ADDRESSING CHURCH MEMBER DROPOUT AND INACTIVITY THROUGH THE PROCESS OF ASSIMILATION

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INTRODUCTION

A commonly observed problem within the local church is the inactive and disconnected member. For years churches have become accustomed to maintaining what is often referred to as an inactive or non-resident membership role. It has been said that of the stated membership of churches and denominations, half cannot be found. While that might be a bit of an overstatement, there are a significant number of members who have become inactive.

According to Lifeway Research, total Southern Baptist Church membership in 2007 was 16,266,920; however, resident membership was 11,435,605, a difference of nearly five million.¹ To further underscore this trend, the same research indicates that the median Southern Baptist Church membership that same year was 209, but resident membership was 147.²

Much emphasis among evangelical churches has been placed on reaching the unchurched and the seeker. Until recently, however, little attention has been given to the lack of membership retention or what might be commonly referred to as “the open back door.” So many churches, including this writer’s church, have failed to take seriously the


²Ibid., 6.
growing number of disengaged members. Strategies need to be developed that will effectively reach those who have become the formerly churched.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the issues and factors influencing people’s departure from regular church attendance and participation. Through this study the author seeks to understand how an assimilation process in a local church can effectively address those issues and promote long-term commitment to church membership and active participation.

George Barna has written extensively about the unchurched. In his book, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In*, Barna stated,

There are significant implications to the fact that one-fifth of the unchurched are born again. One of the considerations relates to church dropouts and retention. The fact that such a substantial slice of the adult born-again population - about 15 percent of the total - could walk away from the church without any intention of returning ought to make us pause and reflect on how we can more effectively retain believers within the church.³

*A National Problem*

Over the last several years there have been many studies of church growth that show a decline in membership. In an article by Rob Philips, it was suggested that demographics might be a factor in this trend. Philips quoted Ed Stetzer, director of Lifeway Research:

There are many factors that can contribute to such decline. One factor is that the mean age of the denomination’s members is increasingly older than the general population, especially in the South, and Southern Baptists are reaching and baptizing fewer young adults. Second, Southern Baptists have failed to

keep pace with the rising number of non-white and non-black citizens in the United States.4

The decline in membership has been clearly seen among Southern Baptist Churches as well as other denominations. Southern Baptist historian J. Clifford Tharp, Jr., cited annual reports that show a trend of slowing growth in Southern Baptist membership. In 2003 there was a reported SBC membership of 16,315,050. In 2009, however, membership had declined to 16,160,088.5

The same reports also revealed a staggering gap in resident and non-resident membership. Non-resident membership incorporated those who have become inactive in church life as well as those who have simply dropped out. In 2003 there were 43,024 Southern Baptist churches with total reported church membership of 16,315,050 and resident membership of 11,346,456. In 2009 there were 45,010 churches with total membership of 16,160,088 and resident membership of 11,403,048. Over this six year time period there was an increase of nearly 2,000 churches while at the same time total membership decreased by 155,000. Though resident membership increased by 56,592 people, with 2,000 additional churches, the gap between resident and non-resident membership increased. Nearly one third of all reported membership was non-resident.

Based on his extensive research, Clifford Tharp made the following observations: 1) Trends in both total and resident membership is becoming flat, 2) total church

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membership is close to decreasing, and 3) the gap between total membership and resident membership is widening.  

Unchurched people are generally understood as anyone who has not attended church in the previous six months. George Barna indicated that about 20 percent of unchurched adults are Christians.  

Reaching this group alone would swell Sunday morning attendance by more than 15 million people — which, if evenly distributed across the nation’s 350,000 or so Christian churches, would equal more than 40 new people per congregation. That inflow would constitute the largest return to the church during any decade in the past century and would increase the size of the average Protestant church by almost half!

Among Southern Baptists, reaching the formerly churched could mean increasing Sunday morning attendance by more than four and a half million people. If spread out evenly among the forty-five thousand Southern Baptist Convention related churches, nearly one hundred people would be reintegrated into the life of each congregation.

A Local Problem

The issue of formerly churched, unreached people takes on a practical perspective in the local congregation. Calvary Baptist Church is a median sized, Southern Baptist related church in suburban, north central New Jersey. Started by transplanted southerners in 1969, the church has seen generally healthy growth over its forty-two year life; and has successfully transitioned into a demographically diverse, indigenous congregation. The


7Barna, Grow Your Church from the Outside In, 26.
Church experienced its greatest growth period in the late 1980s with a total membership of about 280 and active resident membership of 235. Non-resident, inactive membership accounted for about 16 percent of total membership.

In the early 1990s the church went through a difficult period with a pastor conflict and lost a significant number of members. With the call of a new pastor, the church became stable, but did not see any significant growth. When the writer of this paper, Calvary’s current pastor, came in 2004, membership was 158. Active membership was about 110 with average primary worship attendance of 82. In 2004, non-resident, inactive membership was 48, or nearly 30 percent of the total membership.

Between 2004 and the summer of 2010 the church experienced steady growth reaching a total membership of 238 and average primary worship attendance of 146. The inactive membership in 2010 was 47, about 20 percent of total church membership. During this time period a full-time minister of youth was called and the church celebrated its fortieth anniversary with a reunion-type, weekend celebration that drew nearly four hundred participants. A building program that would replace the youth, children, and preschool ministry space with a new facility was also begun.

