



Connecting Newcomers



CONGREGATION & VISITORS



Connecting Newcomers

Contents	PAGE
Leaders Guide	2
Interview:	
WILLING TO COMMIT	
<i>interview with Reggie McNeal</i>	3-4
Assessments:	
WELCOME CHECK-UP	
<i>by Stephen C. Butler</i>	5
MAKING IT OFFICIAL	
<i>by Bob Putman and Herbert Hage</i>	6
Case Studies:	
CAN THIS CLASS BECOME MORE WELCOMING?	
<i>by Don Michael McDonald</i>	7
THE FRINGE MINISTRY LEADER	
<i>by Rich Doebler</i>	8
DANGEROUS MIX	
<i>by Rich Doebler</i>	9
Devotionals:	
FROM OUTSIDERS TO INSIDERS	
<i>by Steven D. Mathewson</i>	10
NO CHARTER FOR COMFORT	
<i>by James D. Berkley</i>	11
How To Articles:	
CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY	
<i>by Merle Mees</i>	12
FILLING THE CRACKS	
<i>by Dave Wilkinson</i>	13
POINTS OF ENTRY	
<i>by Lyle Schaller</i>	14
Activities	
WHO IS OUR TARGET?	
<i>by Wayne Schmidt</i>	15
Resources	
FURTHER EXPLORATION	16
Sample Retreat	17

CONNECTING NEWCOMERS

Leader's Guide

How to use "Connecting Newcomers" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Leadership Resources/Christianity Today, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS is not just another program. Each theme contains materials on the topic you choose—no tedious program to follow. The materials work when you want, where you want and the way you want it to. It's completely flexible and easy to use.

You probably already have regularly scheduled meetings with board members or with other committees or groups of leaders. BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS fits easily into what you're already doing. Here's how to use BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS at the beginning of a board meeting or committee meeting:

1. Select a learning tool. In this theme of "Connecting Newcomers," you'll find multiple types of handouts from which to choose:

- ◆ interview
- ◆ assessment tools
- ◆ case study
- ◆ devotionals
- ◆ how-to articles
- ◆ activities
- ◆ resources
- ◆ sample retreat

2. Select a handout. Suppose, for example, you have decided that your board or team needs to assess its understanding of church membership. There are two assessment options in this theme: "Welcome Check-up" (p. 5) and "Making It Official" (p. 6). From these options, select the one that best fits what you want to accomplish.

3. Photocopy the handout. Let's say you selected "Welcome Check-up." Photocopy as many copies as you need—you do not need to ask for permission to photocopy any material from BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS (as long as you are using the material in a church or educational setting and are not charging for it).

4. Prepare for the discussion. We recommend you read the Scripture passages and identify key discussion questions. How will you apply the principles to specific decisions your church is making?

5. Lead the discussion. Each handout can be read within 5 minutes. After you have allowed time for reading, begin the discussion by asking one of the provided questions. Be ready to move the discussion to specific issues your church is facing.

Each BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS handout can be discussed in 15 or 20 minutes. Your board, committee, or team will still have plenty of time to discuss its agenda.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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CONNECTING NEWCOMERS

Willing to Commit

How to tap into the needs of newcomers.

Philippians 2:5-11; Romans 15:1-2

How do leaders connect visitors into the life of the church? In this interview, Reggie McNeal, director of the leadership development team for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, says the place to begin is with your assumptions.

In an era in which institutional commitment and loyalty seem thin, how does a church motivate people to connect deeper into its body life?

Reggie McNeal: It's ludicrous to say people aren't willing to make commitments. The trick is tapping into their motivations. However, people are no longer willing to the old paradigm of church membership—"Come help us build a great church."

People are desperate for some kind of spiritual experience and encounter and are vitally intrigued by folks willing to commit to them. In the past, commitment was defined as getting people to commit to you as a church—how can we get these people committed to us or even church members committed to show up. But now commitment is defined by the people: "We want a church that will commit to us."

That sounds pretty consumer-driven. Why shouldn't people commit to our church?

A lot of what has passed for Christianity in our culture has been "Churchianity." I'm not the first to say that. But now the church culture has collapsed. Some people, though, don't know that yet. Many still think church is one of the options of how folks spend their time. It's not. Church is not on the radar of most nonchurched people. Even if you build the perfect church, nonchurched people are not going to come.

