

Assimilation

Assimilate or Deteriorate

Christianity is about both believing and belonging. How well we make new-comers and members feel welcome and a part of our church is a significant issue if we want to grow. One denominational study showed that 75% of members who dropped out didn't feel a real part of the church¹. In the average church in America only 12 percent of first-time visitors return the following Sunday and eventually join the church. It's rare for a church to surpass 30 percent.²

Measure Nine Velcro Principles

Assimilation is a process. It begins with a person's awareness of the church, progresses to attending it, and culminates in ongoing active membership and participation in its life and ministry. Here are nine characteristics of an assimilated biblical believer:

- 1) Owns the church's mission.
- 2) Attends worship services regularly.
- 3) Seeks God intently and is growing spiritually.
- 4) Has joined the church.
- 6) Has at least six friends in the church.
- 7) Participates regularly in a small group.
- 7) Has a ministry task or role that fits giftedness.
- 8) Gives regularly and generously to the church's work.
- 9) Tells others about Jesus and invites them to church/small group.

Increase Church Health

Healthy churches assimilate newcomers and members more effectively than unhealthy churches do. Leith Anderson believes incorporation of newcomers is one of the most measurable signs of a healthy church.⁵ Assimilation is highest when church energy and enthusiasm are high, conflict is low, welcoming arms are open to all, and mission drives church life.

Christian Schwarz identified eight vital characteristics of healthy churches. See *Becoming an Enthusiastic Church* by John W. Selcher for a practical and comprehensive guidebook to strengthen these eight characteristics.⁶

Selcher found that for ERC churches that took NCD surveys, the correlation between being a healthy church and enthusiasm about one's church was 0.89. The correlation between being a healthy church and meeting the felt needs of survey takers was also 0.89. Healthy churches excel at meeting the needs of their members which makes those members enthusiastic. They also excel at meeting the needs of newcomers and those who aren't part of any church.

Communicate Clearly

Churches that excel at assimilating newcomers don't speak in religious code. If they use biblical terms like sanctification, justification, propitiation, etc., they explain them. They're sensitive to the limited spiritual vocabulary of newcomers and many church members and communicate spiritual concepts with words that are as simple as possible.

Mobilize Need-Meeting Ministries

Rick Warren said, "What really attracts large numbers of unchurched people is changed lives—a lot of changed lives. People want to go where lives are being changed, where hurts are being healed, and where hope is being restored." ⁷ People go to churches where God is at work. Our church's reputation either attracts or repels. Hearing about others' lives being changed through the ministry of our church attracts newcomers to us, but that glue, like the glue on a post-it note, will only hold so much weight. We need a stronger bond to bind folks to the church for the long-haul.

Frequently, the connecting link between a changed life and a newcomer attending our church is a testimony and a personal invitation to attend. If we don't share with our friends, relatives and neighbors how our church is benefitting us and could benefit them, why would they want to attend? If our church isn't doing much to benefit us, we need to change it so it does! It needs to become healthier.

Effective follow-up often occurs when the inviter is also the post-visit debriefer, asking perhaps, "What did you think of the meeting?" "Is there anything that didn't make sense to you?" Other, non-personal types of invitations can reach people (an attractive building, a clearly visible sign, an ad in the Yellow

Pages/newspaper, or direct mail invitations), but they're rarely as effective as a personal invitation from a trusted friend/relative.

We need practical need-meeting ministries with an intentional outward focus to bring a steady stream of newcomers to our church. We also need practical ministries that meet their needs when they arrive. Christian Schwarz wrote, "The key to church growth is for the local congregation to focus its evangelistic efforts on the questions and needs of non-Christians."⁸ As our need-meeting ministries become progressively more effective, and more and more newcomers enter our church, the effectiveness of our assimilation process becomes critical. Doubling our retention rate from the average of 12 percent already cited to 24 percent could effectively double our growth rate and give us the capacity to reach more and more people through those retained.

Prepare for Company

Gary McIntosh believes we need 4-5 percent of our worship attendance to be first-time visitors if we expect our church to grow significantly. If our average worship attendance is 160, we should have 6-8 first-time visitors every Sunday. We need to prepare for these guests by making our property as attractive as possible, offering quality childcare, providing clear directions throughout our building, graciously welcoming our guests, making our worship service as inspiring as possible, preaching practical and encouraging messages, and following up our visitors.