Just following the anniversary celebration in the fall of 2009, a change began to occur in the congregation and an increasing spiritual apathy began to set in. No apparent cause was evident. There has been no crisis in leadership or controversial decisions. Members and families began to disappear and as of the writing of this paper, membership has declined to 228. More strikingly, however, is the gap that has grown between active and inactive members. Currently there are 93 members considered inactive, which is 41 percent of the total membership. Thirty-six people have moved into the category of the unreached, formerly churched.
After more than seven years of ministry, this pastor is burdened to understand why this is a growing problem at Calvary Baptist Church. This writer seeks to understand the issues that motivate people to leave the church, what can be done to address these issues, and how to promote long-term ministry involvement in the church.

REASONS FOR LEAVING

In 2004, the Barna Group, led by George Barna, conducted a survey of Kentucky residents who were not connected with local congregations. The research involved telephone interviews with 1,204 individuals who were considered unchurched or nominally-churched. Barna described those who were unchurched as individuals who had not attended a church service during the last six months except for special events such as weddings, funerals or holidays. Conducted on behalf of the Kentucky Baptist Convention, the survey discovered that 32 percent of Kentucky’s adult population was unchurched, representing nearly one million people. Even more revealing was the fact that 81 percent of the unchurched were actually what he called de-churched. They once attended a church regularly but no longer do so. According to the group’s research, 42 percent of the unchurched used to attend a Baptist church.8

What has caused some 810,000 Kentuckians to become unchurched? What has caused 93 formerly active members and attenders of Calvary Baptist Church to become inactive and essentially de-churched? There are important insights to be gained from understanding what leads people to drop out.

8George Barna, Growing Kentucky's Churches from the Outside In (Louisville: Kentucky Baptist Convention, 2004), 5.
In an attempt to understand the factors leading those who have become inactive or formerly churched at Calvary Baptist, this writer surveyed seventeen adult individuals who have become inactive over the last eighteen months. Nearly 70 percent of those surveyed indicated that they had become members of Calvary within the last five years; three respondents had been members for more than ten years. Responses to the survey were consistent with what Herbert Byrne identified as the three general categories of issues that lead church members and participants to drop out: theological, sociological, and psychological.⁹

*Theological*

Theological factors focus on doctrine, belief, and experience that often involve denominational and church statements of faith, pulpit and small group teaching ministries, and church polity. Obviously, if what one believes or does not believe stands in contrast to the pulpit and teaching ministry of the church, they may be prone to leave.

In 2006 Lifeway Research conducted a survey of four hundred, sixty-nine formerly churched adults. Formerly churched adults were defined as those whose religious preference is Protestant and who attend church less than five times a year, but who had previously attended church on a regular basis at least twice a month. Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed indicated that disenchantment with the pastor or church was a factor in not attending church regularly. Twenty-two percent of the de-churched further stated that a change in beliefs and attitudes toward church was a factor. Another 19

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percent sited disagreement with teachings as a decisive issue in their lack of participation in church.\textsuperscript{10}

Theological confusion or disagreement may take years to become evident, eventually leading people to leave the church. Thom Rainer, in his book, \textit{High Expectations}, sited a study of the churches in the Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination which found, “Younger generations tend to leave the church within about twenty years if the church has a low view of biblical authority and if the doctrine of the church is not communicated clearly.”\textsuperscript{11}

When Calvary Baptist Church was started in 1969, a majority of members came from a similar Baptist background and, therefore, had a shared theological and doctrinal understanding. As a result of evangelistic outreach, the church developed into an indigenous congregation. The vast majority of new guests and members came from different church backgrounds or no religious background at all. Apart from the gospel, people often had little knowledge of Baptist doctrine, worship format or church polity, and there was little understanding of denominational and association relationships. When doctrine and theology had not been communicated effectively, conflict arose. Theology concerning baptism, for example, had produced conflict leading to member disengagement.


Of those surveyed by this pastor, 34 percent were saved and baptized directly through the ministry of Calvary Baptist. Theological and teaching issues, however, became evident through the survey. While nearly 80 percent expressed either satisfaction or appreciation of the preaching and adult Bible study, a nearly equal percentage of those surveyed stated that they were either somewhat frustrated or very frustrated with the youth and children’s ministry. Two respondents indicated that there was a particular disagreement in the youth and children’s ministry that motivated their leaving. One wrote, “I felt there was a lack of leadership in the children's programs, particularly with the fourth through sixth grades and not enough programs for them to grow spiritually at their age group.”

A personal lack of spiritual life and growth may lead to inactivity. Legitimately or not, people have complained, “I am not getting fed at church.” Members have sited weak preaching or teaching as not promoting their spiritual growth or that of their children. If people have failed to grow spiritually, they have tended to drift away from the church.

*Sociological*

Sociological factors focus on relationships, both social and physical. When church members cannot get along and there is conflict and lack of harmony that is left unresolved, people will leave. A social problem may be a single event or it may be a condition that exists over an extended period if time.

