationship is not lost entirely.”

Fringe members can be a problem...

- **A diluted church** – extra pastoral burden with little contribution to church life.
- **Distorted statistics** – not really true members of the church.
- **False expectations** – wanting ‘hatch, match and dispatch’ services.
- **Spiritual delusion** – may wrongly assume that ‘paying in’, having a visit or attending rarely means they are OK with God.

“Fringe members can be viewed as both a problem and an opportunity. They are potentially a problem because...”

Read points on the slide – the last one is probably the greatest problem.

“But they are also an opportunity...”

Fringe members are an opportunity...

- **A biblical reason to reach them** – God is patient and we don’t know who are his.
- **We have their contact details** – and a reason to visit.
- **There is a connection to the congregation** – a starting point for a conversation.
- **They are more likely to read what we leave with them** – for example, the congregational magazine.

Read points on the slide...

Discover the reason...

Have they:

- Been hurt or put off church?
- Got out of the way of attending?
- No spiritual interest?
- Some good reason for not attending?

Before we think about reaching the fringe, it’s important to consider the reason why people who are members of our congregation have ended up on the fringe. There can be a variety of reasons. Have they... *[Read points on slide].*”

“We need to bear these things in mind when we consider initiatives to reach the fringe – especially when through those initiatives, we have the opportunity to invite them to church and talk to them about church.”

Think of some ideas to reach the fringe

- Example: 'Back to Church Sunday'

“So in light of all that, let’s think of some ideas of how we might reach them. A first example is given – ‘Back to Church Sunday’ – let’s see if we can think of others...”

Open it up for discussion. If they are not familiar with ‘Back to Church Sunday’, it is an initiative which involves inviting people to a special service at the beginning of the ‘church year’ in early to mid-September. It can work well as a means to help people come back who have got out of the habit of going to church – it works best if a culture of invitation is encouraged amongst congregation members who attend church (this also applies to other special services like carol services or harvest services).

Other ideas include:

- *‘Bridge building events’ like a men’s evening or women’s evening perhaps with a special speaker.*
- *A visiting programme of fringe members (perhaps in teams of two) involving people with the relational skills to have a gracious, open and honest conversation. A survey can make it easier to start a conversation. It’s also useful to ask fringe members if they would like another visit at a later date or not. Use the GDPR (data protection regulations) as an opportunity to get in touch to see if people want to remain connected or not but in a warm, relational way and not purely as an administrative task.*
- *Using the congregational magazine to maintain contact and communicate the gospel.*
- *Running an Alpha course at the same time as Parents and Toddlers for the ‘parental fringe’.*
- *Providing tea and coffee and a place to chat with church members for the ‘parental fringe’ while their children attend an organisation.*
- *Elders using their own personal connections to build relationships with people on the fringe – and not just in their districts.*