Open Your Arms Wide

We can offer a warm, inviting, accepting atmosphere through:

1. Training friendly, outgoing greeters, ushers and parking lot attendants.
2. Adopting the "3-meter-greeter" rule of saying "Hi" to anyone we don't know when we're within 10-feet throughout the building.
3. Modeling warmth in the pulpit and the pew by greeting visitors.
4. Training lay leaders to greet those who sit near them and accompany them to the welcome center.
5. Scheduling greeting time both during the service and after the service.

6. Supplying coffee and refreshments after the service.
7. Providing name tags for members so guests know their names.
8. Inviting guests to an event held in their honor at which they can share their ideas and interests.
9. Providing the best possible nursery care.
10. Posting signs that give directions to the nursery, restrooms, class rooms, etc.(church floorplan)
11. By members inviting newcomers to their home.
12. Calling first-time visitors.
13. Reserving the best parking for visitors.
14. Having music playing when persons enter the building.
15. Allowing visitors to remain anonymous.
16. Offering a free gift to guests who sign in at the welcome table.

Develop and Implement a Follow-up Strategy

What can we do to maximize the chance that visitors will return? A letter from the pastor and a telephone call both communicate caring, but can't take the place of an immediate, personal visit. The most effective follow-up is done when a lay person makes a 15-minute visit to build a personal relationship no later than Tuesday evening. The content of the visit could include delivering a fresh loaf of bread or a cake, getting acquainted, answering questions about the church, exploring any religious needs that exist and an invitation to return. Herb Miller says, "When laypersons make fifteen-minute visits to the homes of first-time worship visitors within thirty-six hours, 85 percent of them return the following week."⁹ If a pastor makes the visit, the chance of a return visit is down to 40-45 percent. The longer the time gap between church attendance and the visit, the less effective the visit is in influencing a revisit. If the visit is a week later, only 15 percent will return.

To get feedback about our church another idea is to include a three-question first impression survey at our welcome desk:

1. What did you notice first?
2. What did you like best?
3. What did you like least?

Pastor Jim Tomberlin's follow-up welcome letter invites guests to a Newcomers' Dessert where they can meet the pastoral staff and spouses. His church also offers a class for newcomers called Discovery Class.¹⁰ Another idea is to give the name of the visitor to a small group/Sunday school leader who invites the person to attend his/her group.

Try to pair small group or Sunday school teachers with visitors who seem to fit their group age-wise etc. and have that leader do a follow-up visit. If someone comes to the church through the invitation of a friend who is already in a small group, we'll seek to recruit the person to the same small group.

Intentionally Assimilate New Members

Assigning sponsors to new members helps bond them to the congregation. This sponsorship lasts for three months to a year. Sponsors pray for the new member, develop a relationship, introduce the new member to other members, and encourage the new member's involvement in congregational life.

It's important to develop a system to track the attendance, participation, and follow-up of members. This information helps to prevent people from "falling through the cracks" without anyone's noticing.

Raise Membership Requirements

Churches that have high membership standards are more likely to be growing than churches with low standards. Raising the membership bar raises commitment throughout the church. What might such a membership standard look like? It could include:

1. Completing a 13 week introduction to the church class (Preparing to Be the Swatara Church of God).
2. Sign the Ten Commitments of membership form:
 - a. I'll love other members.
 - b. I'll won't gossip
 - c. I'll follow my church's leaders.
 - d. I'll pray for my church's growth.
 - e. I'll invite unchurched persons to attend.
 - f. I'll welcome visitors.

- g. I'll use my gifts and talents to serve my church and Lord.
- h. I'll attend worship services faithfully, give generously, and live like a believer.
- i. I'll regularly participate in a Sunday school class or small group.
- j. I'll regularly pray, meditate and reflect on Scripture.

Develop a Discipleship Track

After persons become followers of Christ there are four stages through which they pass on the way to spiritual maturity¹¹:

1. The "feed me" stage. Very young believers are dependent on others for loving care and information that will help them grow spiritually. I suggest using the Running to Win booklet to do immediate follow-up of new believers and then taking them through the 13-week "Preparing to Be the Swatara Church of God."
2. The "teach me" stage. Use the Running to Win Series with time spent each lesson sharing personal applications and commitments from personal devotional journal during the previous week. It will take about 12 months to read through the New Testament and to complete the 32 lessons of the four books in the series: Starting Fast, Clearing Hurdles, Stretching Your Stride, Handing Off.
3. The "Show me" stage. The next step is an Old Testament survey with a focus on extracting life principles that will enable victory over sin and an obedient lifestyle. This will take about 18 months with a target of at least 50% of each lesson being life application.
4. The "Follow me" stage. Mature believers use their gifts to minister to and train others. One's small group at this stage could be ones ministry team. One ministry goal is for each person to multiply his/her ministry by recruiting and training at least one other person how to do it. Ongoing leadership training takes place once each month through this small group. The leaders of all groups gather once/month for leadership training which they then pass on to others in their group.

