

**Secrets of a Secret Church Shopper**

**Greg Atkinson, Speaker**

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Chris Reinolds: Welcome to the Columbia Metro Connection, a podcast where you can go to get valuable, relevant and quality resources for you and your congregation. I'm one of your hosts Chris Reinolds lead pastor at Killian Baptist Church and author at [chrisreinolds.com](http://www.chrisreinolds.com). And as always we have the knowledgeable Director of Missions for the Columbia Metro Baptist Association and lead missiologist, George Bullard. The Columbia Metro Connection is sponsored and supported by the Columbia Metro Baptist Association and the almost 100 partner churches that support the ministry of the CMBA. For this week's episode, we've received special support from the Baptist Foundation of South Carolina. Let's take a minute to hear a word from Jacque with the Baptist Foundation.

Jacque: The Baptist Foundation of South Carolina was founded in 1950 to serve South Carolina Baptist churches and institutions primarily through legacy giving. There are a lot of people in South Carolina who think about stewardship from their lifetime perspective but not about an afterlife perspective. And our principle is that we should be good stewards of all of God's blessings, not just our checkbooks or pocketbooks or paychecks but what about our homes and what about our retirement accounts and what about our insurance. God gave us this life at this time in this place for a purpose and we're to be good stewards of all of life.

 Everything that we own belongs to him and God gave us those things at this time of abundance so that we can utilize those things for God's purposes. So, our stewardship ministry involves speaking to churches and associations and ministries about ways that they can give beyond this lifetime, and further the way that they can support their churches and ministries that they've loved and cared about during their lives. And then we have an investment services ministry that knows that people give God's money and they're given by God's people for God's purposes. So we prudently and carefully provide services to help our churches and institutions to invest those monies.

 The Baptist Foundation has had the privilege over these years to work with many joyful givers who understand that God owns it all. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says each person must decide in his heart what to give. That means they're deciding under the lordship of the holy spirit. They don't decide under compulsion or because people make them feel like they have to, they decide because they've decided to give from their knees. This is joyful giving and that's what God loves, a cheerful giver. We're thankful for those cheerful givers who are giving today from heaven because they've given not only in this life but they've left a legacy for eternity.

Chris Reinolds: Jacque, thank you so much for coming on behalf of the Baptist Foundation and we are grateful for the ministry that you guys are providing and reminding us to be good stewards of the blessings that God has given us, not just for today but also for tomorrow. This week's episode features Greg Atkinson. Greg is the founder of The Worship Impressions and First Impressions Conference. He serves as the executive director of [ExPastors.com](http://www.expastors.com) and is on the advisory board of Full Strength Network, a national nonprofit dedicated to helping pastors and church leaders stay healthy and avoid burnout.

 Greg is a published author, leadership coach, consultant and member of the Forbes Coaching Council. Greg has worked with churches of all stages and sizes, including some of the largest and fastest growing churches in the country as well as with businesses, nonprofits and organizations such as Josh McDowell Ministries. In 2016, Greg published Secrets of a Secret Shopper and has been wildly successful and provided church leaders with clear and definitive steps to improve the worship experience of those who enter the church. First of all Greg, I want to welcome you to the podcast, we're so glad for you to be able to be here and visiting with us today.

Greg Atkinson: I'm honored to be here thank you for having me.

Chris Reinolds: Now, for any of our listeners out there that haven't heard about you, could you tell us a little bit about your story and how you got to being part of a secret shopper sort of thing and then also your connection with George.

Greg Atkinson: Sure. I started in ministry in February of 1994, so 24 years ago in the state of South Carolina, which is where I reside, again, in Rock Hill, South Carolina. But started out as a worship pastor for about 11 years. My background is in music and worship. I was a technical director at a large church in Dallas and for six years I was a campus pastor at a multi-site church, which pretty much oversaw anything from first impressions to children's ministry to small groups. And so good pulse on the church and about 10 years ago, I was working as a coach of church planters with ARC, the Association of Related Churches and my boss looked at me one day in a hotel lobby and said, "Greg you need to be a secret shopper." He saw something in me that I didn't know was there and he wrote me my first endorsement and I’ve been off and running ever since.

