

## Assimilation

I sat affixed in front of my TV. THE BORG had just captured my hero and brought him onboard. Those heinous aliens were about to subject Captain Picard to the unimaginable...

*“You will be assimilated,”* a hideous-looking BORG intoned, raising his tentacles to the temples of his helpless victim. *“Resistance is futile!”*

“NO!!!” I shouted. “DON’T!! It will be all over!!!”

I couldn’t look... (even though I knew what was going to happen, since I had seen the show before). Captain Picard was about to lose his ability to think for himself. He would soon become one of *them*!! He was going to be... [gasp!] ... assimilated!!!

Hopefully that episode of Star Trek does not typify your church’s view of assimilation. However, a pastor did tell me once of two young boys in his church who, upon hearing of the church’s desire to “assimilate them,” bolted through the backdoor wild-eyed and terrified...no doubt with an apparition of Pastor BORG hot on their heels!!!

A more intellectual approach to the term takes us to the dictionary, where *assimilate* is defined: “to include into the larger whole; to involve; to make one.”

Scripture offers numerous insights into the importance of our “assimilation”...into the Body of Christ: *“The kingdom of faith is now your home country. You are no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here...”* (Eph. 2:19 The Message)

Assimilation (or use another term if your Trekkies insist) should be a critical concern for every serious church leader. Just as Christ spoke of the shepherd counting his sheep, so we as church leaders are called to shepherd those members—and potential members—God brings into our flock.

Here’s a look at the critical checkpoints in the process of seeing outsiders becoming insiders (i.e., assimilation). How is your church doing at each point? An intentional strategy is necessary for each step...none happen automatically.

### **1. ATTRACTING First-time Visitors**

You can’t assimilate visitors...if you don’t have any. Thus, an obvious prerequisite to effective assimilation is having enough visitors. How many is enough? According to THE CHURCH GROWTH RATIO BOOK<sup>1</sup>, *you need 5% of your total weekend attendance as 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> time visitors* in order to grow. If you average 250 people in worship, for example, you should average 10 – 12 visitors per weekend. (This is an *annual* average that balances high and low weeks.) Most churches average 1-2% visitors, which is one reason why most churches are not growing.

First-time visitor traffic can be increased with more special event services throughout the year, creative advertising to promote those events as well as natural high attendance days, bring a friend days, etc. Outreach Marketing offers a helpful resource kit (name) with many good ideas to increase the number of first-time visitors.

### **2. IMPRESSING Those Visitors Who Do Come**

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Church Growth Ratio Book*, Win Arn & Charles Arn (CGI: Monrovia, CA: 1990; 2004), p. 47

What are the first impressions your church gives to visitors? Most churches don't know...because their regular attendees can no longer see the church through the eyes of a newcomer. But, first impressions have everything to do with whether visitors return.

The first ten minutes of the visitor's experience are great opportunities to say, "Welcome!" If you were to visit Calvary Christian Reformed Church (Pella, IA) you would be met in the parking lot by hosts welcoming you to church. First Evangelical Free Church (Fullerton, CA) stations hosts with red blazers and a "Questions???" button on their lapel in and outside the church building. Red Bank Baptist Church (Chattanooga, TN) has hosts at the visitor center to escort newcomers to a Sunday School class, take mothers to the nursery, and help visitors find the sanctuary.

So, the first ten minutes are an important time for making good first impressions. But apparently not *the* most important time...

We have conducted focus groups over the years interviewing people after their first visit to a church. We asked what most impressed them (or depressed them) about the church they had just visited?" One answer far outdistanced all others: "*the friendliness of the church.*"

"So, how did you determine whether or not the church was friendly?" we then asked.

"Simple," they told us. "It was whether anyone talked to us."

Well, my friends. It's apparently not rocket science, after all. There is a simple, yet profound relationship between the *number* of people who talk to a first-time visitor, and the visitor's impression of the "friendliness" of that church: many conversations = friendly church; few conversations = unfriendly church. It is the perceived "friendliness" of your church that is the most significant factor in whether or not a first-time visitor will return.

We asked one more question in our study: "*When* did you conclude that the church was or wasn't a friendly church?" The most frequent response surprised us. There is a ten-minute window in the 75-90 minutes that most people spend in their first church visit that is critical for that first impression of friendliness. When?

It is the first ten minutes...following the *conclusion* of the service!

It is during this moment, apparently, that most visitors determine whether this is *really* a friendly church. The rules are now off. The people are who they really are. And that's when it really shows, said our subjects.

My family and I visited Cornerstone Bible Church (Glendora, CA) a few years ago while looking for a new church following our move. The pastor, at the conclusion of the service, said to the congregation: "Now, before we go, remember our 3-minute rule here at Cornerstone: No one can talk with a person they know for the first three minutes after the service. You can sit and meditate. You can leave silently. Or, you can talk with someone you don't know." Most, apparently, choose the latter. I found it a "freeing" experience, which allowed me to turn to a stranger and start a conversation. Our three-minute conversation lasted 15-minutes. And, guess who we looked for at that church when we returned for a second visit?