Suggested yearly goals for small group/Sunday school class members in the church:

- 1) Daily reflect on Scripture
- 2) Daily pray for your small group members and leader
- 3) Weekly share personal Scripture application in your group
- 4) Weekly pray in your group for its ministry
- 5) Monthly serve others together through gift-driven ministry
- 6) Monthly share updates on redemptive relationships with pre-Christians
- 7) Monthly do leadership training
- 8) Annually develop an apprentice leader
- 9) Annually add two new persons to the group (through conversion)
- 10) Biennially multiply the group.

Evangelism that ends in something other than the “Follow me” stage is good news with a bad ending. Discipleship happens when disciples spend time with other disciples studying, reflecting on, and applying God’s Word and serving Him together. That’s what small group life is all about. Small group leaders should promote worship attendance and in worship the pastor should promote involvement in a small group.

Idea of having small groups/ministries take turns to be responsible for all the functions of church work for a week: pastoral care, follow-up of new believers, helping at services, doing outreaches etc. or however we want to define those small group/ministry responsibilities.

Strategies to Increase Assimilation

1. **Measure our “belonging pulse” at least every six months with a 10-question survey that everyone in worship takes:**

Mark each statement as follows: 0 = “Very great extent”; 1 = “Great extent”; 2 = “Hardly”; 3 = “Not at all”

- a. ___ I know and agree with where our church is headed in the future.
- b. ___ I attend the worship service at least three Sundays a month.
- c. ___ I set aside time daily to seek God intently.

- d. ___ I’m growing spiritually.
- e. ___ The ministries of our church meet my needs.
- f. ___ I feel like I belong in this church.
- g. ___ I regularly participate in a small group/Sunday school class
- h. ___ I have a regular ministry to others that I enjoy.
- i. ___ I give regularly and generously to our church.
- j. ___ I invite others to attend our church.

2. **Continuously work at improving church health through the NCD process.**
3. **Ask 10 persons to evaluate worship service once/month using this survey and continuously improve weak elements:**

Worship Service Evaluation

Mark each statement as follows: 0 = “Very great extent”; 1 = “Great extent”; 2 = “Hardly”;

3 = “Not at all”

- ___ 1. The worship service was an inspiring experience.
- ___ 2. I enjoyed listening to the sermon.
- ___ 3. The service had a positive influence on me.
- ___ 4. The sermon spoke to my life needs.
- ___ 5. The music helped me worship God.
- ___ 6. Optimal care was given to children during the service.
- ___ 7. The worship service was interesting.
- ___ 8. The worship leader(s) led me into God’s presence.
- ___ 9. I enjoy bringing visitors.
- ___ 10. In our services new faces are common.
- ___ 11. The service had a clear theme.

___ 12. The parts of the service were connected smoothly.

___ 13. The service was God-centered and Bible-based.

___ 14. I was challenged to respond to God in some way.

___ 15. Reflection and celebration were balanced.

___ 16. Many people were involved in leading the service.

___ 17. I sensed God's presence during the service.

___ 18. The service motivated me to live for God.

4. Use a three question first impression survey at the welcome desk and make necessary improvements:

- a. What did you notice first?
- b. What did you like best?
- c. What did you like least?

5. Develop three ministries that meet the needs of people in our community and continue to expand the number of ministries as resources allow.

- a. Celebrate Recovery
- b. Another
- c. Another

6. Do a "Prepare for Company" survey of our facilities and ministries.

- a. Are we using all the channels we could to invite company (phone book, yellow pages, church signs, newspaper articles, newspaper ads, welcome wagon, real estate agents, web site, mailings, special events flyers, listing in nearby hotels)?
- b. Are we providing key information items through these channels that people look for including:
 - i. Times of church services
 - ii. Location of church
 - iii. Sunday School
 - iv. Child Care
 - v. Parking

- vi. Handicapped accessible
- vii. Phone number
- viii. Web site
- ix. Directions

c. Other issues concerning information:

- i. On our answering machine – Is the information up to date? Are service times listed? Is an emergency number included? Can people understand the speaker?
 - ii. On our signs/message boards – Are they located where people can see them, whether walking or driving? Is the printing large enough?
 - iii. Is our website attractive and frequently updated?
 - iv. Is a floor plan of the church displayed to guide visitors?
- d. Is the outside of the church attractive? Is the paint peeling? Has the grass been cut? Is there a sign outside with the name of the church (The Swatara Church of God welcomes you!)?
- e. Is the inside of the church neat and tidy?
- f. Are the locations of the rest rooms clearly marked? Are they clean? Do they have changing areas?
- g. Are Sunday school and child care areas clearly marked?
- h. How do newcomers find out about child care?
- i. Do ushers, greeters and congregants wear name tags?
- j. Do warm, mature believers greet newcomers? Are ushers and greeters trained?
- k. Does the pastor welcome guests during the announcements and invite them to return? Do others do the same before guests leave?

