

The challenge of Assimilation: Keeping and not just attracting

Ministry Today 62 (Summer 2014) 7-13

We are very fortunate as a church. There is never a Sunday when we do not have visitors. Some are ‘out of town’ visitors who are perhaps spending the weekend with friends. Some live locally, and normally attend another place of worship, but have decided to play ‘truant’ for the day. Others have just moved into town, and are looking for a new spiritual home. Others may well have lived in the town for a number of years, but all of a sudden have decided to give church a try. Yet others have already some contact with our church, perhaps they have begun an Alpha course or perhaps they have links with the Toddlers’ Group or their children attend one of our youth activities; whatever, they too have decided to give church a try.

The challenge we face, as indeed all churches face, is not just to attract worshippers, but to keep worshippers. How do we encourage people without a church home to visit us again? How do we keep, and not just attract, visitors?

Clearly people need to be welcomed – and to feel welcome. As Rick Warren has commented: “Long before the pastor preaches, the visitor is deciding whether to come back. They are asking themselves, ‘Do I feel welcome here?’”¹ Many churches have a welcome team ready to greet visitors as they appear at the door of the church. To my mind, however, the initial welcome is so important, I have to be part of that team. Indeed, I ensure that I am at the door twenty minutes before the service, ready to welcome everybody to church. In the case of a newcomer, they are not just welcomed at the door, but then shown to their seat in our ‘meeting place’.

In the service itself we repeat the welcome – twice! At the beginning of the service we welcome everybody – and then, mindful that some newcomers arrive late, after the opening worship we welcome people at greater length. I draw attention to our church welcome cards – which gives visitors an opportunity to tell us not only their names and addresses, but also their first impressions of the church (This is what I first noticed, this is what I liked, this is what I did not like). To encourage them to fill in the card I promise every newcomer who returns one of these cards a pen, inscribed with the name and web-site of the church! It is amazing how a ‘bribe’ of this nature encourages people to give us their details.

I once visited a church in Auckland, New Zealand, where newcomers were offered two gifts. On their first visit they were given a mug with the name of the church. During the week following their visit they were sent a welcome letter and promised a further gift if they were to attend church next week – the gift was a CD featuring a sermon of the senior pastor! Perhaps significantly this particular church has a very high rate of retention of newcomers.²

¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 211

² Heather Wraight, “A large, nationwide survey found that churches which were growing were more likely to give newcomers something (‘Leadership, Vision and Growing Churches’, Christian Research 2003 – private research for the Salvation Army Central Northern Division). It didn’t seem to matter what that ‘something’ was, presumably because the act of identifying the recipient is in itself significant. However, what they are given... ideally should help to encourage them to come again”. (‘Extending a warm welcome’, 211-217 in *How To Become A Creative Church Leader: a MODEM handbook*, Canterbury Press, 2007, edited by John Nelson) 214

But, of course, the welcome that truly counts is the welcome given informally by church members after the service. Newcomers along with everybody else are encouraged to stay for a drink in our friendship centre – in the general melee it is there that introductions are made and friendships begin to form.

While welcome teams and welcome processes can be organised, a welcoming spirit cannot be stage-managed. But it can be developed. I am constantly challenging my people to get to know ‘one new name a Sunday’. The very first ‘value’ we have set ourselves as a church is to be ‘warm and welcoming’. We want a welcoming spirit to be written into our church DNA. It has been rightly said that: “The most important element of being a more welcoming church is a commitment from the whole congregation to be more welcoming. Although welcoming procedures are important, a welcoming attitude is vital”.³

In this respect, let me give you a flavour of the spirit I seek to engender by quoting from a sermon I preached entitled ‘The friendliest church in town’.

“I long to be the pastor of the friendliest church in town. I long for my church to be the most open, the most accepting, the most caring, the most supportive, and the most loving church in town.