Chris Reinolds: That's good. Now, how did you come to know this man over here, George Bullard?

George Bullard: Very carefully.

Greg Atkinson: I knew of him, George is very well-known and then we got connected on social media on Facebook and started chatting back and forth and then when I moved back to South Carolina I knew we had to get together. And then he invited me to his home, to be a part of a retreat and learn up close from him, which I loved and took a ton of notes, and more than that just relationally to spend time with him and hang out. And then he did a consultation in Charlotte which is near right where I live in Rock Hill, and so I tagged along and got to see the fruit of his labor. He had been working with this church for months but this was kind of the culmination day of when it came to a vote of which direction do we want to go in and it was just a beautiful thing to behold.

Chris Reinolds: That's good. Well, we like George, I think we're going to keep him around for a little while.

George Bullard: I hope so, yeah a little while at least.

Chris Reinolds: Now, I've read through your book and I have to say I wish I had had a copy of it, years ago, whenever I started doing church revitalization stuff because a lot of these things I learned through the school of Hard Knocks and also learned through the blogosphere and just reading as much as I could possibly read from a variety of different sources, but you've captured all of that and you've put it all in a nice little wrapper. And there's a lot of information there but for the sake of this podcast, I'd like us to not cover the full gamut because I want people to go out and buy your book.

Greg Atkinson: Sure.

Chris Reinolds: I want them be able to experience it and get into all of the details of it because of all the information that's contained in it. And so we want to focus really on two areas but before we get to those two primary areas, I really want people to hear the heart of your why. The why behind the ministry that you're doing and why it is that you feel that this is so important, essential for churches to hold in such high regard.

Greg Atkinson: I think when I talk about hospitality that it's thoroughly biblical and just came to that conviction years ago. If you look at Rick Warren and Saddleback, their shape profile, I just kind of tapped into how I'm wired, my wiring, my DNA. I'm just by nature hospitable, I'm generous. I try to live that out. So to me it's a lot more than ushers and greeters and parking lot attendants. I mean, we've had people live in our home; we’ve just done a lot of unique stuff that has nothing to do with serving on a Sunday. And so I’ve been passionate about it.

 Once I started the Secret Shopper ministry 10 years ago, it just awakened something in me and it grew and grew and grew and I started seeing a lot of similarities between large healthy growing churches and things that I could put my finger on and say, this is the reason why they're seeing such explosive growth. As I was talking with some friends, they said most churches in North America are 200 people or less and even if they wanted to bring in an outside consultant like a secret shopper, they can't afford it, they don't have the budget for it.

 And so I came up with the idea of the book, Secrets of a Secret Shopper and I said well, if you can't afford to bring me in then pay 10 bucks, read the book. And I pretty much lay out everything that I've learned through the School of Hard Knocks, and through seeing over 100 churches up close and working with them, and finding the similarities and what I consider to be just best practices. Also, in the introduction of the book, I go into a little bit of the theology behind it and where my passion grows from the Old Testament, Leviticus, we should welcome the stranger to the New Testament, be hospitable, all the exhortation is to be hospitable.

 And even in Hebrews, it talks about being hospitable to the stranger. So we hear stranger in Old Testament, stranger in New Testament. And so the way I say it to a lot of churches is welcoming the newcomer, which is a little nicer way than saying stranger but welcoming the newcomers.

Chris Reinolds: Right. I 100% agree. I think that it's essential ministry for people to focus on. This is a spiritual warfare battle and the last thing that we want is for people to trip over the welcome mat and create a reason why they would not come back to the church.

Greg Atkinson: Right.

George Bullard: Well, Greg we would like to cover several different subjects but I'd like to cover two items you speak about in the book. Online presence including social media and website, that kind of thing and the worship experience. So, let me begin by asking you as it pertains to the online presence, why do you put such a premium on a church's website? Why does it have to be something special?

Greg Atkinson: Studies have shown that people check you out online before they come in person and the sad story with a lot of churches is what they see online discourages them from ever coming in person. And so sometimes we miss out on a guest and we don't even know it. There's something whether it's an out-of-date website, a poorly designed website or a confusing website, a busy website with too much information, too much going on, too many pages or it's just not clear enough of here's who we are, here's what we believe, here's our vision, here's what we hope to accomplish in the community and the world. I forget the exact percentages and the touch points but I think people check you out online, it's anywhere from 7 to 10 times before they actually come in person.

