

# Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 7

## How to Build Assimilation Bridges for New Members/Attendees

**Why are we gifting you this volume?** Because the mission statement of our primary publication—*The Parish Paper: New Ideas for Active Congregations*—is to help the largest possible number of congregations achieve maximum effectiveness in their various ministries. *The Parish Paper* is a monthly newsletter whose subscribers receive copyright permission to distribute to their constituents—more than two million readers in 28 denominations. Go to [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com) for subscription information.

**Purpose of this Volume:** Provide in-depth answers to questions that readers of *The Parish Paper* ask regarding principles and procedures by which new members and attendees become (1) highly committed congregational participants who do not drift out the back door to inactive status and (2) spiritually-growing disciples of Jesus Christ.

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### Volume 7 – Contents

#### I. The Architecture of New Member/Attendee Assimilation – Page 2

Removing the Barbed Wire – Page 2

Drawing the Blueprint – Page 3

Constructing an Assimilation-Effective Church – Page 3

When Do Newcomers Assimilate? – Page 5

When Do New Members Drop Out? – Page 5

How Does Assimilation Happen? – Page 5

#### II. Bridges to Group Involvement – Page 6

Church Age Factors – Page 7

Church Size Factors – Page 7

Groups that Facilitate Assimilation – Page 8

How to Involve Newcomers in Groups – Page 8

Cell Groups – Page 9

#### III. Bridges to Friends – Page 10

How to Facilitate Friendships – Page 11

New Member Classes – Page 11

What Counts most – Page 11

#### IV. Bridges to Ministry Roles and Responsibilities – Page 12

Six Crucial Questions – Page 12

The New Member Interview – Page 13

Achieving Accountability for Results – Page 14

Birth Date Behaviors – Page 15

Numerous Entry-Level Positions – Page 15

Financial Stewardship – Page 16

Leadership Roles – page 16

#### V. Bridges to Spiritual Growth Experiences – Page 17

The Church's Central Goal – Page 17

A Poor Track Record – Page 17

What Is Spiritual Growth? – Page 17

What Causes Spiritual Growth? – Page 18

Small Group Methods – Page 18

Do We Elevate People? – Page 19

## I. The Architecture of New Member/Attendee Assimilation

For 150 years, Johnson Creek Church had been five miles out of Henryville. Worship attendance stayed about the same through the parade of each passing decade. Then Henryville started growing. A new Interstate came through, changing traffic patterns. Worship visitors from town began appearing. They could drive here more conveniently than downtown.

Young couples from an edge-of-town housing development began joining the church. The unexpected blessing brought a challenge this country congregation had never experienced: assimilation difficulties.

The Martins said after the end of the first year, “This congregation will let you into the building, but they won’t let you into the fellowship. They’ll let you into the membership, but they won’t let you into the church. We haven’t been attending very much lately.”

A young businessman said, “It seems like everyone who runs things around here either came over on the Mayflower or is the granddaughter of someone who did. When I joined, I was enthusiastic about serving in some capacity that would help the church grow, but that opportunity never came.”

Another new member said, “I’m on the church council, probably because I married one of those granddaughters. We moved here after college. But making changes in this church is about as easy as persuading the president to change political parties.”

Most of Johnson Creek’s long-term leaders are unaware of these feelings. The barbed-wire fences around their pastureland keep the stocky beef cattle from wondering away. The barbed wire that keeps newcomers from getting into their church is invisible to them.

Assimilation barriers are not limited to small, rural churches. Large city churches also experience them.

The New Testament Book of Acts describes rapidly developing congregations with phrases such as “added that day” (Acts 2:41). Again and again, Luke cites the total number of people who connected with churches, along with the words, “and there were added to the Lord” (Acts 5:14).

Luke’s words can help church leaders face a crucial question: Are we adding all of our new members to Christ and the church? Or are we adding a big percentage of them to the membership roll, and then shifting them to the *inactive*-member list?

**Removing the Barbed Wire:** Do you want the Mr. and Mrs. Jones who join your church next Sunday to be active participants one year from now? Do you want the Smiths who began attending regularly two months ago to be fully committed disciples of Jesus Christ and consistent pew residents one year from now?

The old cliché about “an ounce of prevention” is old because it applies to so many situations. Inactive church members are one of those. If new members and attendees are to become and remain active participants, they must have experiences that bond them to your congregation. How, exactly, does that happen? Why does it happen better in some churches than in others?

The accusation that some churches take in crowds of new members who go out the back door soon after joining is based on a faulty metaphor. More often, new members who drift out the back door into inactive status never got into the front door.

Churches in which most new members and attendees become (a) highly committed congregational participants who do not drift out the back door to inactive status and (b) spiritually-growing disciples of Jesus Christ do not focus on shutting the back door. They build bridges by which newcomers get fully into the front door.

Opening the front door is important for two major reasons:

- *Spiritual:* Churches that bring people into membership but not into discipleship can spiritually damage them in ways that prevent them from ever becoming active disciples. Christian discipleship is the objective of newcomer assimilation, not just membership.

- *Pragmatic*: Congregational assimilation failure is estimated at 40 percent to 70 percent by various authorities. If congregations fully open their front doors, they double their growth in both membership and discipleship.

Congregations that effectively assimilate gain 90-or-more *active* disciples per 100 new members, instead of only 40-to-70 *active* disciples per 100 new members.

**Drawing the Blueprints:** Congregations that exhibit maximum assimilation-effectiveness meet the basic and universal psycho-social needs of new attendees and new members! Mentally healthy people who experience a sense of wholeness and well-being in their lives have the following qualities: 1. Strong self-identity. 2. Goal oriented. 3. Hopeful. 4. High self-esteem. 5. Feeling important. 6. Feeling loved. 7. Loving others. 8. Stable social relationships. 9. Personal freedom. 10. Opportunities for new experiences. 11. Clear personal value system. 12. Faith in God’s providence.

Remove one or two of these twelve, and you move toward unhappiness and dysfunctional behaviors. If you lack three-to-five of them in your life-experiences, you feel dissatisfied and unhappy much of the time. If six-to-nine of them are missing, you sometimes feel that you are bordering on mental illness. If nine-to-twelve of them are missing, you are probably under psychiatric treatment and/or hospitalized.

Assimilation-effective churches meet those twelve basic psychosocial needs, which summarize into a three-layer cake.