If we are to be the friendliest church in town then in the first place we must know one another by name. I believe that had Christ been standing at the door of our church welcoming us to church, he would have welcomed each one of us by name. He wouldn’t just have said: “Good morning” to me, but “Good morning, Paul”. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, “calls his own sheep by name” (John 10.3). And so too should we! The fact is that to greet a person by name is show that they count, they have value.

But some might say: “*There are too many people in our church to get to know*”. I don’t buy that one. I read of one American pastor who claimed to know all 16,000 of his members by name. Nor do I buy that excuse, ‘But I haven’t got a head for names’. I believe that when English people say they have a bad memory for names, they are in effect saying “I can’t be bothered”; “I’m too lazy”. If you don’t believe me, then why is it that Americans are by and large better than British people in remembering people’s names? Is it that they are cleverer? Or is it that in American society it is impolite not to know somebody’s name?

Some people accuse me of having a small church mentality. No I have the mentality of Jesus - Jesus for whom names are important. On this ‘Name Tag’ Sunday let me encourage you to look at other people’s name tags and learn their names – and then greet them by name! In saying their name, you will more easily remember their name the next time!

³ Rob Norman, quoted in *New Era, New Church?* (HarperCollins, London 1999) by Steve Chalke with Sue Radford

But there is more to friendliness than simply standing at the door, and saying “Hi Bill”, “Hi Gwen”. Friendliness goes a step further. The smile and the handshake are accompanied by an offer of a coffee or a meal at home. Friendliness involves welcoming one another into one another’s homes.

It is true that nowhere do we read that Jesus welcomed folks into his home – probably for the simple reason that he was a single guy who spent much of his time on the road. But one thing we do read: Jesus was always having meals with others. So much so that his enemies described him as a glutton and a wine-bibber. Not surprisingly, perhaps, is that his followers made a big deal of hospitality. So Paul wrote: “Open your homes to strangers” (Rom 12.13). Peter wrote: “Open your homes to each other without complaining” (1 Pet 4.9). The unknown writer of the letter to the Hebrews wrote: “Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it” (Hebs 13.2). Do notice that the New Testament does not say “those of you with larger homes or with children off your hands and who have the gift of hospitality, open your homes to one another”. In the New Testament hospitality was not perceived as a gift of some, but rather as a duty for every Christian. What was true then, remains true today. We too in our turn need to be inviting people into our homes

If we are to be the friendliest church in town then we must learn not only to greet one another by name, but to invite one another into our homes.⁴

But is a welcoming spirit sufficient to encourage people to return? According to one American study the three most important factors in ensuring a return visit were the pastor, the nursery, and the signs! I find that a fascinating insight. It’s not just the pastor – it’s about facilities for children, and also about finding the facilities! It’s not enough to welcome people at the door – the whole church environment needs to be welcoming!

Important as is the environment, even more important is the attitude of the congregation toward their faith. According to Graham Tomlin, it is not primarily the quality of the preaching, liturgy, or music which brings people back to church – it was the authenticity of the church members. “Unless there is something that intrigues, provokes, or entices, then all the evangelism in the world will fall on deaf ears. If churches cannot convey a sense of ‘reality’ then all our ‘truth’ will come to nothing... Churches need to be provocative, arresting places which make the searcher, the casual visitor, want to come back for more”⁵

Another American study lists the following five factors as being key to attracting new members

- a positive identity (energy, inclusive, common vision)
- congregational harmony & co-operation
- the pastor's ability to generate enthusiasm (good sermons, warmth, spiritual depth)

⁴ A sermon based on Psalm 133: ‘Let’s be the friendliest church in town!’ Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford 27 January 2008

⁵ Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church* (SPCK, London 2nd edition 2004) 10-11

- congregational involvement in social action/service
- small group programming

With regard to this last factor, in larger churches small groups are certainly key to retaining people. It is, however, not enough to advertise small groups; nor even to give the newcomer a list of small groups in the church. People need to receive a personal invitation – ‘come to my small group’. Better still, ‘May I call on you on Wednesday night (or whenever) and take you to my small group.’