Many factors are often involved in a social crisis that leads to dropout. One significant factor is a change in life situation. According to Lifeway Research, 36 percent of formerly active members said that they simply “got too busy,” or there were family
responsibilities that prevented their attendance. Other issues that were sited, but statistically were less significant, included location to the church, work situation, marital issues, and perceived hypocrisy among church members.\(^\text{12}\)

Some social factors are more generational in nature. One of the dilemmas facing the church today is the transient lifestyle of the post-modem culture and the younger generations. Eighteen to twenty-two year olds tend to site issues such as strong social ties outside the church, lack of concern, and uninteresting programs as major reasons for leaving the church.\(^\text{13}\) There is no longer allegiance to organizations, jobs, hometowns or even denominations. Herbert Byrne wrote, “Some people are caught up in a dropout culture. A mobile population, anti-institutionalism, the weekend recreation syndrome, lack of parental example and discipline are all contributing factors to inactivity.”\(^\text{14}\) The younger generation is the fruit of the attitude expressed by their parents. According to George Barna, only 43 percent of adults had confidence in the Christian churches.\(^\text{15}\) This means that less than half the people surveyed had confidence in the church to meet their needs.

The establishment of personal relationships in the church is an extremely important factor. Pastor Rick Warren concluded, “The importance of helping members


\(^\text{13}\) Byrne, 17.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 17.

develop friendships within your church cannot be overemphasized. Relationships are the glue that holds a church together. Friendships are the key to retaining members.”\(^{16}\)

Kennon Callahn, a church-planning consultant, helped more than two thousand churches with long-range planning. Underscoring the importance of establishing relationships in a social, small group setting, Callahn made this observation, “Generally speaking, within the first six months and in some instances within the first year and a half, people will need to discover such a group or they will be likely to join that great Sunday school class in the sky called inactive members.”\(^{17}\)

Among those surveyed at Calvary Baptist Church, more than half said that they initially came to the church as a result of an invitation from a friend or a personal relationship with a member of the church. The survey further indicated that a significant number of the respondents rated warmth of fellowship and personal relationships as important, though nearly 40 percent of them were not active in a small group ministry such as Sunday school.

Byrne commented, “In the busy work-a-day world, some people feel that they have lost a sense of real identity. They need to feel a new personal sense of importance, that they have a real place to fill, and that they matter to someone else.”\(^{18}\)

Another major area of sociological concern involves physical issues. The church building itself can become a prohibitive factor. Buildings that have grown into disrepair


\(^{18}\) Byrne, 21.
or are non-hospitable lead to discomfort and erode confidence in ministry. If people are not comfortable or cannot find easy access to church facilities, they tend to stay away from the church, often permanently.

Calvary Baptist Church has suffered greatly from facility problems. The buildings used for children and youth ministry are detached from the main building and have fallen into such disrepair that they present safety issues. The area of greatest frustration and concern expressed in the Calvary Baptist survey was with the condition and ease of use of facilities. Some parents of young children became uncomfortable with the condition of the buildings and as a result, left the church.

Poor health, illness, and disability, whether short-term or permanent, can also lead to an individual’s disengagement from fellowship. Though generally a small percentage of inactivity is a result of physical limitations or illness, it can be one of the easiest factors to identify. John S. Savage in his book, The Apathetic and Bored Member, surveyed adult church dropouts and discovered that only 3 percent stated that the change in attendance of worship services and other activities was due to personal or family illness. People who find themselves separated from church life as a result of personal or family physical issues often need help to deal with loneliness, physical care, and spiritual encouragement. It is important that the church understands and ministers to the needs of those dealing with physical issues.

This has been an area that Calvary Baptist has excelled in. Over the last five years the church has strategically developed an effective ministry to those who have become aged and less physically mobile. By reaching out through this “daycare” type

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ministry, senior adults and physically challenged individuals are now being ministered to. There is also a very active *Mercy Meals* ministry that seeks to assist members and others who have had surgery or significant illness in their home. Ministries like these have served as a means of encouragement to those who have found themselves isolated from the fellowship of the church.

*Psychological*

Psychological factors emphasize personal issues, such as attitudes, motivation and emotion. When conditions in churches are not right, then there may be a personal negative reaction, which drives people away. In addition to conflict, anxiety and anger are contributing psychological factors. If basic needs are not met, this tends to alienate people from the church. Byrne elaborated on this factor,

> Since people have basic needs to be accepted, loved and supported, if these are missing, this also tends to turn people away. In all of these needs, there resides the potential for frustration, anger, disappointment, anxiety, and a multitude of other emotional reactions. With a better understanding of these factors, churches are better prepared to meet with the inactive member.\(^{20}\)

When one looks at any particular person and attempts to determine the cause for disaffection, a pattern of behavior may be discovered. People usually have not left a church or ceased activity unless there was some kind of event or disturbance which caused it. It might have begun with bad interpersonal relationships, either with other church members, the pastor, or friends and family members. The result of these poor relationships is often anger, which can lead to asking for help and seeking resolution, or conversely to placing blame on someone else, often the pastor. Byrnes observed, “This may be followed, if they do not receive help, by indifference, apathy and even guilt.