 Today I was speaking somewhere and we talked about word-of-mouth marketing. And so what happens is a lot of time people will hear about the community through, maybe they see somebody wearing a shirt in the community that has your church logo on it or they drive by and they see the physical building and the church road sign and there's different things that pop in their head of okay, this church exists. And then sometimes it culminates in a personal invitation of somebody saying hey, I would love for you to be a guest at our church. What is your church? Our church is such-and-such Baptist Church. Cool. And then they go immediately in Google search it and pull it up online and what they see there oftentimes will determine if they make that first visit or not.

Chris Reinolds: Now, are there any key components specifically on a ... you mentioned mission, vision, service times, that sort of thing but what are some key components that people are looking for specifically? What is appealing to the people that are going to those websites?

Greg Atkinson: Four things I could think of, three would be my top three. One, as you mentioned, service times and locations are huge. If you're multi-site, you need to tell where the campuses are located.

Chris Reinolds: Have you ever had a church forget to put their service times?

Greg Atkinson: Yeah. Again, that's what I'm talking about. It's sad that sometimes people never visit just because of the website, they just can't ... They look and they look. I worked with a church last year where I couldn't find the address and what they had on the website was the mailing address, it was a P.O. Box. The other thing that's important to talk about online presence is mobile first. People check you out oftentimes on their mobile device and so when you design a website, excuse me, and you have your address, it's awesome if you can click on it and it opens up in GPS. Whether it be Apple Maps or Google Maps. If I see your street address and I can click on it, and it opens up on my GPS, that's great.

 And so service times, directions, your address and then believe it or not your staff page is the most read page on the website. That is the number one most read page. And the sad thing is a lot of churches just skip over it and don't think about it or they just have text. It's here's the pastor name, associate pastor name, music name, youth name and there's no pictures, it feels cold, it feels dead, it feels corporate.

Chris Reinolds: So the people really want to get to know the staff before they-

Greg Atkinson: Yeah, because again, they are checking you out, they're kind of kicking the tires. They're checking you out online and a head shot of a staff member can say a lot and the bio can say a lot. There's some churches that have very professional bios and list all these degrees and that's fine. Some have very humorous and funny bios. Some have here's my favorite movie. It just shows you a little bit of personality. But I'd like to see a headshot, a title, what your role is on staff, an email that's clickable and that they could email you, and then if you want to include a couple little interesting facts you can, but at least headshot, title email.

 And then get creative with the headshots. I've seen some that are very stale, corporate, boring. I've seen some that have beautiful background, they took it outside with green trees and there's some that really put a lot of thought into their pictures. There was a study, it's probably close to 10 years ago, maybe 2008 or 2009, a magazine did this study and the number one most viewed page on a church website was the staff page. So I never forget that. And then the third thing that I would mention that I'm seeing more and more churches do and that makes me happy because I know how important it is, is an “I'm New” or “What to Expect” page.

 When I'm coming to a church, it's great if I can click on an “I'm New” page and I can find out hey arrive 15-20 minutes early, check in your kids here, and sometimes it'll say, "What should I wear?" And it'll be like, “You could dress casual,” or just giving people a heads-up of what to expect.

George Bullard: Greg I'd like to say that one of the things I hear you saying is who is the client for the webpage and the client for the webpage is not necessarily church members?

Greg Atkinson: That's right. I've worked with a lot of projects that develop and design websites for churches and the very first question out the gate is who is this for?

Chris Reinolds: Do you find that most churches are building their website predominantly for their membership base more than they are for the guests?

Greg Atkinson: I think that's probably the majority, yeah. And just knowing Google searches and word-of-mouth and all that, guests check you out online and so I would gear it towards them knowing that members can find whatever they need to find. When I talk about online presence, meaning social media and website, that's the true first impression of your church. They check you out online before they step on your physical campus.

Chris Reinolds: We're going to get to social media in a second but I want to do a little bit of a follow up. A lot of pastors are listening right now hear you talking about Google and search engines and stuff like that, but is that sort of a recommended resource? Is there anything that you would suggest that they go and check out maybe it can help them in that regard?