- *The spiritual component*: The assimilated member has a feeling of positive connectedness with God. This is the transcendent aspect of human experience. The opposite of this feeling is a sense of being totally self-dependent and “alone in the universe.”
- *The emotional component*: The assimilated member has a feeling of positive connectedness with other people. This is the relational aspect of human experience. The opposite of this feeling is a sense of loneliness.
- *The rational component*: The assimilated member has a feeling of positive connection with stimulating insights about life and self. This is the informational aspect of human experience. The opposite of this is a feeling of boredom.

All three of those layers are important in the process of assimilation. Remove one of them and you destroy the cake.

**Constructing an Assimilation-Effective Church:** That kind of congregation is like a chemical compound that contains these essential ingredients:

*Attitude + Atmosphere + Actions = Assimilation.*

Some authors lobby for the word “integration” rather than assimilation. While much can be said for that interesting argument, the term is more of a cosmetic way of saying the same thing than a profound observation about the nature of reality among newcomers. Integration is also confusing when applied to newcomers, because it has been used for the last sixty years to speak about civil rights issues.

Positive-assimilation *attitude* equates with “congregational extroversion.” This attitude says what a farmer’s wife with a large family always said when someone showed up unexpectedly for lunch: “We always have room for one more.”

The opposite attitude repeats in various ways the seven last words of declining-effectiveness churches: “Our church is about the right size.” Or, as one long-term member put it, “The new members are nice, just as long as they don’t start thinking this is their church.”

Positive-assimilation *atmosphere* equates with emotional warmth and acceptance. When you visit a church for the first time, the emotional atmosphere becomes obvious in 120 seconds. The atmosphere is either warm or cold. You read the atmosphere in the body language of the people.

- Positive-assimilation atmosphere churches send emotional signals that repeatedly say, “How can we help you to feel at home?”
- Negative-assimilation atmosphere churches send many kinds of signals that say, “New people are responsible for making a place for themselves.”

Positive-assimilation *actions* equate with “organizational inclusiveness” behaviors. Assimilation-effective churches know that the bridges to active participation must be built from both ends.

The leaders and members of non-assimilating churches have a predisposition to actions that build invisible glass walls between themselves and new members (invisible to members; the new members see these walls quite clearly).

*What do assimilated members look like from the inside?* Assimilated people *feel* like this:

1. *Acceptance*—“Somebody loves me.” This is like the feeling of intimacy and unlimited affirmation that a child has in a good family. In churches, this is God’s Grace through others.
2. *Security*—“I belong.” This is a feeling of fitting in, the feeling that you are included in the group.
3. *Self-Esteem*—“I am somebody.” This is the feeling of positive self-identify that brings a sense of healthy importance and value.
4. *Influence*—“My opinions count.” This is the feeling of having my ideas taken seriously, the sense that I can impact the direction of the group.
5. *Meaning*—“I enjoy worshiping here.” This is the feeling of personal enrichment. It brings a strengthening of values, character, and relationships.
6. *Opportunity*—“I feel like I am growing spiritually.” This is a feeling of spiritual progress that brings psychological and social growth through positive new experiences.
7. *Service*—“I am helping someone.” This is a feeling of positive contribution to the lives of others. It helps me feel that I am making the world a better place.

Church leaders are inclined to pick one of these seven and say it is the one that really counts. However, if you remove any two of them, active discipleship is unlikely to happen—or fades very soon after it begins.

The opposites of those assimilated feelings are easy to identify. How does the *unassimilated* person feel?

1. Acceptance—“I’m not sure anyone cares about me.”
2. Security—“I don’t fit in very well.”
3. Self-Esteem—“I’m a ‘nobody’ compared to most other members.”
4. Influence—“No one cares what I think.”
5. Meaning—“I don’t get much out of the service.”
6. Opportunity—“I do not feel spiritually fed.”
7. Service—“Nothing I do matters much.”

If two or three of these negatives are present, assimilation does not happen and many assimilated people begin to “unassimilate.”

*What do assimilated members look like from the outside?* From the perspective of observers in the congregation, five characteristics determine whether newcomers become and remain active disciples in a congregation:

1. They have a supportive relationship with some small group in the church.
2. They have some type of role/responsibility in the church.
3. They have a warm relationship with two or more people in the church.
4. They have a positive attitude about the pastor.
5. They have a sense of devotion and loyalty to God.

Remove two of those five and most people do not become assimilated, or they drop out after church leaders *thought* they were assimilated. When newcomers fail to become active or drop out immediately after joining the church, many church leaders charge that “Item #5” on the list was absent. “They just weren’t committed!” leaders often say with an air of betrayal. Often, however, the inactivity problem stems from the absence of one or more items higher up the list.

**When Do Newcomers Assimilate?** Crucial periods during which newcomers move toward more (or less) active discipleship in a congregation:

1. The months prior to becoming members
2. The first six weeks after joining
3. Six weeks to one year after joining.

**When Do New Members Drop Out?** Of newcomers who join and later become inactive, 70-to-75 percent drop out during their first year. (Robert Orr, “The First Year,” *Net Results*, March 1991, page 6)

1. The first spike in the dropout pattern comes within the first three months after joining.
2. The second spike in which a large number of new members drop out comes during the fifth-to-seventh month after joining.
3. The third point at which a large number of people become inactive (although a smaller percentage than the previous two spikes) is the eleventh-to-thirteenth month.

**How Does Assimilation Happen?** Acts 2:41-47 lays out a roadmap by which the early church assimilated new members following the day of Pentecost. (Vergil Gerber, unpublished paper, Consultation on Contemporary Evangelism, Chicago, Illinois, November 30, 1996)

1. Conversion: They accepted the message.
2. Identification: They were baptized.
3. Incorporation: They were added to the church.
4. Instruction: They received Christ’s teachings in and by the church.
5. Involvement: They became actively involved in the church’s ministries.
6. Propagation: They reached out into the community with the message.
7. Reproduction: God multiplied them as others responded to the message.

But the sequence of that seven-card assimilation deck has reshuffled several times since the mass conversions that followed Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost:

1. During the church’s early centuries, *Instruction* preceded *Identification* (baptism), followed by *Incorporation* as newcomers became formal members.
2. During the tent-meeting revival era of the early 1900s and up until about 1960, the seven-step Pentecost pattern of Acts 2:41-47 reappeared.
3. About 1960, many congregations in mainline denominations adopted a completely new pattern. *Incorporation* and *Instruction* happen *first*—before *Conversion*. (In some cases, of course, *Conversion* never happens.)
4. Today’s fastest-growing megachurches changed the sequence again. *Involvement* (what most scholars call “assimilation”) begins *before* official membership. New

attendees become active in the congregation's ministries *before Conversion, Instruction, Identification, and Incorporation* as formal members.