\(^{20}\)Byrne, 15.
When their feelings are not resolved, people who have been active will begin to show the signs of dissatisfaction.”\textsuperscript{21}

People who are more prone to psychological disturbance may have co-dependency issues and are easily upset when their needs are not met. For others, anger may arise from a personal conflict. Often business meetings can become the incubator of a psychological disturbance if a person perceives that they have been ignored or not been heard. Again, as Byrne claimed,

Adults have a need to be heard. The sense of powerlessness that characterizes technological society frustrates people in their struggle to achieve social and civic responsibility, the resulting tensions spilling over into everyday life relationships including the church. Here we see the importance of the church giving heed to what people say and how they feel.\textsuperscript{22}

Because of conflict and the resulting anger, some members become permanently disengaged from church. Two of the people surveyed at Calvary Baptist Church indicated they left as a result of a specific event. There was no apparent attempt to resolve the particular issue which led to anger. As a result, one person said that he was “prayerfully seeking fellowship in another congregation,” and the other stated, “I have decided to not be involved in the fellowship of Calvary or any other church at this time.”

It is the experience of this pastor that it is critically important to not allow pride to hinder a swift and loving response to angry or disturbed members. Some members will reach a state of complete frustration and loss while others will simply withdraw with the hope that someone from the church will notice them, love them, care about them, and help them. Whatever the situation may be, it is clear that the church must be alert to the

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 21-22.
signs of disaffection among members, be sensitive to their needs, and then plan to reclaim them.

In the light of the sited theological, social, and psychological factors, as well as others, one concludes that no one single factor is necessarily responsible for members becoming inactive or formerly churched. This writer has become aware that the local church needs to specifically address the problems of inactive of members, develop a strategy that prevents dropout, and work out solutions that lead to restoration.

A PLAN FOR PREVENTION

It has long been said, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Could that be the case with the issue of church dropout with formerly active members becoming the unreached, formerly churched? With years of experience helping churches evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, Glen Martin came to the conclusion that there are two key questions upon which to focus: 1) How can churches develop strategies that bring more people in the front door? 2) How can strategies be developed that will keep people from leaving through the back door? 23

After more than seven years as the senior pastor, this writer has come to the conclusion that one of the most significant factors leading to membership dropout and church growth stagnation at Calvary Baptist Church is the failure to plan for member assimilation that leads to spiritual growth and formation. The abnormally high active to inactive member ratio, weak evangelism efforts, and a decreasing rate of baptisms

emphasizes the ineffective assimilation and integration of people into church life and becoming Christ followers.

Like Calvary, many churches have placed an emphasis on attracting seekers and visitors, but have rarely planned on a process of connecting them to the church. Assimilating new members into the life of the church is a major step in preventing dropout and essentially, closing the back door. Failure for churches to plan to assimilate members may be an invitation for them to remain uninvolved and eventually become inactive.

As defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word “assimilate” means “to make similar: to absorb into the culture or mores of a population group.” The general purpose of an assimilation process in the church should be to move people from simply being a part of the crowd to becoming an active part of the congregation. In his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren used “The Circle of Commitment” to define the levels a person moves through as he or she becomes a committed participant in the body of Christ. “The goal of a living church,” Warren wrote, “is to move people from the outer circle (low commitment/low spiritual maturity) to the inner circle (high commitment/high spiritual maturity).”

Church growth specialists have long stressed the importance of new believer follow-up and have challenged the church to develop plans for member assimilation that lead to spiritual maturity and ministry in the body of Christ. Many church members have remained stagnant in their growth being either unwilling to grow or not knowing how. John Wesley stated, “How dare you lead people to Christ without providing adequate

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opportunity for growth and nurture. Anything else is simply begetting children for the murderer.”

*The Biblical Basis for Assimilation*

While the word *assimilation* does not appear in the Bible, the concept does. It is seen in the Old Testament through the Lord’s identification with a nation of people. God Himself declared, “I will place My residence among you, and I will not reject you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be My people” (Leviticus 26:11-12, HCSB). In the Gospel of John, just prior to His crucifixion, the Lord Jesus prayed for those whom the Father would give Him,

I pray for them. I am not praying for the world but for those You have given Me, because they are Yours. Everything I have is Yours, and everything You have is Mine, and I have been glorified in them. I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to You. Holy Father, protect them by Your name that You have given Me, so that they may be one as We are one (John 17:9-11, HCSB).

The goal of church assimilation is based on the biblical mandate to make disciples. Disciple making certainly involves leading people to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but it also goes beyond that.

The place to begin building a church, which is the body of Christ, is to lay a proper foundation. The Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, referred to himself as a wise master builder laying a foundation, “According to God’s grace that was given to me, I have laid a foundation as a skilled master builder, and another builds on it. But each one must be careful how he builds on it” (1 Corinthians 3:10, HCSB). According to Rick Warren, a church’s foundation will determine both its

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size and strength. Warren claimed, “You can never build larger than your foundation can handle.”

By identifying himself as a builder, Paul implied that believers do not automatically become great Christians, but are made into great Christians. The process of spiritual development can be intentionally accomplished through assimilation.

What is the objective of assimilation? Assimilation strictly for the sake of building a community is insufficient in itself. Randy Frazee, in his book, *The Connecting Church*, wrote,

To have an effective assimilation strategy that will get people involved in the church but then to not have a clear idea of what the ultimate purpose of those structures are would be hollow and aimless. The Bible does not define church activities as “spiritual formation”; rather, spiritual growth involves the “renewing of the mind” in the core beliefs of the Christian faith.