Greg Atkinson: Yeah. A friend of mine Alejandro Reyes, R-E-Y-E-S, is putting on a church marketing summit which I was one of the speakers for. It's an online conference, you don't have to travel but I think it's going to happen in April and so you can still check it out. I would look for just start Googling “Church Marketing Summit,” it's a-

Chris Reinolds: We'll also put that in the show notes. We'll find it and put in the show notes.

Greg Atkinson: It's an online conference that dives into Google SEO, my talk was on this kind of stuff, online presence, website. I have this thing that I talk about always point people to the website. And so when I call your church and I speak to your receptionist, I want to hear somebody friendly greet me, I want her to talk about service times, location and then I'd like to hear, “For anything else, just check us out online at gracechurch.org.” And so always point people to the website. Same thing with your voicemail. If I call after hours, I should hear, “Our service times are so-and-so. We're located at so-and-so. For everything else, go to gracechurch.org.” Always point people to the website. That spills over into Sunday morning.

 People don't want to hear 10 announcements, you want to hit them with one big idea, one big thing. Hey guys, don't forget, we have a newcomers class right after the service today, for everything else go to gracechurch.org, we have some cool stuff going on. That's where the members can go check out. But if you stand up in front of your guests and you do 10 insider member announcements, you're going to just overwhelm them. And it's kind of like, if I told you I want you to remember my phone number and I tell it to you and you remember it, and then say, I want you to remember my wife's phone number and my daughter's phone number and my son's phone number, you're going to lose track.

 If we stand up and we say, here's 10 things you need to know going on, they're not going to do any ... There's a great quote by Kim Meyer when it comes to communications that says, "If everything is important then nothing is." And so less is more and always point people to the website. So, that's my talk and then they're going to dive into the real practical Google SEO stuff at that summit.

Chris Reinolds: That's good. Now, as far as the social media goes, are you still encountering churches that are resistant to getting involved in social media and what is sort of your advice to them. And also, what about the churches that are located in the rural part of a county to where they think we're out in the middle of the country, we don't need to focus in on social media.

Greg Atkinson: Well, I think people used to be a lot more resistant about 10 years ago, 2007 or 2008, I wrote the foreword for a book called, *Facebook for Pastors*. And that's when we were making the case of you need to be on Facebook and it was very controversial back then and people were very resistant. But that 10 years have passed and so a lot of times when I travel and interact with pastors, it's not that they're resistant, it's that they're ignorant and I don't mean that in a negative term, I mean ignorant in the sense of they don't know what to do, they don't know where to start.

 And so that's why so many conferences and online summits and webinars and things like that are popping up to help take the mystery out of it, to help explain it. There's a lot of great resources out there, a lot of free resources out there. There's a lot of downloadable PDF eBooks that tell how to's and basics. But I think two things, one, people get overwhelmed with where do I start and the good news is there's a lot of resources out there. And then two, this is the big one, they get overwhelmed with I can only do so much. I'm trying to keep my head above water, I’ve got a sermon I’ve got a crank out every week. And what I tell people is you don't have to do it. Equip and train and empower lay leaders. If you don't have staff that can do it, if you're a small church which most are and you're the only person on staff, find somebody that's passionate about social media in your congregation and empower them. Instruct them, train them, guide them and then set them free.

George Bullard: What kind of content is most helpful on social media? Because it's not just about posting anything.

Greg Atkinson: I talk about some stuff is information, hey, come to our men's breakfast this Saturday. Some stuff is inspiration of sharing stories of life change, sharing we baptized eight people this weekend and celebrating and maybe a picture of somebody coming out of the water. Some stuff is scripture and quotes, check out this verse, the verse of the day, sometimes it's scripture verse. Sometimes it's celebrating a volunteer, spotlight on somebody. What I like to see on Facebook is when they have like a volunteer of the month. Joe's been serving in kids ministry for 12 years and we asked Joe, why do you serve and it's got a little quote from him, it's got a picture of him standing, smiling, wearing the kids ministry shirt, and so just celebrating people.