So how does a church commit to people and thus connect them into the church?

Churches committed to people have a passion for people because its leaders have a passion for Jesus. That sounds simple, but it's the first piece. The second piece is that passion has to get translated into action.

This may be somewhat a stereotype, but if you join most churches you get a packet of envelopes, a calendar, a directory—what I call "club-member stuff." The assumption is these people have come to the church to make it a better church.

But now let's reverse that: A person joins the church and instead of a packet of information about what the church has to offer, she meets with someone who says, "What would you like to see happen in your life over the next 12 months in a spiritual way?" Everyone has an aspiration like that.

Do you see the difference? This approach says to newcomers: "We're not trying to fit you into our culture here, our club. We are here for you." It convinces people that the church is vitally interested in their personal spiritual growth.

Let's assume our church is passionate about serving the spiritual needs of newcomers. What's the next step?

Every church ought to know what folks want to learn spiritually at church. How do you find that out? Ask them what they'd like to see happen in their lives, spiritually. You may discover what God's really up to! You don't start your planning with calendars and budgets; you start with people..

But any shift in the way your church serves newcomers requires a sort of conversion in the church leadership, how the group views the mission of the church. ➤



REGGIE MCNEAL

"To tap into what God is doing, start with what people want to learn"

Willing to Commit *continued*

What's a specific example of how a church could change its approach?

Shift the focus of your membership process, change the focus of your classes. Turn the entire process into a coaching session to help newcomers identify their learning goals. The wrong question is “How do we get our church to grow?” To tap into what God is doing, figure out ways to get out of the church. Connect with people who have a heart hunger for God and then provide them with what they need to develop into followers of Christ. Don't begin with what you have to offer; start with what people want to learn.

To Discuss

1. How do you feel about “starting with what people want to learn”?
2. In Philippians 2:7 it says that Jesus took the “very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” How does his model form the biblical basis for meeting the needs of those seeking after God?
3. What process do we currently use to connect people into the church? How can we improve that by at least 2 percent?

CONNECTING NEWCOMERS

Welcome Check-up

How does our congregation measure up?

Acts 16:14-15; Matthew 5:13-14

Every church wants to welcome and nurture new people. Here are 5 categories to help you assess how your church is doing:

- 1. Visibility.** Newcomers to our community can easily find out about our church through a listing in the Yellow Pages, a weekly ad in the local newspaper, brochures in motels, a web site, a message on the church's answering machine that lists the times of services and classes. Our building is easy to find. If yours is not, make sure visible signs clearly point the way to it. We have a prominent sign listing our church name and times of services; the information is up to date.
- 2. First Impressions.** People measure us by what they see: Our grounds are well maintained. We have adequate parking, and our lot does not have major problems. Our building is accessible to the physically handicapped. Friendly members greet people at each major entrance. Bulletin boards or other displays inside the church are attractive and up to date. Childcare is available. Room numbers and directions are clearly visible.
- 3. Worship Experience.** The bulletin is easy to read. It lists the church's name, address, and phone number. The words to hymns, whether printed or displayed, are easy to read. Directions are given for all portions of the service in which people participate, such as prayers and responsive readings. During the service, traditions or approaches that might be unfamiliar to people, such as the way Communion is handled, are explained. Children are welcomed through special music or children's sermons, or are provided with a children's service.
- 4. Reinforcement.** Visitors need reminders that someone cares about them. The newcomers may be long-time members of the community, but when they attend a church worship service, they need to be reassured they have done a good thing. Each visitor is sent a letter (personally signed), called and/or visited as soon as possible.
- 5. Nurture.** We offer special study groups or discipleship classes for newer Christians. We also offer several short-term groups or activities. (After meeting together for six to twelve weeks, people in a group tend to bond together, and newcomers find it more difficult to break in.) Also, before each membership class begins, we invite every nonmember who has attended the church recently.

—STEPHEN C. BUTLER

To Discuss

1. Which of the above areas are we strong in? Where do we need improvement?
2. On a scale from 1 to 10 (high), how much do we truly value bringing new people into our church family? How does what we say we value correspond to reality?
3. What one change would you like to see our church make in order to welcome people better?