An effective plan of assimilation must foster our relationship with the Lord as well as our relationship with other believers through the church. Jesus made this point in His summary of the commandments in the Law of Moses, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands” *(Matthew 22:37-40, HCSB).*

Frazee continued,

Central beliefs that forge our communion with God—such as our belief in the Trinity, salvation by grace, the authority of the Bible, the personal nature of God, and our identity in Christ—are a necessity. Central beliefs that cement our communion with people—such as our view of the church, biblical humanity, Christian compassion, eternity, and biblical stewardship—must be considered.

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26 Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 86.


28 Ibid., 67.
The Elements of Assimilation

The Context of Assimilation

Many people think of assimilation as a class or course, but effective assimilation must really be a process of transformation. Andy Stanley summarized, “Saying spiritual maturity is a point in time is like saying physical fitness is a point in time.”

Understanding the perpetual nature of spiritual maturity, churches should have in place a plan for moving people into that process. Generally, there are three basic formats through which churches have offered nurturing for new and growing believers: classes, small groups, and one-to-one discipleship. The process of assimilation should incorporate all three formats.

Jesus poured his life into making disciples. One way Jesus nurtured His disciples was in a class setting, teaching the multitudes. An example of this format can be seen in how Jesus taught the Beatitudes in His Sermon on the Mount, “When He saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. Then He began to teach them . . .” (Matthew 5:1-2, HCSB).

Jesus also frequently nurtured the apostles in the small group setting of just the twelve or in the even smaller group of Peter, James and John. Finally, the scriptures show that Jesus’ focus narrowed to Peter specifically, nurturing him in a one-to-one context.

There are nearly as many differing opinions as to the most effective context for an assimilation process as there are church growth specialists. One approach is to place

people in a class such as Sunday school or discipleship. Another plan moves people into ministry teams where they can begin to understand and exercise their spiritual gifts. A popular approach is to form small groups where people can establish intentional relationships. Many churches, in various contexts, have successfully used one or more of these venues to lead members into the ongoing process of assimilation and spiritual maturity.

Many churches have successfully used a new member class as an entry point in an assimilation process. As a short-term class, it is usually repeated several times a year. Considering Calvary Baptist’s current culture, a new member class or seminar could be effective.

Chuck Lawless, Dean of the Billy Graham School of Evangelism, at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has done extensive research regarding new member training and assimilation. Lawless sited two reasons why membership classes are important. First, Lasting church membership begins with the front door process. He wrote, “People tend to be much more committed if the church publically expects them to be committed up front.”30 Second, the membership class presents the congregation’s mission and vision by letting people know what the church believes and why what they do is important. Lawless elaborated, “A healthy church produces disciples whose theological foundation is sound and whose faith influences all that they do. The churches we studied told us that a membership class is the place to start the process.”31

30Chuck Lawless, Membership Matters: Insights from Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 32.

31Ibid., 33.
An inherent problem, however, is that a new member class can become too focused on academic content or a curriculum rather than relationships. Focusing on a curriculum or class can lead to a dangerously false sense of completion. If done properly, new member classes can be not only the first significant introduction to the church, but also the place where important relationships are formed and take root, and where people are challenged toward the goal of transformation and spiritual maturity.

The Content of Assimilation

Assimilating new members into the life of the church is vitally important for health and sustained church growth. Rick Warren stated in his book, *Purpose Driven Church*, “Don’t focus on growing a church with programs, focus on growing people with a process.” A church needs be intentional in developing an assimilation plan that moves people toward ministry involvement and spiritual maturity.

Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin suggested that believers are assimilated through a series of strategies: 1) help people develop friendships, 2) help people become involved, 3) help people belong, 4) help people work together, and 5) help people grow in their faith. These goals can be realized in various ways, such as one-to-one settings, small groups and Sunday schools, or large groups. Fellowship and friendship, serving, community, vision, and discipleship constitute the purpose of the church. Together these strategies provide a sound foundation that move people into the life of the church and provide opportunity for spiritual growth.


Rick Warren defined Biblical fellowship as, “being committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ.” Printed text: 34 Biblical fellowship is more than a cup of coffee together; it is intentional and intimate, allowing spiritual accountability and encouragement. A significant response to this writer’s survey of dropout members at Calvary Baptist was that they did not feel like they were connected to the fellowship. One respondent wrote, “I never felt connected, so I am not sure if we were supposed to be there or not. The church did not have a family feeling to me, as I had experienced before, and that was difficult. I really still kind of felt like a visitor after being there for two years.”

An assimilation strategy for fellowship should be incorporated and encouraged in various contexts. Rick Warren outlined fellowship as a series of levels, each appropriate at different times. The simplest levels of fellowship are the fellowship of sharing and the fellowship of studying God’s Word together. A deeper level is the fellowship of serving, as when we minister together on mission trips or mercy projects. The deepest, and most intense level is the fellowship of suffering, where we enter into each other’s pain and grief and carry each other’s burdens. 35

Church growth consultant, Lyle Schaller's research suggested that the more friends a person had in a congregation, the less likely that person was to become inactive or leave the church. 36 Calvary Baptist Church attempted to create and encourage opportunities for fellowship through strengthening Sunday school, small groups, and the

34Rick Warren, The Purpose Driven Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 133.
35Ibid., 141.
deacon family ministry plan. Calvary also sought to foster fellowship in social contexts, such as dinners for eight, where participants were rotated into different groups of eight people for fellowship meals. As a result of the focus on fellowship in the congregation, members responded with appreciation and participation. Encouragement in fellowship is an important ingredient in any developed assimilation plan for new members.