Assimilation-effective churches build four kinds of bridges for newcomers:

1. Bridges to group involvement that gives newcomers the sense of inclusion that helps them to feel loved and gives them the opportunity to express love to others.
2. Bridges to friendships that give newcomers feelings of acceptance and self-esteem.
3. Bridges to ministry roles and responsibilities that give newcomers a sense of purpose, meaning, and positive self-identity.
4. Bridges to spiritual-growth experiences that give newcomers Christ-centered values.

These four bridges meet universal psycho-social-spiritual needs that help people become (a) highly committed congregational participants who do not drift out the back door to inactive status and (b) spiritually-growing disciples of Jesus Christ.

In other words, the four bridges to effective assimilation are like a box with four sides. Remove one or more of the sides and the contents of the box do not stay inside. The next four sections illustrate ways to build those four bridges.

## II. Bridges to Group Involvement

A man sitting next to a famous mountain climber at a dinner asked, "Why do mountain climbers rope themselves together? If one falls, doesn't that endanger all the rest?"

The climber replied, "The rope is not so much for safety as it is to keep the tired ones from going home." Laughable when applied to mountain climbing, that remark is fairly accurate when applied to assimilating newcomers in churches. Involving new attendees and members in meaningful groups maximizes assimilation-effectiveness by meeting their need for inclusion, feeling loved, and expressing love to others.

In every type of organization, knowing whether you are "in" or "out" is extremely important. Assimilated people know they are in. How do they *know* that they are in? That feeling comes primarily from their involvement in some type of group.

In groups, people become bonded to others in ways that make them feel more comfortable staying with the group than leaving it. Thus, when they think of dropping out of this church, they define the idea of leaving in terms of "leaving this group," which they do not want to do. This feeling of inclusion and being cared for by the group is similar to the feeling of being included in a family in childhood. Families are never perfect. Some days they are quite imperfect. Yet, strong emotional bonds hold them together.

The feeling of inclusion in a group is similar to but different from the feeling of acceptance gained from individual friendships. We can gain the feeling of friendship acceptance from a counselor or a psychiatrist. But we only gain the feeling of group inclusion from relating to several people at the same time.

The best of mothers and fathers provide the psychological feeling of *acceptance* that is essential to mental health. The best of families also provide the psychological feeling of *inclusion* that comes from relating to the family group. The best of churches provide both feelings—*acceptance* and *inclusion*. But the feeling of group inclusion is likely to precede the feeling of individual friendship acceptance. When they are included in a group, people begin to know other people well enough to form the friendships that lead to feelings of acceptance.

One of the barriers to assimilation-effectiveness is the illusion that people are assimilated into churches by attending worship services. Worship has enormous value in Christian life. The majority of Christians identify worship as their number-one source of spiritual growth. Attending worship also enhances self-esteem and positive self-identity. However, worship cannot meet the basic need for inclusion, feeling loved, and expressing love to others. That comes from group involvement.

**Church Age Factors:** A congregation's age influences how effectively it assimilates newcomers through group involvement. When new churches reach the age of fifteen years, they become less effective at adding new people to their groups. The fellowship glue that bonds long-term members together as they become well acquainted becomes a barrier to assimilating new people into the church's groups. This is one of the reasons why most churches stop growing approximately fifteen years after birth. By that time close-knit groups and cliques prevent newcomers from feeling at home in the various groups.

In churches more than fifteen years old, getting new people into various kinds of groups requires intentional procedures. Otherwise, long-term members of the various groups do not see and take down the invisible fellowship barriers. The best of intentions and the pastor's strong appeals to the virtue of "welcoming newcomers into our church family" come to nothing. A few strongly extroverted personalities (about 15 percent of new attendees) make it through the fellowship glue encasing the various groups. The other newcomers bounce off.

**Church Size Factors:** A congregation's size influences the type of assimilation process it must use. Churches with fewer than 100 people in average worship attendance (about 50 percent of American congregations) have some subgroups. Overall, however, a small church *is* a group. The leaders of a small-membership church must therefore find highly intentional ways to assimilate newcomers into the total group.

One possibility is a three-month plan such as the following—in which long-term members help newcomers feel at home: Have one family invite a new couple or member to their house for dinner (or a local restaurant) and invite two other long-term-member couples (total of eight people). The following month, ask one of the other two long-term-member couples to host a dinner (or a restaurant get-together) for the new couple or member and invite two *different* long-term-member couples that attended the first month's dinner (total of eight people). Repeat the second step for the third month.

In his workshops, Charles Yarborough of Albany, Kentucky, describes an assimilation procedure that he invented during the years when a micro-congregation that had fewer than two-dozen attendees grew to more than 100 people in worship.

- The father in Christ's parable put rings on his prodigal son's fingers and shoes on his feet. He then killed the fatted calf and gave a party to welcome his returning son. Based on that metaphor, Yarborough developed a "Dinner of Love."
- When someone joins the church, leaders schedule a dinner for the following Wednesday evening. They cancel all other regularly scheduled Wednesday programs to throw this party at 6:30 p.m. in the fellowship hall. This is a big deal: good tableware—china, glass, etc., no paper plates. The pastor urges new members to invite other family members as guests, but none of them is to bring food for this potluck dinner.
- New members are the guests of honor, seated in a special place with the pastor, board chairperson, Sunday school teacher(s) etc.
- In front of each new member's plate are cards and letters from all members. (This marvelous bonding procedure involves all the long-term members in doing something quite specific to welcome these new members into their church family.)
- Each new member receives a beautifully wrapped leather Bible with his or her name engraved on it. If the church is welcoming a family that involves a husband, wife, and child, each person receives a Bible.

In small churches, what happens if bonding to the total group does not occur though one of the above or similar methods? Efforts to get people into adult classes, the women's organization, or the choir will come to nothing (except for the 15 percent of newcomers whose personalities are highly extroverted).

**Church Groups that Facilitate Assimilation:** All large churches and many midsize churches contain seven types of groups. Small churches may contain only two of these groups.

