

Helping Newcomers Connect, Grow, and Stay

by Dr. David D. Durey

Pick three new Christians who became successfully assimilated into your church during the last year or two. Imagine that you had a long conversation with them, asking how they were drawn to the church and why they stayed. Now repeat the same process in more than a dozen growing churches across your city, speaking also with a pastor at each church to gain additional perspective.

If you had time for this extensive research, what would you learn? Chances are that you'd see certain patterns emerge. You'd become convinced of specific actions you could take to improve the way your congregation attracts the unchurched in your community and assimilates them into the Body of Christ.

Too Many People Don't Come Back

Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Church*, says, "Assimilation is the task of moving people from an awareness of your church to attendance at your church to active membership in your church" [Zondervan, 1995, page 309]. I want to learn how to do a better job of just that--helping people find the most important relationships in the world: with Jesus Christ, and with the body of Christ.

For my Doctor of Ministry dissertation, I received permission to work with 15 Portland-area churches that have a solid track record of successfully assimilated new converts. I then spoke extensively with 45 new Christians (3 each in the 15 churches) and with 15 senior or associate pastors (one per church). The churches were both denominational and non-denominational, both charismatic and non-charismatic, both long-established and relatively young.

After analyzing all the data, I grouped the findings into three areas: personal relationships, intentionality, and small groups. First, personal relationships were the most significant reason why unchurched people were attracted to and stayed in the church. Second, these churches were intentional in reaching lost people, welcoming visitors and providing a pathway for spiritual formation. Finally, the practice of providing small groups was found to be the most effective means of helping new people form significant relationships and grow spiritually.

Personal Invitations Carry the Day

When asked, "What attracted you to this church?" over 70 percent of the new Christians interviewed responded by saying it was a personal invitation. Just as Andrew went out, found his brother Simon Peter, and invited him to come and see Jesus (John 1:40-42), so the people I interviewed had received a personal invitation to church from someone they knew and trusted. One of the pastors I interviewed explained, "Our people are our tool for evangelizing. What God has done in their lives is an example for the people that they are around--in families, in neighborhoods and in the workplace. Our members either extend an invitation to their unchurched friends or these friends visit our services because of what they see the Lord has done in our member's lives."

National surveys have confirmed the importance of the personal invitation. Herb Miller summarizes, "Invitations are the way churches open their doors" [*How to*, pages 31-32]. Church Growth, Inc. of Monrovia, California, asked more than 42,000 Christians, "What or who was responsible for your coming to Christ and your church?" Over 75 percent said that it was a friend or relative [Win Arn and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan of Making Disciples*, rev. ed., Baker, 1998, pages 45-46].

Most people become Christians and enter the church through webs of *relationship*--common kinship, common friendship, and common association. Leading churches in Portland report the same findings, and so they primarily use relational ministries to mobilize their members for outreach. Personal invitations clearly dominate the top spot.

Growing Churches Create Intentional Pathways for Growth

All churches in the study provide specific ministries to assist in the spiritual growth of newcomers and members, most of them using small groups as a primary tool for helping disciples grow. Eight churches acknowledged adult education as a significant ministry for Christian maturation. One-on-one discipleship was also mentioned. The new Christian interviews verified that all of these ministries helped

with spiritual growth, along with preaching and corporate worship. Whatever the format, a majority of the churches indicated that they had created a specific pathway for spiritual growth, most offering this formation pathway in the form of seminars or classes. Some churches have discovered the wisdom of integrating the formation pathway into the small group ministry by providing both open groups for outreach and accountability groups for depth and maturity.

People Stay Because of Meaningful Relationships

When asked, “Why did you stay?” over 77 percent of those interviewed responded in the combined categories of friendliness and caring, new relationships, or small group involvement. Fifty-three percent of the responses specifically indicated the importance of the church being friendly and caring. One new Christian said, “I think I’ve stayed because of the love that they have showed me and that they have cared.”

These churches were keenly aware of the importance of personal relationships to newcomers and they affirmed that most people formed their significant friendships through small groups.

Practical Applications

Throughout the research, analysis, reflection, and writing, a number of practical applications continued to surface. Two relate to attraction and outreach while the other two focus on assimilation.