_Serving_

Churches have increasingly emphasized the discovery of spiritual gifts and service as a strategy of assimilation. The Calvary Baptist survey showed that 70 percent of those who left the church said that they appreciated the opportunities for ministry involvement, and sited factors other than service as causes for dropping out.

The Chuck Lawless survey stressed the significance of serving when it revealed that 50 percent of the churches studied included a spiritual gifts inventory as a part of their membership class. The result was that in the churches surveyed, over 70 percent of the members who joined in the last two years remained involved in the church.37

Moving people into fruitful ministry promotes identity and purpose in the church. Martin and McIntosh described three benefits of service in an assimilation plan. First, the members of the body were edified resulting in the maturing of the church. Second, the needs of the members were met. Third, through the expression of spiritual gifts and ministry, the members were satisfied.38

37Lawless, 101
Church growth leader, Win Arn, concluded that healthy and growing churches offer sixty tasks or responsibilities for every hundred adults, with little or no overlap.\(^{39}\) Most churches have an eighty to twenty ratio, with twenty percent of the people doing the work. It is vitally important, both for the health of the church as well as for ministry strategy, that every member be led to understand his or her spiritual gifts and engage in ministry.

Engaging people in ministry can start with the new member class where the opportunity presents itself to introduce the current ministries of the church and lead participants in discovering and affirming their spiritual gifts and abilities. Spiritual gifts inventories are an effective way to lead people in understanding spiritual gifts and how they relate to church ministry.

Small groups afford another venue for people to become involved in ministry. Thom Rainer suggested that the small group was where people could participate in face-to-face ministry.\(^{40}\) Through the relationships that grew in a small group setting, ministry needs became more apparent and the ministry resources within the group were better known.

Churches need to be willing to rethink ministry and allow people to engage in service according to their God-given gifts and passions. An example is the senior adult ministry of Calvary Baptist Church, which was birthed out of the burden and giftedness


of a resident nurse who believed that God had given her a ministry. A fruitful ministry now exists because the church supported the person and her call.

**Community**

Small groups are important in creating a sense of belonging. Andy Stanley and Bill Willits observed, “We are a culture craving relationship. In the midst of our crowded existence, many of us are living lonely lives. We live and work in a sea of humanity, but we end up missing out on the benefits of regular, meaningful relationships.”

Community was the heartbeat of Jesus as He prayed to the Father in the garden, “May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. May they also be one in Us, so the world may believe You sent Me” (John 17:21, HCSB).

Randy Frazee wrote concerning the need for community in the church,

The development of meaningful relationships where every member carries a significant sense of belonging is central to what it means to be the church. This is a God-ordained gathering of people that is so strong that even “the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Yet, in the busyness of the American lifestyle, people who profess faith in Jesus Christ and yet do not attend church make up the largest religious category in America. If the author of Hebrews were writing his words of challenge to us today, he would write, “Let us not give up meeting together, as most are in the habit of doing.”

Even with the growing isolationism in American society, people still hunger for a place where there is a sense of identity and care. Virtual online communities have become popular. Millions have joined social networks where they spend significant amounts of time talking about their activities, relationships, family, and experiences.

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41 Stanley and Willits, 24.

42 Frazee, 34.
Churches have followed suit, using websites, blogs and social media to foster community.

David Prior, in his book, Creating Community, emphasized the importance of establishing a true community.

Above all, such a church will have a feel of being a true community, a place where people feel they belong, where they are welcomed, accepted, and both challenged, and encouraged. Whatever is said and done in such a church will have the goal and the result of building its community life, if what is said and done does not move people in this direction, it will be put aside.⁴³

Martin and McIntosh wrote about the significance of relational community, “This is what people are looking for today, a community where they can know and be known. A place to love and be loved. A relationship in which they can care and be cared for.”⁴⁴

Small group involvement for its new members should be a concern of the church. There is a natural assimilation that begins when people are given an opportunity to engage in a small group, such as Sunday school, where relationships lead to ministry.

Gary McIntosh wrote about the significance of small group connections,

Newcomers enter a church looking for three key elements: friends, a place to belong, and a ministry. Is it any wonder that classes and small groups are often attractive places to assimilate new people? It is in these small gatherings that we usually develop loving friendships, a group identity, and quite often a place of service. As many as 90 percent of all newcomers who join a small group remain loyal to the church.⁴⁵

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⁴³David Prior, Creating Community: An Every Member Approach to Ministry in the Local Church (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992), 9.

⁴⁴Glen Martin and Gary McIntosh, Creating Community: Deeper Fellowship through Small Group Ministry (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 7.

Martin and McIntosh described community fellowship this way: “Fellowship is being part of God’s family; fellowship is the encouragement of other believers to grow spiritually; fellowship is the power of God when we gather together; fellowship presents a picture of Christ to a lost world.”