1. *Learning Groups.* Examples: New or Prospective Member Groups, Bible Study Groups, Ceramics Class, Sunday School Classes, Spiritual-Gifts Classes, Managing Your Money Classes, and Parenting Groups.
2. *Praying Groups.* Examples: Women's Prayer Group, Men's Prayer Group, Church Renewal Prayer Breakfast, Prayer Chains, and Pastor's Prayer Partners.
3. *Relating Groups.* Examples: Senior Adult Groups, Women's Organization Circles, Youth Groups, Men's Softball Teams, Women's Volleyball Teams, Saturday Night Supper Club, Bridge Club, Young Mothers' Club, Quilting Club, Singles Ministry, College Group, and Cluster Groups.
4. *Serving Groups.* Examples: Choir, Helping-Hands Group, Property Care Group, Greeter Ministry Team, and Meals on Wheels.
5. *Supporting Groups.* Examples: Grief-Recovery Groups, Divorce-Recovery Group, Aerobics and Fitness Groups, and Dieting Groups.
6. *Caring Groups.* Examples: Care-Team Ministry, Adopt-A-Shut-In Group, Twelve-Step Groups, Stephen Ministry, Tele-Care Ministry, and Crisis-Care Teams.
7. *Growing Groups.* Examples: Covenant Discipleship Groups, Accountability Groups, and One-on-One-Discipling Groups.

**How to Involve Newcomers in Groups:** The typical congregation's leaders expect new members and attendees to get into fellowship groups by providence or accidents. That seldom happens. By contrast, assimilation-effective churches have a specific system in place to

- Involve all newcomers in a regularly-meeting group that focuses on fellowship, study, or service within six weeks after they join or become regular attendees.
- Involve all newcomers in a ministry role or responsibility within six months.

(Section III below, "Bridges to Friends," outlines a comprehensive system to accomplish both of those goals.)

The following examples illustrate some of the ways that assimilation-effective churches involve newcomers in one of the best types of assimilation group: adult Sunday school classes.

*Build extroverted adult Sunday classes.* To enable present adult classes to grow and future adult classes to have vitality, form the following leadership structure within each class from the very beginning of its existence:

- A teacher
- A membership-care coordinator
- A social-activities coordinator whose job it is to organize a monthly social activity
- A hospitality coordinator whose job it is to help first-time visitors to the class and new attendees feel socially comfortable
- A "recruitment coordinator" who is responsible for attracting and involving new class members

Those five persons serve as an "executive committee" within each class, which meets monthly and focuses on involving the class members via the behaviors implicit in the titles of those five class leaders. At least once a year, more often in large groups, rotate new attendees into the four roles (the teacher is the exception to this rotation). Such a procedure counterbalances the inclination of adult classes to rise or fall on the teacher's energy level.

Midsize and large churches find that the "Triple-Play Plan" involves a maximum percentage of new members in adult Sunday school classes. To get it started, the pastor and the congregation's Nurture Committee Chairperson ask one person in each adult class to serve as its recruitment officer for one year.

Then, during the first week after a new member joins (or after newcomers have regularly attended worship for two months), the pastor notifies the recruitment officer of whichever adult Sunday school class's members seem to have ages and interests similar to those of the newcomers. The recruitment officer of that class makes a twenty-minute visit to the home of the new member, with three objectives:

1. To get acquainted
2. To say, "We're glad you joined our church (or are attending our church)."
3. To invite the new member(s) to his or her adult Sunday school class

The following week, another person from the same adult class makes a *phone call* to the new member, using the same three-point conversational formula.

The third week, same play, *different* phone caller, from the same class!

That "organized extroversion" helps new members feel wanted, while assuring the numerical health of adult classes. Churches never reach the point at which all adults who attend worship attend Sunday school. However, using the Triple-Play Plan for five consecutive years can increase the number of adults in Sunday school classes from the 30 percent typical of mainline congregations toward 80 percent.

*Frequently start new adult Sunday school classes.* Contemporary adult classes seldom exceed thirty-five people on the roll and an average attendance of twenty. The reason behind this pattern: Most young adults prefer to discuss more than they like to listen to lectures. When the group size grows beyond twenty, many people are unable to talk.

To form a new class, do not divide a present class. Both groups may shrink and die. Instead, establish a class vision, one part of which is the trust that God will call one or two couples or individuals from within the class to be the organizing nucleus for a new class that consists of church newcomers. A goal of 20 percent of a congregation's adult classes launched during the past two years sounds ambitious but is not too high.

While many midsize and large churches feel that they have numerous adult classes, many of those classes do not grow larger for a reason other than an average attendance of more than twenty: *they fail to grow because of their class's age.* Classes and groups of all kinds begin to feel socially closed to the addition of newcomers within about two years after establishment.

Adult classes started ten years or more ago find it increasingly challenging to assimilate newcomers. Assimilation is not impossible! The Triple-Play Plan described above can overcome some of that socially-closed feeling. However, those older classes seldom assimilate newcomers as quickly and easily as do adult classes established within the last two years.

Concentrate on launching classes that reach people in the age range of twenty-five to forty-four, especially people who have recently joined or started attending the church. Some congregations establish the nucleus that eventually becomes a new young adult class by scheduling a Sunday morning, eight-week, study/discussion group on a subject such as "parenting," then personally inviting not more than sixteen people to commit to attending for the eight weeks. About 60 percent of the time, this group blossoms into a new adult Sunday school class. (Obtain excellent study material on parenting, marriage, and other aspects of family life from sources such as Focus on the Family: ([www.focusonthefamily.com](http://www.focusonthefamily.com)).

Small-town congregations sometimes advertise that kind of course in the local newspaper, for launch in September or January. To insure that the group "makes," they invite specific young adult couples and single parents from their congregation to be its four-to-six-person nucleus.

**Cell Groups:** A few congregations achieve group involvement for newcomers with "cell groups" or spiritual growth groups that meet during the week. A system for accomplishing that is outlined in Section V below: "Bridges to Spiritual Growth Experiences."

However, cell groups are more often advocated than actually experienced, especially in mainline churches. That may change during the next decade. Right now, at least 90 percent of

American churches either attempt to or achieve group involvement through their adult Sunday school classes and the seven kinds of groups listed above.

In church life, just as it is in family life, there is no substitute for the sense of belonging that comes from group involvement. Great preaching will not substitute for it. Beautiful buildings cannot substitute for it. If we expect people to feel a sense of belonging by accident, many of them will not.