George Bullard: So how important these days on Facebook and other kind of social media is video even live Facebook at this point?

Greg Atkinson: A lot of churches are streaming Facebook Live and then a lot of churches are doing 15, 30, 45 or 60 second sermon highlight clips. If you post your sermon on Facebook, a 30, 40 minute sermon, most people aren't going to watch it. If you do a 60-second sound bite, it takes a little bit of editing but if you do a 60-second sound bite, it's going to tease people in a good way. It's going to make them think, I need to go check out this podcast, I need to go listen to this sermon archived on the website or to a guest, I need to come visit this church, this is really cool. Just being creative with how you use it.

 I think one of the things that we try to educate people on is social media is social. It's supposed to be interactive, it's supposed to be discussion-based, there are supposed to be comments and questions and answers. It's not just a broadcast tool of posting and announcing and posting and announcing, it's not broadcast only. Dave Adamson who is over social media for North Point with Andy Stanley, he said, "We try to use more question marks than periods." And so that's just kind of a mic drop. We ask questions for engagement. The number one rule for social media is engagement. Are we starting conversations, are we having a dialogue, are we discussing things. And so at North Point they use more question marks than periods.

Chris Reinolds: Well, in mentioning how people maybe it's easier for them, especially guests, to be able to come and plug in to a worship experience, I want to transition towards the worship experience aspect of your book. What are you looking for whenever you engage a church as far as the worship experience goes?

Greg Atkinson: Quality. I've said for years, excellence transcends. I have worked with traditional churches, choir, orchestra, pipe organ, I've worked with churches of Christ that are a cappella, I've worked with blended churches, I've worked with modern cutting-edge churches with lights and haze and fog and rock band. All that I'm looking for is excellence. I don't get into styles, I don't tell people you should be modern or you should be traditional. I'm just looking at are you prepared, is it done with quality and with excellence. We talk about removing stumbling blocks and barriers so that people can encounter the living God. My hope is that they come to a local church gathering and that they encounter God.

 And so if there's stuff that takes them out of the moment, if the transitions are poorly done or there's things out of tune or bad people playing the bad notes or a bad soloist or there's things that make them scratch their head and think, this is horrible, then they're not listening to God. They actually change to where they feel embarrassed for you and they feel sorry for you and they think, this is a train wreck. We want to try to remove those barriers and those roadblocks.

 I look for excellence. Like I said, it doesn't really matter to me what style you are. I've worked with churches that wear suits, some that wear khakis, some that wear jeans, some that wear shorts and flip-flops. Just as long as you're genuine, authentic, relevant. I said earlier when I spoke that people can smell fake, so being authentic. One of the things I talk about in my book, there's a chapter it's called keeping it real, and I talk about an approachable, accessible pastor as something I always look for. Is the pastor available, is he accessible. I don't want a rock star pastor. I don't want somebody to disappear in a limo with bouncers, I want to be able to shake his hand and look him in the eye.

Chris Reinolds: Be able to make connections and contact.

George Bullard: One of the hot-button things in a lot of worship is that they stand up and turn around and greet somebody near them, so tell me what you think about that Greg in terms of for guests.

Greg Atkinson: That is an interesting thing that I'm seeing happen. It’s coming back, more and more churches are doing it. For years, when I was leading worship in the '90s and early 2000s, it wasn't cool anymore and we were like, we’ve got to cut that from a service, we’ve got to stop doing that. Some of the largest churches I've seen around the country will say, turn and high five, five people or ... I was just at a church in Tampa where they said it's fist-bump February, give four people a fist-bump and that was to avoid the flu that was going around and not touching people, but they said it's fist-bump February. But again life comes down to relationships, people want you to be genuine, authentic and real and so some churches high-five, some shake hands, some hug.

George Bullard: So you think it's good?

Greg Atkinson: I do think it's good nowadays. There was a time where as a worship leader, I took it out of the service but I read an article and I think Mark Batterson spoke on this once but I read an article about the power of touch. And there was a time years where I had a website called multi-sensory worship and I would do a lot of writing and speaking on engaging the senses. And as you know in my book there's a chapter on the sense of smell. But I read something that just blew me away and brought tears to my eyes of the power of the sense of touch. There are people in your congregation that have not come in human contact with another person in the last seven days.