1. Encourage Personal Invitations. Churches need to provide opportunities and encouragement for members to extend personal invitations. According to Lutheran historian Martin Marty, one concept defines the difference between churches that grow and those that do not: are they inviting others to join them?

Church leaders must instill this as a value in their people. Leaders cannot rely on visibility of their church facilities or great preaching as their primary means of attraction. Churches grow when those who attend invite friends, relatives, and acquaintances who are not connected with a church. Wise leaders create events, ministries, and activities about which their members feel excited and to which they want to invite their unchurched friends. Worship services in “inviting” congregations are also high quality and seeker friendly so members know they can be enthusiastic in encouraging friends to attend.

One of the congregations in the study provides a particularly good example of an inviting church. They offer a lot of bridge-in events throughout the year, such as drama presentations, a mother-daughter tea, and a public-garden tour. Also, “every weekend service we present the gospel,” states one of the pastors of that congregation. “So, we encourage people to bring their friends. We try to work primarily through networks of relationships so the people we are reaching are people like us. They know that it is a safe place to bring their unchurched friends.”

George Barna’s *User Friendly Churches* [Ventura, CA: Regal, 1991, page 100] suggests that in successful churches, members realize that inviting people to church is just part of their responsibility. They are also expected to accompany their guests to the church activity then provide the follow-up.

2. Equip Members for Personal Evangelism and Follow-up. Many of the churches studied equip members and lay leaders alike with tools they can use to share the gospel on a person-to-person basis. One of the pastors I studied regularly concludes his sermons with an explanation of how to become a Christian. Yet that’s still no substitute for one-on-one discussions, he says. “I’ve found that a lot of people don’t get it until someone sits down with them personally and says, ‘here’s what the Bible says about how you can know for sure that you are going to heaven, how you can be forgiven, and how to be saved,’” he concludes.

One church uses an “altar call” for inviting people to make a public commitment to Jesus Christ. It then has altar workers available to pray with people who respond to the invitation to accept Christ. Each altar worker who prays with the new converts continues one-on-one follow-up with them for at least three weeks or until they get connected in a cell group. The goal is that within three weeks, new converts will cover three simple booklets with the discipler and begin attending a cell group.

3. Emphasize a Small-Group Formation Path. Rick Warren states that “believers grow faster when you provide a track to grow on” [*Purpose*, page 335]. He also acknowledges that Christians need relationships in order to grow and that believers develop best in the context of fellowship [338-339].

Churches could easily combine the intentionality of a spiritual formation path with the relational support and accountability provided by small groups. At one of the churches studied, new Christians are invited to a commitment level called the “Follow Me” stage. It involves working on their growth process in

a small group for up to a year and a half. As they continue to grow, they move into the “Be with Me” stage where they begin to take on ministry leadership responsibilities. Even at this stage, they continue in an ongoing accountability group which helps them continue to grow.

4. Update Your Membership Class. Finally, churches should provide a membership class that will both spell out the expectations of a fully-assimilated member and help build new relationships. The research in this study indicated that these churches had essentially the same expectations of new members as they did for those they considered to be fully assimilated in the church. They help newcomers evaluate if they want to continue to associate with the church, and they project what newcomers can anticipate for their future involvement within the church.

Full Assimilation Involves Making New Ministers

What are the characteristics of someone who has been assimilated into the life of a local church? Collectively, these churches affirmed the nine characteristics of an incorporated member offered Win and Charles Arn which parallel Bob Logan’s assimilation continuum [Arn and Arn, *Master’s Plan* pages 49-55; Logan, *Beyond Church Growth*, Revell, 1989, page 109]:

1. Identifies with the goals of the church;
2. Attends worship services regularly;
3. Experiences spiritual growth and progress;
4. Becomes a member of the body;
5. Has 5-10 new friends in the church;
6. Has an appropriate task or role that matches spiritual giftedness;
7. Is involved in meaningful fellowship in a small group;
8. Regularly tithes to the church; and,
9. Participates in the great commission by spreading the Good News to friends and relatives

For Further Information

For a complete report including additional charts and case studies of each church visit Assimilation Study at www.missionportland.org/reports-assimilation.htm.

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