Early one Sunday morning, the young pastor of a new church was talking with someone at the back of the fellowship hall, which in this “first unit” doubled as the sanctuary. As she looked at the front of this multipurpose room, the pastor saw a three-part picture parable: A communion table, a baptistery, and a coffeepot perking noisily on a small table near the adjoining door of a classroom. *Yes, these are symbols of our faith*, she thought. *And the coffeepot is just as important as the other two. Without fellowship, we have little “followship.”*

How does your congregation get people involved in adult groups?

### III. Bridges to Friends

As a swimming instructor at the Y was explaining the buddy system to a group of beginners, she asked, “Does anyone know what a buddy is?”

An eight-year-old boy answered, “That’s someone who drowns with you.” That extreme definition of friendship expresses a great truth about human nature: In the swim of life, everyone needs a buddy. Not to drown with us, but to keep us from drowning, as the successive waves of life experience wash over us.

This is another point at which the way churches meet a basic psycho-social-spiritual need influences their ability to assimilate newcomers. The opportunity to develop friendships maximizes assimilation-effectiveness by meeting the newcomer’s need for acceptance, self-esteem, and a positive self-identity. Flavil Yeakley interviewed fifty laypersons who had been members of their respective congregations for at least six months. The people who were still active had acquired an average of seven or more friends in the church. The people who had dropped out averaged fewer than two new friendships. (Flavil Yeakley, *Why Churches Grow* [Monrovia, CA: Christian Communications], p. 54)

Everyone who travels knows that few satisfactions equal that of arriving home after a long absence. Someone said that home, in one form or other, is the great object of life. What is the item most essential for feeling at home? Family and friends! Home is the comfort we feel when genuinely accepted by people who care about us—warts and all—no matter what! Americans are not looking for organizations to join. Americans are looking for and need positive relationships. Numerical growth is not the objective when a church provides those positive relationships! Ministry is the objective! However, churches that learn how to build strong relationships among their members also tend to become more effective in building their numerical strength.

How do friendships happen in churches? The initial opportunity to make friends is most likely to arise through the involvement of new attendees and members in groups of various kinds. The end result of this powerful mixture of inclusion, belonging, acceptance, and friendship is called fellowship.

Churches with poor assimilation procedures have a small fellowship circle, in the middle of a large attendance circle, with a thin veneer of visitors on the outer edge of the circle. In assimilation-effective churches, the fellowship circle fills a much larger part of the total attendance circle.

In many high-commitment churches that expect high commitment of their members (such as tithing and regular attendance in adult Sunday school classes), that graphic looks quite different. The fellowship circle is sometimes bigger than the membership circle. Average worship attendance often exceeds the membership total (rather than worship attendance being 42 percent

of the membership total as it is in many mainline congregations). These high-commitment churches welcome everyone into groups and ministries, but only the highly committed become church *members*, usually after weeks or months of membership classes. Guess what happens in those classes. Three things: education, fellowship, and friendships.

When Jesus said, “I have called you friends” (John 15:15), he stated one of the bedrock principles upon which all effective churches are built.

**How to Facilitate Friendships:** One of the oldest, most commonly used, and most dysfunctional assimilation procedures is the “new-member sponsor program.” This assimilation bridge works in fewer than 5 percent of congregations. Leaders keep thinking they can make it work if they (a) work harder at it, (b) organize it differently, or (c) start over with it. This thinking is usually a myth that keeps congregations from looking at systems that actually get results.

**New-Member Classes:** The larger the church, the more important the new-member class or new-member orientation becomes. People often ask, “How long should these new member classes be—four weeks, six weeks, twelve weeks?” The most effective systems in large, growing mainline churches that use new member classes is four sessions, held at the Sunday morning Sunday school hour.

The number of sessions is not, however, the primary determiner of effectiveness. The major issue is whether the new member class *builds a bridge from the church’s visitor circle into its fellowship circle*—from visitor status into group involvement such as people experience in a Sunday school class, singing in the choir, or playing on the men’s softball team. In these groups they form new friendships that bond them to the congregation in ways that nothing else can. Thus, the prime objective with new attendees and members is to get every individual *into a job and a group*.

**What Counts Most:** A Spanish proverb says, “An ounce of mother is worth a ton of priest.” The education of love is stronger than the education of doctrines and theology. Many congregations have not yet learned that lesson. Kennon L. Kallahan says that people expect three things from a church: help, hope, and home. A genuine “home” provides new members with the feeling of acceptance that comes through friendship with other members. Unless that happens, few newcomers stay around long enough to absorb its theology and doctrines.

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg sheds light on this issue in his research of American taverns. He notes that the most important aspect of the drinking ritual is that it takes place among friends. A successful tavern must regularly attract a goodly number of people who are already friends, or it must successfully encourage friendship among those who first encounter one another on its premises. Good bartenders have the knack of getting their customers together and of making sure that the return patron receives at least one personal greeting as he or she stops in.

Oldenburg describes two enterprising gentlemen who capitalize on this principle. They buy a tavern with deadly, unfriendly atmosphere. Business is poor and the price is accordingly low. They take it over and “do their thing,” which is good hosting. They learn patrons’ names quickly, greet them enthusiastically, and introduce them to one another. Soon, the place is crowded.

Even during those off hours each day when other places may be empty, their tavern has both bodies and life. The location may not be all that advantageous, but the place becomes a gold mine. Then they sell it, find another disaster of a bar, and work their magic all over again. They know that the basic commodity a tavern sells is not alcohol but friendship. (Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, [New York: Paragon House])

What is the basic commodity that churches provide people? Bottles of theology and doctrine are not enough. Churches must also build bridges to friends that provide acceptance, self-esteem, and positive self-identity.

## IV. Bridges to Ministry Roles and Responsibilities

According to an old story, Abe Lincoln and a friend attended a church service one Sunday morning. Afterward, the friend said that the minister had preached a good sermon. President Lincoln replied, "I don't agree."

"But why?" his friend asked.

"It is very simple," said Lincoln. "He didn't ask us to do anything great."

One of the invisible secrets of effective leaders is that they do not expect greatness from the people around them. That is also true of assimilation-effective churches. They see their new attendees and members as people with great potential for helping to achieve the church's mission and ministry goals. They immediately and effectively ask them to do something great! Assimilation-effective churches bestow a great gift on everyone who comes near them: trust.

Trust benefits individual new members and attendees because they find their highest selves developing when they give themselves to great causes. Involving new attendees and members in ministry roles and responsibilities maximizes assimilation-effectiveness by meeting their need for purpose, meaning, and making a difference. Trust benefits the new member's congregation because engaging people in actively working at a goal develops more commitment to that goal than merely hearing something about it, thinking about it, or discussing it.