CONNECTING NEWCOMERS

Making It Official

Why joining a church makes biblical sense.

1 Corinthians 12:25-27; Psalm 84:1-4

Does membership in our transient, church-shopping age matter? Here's how one congregation put in writing the biblical values behind making things official:

- 1. Membership says, "I belong here."** God says believers belong together (Heb. 10:23-25). You sense that God wants you here with the people of Hillside Baptist Church at this time in your Christian life, and you want to make a public declaration you are committed to God's work through this church.
- 2. Membership says, "We share the same ministry goals."** God says believers are to be committed to one another for the sake of spiritual impact (Eph. 4:16). You believe Jesus has a work to do here and around the world, and you're willing to join with others to see that it gets done.
- 3. Membership says, "I accept responsibility for a group of fellow believers in the family of God."** That's God's plan as well (Gal. 6:1-2, 10). You want to be part of a caring network of people, sharing one another's joys and sorrows, and helping one another grow through worship, Bible study, and fellowship.
- 4. Membership says, "I am accountable to mature brothers and sisters in Christ for my walk with God."** God warns against spiritual autonomy (Heb. 13:17; Matt. 18:15-20). You don't want to go it alone standing for Jesus Christ; you want to receive the guidance, equipping, and assistance necessary to remain on target.
- 5. Membership says, "I accept responsibility for how things are done here."** Members elect elders, deacons, and other church officers, approve an annual ministry budget, and call pastors to serve as our spiritual leaders. Every member helps shape our church's direction and ministry goals (1 Cor. 12:20-27).
- 6. Membership keeps us legal.** The State of Illinois recognizes churches if they have a credible membership and organization. Obedience to these laws affirms we are responsible citizens with a desire to serve (1 Tim. 3:2; 1 Pet. 2:13-17).

—BOB PUTMAN AND HERBERT HAGE; ADAPTED BY BRUCE HOPPE

To Discuss

1. How does our church's view of membership compare to the above?
2. Many people today attend multiple churches: the kids attend the youth group at First Baptist and the parents worship at Community Church, for example. How does our church view multi-church attenders?
3. How does our church assure that church membership means something?

Can This Class Become Welcoming?

From stagnation to vitality.

Acts 4:32; 1 John 3:18-20

The Case On the surface, the couple's class at Hope Community Church seemed to be thriving. The class was stable—unusual in a relatively young church: Hope had recently celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary, and the class had been around for fifteen of those years.

Yet Hope's pastor wondered if stability was turning into stagnation. Over the course of a year the average attendance had declined from 25 to 20. The guest book was filled with the names of first-time visitors, but none had returned. Most of the regulars had been with the class for more than three years.

The pastor met with key leaders; all agreed something needed to be done—not only to revitalize the class but also to address the deeper issue: helping newcomers feel connected.

What Would You Do?

- ◆ How does this class fit into the larger strategy of the church?
- ◆ How would you make this class inviting to strangers?

What Happened The class leaders realized the key to visitors returning is helping them to feel comfortable and accepted; the class strength—intimacy—was a barrier to that. The leaders felt that providing an accepting atmosphere was critical, so they began to change established patterns of the class structure and content.

The most important step was to create a format that required no previous experience with the group (or the church). For example, announcements now covered only coming events. Bibles were made available. The lesson did not require knowledge from past Sundays. The group did not sing unless there were more than thirty in attendance, and song lyrics were displayed up front. Because new people may be uncomfortable praying with strangers, the long-standing prayer-and-share time was dropped. Regular class attenders were encouraged to join smaller groups outside the class for deeper spiritual intimacy. Even the chairs were rearranged from a circle into straight rows.

The leaders also fostered a ministry mentality among the regulars, discussing how to make newcomers feel more comfortable.

Within five months, attendance averaged about 30 (from 20). About 80 percent of class visitors returned. And regular attenders began looking for opportunities to reach out to others.

—DON MICHAEL McDONALD

Discuss

1. Another option for connecting newcomers would have been simply to start another class. Which option do you think is best?
2. What kind of insider cues and language turn visitors off?
3. What is the purpose of our adult Sunday school ministry? How does that compare with the purpose of our small group ministry?