 I don't know if you've ever been there, I've been there as a pastor where I come up and give somebody that Baptist side hug and you see tears come in their eyes, they have not encountered another person in a week. And so I'll come up and aunt Susie comes walking in, I say, “Hey aunt Susie, give me a hug.” And there's this look in her face and tears in her eyes of it just feels so good to interact with somebody. And so as a pastor, I was always standing in the back of the auditorium hugging people as they came in, high-fiving. So, I've kind of changed my perspective.

 Can things be over done? Yes. Can they be underdone? Yes. I think it comes back to authenticity and being real. At the end of the day, we are a community, we are a local faith gathering and so we should be about relationships.

Chris Reinolds: I think it's good. Now, sort of as a wrap up final question. If you were revising this book for 2018, what are some of the things that you would add to it? Maybe one or two.

Greg Atkinson: Well, one I'm going to write a follow-up but two, I met a guy named Dr. Chester Goad who's going to be a part of the First Impressions conference that I'm putting on. I met him at the Catalyst conference in Atlanta after I had already turned in my manuscript. Chester writes for Huffington Post, he's a professor and his passion, just like I'm passionate about hospitality and guest services, his passion is accessibility and people with disabilities and special needs. We had a conversation at a restaurant and he blew my mind. He said, did you think of this, did you think of this, did you think of this, did you write about this? And I got tears in my eyes and I said, man I've missed it, I have missed it. I want to go back and write my book all over.

 Because if we're not sensitive to those with visual needs, what type of font do we have, what kind of signage do we have? Are we wheelchair-accessible? What are our restrooms like? Do we have handicap stalls? Handicap parking? I did talk a little bit about handicap parking in the parking chapter of the book but if we are to be welcoming and hospitable to all, all includes those with special needs and so if I could go back, I would include more on that because I think it's the essence of our Christian faith.

Chris Reinolds: That's good.

George Bullard: Well, listen. We really appreciate you being here with us today. Greg, this has been fantastic in terms of you talking about all the different things. But tell us how folks can follow up with you because this is not just a one-and-done kind of thing, our folks really want to connect with the kind of stuff you're doing. So, if someone's looking for more information about you or about what you do, how can they connect with you?

Greg Atkinson: Again, my name is Greg Atkinson, A-T as in Tom K-I-N-S-O-N. You can check me out at [gregatkinson.com](http://www.gregatkinson.com), that's my website and blog where I blog about this kind of stuff weekly. My email is just my name greg@gregatkinson.com. My Secret Shopper site if you're interested in things like that is [worshipimpressions.com](http://www.worshipimpressions.com), so what kind of impression do they have of your worship service. I mentioned that I'm hosting an online conference, there's no travel. You can watch the whole thing online, that's [firstimpressionsconference.com](http://www.firstimpressionsconference.com).

 And then I interact daily, I lead a Facebook group on First Impressions and Guest Services and every single day we talk about Sunday and people can ask questions and we can discuss with one another and pick each other's brains and share ideas, and have kind of crowd feedback. If you want to join that Facebook group go to guestservices.church. If you go to guestservices.church, it'll land you on the welcome page of the Facebook group and just request the enter and I'll prove it and you'll be in the group and there's a lot of great resources in there.

Chris Reinolds: That's good. Well, for those of our listeners that are driving their car or running on the treadmill, we don't want you to crash or fall, so we're going to put all that stuff in the show notes so that you can get connected with Greg and his ministry there. Greg, thanks so much for being with us.

Greg Atkinson: Yeah, thank you for having me.

George Bullard: Absolutely.

Chris Reinolds: Well, as I mentioned before, if you're interested in connecting with Greg, please be sure to check out the show notes from today's episode and all of the applicable links are going to be there. Also, if you found this podcast to be helpful to you or your ministry, share it with others so that we can get the word out about what God is doing in the Columbia Metro area. Maybe if Greg's ministry would be beneficial for someone in your church to hear about, you could share this podcast with them. Until next time from all of us at the Columbia Metro Connection, we thank you for listening and urge you to share this podcast with everyone you know. It's the good news about the good news in the Columbia Metro Baptist Association.