Social scientists observe four levels of fellowship warmth.

Level #1: Attending an event, such as a movie, with total strangers

Level #2: Meetings of large organizations where we know a few people, such as Lion's Clubs, family reunions, fellowship dinners, church services

Level #3: Talking with peers in a relaxed atmosphere, such as coffee breaks with trusted colleagues, dinner with close friends, Sunday school classes whose members have been together for twenty years

Level #4: Working together on a challenging common goal, such as soldiers during months of combat, a football team moving toward the championship, church leaders in a three-million-dollar building campaign

Does this explain why a great many church members find their best fellowship in working with other members in ministries? Yet a Gallup Poll indicates that 8 percent of any group consists of initiators, while 92 percent must be approached and asked to get involved. If only 8 percent of new members initiate their involvement in ministries, the congregation must set up some kind of system to reach out to most of its new members and attendees and ask them to get involved. (Calvie Hugson Schwalm, "The Interview" *Net Results*, January 2000)

**Six Crucial Questions:** Churches with maximum assimilation-effectiveness answer six questions in the affirmative:

1. Do we have an intentional system that helps all new attendees and members become involved in a group within six weeks?
2. Do we provide the opportunity for all new attendees and members to develop five-to-seven new friends within the first six months?
3. Do we have an intentional system that involves all new attendees and members in a role or responsibility within the first six months?
4. Do we have a large number of entry-level places of service?
5. Do we have an attitude of openness to the idea of beginning the kinds of new ministries each year in which new members want to be involved?
6. Do we provide several kinds of opportunities for personal spiritual growth that help new attendees and members experience a life-transforming connection with God?

Churches that effectively answer questions #3, #4, & #5 have some kind of placement system. This compensates for the fact that most newcomers have no natural social connections in this

church and no way to get into the instant comradeship of working together on ministry goals with long-time members.

Bob Buford of Leadership Network, Dallas, has described the universal components of a placement system like this: 1. Identify each individual's S.H.A.P.E. (S. = Spiritual Gifts; H. = Heart, Passions; A. = Abilities; P. = Personality; E. = Experiences.) This takes many different forms in various sizes and types of churches. Do not, however, assume that your church can accomplish effective placement in ministry roles and responsibilities through a new member class alone, without additional placement methods. The personal interview is the only way to achieve the goal of placement with a large percentage of new members.

**The New Member Interview:** Many small and midsize churches appoint a new member assimilation coordinator. He or she is responsible for visiting and interviewing all new members in order to fill out a "talent and interest inventory." In small and midsize congregations, train a volunteer for this role. In larger congregations, a quarter-time or a half-time lay staff person works best.

How the interviewer uses a "Talent and Interest Inventory" is more important than what you print on it. Do not send it in the mail. Do not leave these inventories in the home. The majority of new members forget to return them. During the first week after people become members, make an appointment to visit their home to conduct a new member interview. (Tell them when you telephone for the appointment that "we do this with all new members.")

Take along a New Member Packet, which contains various items to help get them acquainted with the congregation. In some cases the packet contains such things as a baptism certificate, a roster of members' names/addresses, etc. (*Some churches also conduct these interviews with everyone who attends regularly for two or three months.* In using the interview process with not-yet-members, modify the following outline slightly. Say something like, "We interview everyone who establishes a regular attendance pattern.")

Some churches schedule these interviews on Sunday, at the church during the Sunday school hour. The interviewer telephones the interviewee on Saturday afternoon or evening to set up or confirm the interview time and location in the building. The telephone call keeps the member from forgetting and reduces interviewer frustration due to no-shows.

After explaining the contents of the New Member Packet (or Newcomer Packet, if they have not yet joined the church), the interviewer says something like this: "We try to avoid working anyone to death in our church, but we know that everyone God sends to our church has special talents and abilities that allow them to serve Christ in a special way. May I ask you a few questions about the kinds of things in which you have had experience or in which you might be interested?"

New members and newcomers respond affirmatively. They obviously feel positive about this congregation. They just joined it, or they have become regular attendees. The interviewer uses a form on which he or she writes notes. The questions are oral, developed from glancing down the sheet at various categories that are personalized for each congregation. Examples: "Have you ever sung in a church choir? Do you play the organ or the piano? Do you play other musical instruments? Have you ever taught a Sunday school class?"

In response to the question, "Have you ever taught a Sunday school class?" one woman said, "Yes, I taught the junior highs where we lived before moving here."

The interviewer wisely asked, "Did you enjoy teaching that age group?"

The interviewee vehemently replied, "I hated it!" Then she added in a more moderate tone, "If I ever teach again, I'd like to teach the younger ones, perhaps first graders."

This example illustrates an important fact about everyone who joins or begins regularly attending a congregation. *Newcomers give information in oral interviews that they will not put on paper.* Conversation also enables the interviewer to ask questions that no committee or staff

member would think of putting on paper. Churches should stop trying to substitute paper for people when attempting to help newcomers feel at home.

The interviewer returns to the church with information that otherwise would have taken years to learn. Most churches learn that kind of information after using the Russian-roulette method of asking people to assume a role or responsibility, then finding that they do not enjoy it or do it well.

Other kinds of questions that facilitate helpful interviews with new members and attendees:

- How did you first hear about our church?
- What are some of the reasons you decided to begin attending regularly?
- Have you been involved with other congregations before coming here?
- What are some of the ways you think our church can be helpful in strengthening your relationship with Christ?
- Are you involved in one of our Sunday school classes?
- What are some skills or knowledge that you have enjoyed using in other churches?
- What are some things you've never been involved in but think you might find meaningful?
- What are some things you hope we will never ask you to do?
- At what times and where do you prefer receiving telephone calls?
- Do you prefer your mailings to come to your home or somewhere else?
- Do you have any specific questions about the church or its ministries?

Churches of all sizes increasingly use one of the several available forms of spiritual-gifts inventory to help new people connect a feeling of God's spiritual call with their roles and responsibilities in the church. Using a spiritual-gifts inventory helps church leaders move away from the old institutional slot-filling methods toward asking each individual to listen for God's call to ministry. Take care, however, not to substitute a survey sheet for a personal interview. The interview, especially when conducted by a capable interviewer, has far more value than a survey instrument.

**Achieving Accountability for Results:** In small and midsize congregations, the New Member Assimilation Coordinator develops a follow-through chart that motivates other church leaders to assist in involving new members/attendees in ministry roles!