Purpose and Vision

If anything is certain in today’s post-modern, American culture, is that life is complex and demanding. Our culture is filled with isolation and individualism and it is a challenge for the church to break through that culture. For the church to do that, there needs to be a clear and realized vision and purpose. People no longer engage simply for the sake of tradition. Many people desire a place to find identity and purpose.

Having a common purpose was a characteristic of the first-century church in Jerusalem. Luke wrote in the book of Acts, “Now all the believers were together and held all things in common” (Acts 2:44, HCSB). It is interesting to note that just two verses earlier he wrote, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42, HCSB). Later in Acts 4, Luke described the same characteristic: “Now the large group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one said that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common” (Acts 4:32, HCSB). There was a common set of beliefs and convictions that led to actions of ministry and care.

Vision and purpose is important. People want to know why they should commit to the church and what God wants them to do. Rick Warren suggested that the motivation for people to join a church was rooted in the understood value-for-value

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46Martin and McIntosh, Creating Community, 7.
benefits received through commitment. Rainer wrote, “A clear, Great Commission vision creates a sense of ‘being on the team,’” Any assimilation plan should articulate vision and purpose statements so that new members can identify and integrate with the team and its vision.

Though not directly sited by the survey, this pastor believes that Calvary Baptist lacks a clearly defined vision and statement of purpose. Historically, the church has embraced slogan-type statements such as, “Where everybody is some body, because Jesus Christ is Lord,” or, “Loving God. Loving each other. Loving our world.” Statements like these may be somewhat helpful in promoting a sense of identity, but in actuality they do little to define purpose. In developing an assimilation strategy, the church should purposely, prayerfully, and with passion, seek a clear vision of what God has called the congregation to do and then identify how each member can be involved in that task.

**Discipleship**

Martin and McIntosh’s fifth element of an effective assimilation process was spiritual growth. Discipleship is the life-long transformation process by which believers become more like Christ. The word disciple comes from the Greek word μαθητής, which literally means learner. Jesus referred to the twelve men he called to follow him as disciples. The discipleship process is clearly seen in the New Testament and modeled

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47 Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 313,

by Jesus. Spiritual growth through discipleship should be at the heart of church leadership and a central focus of an assimilation program.

James Emery White suggested that discipleship takes more than time; it is a process of training that leads to Christ-likeness. He wrote, “Effective discipleship will help people learn how to order their lives around attitudes, practices, disciplines, relationships, and experiences of Christ. Once trained in this way, they are able to enter into training for themselves — training that will allow them to become increasingly like Christ.”

An additional component in an effective discipleship program is relationships. Whether in a one-to-one context or a small group, life change is encouraged through relationships. Calvary Baptist has a growing discipleship program that includes expository preaching, age graded Sunday school, gender based Bible small groups, and an age graded discipleship program on Wednesday evening. Over the last ten years, a fruitful discipleship group at Calvary Baptist has been the ladies’ small group, Tree of Life. The women in this group have prayed for each other, ministered to one another, and acted as a faith support group. Several ladies from this group have moved into ministry and leadership roles in the church.

Relationship based discipleship was reflected in the words of the writer of Ecclesiastes, “Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, HCSB).

Small groups have successfully taken many forms, including affinity based
groups and Sunday school classes. Whatever the format, small groups should be
developed in such a way that relationships needed for discipleship are encouraged.

THE POSSIBILITY OF RESTORATION

The survey of the inactive and formerly churched of Calvary Baptist Church
included some encouragement. Of the seventeen people surveyed, only one indicated
that they would not consider coming back to the church or any other church. Two others
(a couple) have become active members of another local evangelical church. The
remaining people expressed no decision in regard to their membership at Calvary and one
even indicated that they still considered Calvary his home church.

Is it possible, then, to still recover any of the thirteen who have dropped out of the
church? Lifeway Research discovered nationally that many of the formerly churched
adults were still open to return. Four percent said that they were actively looking to
attend a church regularly. Six percent indicated their desire was to return to their former
church. The remaining formerly churched said that they were not currently looking for a
church, but were still open to attending regularly again.\(^5\) Many dropouts simply felt like
they were never a part of the body. Convincing people that the church cares for them was
possible, but challenging.

Two significant areas of concern appeared among those who have dropped out of
fellowship at Calvary Baptist. The first was both a theological and social issue relating to
effectiveness in ministry to children and youth. The second, a social issue, was lack of

relationships and fellowship. Several steps need to be taken in order to begin the process of reaching the formerly churched of Calvary Baptist.

The church is compelled to address the weakness of the children’s and youth ministries. The Bible study element of these ministries is sound, with effective and engaged leaders and teachers. The physical condition of the buildings, which house these ministries, however, is a significant issue. The church has taken a bold step to restart a building program and, in the summer of 2011, will be razing the old buildings. Sunday school and Wednesday evening activities will be accommodated in the main building during a building program.

The ministry to children and youth should become more relevant to the family, providing encouragement to the parents, as well as opportunities for social interaction for the children. The commitment of workers and re-organization of ministry will help promote confidence and integrity. Efforts should be made to reach out to families who have children, communicating to them the commitment of the church to do ministry to children and youth with excellence.