The Fringe Ministry Leader

Will responsibility deepen commitment?

Ephesians 4:14-16; 1 Tim 3:1-13

The Case Jim, a young, single-adult believer, had visited Bayview Christian Center off and on for some time. Yet he showed no inclination to deepen his commitment. If we could plug him into a fulfilling role or ministry assignment, thought Pastor Steve, Jim may start to feel like he's one of us.

After some thought, the pastor approached Jim. "We're looking for someone with your abilities to work with Eric in leading the singles group," he said. "Would you be interested?" Jim was a natural for singles ministry. He would benefit from the relationships and discipleship program. Pastor Steve believed the role could be the catalyst Jim needed to move him from the church fringes toward the committed core. Plus, it was a job tailor-made for Jim because (1) Jim could readily identify with singles, and (2) by teaming Jim with an established leader the assignment would be less demanding. The plan seemed ideal.

What Would You Do?

- ◆ What do you think about recruiting for a leadership position someone who is not an active participant in the church? Why or why not?
- ◆ What steps would you take to ensure Jim's success in his new role?

What Happened When the opportunity was put to Jim, he responded with a burst of enthusiasm. "Yes!" he exclaimed, "I'd be glad to help lead the group." Suddenly Bayview Christian Center could do no wrong.

"This is the church I've always been looking for," he announced. "From now on, this is going to be my church!" He praised Steve's sermons ebulliently. Jim couldn't get enough of worship: "I didn't think I'd experience worship like that until I got to heaven," he gushed.

Then one day, inexplicably, shortly after his immersion into the church, Jim disappeared. He was simply gone, and no one could find him. As Steve said later, "It was like trying to tie down a migrating bird." Not only had Jim not been enfolded into the congregation, he had dropped the ball on his assigned role as co-leader of the singles.

—RICH DOEBLER

Discuss

1. Putting anyone into a leadership role is somewhat of a risk. What steps does our church take to recruit qualified people for key ministries?
2. At what point should a newcomer be given an opportunity to serve in a meaningful role?
3. What types of service in the church can newcomers and semi-regular attenders contribute?

Dangerous Mix

Keeping newcomers from disgruntled members.

Titus 3:9-11; Colossians 4:5

The Case Shortly into his new pastorate, Pastor Andy Meier initiated “Recent Attender Receptions.” Invitations to the pastor’s home helped lower the threshold for people entering the church. Here was an opportunity for newcomers to mingle with one another, become acquainted with the church staff, and ask questions about the church.

But Andy wasn’t satisfied to connect only with newcomers. He also wanted to reach those who floated around the edges of the congregation without ever becoming active. It was a logical step, then, to include the floaters when he sent out invitations to the receptions.

That night, Phyllis, a long-term floater, came to one reception with her husband, Ted. Andy introduced himself and invited the guests to introduce themselves and tell briefly how they had come to visit Ridgewood Community Church. All went well until Phyllis took a turn.

“We’ve had trouble involving ourselves in Ridgewood for a number of reasons,” she began. Andy felt his stomach tighten as she began a litany of grievances.

Phyllis pressed on with why she and her husband could never tithe to a church like Ridgewood, what was wrong with the music, why they always walked out when communion was served.

Andy felt trapped—Phyllis was driving people from the church. An overwhelming feeling of helplessness and rage engulfed him.

- What Would You Do?**
- ◆ Should Andy confront Phyllis immediately? How can a church leader counter or interrupt a negative viewpoint without appearing dictatorial?
 - ◆ How are the needs of newcomers and floaters different?

What Happened Andy maintained an appearance of calm but boiled within. He didn’t say much except “Thank you for sharing” after Phyllis ended her tirade. Humiliated, he vented the next morning to Ben, his church chairman. Andy determined never again to put himself in such an awkward situation. Phyllis and her family eventually moved to another state, taking their grievances with them.

Today Andy still invites newcomers to his house but no longer includes floaters on his guest list. When he meets with his staff to plan these gatherings, someone occasionally suggests that maybe they could recruit Phyllis to serve as host. Enough time has elapsed so Andy can now laugh at the suggestion.