### **3. RETURNING: Seeing Visitors Come Back**

A remarkable pattern appears, upon closer study, of the visitor assimilation process. Remarkable, but logical: *The more often visitors return, the more likely they stay.*

Here are the results of a study we conducted several years ago on visitor return rates. We asked churches to identify a continuous six-week period and observe the number of people who visited once in that time frame; twice; or three times. Then, one year later, we asked the churches to determine how many of those people who visited had joined or become active. Here are the results:

**How Many Visitors Stay?**

	<i>Non-growing Churches</i>	<i>Growing Churches</i>
<i>One-time Visitors</i>	9%	21%
<i>Two-time Visitors</i>	17%	38%
<i>Three-time Visitors</i>	36%	57%

We found that 9% of those who visited non-growing churches one time during the six weeks became involved in that church the following year. However, of those who visited twice in the six-week period, 17% subsequently became active. And, even in non-growing churches, over one third of the newcomers who visited three times were now participating in that church. The pattern is similar, but even more significant, in growing churches.

The question should leap off the page: *“Do we have an effective visitor follow-up system for more than just our first-time visitors?”*

This is the first point in the assimilation process where the new computer software programs can be helpful.

A primary goal of your visitor follow-up strategy should simply be to see the first-time visitor return a second time...and a third time. When they do, you have doubled the chances of seeing them for a long time.

**4. NURTURING: Building Relationships with Newcomers**

Try asking your new members the same question we have asked over 40,000 laypeople in the past eleven years: *“Why did you join this church?”* If your people are typical (most pastors don’t think theirs are!) somewhere between 75% - 90% will mention “a friend or relative” as a key part of the process.

*Relationships* have been the most important ingredient in the expansion of Christianity since the first century!<sup>2</sup> Donald McGavran called relationships “the bridges of God” in the spread of the

---

<sup>2</sup> See *The Master’s Plan for Making Disciples* by Win & Charles Arn (Baker, 1999), for a complete discussion of the scriptural principle of social networks in the spread for the Gospel, and how to intentionalize the process today.

gospel and the growth of the church.<sup>3</sup> An effective assimilation strategy, therefore, will create a “greenhouse” in which new relationships between newcomers and your church members are nurtured.

In my own case, an important part of our eventual selection of a new church home grew from an invitation I received two days after our first visit. It was an invitation...to play on the church softball team. It was not the kind of invitation I was expecting from the church phone caller. After a moment, I said, “well, OK.” My wife was later invited to be part of a women’s Bible study. For both of us, it was the beginning of relationships with new friends that became our bridges into that church.

Friendships grow around things we share in common; common interests, common needs, common concerns, common problems, common life situations. Identifying people (both in and outside the church) who share things in common, and then beginning a group around those common denominators, will bring amazing results.

## **5. JOINING: Affiliation and Membership**

A missing assimilation link in many churches is the Inquirer’s Class. This is a low-commitment class where anyone who is interested can learn more about the church...no strings attached. The class is not a hard sell on membership, not a bait-and-switch sales technique. An Inquirer’s Class simply gives interested people a chance to learn who you are, what you believe, and why you’re here. Our experience is that 85% of all graduates from such a class decide to join.

Another thought on assimilation and new members: *have high expectations for your new members.* The Inquirer’s Class should clearly explain the high calling of membership and discipleship. What are the “minimums” that a member of your church should expect to do? St. Paul’s Lutheran Church (Trenton, MI) tells all those interested that every member is expected to: 1) be regular in worship, 2) be involved in a small group, 3) give financially to the church, and 4) have a ministry consistent with their spiritual gift. No wonder the church has a high member-to-attendance ratio and a low dropout rate.

The opposite pattern, common in many churches, is reflected in the country western tune: “I’m Living Up To Her Low Expectations...” Researchers and educators know well the truth of the “Pygmalion Effect”— expectations affect results.

## **6. MONITORING: The First Year**

Of all those new members who drop out of church, over 80% do so in the first year. Like a new baby entering the world, that first year is critical to the survival of the new believer and member.

From our interviews, newcomers are apparently asking certain questions during the first six months of their church involvement. And they are asking different questions the second six months. Satisfactory answers to these questions keep newcomers coming back. Unsatisfactory answers send them home packing...

© Charles Arn

Here’s what newcomers seem to be wondering in the first six months of their involvement in their new church:

---

<sup>3</sup> *Bridges of God* Donald McGavran (get ref.)

1. Can I make friends in this church?
2. Is there a place I can fit in in this church?
3. Does this church want me?

It seems to take about six months for newcomers to arrive at an answer to these questions. (Different people, by the way, place different emphasis on each question.)

Those who are satisfied with the answer to these questions stay; those who aren't, leave after 5-6 months. Of those who stay, there are three more questions that are being asked:

1. Are my new friends as good as my old friends?
2. Is the benefit of being involved worth the cost?
3. Is my contribution important (i.e., significant)?

The second spike in the dropout chart comes from people who are not satisfied with the answer to these questions. But those who stay will be around for a long time to come. It is these people who no longer talk about "*their* group" and "*your* pastor," but about "*our* group" and "*my* pastor."

Assimilation. It's not rocket science. But, neither is it all intuitive. There's much to learn. But it is well worth our effort to learn it. For there is no doubt that the heart of God is filled with joy when the sheep he places in our care, are all present and accounted for—in your church.