A significant need for Calvary Baptist Church is to promote relationship building and fellowship. The challenge for the church is to not take the easy route of simply dismissing those who have dropped out. With genuine care, the church should actively reach out to those who have become estranged and seek to restore them.

This writer is convinced that one-to-one relationship building and Sunday school are good re-entry points. A small group of adults at Calvary Baptist became burdened for the formerly churched in the same way this pastor was. Through phone calls, lunch dates, and personal invitations, these caring members made an effort to re-engage those who are inactive. As a result, two people again became active in the fellowship.
Sunday school is also an important tool in reaching inactive members and dropouts. Thom Rainer in his book, *High Expectations*, quoted a pastor in California, “Our church has tried everything to create relationships among the members: small groups, dinner clubs, family ministries, you name it. But we keep coming back to the Sunday School. That's where people get to know one another best. We've finally gotten smart enough to decide to put our best efforts in relationship building there.”

Organizing classes for care ministry is critical to providing an environment that will nurture, challenge, and engage people in spiritual growth and ministry. All Sunday school classes should be organized to make personal contacts with class members and those outside classes. Teachers of the classes should appoint outreach leaders and organize the classes into small groups to make weekly contacts. Particular attention should be given to attendance, illness, and any crisis experiences of people. As a result, an attitude of caring would be developed and spread throughout the membership.

**CONCLUSION**

Successful assimilation may begin with a new member class, but in order to successfully integrate and retain church members, it should not end there.

Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger outlined an assimilation plan called, Foyer to the Kitchen, used by Northpoint Community Church, in Alpharetta, Georgia. Northpoint Church is pastored by Andy Stanley. The goal of this assimilation plan was to lead people through the various rooms (stages) of the plan until they arrived at the last room,

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the Kitchen. The Kitchen was where the people became involved in affinity groups with others. People entered into this assimilation strategy in the Foyer, which was the worship experience. The worship service was where guests are expected and planned for.

From the Foyer, people then moved into the Living Room experience, which Northpoint leadership referred to as GroupLink. Meeting periodically through the year, GroupLink would be where people connected to one another relationally. The intention was to use GroupLink to move people into the Kitchen, which is where deep fellowship and Bible study occurred in small groups. The key to this process was movement. People were not expected to stay in any one stage. Once members were in the Kitchen, they were challenged to bring others through the same process, beginning in the Foyer.52

Jesus commanded the church to reach the lost. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20, HCSB).

A necessary component in fulfilling this command is assimilating believers into the body of Christ, so that they are moved toward spiritual maturity. It is through this process that believers and the church can realize fully all that Christ has for them. The challenge of member drop out and inactivity needs to be addressed at the beginning of an individual’s relationship with the church. As Thom Rainer stated, “If churches effectively integrated all new members, reclamation would not need to be addressed.”53


53 Rainer, The Book of Church Growth, 286.
APPENDIX:
SURVEY OF INACTIVE AND FORMERLY CHURCHED MEMBERS
OF CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH, ABERDEEN, NJ

Background

In the spring of 2011, the following questions were asked of seventeen people who had been active at Calvary Baptist Church, but had become inactive over the past eighteen months. The survey consisted of ten questions, nine of which were multiple choice. One question asked for a written response.

This appendix shows the questions and responses to that survey.

Questions

1. I (we) became involved at Calvary Baptist Church:
   a. Within the last year — 0
   b. One to five years ago — 12
   c. Six to ten years — 3
   d. More than ten years ago — 2

2. I am a Christian and have been baptized.
   a. Yes — 17
   b. No — 0

3. Were you led to the Lord (saved) and baptized at Calvary Baptist Church?
   a. Yes — 6
   b. No — 11
4. How would you describe your current relationship with the church?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 4</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I consider Calvary my home church and I am spiritually enriched by my membership.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have some issues that I would like to discuss with either a deacon or the pastor in regard to my fellowship.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am prayerfully seeking fellowship in another congregation.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have become involved in another church and no longer desire membership at Calvary Baptist.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have decided not to be involved in the fellowship of Calvary or any other church at this time.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Responses</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. What particular thing(s) influenced your first visit to Calvary Baptist Church? You may select all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 5</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A special service (Easter, Christmas, a wedding, a funeral).</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through the benevolence or counseling ministry.</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I passed the church while traveling.</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found the church myself (through the Internet, phone book, etc.).</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's involvement in the children or youth ministry.</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's involvement in Vacation Bible School.</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An outreach event (Aberdeen Day Fair, Fall Festival, etc.).</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An outreach visit from someone at Calvary.</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvary's affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention.</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An invitation from a friend or a personal relationship with someone from Calvary.</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. What particular issues describe your current or former relationship with Calvary Baptist Church? Please try to rate these according to how they impacted you.

7. Was there a particular event or conflict that has negatively impacted your relationship with Calvary Baptist Church?
   a. Yes – 2
   b. No – 8
   c. No response – 7

8. If your answer to question 7 was yes, please describe the event so that we might address it in a helpful manner. (One response)
9. How would you rate Calvary’s effectiveness in these areas?

10. Please take a moment to let us know what you have observed that we could do better. We can’t fix everything, but we want to do ministry for the Lord with as much excellence as possible.
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