- l. Is safe and adequate childcare available with clean, well-stocked facilities?
 - m. Do we need to re-evaluate the content of the visitor packets?
 - n. Do greeters funnel newcomers to the welcome center? Do congregational leaders?
 - o. Do we read Scripture publically in a contemporary translation?
 - p. How can our worship service be more inspiring?
 - q. Are the pastor's messages practical and encouraging?
 - r. Is our follow-up of visitors timely and consistent?
 - i. What's done for the visitor?
 - ii. Who's involved?
 - iii. What's said to the visitor? By whom?
 - iv. What materials are provided to the visitor? Who gives them out? Where are they?
 - v. How long has it been since the materials we give visitors were updated or the practices reviewed?
- 7. Maintain 5 practices that increase the friendliness quotient of our congregation**
- a. Promoting the "3-meter-greeter" rule of saying "Hi" to anyone we don't know when we're within 10-feet throughout the building (invitation to return).
 - b. Pastor greets visitors every Sunday from the pulpit, scheduled greeting time both during the service and after the service. (Invitation to return).
 - c. Letter from pastor.
 - d. Members invite newcomers to their home or out for lunch. (Invitation to return)
 - e. 15-minute visit from a lay person before Wednesday. (Invitation to return)
 - f. Offering a free gift to guests who sign in at the welcome table (3-question survey, invitation to return).
- 8. Track the attendance of all members weekly and send a bulletin and note to those who are missing.**
- 9. Raise membership requirements:**
- a. Completing a 13 week introduction to the church class (Preparing to Be the Swatara Church of God).
 - b. Sign the Ten Commitments of membership form:
 - i. I'll love other members.
 - ii. I'll won't gossip
 - iii. I'll follow our church's leaders.
 - iv. I'll pray for our church's growth.
 - v. I'll invite unchurched persons to attend.
 - vi. I'll welcome visitors.
 - vii. I'll use my gifts and talents to serve my church and Lord.
 - viii. I'll attend worship services faithfully, give generously, and live like a believer.
 - ix. I'll regularly participate in a Sunday school class or small group.
 - x. I'll regularly pray, meditate and reflect on Scripture.
- 10. Develop and implement a track that makes discipleship systematic.**
- a. The "feed me" stage. Very young believers are dependent on others for loving care and information that will help them grow spiritually. I suggest using the Running to Win booklet to do immediate follow-up of new believers and then taking them through the 13-week "Preparing to Be the Swatara Church of God."
 - b. The "teach me" stage. Use the Running to Win Series with time spent each lesson sharing personal applications and commitments

from personal devotional journal during the previous week. It will take about 12 months to read through the New Testament and to complete the 32 lessons of the four books in the series: Starting Fast, Clearing Hurdles, Stretching Your Stride, Handing Off.

- C. The “Show me” stage. The next step is an Old Testament survey with a focus on extracting life principles that will enable victory over sin and an obedient lifestyle. This will take about 18 months with a target of at least 50% of each lesson being life application.
- d. The “Follow me” stage. Mature believers use their gifts to minister to and train others. One’s small group at this stage could be ones ministry team. One ministry goal is for each person to multiply his/her ministry by recruiting and training at least one other person how to do it. Ongoing leadership training takes place once each month through this small group. The leaders of all groups gather once/month for leadership training which they then pass on to others in their group.

11. Conduct leadership training classes once/month. (to be developed)

12. Small groups/ministries each develop annual goals.

Suggested goals for small group/Sunday school class members in the church:

- a. Daily reflect on Scripture
- b. Daily pray for your small group members and leader
- c. Weekly share personal Scripture application in your group
- d. Weekly pray in your group for its ministry
- e. Monthly serve others together through gift-driven ministry
- f. Monthly share updates on redemptive relationships with pre-Christians
- g. Monthly do leadership training

- h. Annually develop an apprentice leader
- i. Annually add two new persons to the group (through conversion)
- j. Biennially multiply the group.

13. Help small groups/ministries cooperate to achieve the church’s mission.

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