—RICH DOEBLER

- Discuss**
1. What challenges do we face in connecting newcomers into the life of church?
 2. How much effort should go into winning over the chronically disgruntled?
 3. What type of newcomer events has worked effectively in recent history?

From Outsiders to Insiders

The basis is our common bond in Christ.

Romans 12:9-10

Read *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves (Rom. 12:9-10).*

Comprehend Forming a clique seems like a strange strategy for connecting newcomers to the church, but it's precisely what the apostle Paul prescribes. In his culture, the expression "brotherly love" referred to the affection exchanged between persons belonging to an "in-group"—what we would call "a clique." In fact, in the original Greek language in which he wrote, Paul put the expression "in brotherly love" at the beginning of the sentence to give it emphasis.

Cliques get bad press because they often exclude people. Christian writer Philip Yancey admits: "Given a choice, I tend to hang out with folks like me: people who have college degrees, drink only Starbucks dark roast coffee, listen to classical music, and buy their cars based on EPA gas mileage ratings." But the "in-group" or clique that Paul describes is supposed to be inclusive of those whose common bond is Christ (Romans 12:5), not income, not hobbies, and not musical tastes.

But how do you create a clique that includes people?

The second part of verse 10 provides the answer: "Honor one another above yourselves." Sometimes, competition hurts relationships. But here's one place where you have the Bible's permission to try to outdo other Christians. The idea is to put their needs ahead of yours.

Applied to newcomers, this means taking the initiative to introduce yourself to them, to ask how you can pray for them, to invite them into your home, to include them in your next outing to the lake. Bring them into the clique of Christ by turning them from being outsiders into being insiders.

—STEVEN D. MATHEWSON

- Discuss**
1. What many newcomers want are friends and a sense of belonging. What does our church provide to make that happen?
 2. How does a church move from simply being friendly to outsiders to connecting them into the life of the church?
 3. Some churches employ a "three-minute rule"—regular attenders and members spend the first three minutes after a worship service visiting with someone they don't know. Would this work in our setting? Why or why not?

No Charter for Comfort

Jesus commissioned the church to shake up the world.

Philippians 2:3-4

Read *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others (Phil. 2:3-4).*

Comprehend Is there anything simpler or more natural than members of a church looking out for their own interests? We like to park conveniently. We want our pew available each week. We expect our kind of music to be sung—not that other ungodly stuff! We like things our way, to our convenience and taste.

How easy it is to make church nice and comfortable for us! And how wrong!

Why? Because church isn't meant to be comfortable. No pioneering, radical, countercultural organization has the leisure to be comfortable. A country club can be comfortable. A golfing foursome can be comfortable. A family gathering can be comfortable. But a church—that culture-shaking, eternity-changing band Jesus commissioned to turn the world upside down—doesn't have the charter to be comfortable. It's commissioned as activist for the kingdom of God!

My pleasure, my ease, my way are really not important. God's glory, God's tasks, others' benefit—that's the reason for the church. The apostle Paul makes clear that Christians must treat one another as more important than themselves. They are to be "put out" by the interests of others. The church is not my personal vending machine. Instead it is a lifesaving station to reach out to those in peril needing to be made safe.

How does that happen? When leaders decide their responsibility is to follow seriously the One who came to seek and save the lost.

That, however, gets expensive, when the church has to add parking and pews and programs for those not yet in the church. That becomes difficult when the comfortable become discomfited by change. That becomes messy when the sacred mixes with the profane. Granted.

But Jesus emptied himself, humbled himself, and died on a cross for us—and that is to be our mindset (Phil. 2:5-11). As leaders we must proclaim to the comfortable the message of Christ. And then refocus our thinking and strategy on the outsider, so that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

—JAMES D. BERKLEY

- Discuss**
1. Many outsiders are people who attend only sporadically. How does our church intentionally reach out to people on our fringe?
 2. Respond to this statement: The church should focus first on growing people deeper in the faith; then outreach will be a natural extension of their spiritual life.
 3. What approach does our church use for helping newcomers become insiders?

CONNECTING NEWCOMERS

Culture of Hospitality

4 ways to welcome visitors.