Design this chart on a large poster board. Put spaces down the left side on which you list new members/regular attendees. Across the top, put headings that describe actions a church typically takes after people join. Examples of those categories across the top: church mailing list, newsletter list, notify previous church of membership transfer, letter of welcome from pastor, baptism certificate, pledge card from stewardship chairperson, youth group invitation, adult class invitation, etc.

The major reason for constructing this "New Member Assimilation Log" is the last two columns on the top, at the extreme right: *Group Involvement* and *Ministry Role*.

Do not, of course, hang this poster board in the foyer: it is an in-house tool for leaders. The New Member Assimilation Coordinator takes five minutes or so to display this poster board in each department and governing board meeting. He or she reviews each name orally with those groups. The purpose: to ask the question, "How are we doing with the Smiths?" In other words, what group are they in and what ministry roles have they assumed? The task of church governing board members, committees, and ministries is to get those last two blanks filled in. Until those two blanks are complete, the New Member Assimilation Coordinator leaves the Smiths on the chart for monthly review.

This procedure is effective because it is based on the well-known principle of behavior modification. In simple terms, this means that if people periodically pay attention to something, they do a better job with it. The repeated review of the New Member Assimilation Log tells the

leaders how they are doing with the Smiths. No one individual, working along, can accomplish the result that a group of leaders working together can achieve.

When unemployment rises to high levels in a capitalistic system, it threatens the structure of society. People also lose the sense of belonging and merit that gives them personal psychological health. Church societies operate in a similar way. Congregations that put people to work (everyone, no matter what his or her talent) provide a feeling of worth that strengthens both individual and institution. Work—when people *want* to participate in that particular way—far more effectively involves newcomers than when a church offers them bleacher seats.

Involvement in a ministry role is so essential to new member assimilation that some churches make it a prerequisite of membership. People commit to a ministry before they join. No ministry, no membership. Other churches make involvement in ministry *simultaneous* with membership.

Rick Warren at Saddleback Valley Church in California uses a new-member assimilation procedure that is especially valuable in large congregations. Download the C.L.A.S.S materials at <http://www.saddlebackresources.com/en-US/MinistryTools/ClassMaterials/ClassMaterials.htm>

Training events and materials for Directors of Volunteer Ministries (a part-time position in some churches and a full-time position in others) are available through the national and middle-judicatory offices of many denominations.

**Birth Date Behaviors:** Whatever interview system you choose, the process must recognize the vast differences between effective assimilation methods during the 1950s and effective methods of the 2010s. People born before 1946 have strong institutional loyalties driven by a high commitment to and confidence in the credibility of large institutions. A chain of command in which they have no personal say is quite acceptable. Much of this attitude was shaped by the successful winning of World War II, one of the greatest institutional triumphs in history. Such people are easily motivated by “duty,” by “ought to,” and by “should.” For this group, the following values are important: United we stand! Whatever it takes to get the job done! Meaning comes from commitment to great causes!

By contrast, people born after 1946 have low confidence in institutions, coupled with a strong drive toward decision-making by individuals. They insist on having a say in major decisions of any group they are in. A chain of command works only when they have involvement in and input into the process. Much of their opinion was shaped by the Vietnam War, one of the worst cases of institutional mishandling in history. They do not respond to “guilt” motivation. They put great energy into things that make sense to them. They pay little attention to older church leaders’ “we ought to” urgings. If an institution is not willing to meet the needs of those young adults, they move to another church. For them, the following values are important: Individually, I’ll decide! Whatever makes sense to me determines the job I’ll do! Meaning comes from personal choices!

These differences explain why most assimilation-effective churches have small governing boards of twelve people, smaller and fewer committees (with not more than six members each), and numerous “ministry teams” in which newcomers can participate without being elected through a nominating committee. For elaboration on these differences, see *Church Personality Matters!* by Herb Miller (St. Louis: Chalice Press).

**Numerous Entry-Level Positions:** Whatever the size of your church, the assimilation process only works when you have an open participation system that absorbs new people into roles and responsibilities throughout the year. One example of such a system is the use of “Teacher Teams” in the elementary Sunday school classes. (Do not confuse this term with “Team Teaching,” which is something else altogether.) The Teacher-Team concept has four, five, or more substitute teachers for each class.

Churches implement this concept in a variety of ways. In one model, the master teacher teaches during the nine months of the school year and each of the three teacher-team members teaches one of the three summer months. Teacher-team members also rotate, one month at a time,

from September through May, assisting the master teacher in the classroom. Another model for teacher-team implementation uses quarterly rotation. Either way, since each teacher has several substitutes on which to call in an emergency: teachers never telephone the Sunday school superintendent to find a replacement when they are sick or out of town.

New teachers can enter the team at any time during the year, rather than only in September. The teacher team concept provides excellent in-service training and a pool of experienced persons from which to draw future lead teachers. It gives people who are not sure whether they have the gift of teaching an opportunity to put their toe in the water rather than diving into a whole year of responsibility for an elementary Sunday school class. For more detailed, how-to information on implementation of the teacher-team concept, go to [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com) and download free of charge *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 12, How to Increase Children and Youth Sunday School Attendance*.

**Financial Stewardship:** Whatever your system of assimilation, it must invite people to commit themselves to financial support of the congregation's ministries. Research tells us that financial stewardship is one of the most important causes of spiritual growth. So the reason for involving people in financial giving is not merely to pay the church's bills or support its staff. Financial giving is an integral part of the spiritual growth process for new Christians and long-term Christians who transfer in from other-churches. One effective way to accomplish this: Set up a five-step system that unfolds in the following manner.

1. The pastor writes a letter of welcome to new members the week after they join the church.
2. The second week after they join the church, the stewardship chairperson writes them a letter of welcome that outlines the cost of some of the major ministry sections of the church budget, enclosing a commitment card and some type of information or brochure encouraging them to consider giving a specific percentage of their income to God's work.
3. The third week after they join, mail them a box of offering envelopes.
4. When they return the commitment card (80 percent return it), the stewardship chairperson writes them a thank-you letter.
5. If they do not return the card by the fourth week, the stewardship chairperson telephones them and says, "It is great to have you in our church. I just wanted to be sure that you got the commitment card." (Most of the people who forgot to return the commitment card appreciate this reminder and do so immediately.)

Disregard the tiny percentage of persons who do not return the commitment card at this point. Do nothing further. Most of them will make a commitment at the next annual stewardship campaign.