An issue with which I have struggled is at what point does the church follow up newcomers? According to Bill Easum, a North American Methodist church consultant, “traditional churches must respond within 24 hours to those who decide to give you their names, addresses, and phone numbers. This contact needs to be personal and made by the pastor in a church with fewer than four hundred in worship and by laypeople in the larger church. The layperson can call the visitor on the phone or make what some call a ‘doorstep visit’, taking a gift of some kind and not going inside the door. The key to assimilating new people is introducing them to five to seven new people whom they will consider to be good friends within the first three months of their visiting.”⁶ A little later Easum writes:

“Studies show that friendly, brief visits to first-time visitors within 36 hours after they attend will cause 85% of them to return the following week. If this home visit is made within 72 hours, 60% will return. If it is made more than 7 days later, 15% will return. If the pastor makes this call, each result is cut in half. A phone call by a layperson or the pastor instead of a personal visit cuts results by 80%. This immediate response by a layperson is the most important factor in reaching first-time visitors. The average person today visits several churches before deciding on a church. This means he or she may not come back for six weeks. By then, the average person decides which church to return to based on the friendliness and helpfulness of the members. If you wait until they return the second time, you lost 85% of your visitors.”⁷

These statistics relate to a particularly cultural situation. What may be true in the States may not be true elsewhere. Nonetheless, I find the statistics challenging – and not least the emphasis upon the prompt follow-up by a layperson.

Over the years I have adopted different strategies. Sometimes I have just written a letter expressing my delight in their visit; and sometimes I have sent a family flowers. Once people have been more than once to a Sunday service, then I normally offer to visit them in their homes – for the fact is that when I stand at the door on a Sunday, it is impossible to have any deep meaningful conversation with anybody.

For those newcomers who have yet to come to faith, then clearly an invitation to an Alpha class would be the next step. For those newcomers who have already a Christian faith, then the next step is to attend a new members’ class. According to one American study, in ‘demand churches’ these new membership classes tend to be between 1-3 sessions, while in ‘high demand’ churches the classes can last be between 24-45

⁶ *The Complete Ministry Audit* (Abingdon, Nashville, Revised Edition 2006) 125.

⁷ Easum 126

sessions! In the light of that categorisation, we must be in the low demand group! We find it very difficult to get newcomers to commit themselves to a course of any length.

In this respect I find it interesting that the membership class run at Saddleback is only four hours long and is taught in one day. The course ends with a ‘Saddleback quiz’ testing the prospective members on how well they can state the purposes of the church!⁸

The newcomers’ course at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, takes the following format:

1. INTRODUCING ONE ANOTHER
 - 1.1 Introduction to the staff team
 - 1.2 This is my story - We introduce one another
 - 1.3 This is our (church) story

2. INTRODUCING BAPTISTS
 - 2.1 Our roots
 - 2.2 Our beliefs
 - 2.3 Breaking bread and drinking wine⁹

3. INTRODUCING CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH
 - 3.1 Our mission
 - 3.2 Our five purposes
 - 3.3 Our values
 - 3.4 Our covenant

4. TEAMS AT CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH
 - 4.1 The leadership team
 - 4.2 The task-oriented teams

5. BELONGING TO CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH
 - 5.1 Worshipping together
 - 5.2. Loving one another
 - 5.3 Attending church meetings
 - 5.4. Giving proportionately
 - 5.5. Serving in the church – and beyond
 - 5.6. Winning others for Jesus

6. MY DREAM FOR THE CHURCH

Yes, as a church we do our best to ‘keep’ and not just ‘attract’ people. Sadly, in spite of all we do, there are many who just come and go. Assimilation remains an ongoing challenge for us.

⁸ Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* 316, 317.

⁹ This emphasis on the Lord’s Supper may seem to some a little strange. However, I have found that even amongst Christians of long-standing, there is a good deal of ignorance about the meaning of the Lord’s Supper.