Hebrews 13:2; Luke 7:44-47

For a church to be intentional about welcoming visitors, people have to be equipped and involved at all levels. Here's what one congregation does:

1. Encourage a hospitality mindset. About four times a year I give a “manners talk” to the congregation. I encourage them to invite visitors to sit with them, introduce them to others, offer directions, and ask them to lunch. I remind the church what it’s like to visit a church for the first time, and I give examples of how to meet people without embarrassing them.

2. Create an atmosphere of easy friendliness. We tried a hospitality room where we invited guests to come and meet the staff following the service. It didn’t work, because the room was hard to find and visitors were reluctant to walk into the “showroom” to be pounced upon by the clergy. Now staff members mingle with worshipers before and after the services. Ushers and greeters don’t wear nametags because we want guests to feel that people aren’t being nice just because it’s part of their official duties; rather, it’s part of our culture.

We have a “Welcome New Members” board in the lobby. For each person, there is a picture and a brief bio: where they are from, how long they’ve attended the church, their family, hobbies, and so on.

3. Write a “welcome script.” We carefully compose what is said during the welcoming portion of our worship service. For example: “Welcome to this time of worship. To the guests among us, we know there are a number of good churches you could have driven to, and we are honored you came here. You’ll find the order of worship on the front of the worship folder and the words to our songs on the inside. If you like to write things you don’t want to forget, you’ll find a listening guide on the back of the worship folder. And if you’d like some information about the church or answers to some of your spiritual questions, simply fill out the welcome form and drop it in the offering plate when it comes your way. I’m glad we’re here together.”

4. Follow up immediately. We have a Rapid Response Team that delivers to a visitor’s door a personal note and some cookies immediately following the morning worship. We try to drop this off before they arrive home.

Along with the usual letter from the pastor, we enclose a First Impression Survey on a postage-paid, self-addressed card. The card states, “Western Hills wants to serve you better, so would you please give us your opinion? What did you notice first? What did you like best? What did you like least? Thanks for your input!”

—MERLE MEES

To Discuss

1. What are examples of the difference between welcoming visitors and pouncing on them?
2. What do we think is the single most important factor that makes a visitor come back?
3. What is one step we could take to improve our follow-up process?

CONNECTING NEWCOMERS

Filling the Cracks

How to make a personal connection with newcomers.

Ephesians 4:15-16; Colossians 3:14

It's easy to welcome first-time visitors. Assimilating them into the family is another story. One critical element seems to be the personal connection: when attenders feel that someone is actually interested in them and cares about their involvement in the church, they're more likely to stay. Churches make this personal connection in a variety of ways:

- 1. One on One.** Trinity Presbyterian Church in Anchorage, Alaska, assigns a deacon to a person or family who attends worship for several Sundays.
- 2. Enfoldment Coordinators.** At Berean Baptist in Burnsville, Minnesota, the persons responsible are called “enfoldment coordinators.” They link visitors with a “first friend,” who visits the new persons at their home. The “first friend” learns the visitors’ interests and refers their names to the appropriate ministry area.
- 3. Integration Czar.** Moorpark Presbyterian Church in California uses an “integration czar.” When a person expresses interest in a program or ministry, the czar assigns a specific leader to extend an invitation to the newcomer. The czar then follows up with the leader, asking about the newcomer’s response. This ensures all invitations get made.
- 4. Family Mentor.** Hillcrest Christian Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan, assigns a mentor family to each new person or family. The church attempts to match the backgrounds and interests of its mentor family with those of the newcomers. To gauge the effectiveness of the mentor program and to identify needs, a committee tracks people’s attendance in worship, involvement in service, and giving habits.
- 5. Tracking Changes.** Bethel Baptist Church in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, puts its people on notice: “If we don’t see you, we’ll call you.” In tracking attenders, Bethel focuses on changes in a person’s attendance pattern. A call or visit is made when someone’s pattern changes.

—DAVE WILKINSON

To Discuss

1. Is there a black hole new people fall into after the initial welcoming period?
When does it happen—after 3 months, 6 months, one year?
2. What ministry opportunities does our church offer new attenders?
3. How does our church provide newcomers the personal connection mentioned above?

CONNECTING NEWCOMERS

Points of Entry

How many doors does our church have?