**Leadership Roles:** Another crucial issue regarding ministry roles is the degree to which your church allows new people into leadership roles: The following questions let your church's leaders discover how open they are to newcomers.

- Did 50 percent of our current church officers and board members join our church in the past twelve years?
- Did 25 percent of our church officers and committee members join the church in the last five years?
- Are 25 percent of our officers and committee members from the twenty-five-to-forty-four age range?

If the church officer and governing board group does not reflect these percentages, the leaders may knowingly or unconsciously resist the inclusion of new people and new ideas.

Someone has said that “exclusive” is the most painful word in the English language. Yet, many churches systematically exclude newcomers. Why? Because they are better organized to protect themselves from change than they are to include new people!

How is your church organized? Does it build bridges to ministry roles that give newcomers a sense of purpose, meaning, and making a difference?

## V. Bridges to Spiritual Growth Experiences

Peter Drucker, the famous guru of American business management, says that the most important question the leader of any organization can ask is, “What business are we in?”

How would leaders of churches answer that question?

Since every congregation is “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:16), its business is to be, do, and say what Jesus was, did, and said. A congregation’s leaders must therefore answer Drucker’s question the way Jesus answered the young man who asked Jesus for his mission statement. Jesus responded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

**The Church’s Central Goal:** The business of the church is to help people make a spiritual connection with God that works a positive transformation in their lives and their relationships with other people. Churches are in business to involve new attendees and members in spiritual-growth experiences that connect them with God, heal emotional hurts, build a healthy personal value system, give them faith in God’s guiding providence, and encourage them to unselfishly care about their “neighbors.” If churches do not accomplish this spiritual-growth task, they fail at their central reason for existing. They also fail at their assimilation ministry.

**A Poor Track Record:** Research in mainline congregations, conducted by the Search Institute, says that “Only a minority of Protestant adults evidence the kind of integrated, vibrant, and life-encompassing faith congregations seek to develop.” Specifically, 36 percent of adults have an undeveloped faith. At every age, women have a more developed faith than men. Half the men in the fourth decade of their lives have an undeveloped faith. (Peter Benson and Carolyn H. Eklun, *Effective Christian Education* [Minneapolis: Search Institute], pp. 16-18, 45-64)

That same research says that 49 percent of the women and 35 percent of the men born before 1928 displayed “high faith maturity.” In the next generation, born from 1928 to 1948, “high faith maturity” dropped from 49 percent to 40 percent of the women and from 35 percent to only 15 percent of men. Did the people born before 1928 grow up in an environment more favorable to and supportive of one’s faith journey?

**What Is Spiritual Growth?** The Apostle Paul gives a clear definition of spiritual growth: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). That is the most important objective of any church. It is also a key element of any church’s attempt to assimilate new attendees and members. If a church fails here, its efforts to provide group inclusion, friendship acceptance, and ministry roles are valuable but inadequate. Without spiritual growth, a church does little more than what a high quality civic club accomplishes.

The objective of spiritual growth is spiritual maturity—having the mind of Christ. What does that look like in people? George Gallup’s research indicates that spiritually mature people have nine qualities:

1. They are much more likely to have a daily time of private prayer.
2. They feel a genuine sense of the presence of God in their lives.
3. They report that their religion experiences are a source of strength, personal growth, and the healing of inner conflicts.
4. They tend to have a greater sense of inner peace, to feel more joyful and happy, and are less likely to feel depressed.
5. They are more humble, less likely to exhibit an inflated sense of self-importance.
6. They are far more often engaged in compassionate helping acts to others.
7. They are less racially prejudiced.
8. They are far more capable of forgiving people who wrong them and to be constructive, reconciling members of society.
9. They are more favorable to church involvement in political activity in order to right wrongs in society.

(George Gallup, Jr., and Timothy Jones, *The Saints Among Us* [Ridgefield, CT: Morehouse Publishing])

Spiritual maturity has three principle results: People (a) find their emotional hurts being healed, (b) develop a healthy personal value system that influences the way they treat other people, and (c) feel the peace and power of faith in God’s guiding providence. People who experience those kinds of results form a strong bond to the congregation that helped them to find that life-transforming experience.

**What Causes Spiritual Growth?** Across the country, people say that their spiritual growth has come principally from these ingredients: worship, prayer, fellowship, Bible study, financial stewardship, and service. (Herb Miller *Connecting with God* [Nashville: Abingdon Press]) This helps us to see why the small-group movement is so helpful in facilitating spiritual growth. Small groups are the spiritual-growth equivalent of the adult Sunday school class in the pre-1928 era. Small groups create a fellowship environment that encourages several of those critically important spiritual-growth experiences.

The big question: *How do we get mainline church people into these spiritual growth groups?* Low-commitment Christians do not respond well to high-commitment requests for the use of their time. Few mainline congregations have effectively overcome that resistance but they are (a) more often the exception than the rule and (b) more likely to be new congregations that built into their life from its beginning the meta-model in which the church is broken into small groups of ten-to-twelve people that meet weekly or biweekly.

**Do We Elevate People?** The old Pittsburgh Airport (now replaced with a sparkling new one) was one of the few U.S. airports that had a hotel inside the airport. Years ago a church consultant went into the elevator on the main floor of that hotel on his way back to his room after dinner and pushed the second-floor button.

But the elevator door would not shut. Nor would the elevator go up. He pushed the second-floor button again. No success. Then he started pushing the various “door close” and “door open” buttons, hoping to nudge the metal machine into levitation. Nothing happened. After several minutes he walked out of the elevator and up the stairway to the second floor.

The next morning on his way back from breakfast, he had the same experience. While he was standing there pushing buttons, a hotel employee came into the elevator. The traveler remarked that the machine was malfunctioning.

“Oh,” she said, “This elevator won’t go up to the second floor. It only goes to the mezzanine.”

He punched that button. She was right. The elevator faithfully rose toward the mezzanine, where he stepped off and climbed the remaining stairs to the second floor.

What value is an elevator that does not rise to the next level? Are not elevators supposed to elevate? But that is no more of a paradox than a church that cannot elevate people to a relationship with God.

The bottom line objective of effective assimilation methods is *not* assimilation. The bottom line objective is to help people become active disciples of Jesus Christ through life-transforming spiritual growth experiences. When that happens in a church, few people drift out the back door, because they have fully entered the front door.

To what extent are these spiritual growth experiences happening in your congregation? In what ways can you open the front door wider?