1 Peter 4:9-10; Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus is not merely a nice addition to complete an otherwise fulfilling life. He is essential to all life. Without him, our neighbors are utterly lost. This activity can help motivate and prepare your team to reach your community for Christ.

A nearly century-old congregation in Ohio had plateaued at 145 in attendance for 12 years. Then it doubled in the next five years. What happened? The congregation added a second staff person, whose primary responsibility was to expand the entry points for new people. During her first year, she identified a dozen volunteer allies. She began to build a list of prospective new members, most of the names coming from those who attended the special events she scheduled:

- ◆ a four-session divorce-recovery workshop,
- ◆ a new adult Sunday-school class that was started every year for those first five years,
- ◆ an appreciation Sunday for teachers employed in the local public school system,
- ◆ she enlisted a 63-year-old grandmother to organize a ministry for new mothers,
- ◆ she persuaded the leaders to expand the Christmas Eve schedule from one to two to four services
- ◆ she convinced the minister to teach a new Tuesday evening Bible study group if she would recruit the members for it,
- ◆ she found a person who could lead a series of marriage-enrichment events,
- ◆ she identified a non-member couple who agreed to teach a Sunday morning class for developmentally disabled people,
- ◆ she persuaded the governing board to add an early worship service to the Sunday morning schedule,
- ◆ she found someone to organize and direct a young adult choir for that new worship service,
- ◆ she talked the minister into working with a planning committee for six weeks before the first early service—and six of the nine members of that committee came from her list of prospective new members.

Behind the success

For most of these new entry points, this staff member enlisted others to help her. With few exceptions, she always included at least two or three people from her list of prospective new members. She followed the basic principle that most prospective members prefer to help pioneer the new rather than join the old.

Finally, instead of seeking approval from the appropriate committees and the governing board, all she sought was the withholding of a veto, sometimes expressed as, “Well, let’s try it one time and see what happens.”

Equally important, she did not wait for the boards and committees to take the initiative to tell her what to do. For the most part, she functioned outside the existing committee structure. She wanted help, not arguments. She understood and affirmed the value of ad hoc groups and single-function task forces. Rather than burden the nominating committee, she enlisted her own allies. Rather than ask the finance committee for budgeting, she raised the money needed through designated, second-mile giving.

—LYLE SCHALLER

To Discuss

1. What is an entry point? What are some in our church?
2. What special events or programs have had an effective outreach? Why?
3. Which of the above ideas may work in our church and community setting?

CONNECTING NEWCOMERS

Who Is Our Target?

3 questions to match our church strengths with the needs of visitors.

Here is a simple activity to improve the process for connecting newcomers into the life of your church. Simply spend the first 10 minutes writing your answers to the three questions, and then spend the next 10 to 15 minutes discussing them with the team.

1. What does our church offer newcomers?

First, list at least three key strengths of your church. For example, you may write, “Our church provides effective, fun-filled children’s programs.” Try not to write general items such as “Our church is friendly.” Be specific.

Second, list how some of the strengths you identified could be communicated to visitors. For example, you may write, “We can use letters and e-mail announcements to visitors about our children’s programs.”

Third, based on your strengths, what type of newcomers may likely connect with your church? For example, if your strength is a well-organized children’s program, your church may connect best with young adults with children. If your strength is traditional worship, you may connect with a specific cluster of young and older adults who value historic forms of worship.

2. Who is our audience?

First, focus on the spiritual condition of the person with whom you believe the church needs to connect. Is it the “shuffling saint” coming from another congregation? A pre-Christian with little church background? A de-churched person disillusioned by past church experience?

Second, put yourself in his or her shoes. The greater the difference between that person and those in your church, the more effort it will require in order to view your church from his or her perspective. (Another way to do this is to interview people similar to those God is calling you to reach.) How will he or she fit in with the social culture of your church? Is she a white-collar person and your church more blue-collar? Is this person younger and is the average age in your church more than 50?

3. What is our process for drawing them in?

Draw a simple flow-chart for how you think newcomers connect into the church. For example, in our church, reaching primarily de-churched people, we follow up with a visitor only if they sign our Friendship Folder, which is passed in every service. “Signing in” is the way people step beyond anonymity at our church, so our follow-up process is based on the times they sign in. Do you track guests in a way that provides anonymity but also the opportunity to step forward? What are appropriate ways for you to seek to make a connection with them, and when?

—WAYNE SCHMIDT

To Discuss

1. Do we generally agree on our church’s strengths? Why or why not?
2. Do we generally agree on who may more likely connect with our church? Should churches even think about newcomers in this way?
3. How do our flow charts vary? How can we monitor the connecting process of newcomers more closely?

CONNECTING NEWCOMERS

Further Exploration

6 resources to strengthen your newcomer ministry.

1. Discontinuity and Hope by *Lyle E. Schaller.*

This book is more conceptual than practical, but it gives the big picture of why attracting and keeping newcomers is so critical in this era of rapid change. See especially “New Generations Bring a New Context.”

2. The Five Star Church by *Stan Toler and Alan Nelson.*

Two strong chapters in this book are “The Secret Church Shopper” and “Evaluation and Measurement.”

3. Growing Spiritual Redwoods by *William Easum and Thomas Bandy.*

A realistic view on spiritual growth and how spiritual vitality takes time to develop.

4. Leadership Journal—Special Issue on “Reaching & Connecting.” (*Summer 1998*)

The premier journal for church leaders devoted an issue to “Reaching & Connecting.” Read this issue online for free: www.leadershipjournal.net, click on “Archives,” scroll down and click on the issue. You’ll find a list of articles from that issue that relate to how your church can improve its connecting process.

5. The Purpose-Driven Church by *Rick Warren.*

A classic on personal evangelism.

6. Rethinking the Church by *James Emery White.*

This takes every aspect of how a church functions and forces the reader to check his or her assumptions. Check out the chapters on “Rethinking Evangelism” and “Rethinking Discipleship.”

—DAVE GOETZ

CONNECTING NEWCOMERS**Sample Retreat Schedule**

How to create a weekend retreat on the theme of “Connecting Newcomers.”

BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS expands easily into a retreat format. Here is a sample retreat schedule you may follow for the Connecting Newcomers theme. The purpose of this retreat is to move board members and leaders to think strategically about how newcomers are connected into the life of the church.

Friday Evening

- ◆ 8–8:45 P.M. Opening Devotional: Begin the weekend with “From Outsiders to Insiders,” a devotional on page 10. You can either photocopy and pass out the devotional, or use it as your notes for the opening talk. Focus on the importance of community in an age of disconnection.

- ◆ 9–9:45 P.M. Break-Out Session: Hand out copies of “Willing to Commit,” an interview on pages 3 and 4, and break into groups of three or four. For 20 minutes, have each group read and discuss the interview on rethinking assumptions about newcomers. Reconvene and discuss in an open forum some of the key assumptions critical to an effective connecting ministry.

Saturday Morning

- ◆ 9–10:15 A.M. Begin the day by building a foundation for your ministry to newcomers. Hand out copies of “Who Is Our Target?” an activity on page 15, and allow each member to find some solitude to read it and answer the questions. At 9:30 a.m., reconvene the group and lead a 45-minute discussion about the type of newcomers that come to your church.

- ◆ 10:30–11:15 A.M. Hand out “Can This Class Become More Welcoming?” a case study on page 7, and break into groups of three or four. Each group must prepare to give its rationale for how it would handle the situation in the case study.

- ◆ 11:30–NOON. Reconvene as a large group, and have each small group explain how they would open the Sunday school class to outsiders. Guide the discussion toward developing a purpose statement for the various smaller group settings in the church: Sunday school classes and small groups, for example. How does your newcomer strategy fit with what your church wants to accomplish in small groups or in Sunday school?

- ◆ NOON—Lunch.

Saturday Afternoon

- ◆ 1–2 P.M. Final Group Session: Close the retreat with “No Charter for Comfort,” a devotional on page 9. You can either photocopy the handout or use it as your notes. Use this time to communicate your passion for the church’s mission of changing lives. Spend at least 15 minutes in group prayer for those who do not yet attend the church

You can create similar retreat plans for any of the other BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS themes. Simply determine what you want to accomplish and select the handouts that support your objectives.