

INTEGRATING THE NEW MEMBER

By Pastor J. Huebner

Florida Conference
South Atlantic District WELS
January 24, 1979

A certain Californian was visiting a friend in Florida. The Californian was bragging a little as he pointed to a certain tree: "In California we can grow a tree like that in just a year. What about Florida?"

The Floridian replied, "I can't say. All I know is that the tree wasn't there yesterday!"

This is the second-fastest growing state in the union, numbers-wise, and our South Atlantic District is the fastest growing in our Synod, percentage-wise. Our Synod has been blessed in recent years with a renewed emphasis on evangelism. In 1977 we confirmed 635 more adults than we did in 1968. While that figure doesn't exactly bowl you over with its impressiveness, it is a sign of increased effort in reaching out with the Good News of Jesus Christ. We thank God for this zeal and for blessing the work.

And yet, there is a problem. A group of ministers in Philadelphia have referred to one of the churches in that city as the "Holy Sieve" because people flowed out of that church almost as fast as they poured in. One national denomination, over a 20 year period, welcomed 4,122,354 new members. Yet over that same period, they had a net gain of only 122,836. According to Arthur C. Archibald, in that 20 year study of all major denominations, "nearly 40% of converts are lost to the church within seven years of their reception." (Archibald, Established the Convert, Chicago: Judson Press, 1952) According to last Saturday's paper, things have not changed for the better: "About 43 percent of Connecticut's residents are Catholic, and about 30,000 (misprint?) of the 900,000 Catholics in the state attend church regularly" (Sarasota, Florida Herald-Tribune, Jan. 20, 1979).

In 1977 our Synod gained 14,635 communicants through professions of faith and children and adult confirmations, 3,756 were buried, for an actual total gain of 10,879. Yet the statistics show we ended up the year with only 4,073 more than we started with, for an actual loss of 6,806 previously active communicant members (or counted as active). Many of them were no doubt transfers--but it would still appear that we lost more communicants through inactivity than we confirmed as adults!

In our South Atlantic District, there were 54 communicants who disappeared (some of whom were probably transfers).

Arthur E. Graf writes

The little leaks must be stopped. If you have an average-size congregation (300 communicants) and lost 6 members in addition to legitimate losses by death and transfer last year, then your congregation contributed the average share to the damage. (Graf, The Church in the Community, Eerdmans, 1965, p. 171)

Reducing his figures to the level of many of our missions, if we had 50 communicants in our congregation and lost one through inactivity--we contributed our share to the problem.

In a recent issue of Christianity Today, Alvin Shifflet, a rural pastor in Indiana states that "You can take people into the church, but unless they get involved in church ministry and become committed disciples, you haven't accomplished much."

Which brings us to the title of this paper: INTEGRATING NEW MEMBERS INTO THE CONGREGATION. Somebody told me that the "younger brethren" needed to learn about some of the things that can be done to work new members into the congregation. Well, after looking at the problem more closely, it appears to me that I need to learn and practice a number of things in order better to deal with the problem of trying to keep our new members active.

In His parable of the shepherd who goes out looking for the one lost sheep out of the hundred, Jesus did not say: "Oh, that was just a weak sheep anyway, all he did was eat up the food that the others could have had. The flock is better off without him." Jesus didn't call that missing sheep a piece of dead wood. As the shepherd cared for the sheep, so Jesus indicated His concern over even one soul who had fallen away from Him. That is the kind of shepherd-heart we all covet as pastors of our Lord's little scattered flocks. And it is that kind of caring that causes us concern when someone who has stated that he trusts our Lord Jesus for salvation begins to show evidence that his relationship with our Savior has begun to deteriorate and, perhaps, even has been completely wrecked.

None of us wants that to happen. Maybe there are a couple of "thorns in our flesh" who we wish would transfer to a sister congregation or maybe even to one of the other synods so that there might be a more equitable distribution of agony...but none of us would even permit in our hearts the secret desire that a soul might end up in hell. It is embarrassing to have to report statistically that a member has fallen away. But the real pain is inside, when one realizes that lips which have tasted the precious blood of our Lord, a mouth that has expressed the sheer holy joy of simply praising God, a heart that was once lit by the fire of the Spirit of God--that none of those things are there any more. God calls His believers His treasure (Mal. 3:17). When someone is a treasure, that person is still very important, even if the finish is tarnished.

The moment a person comes to faith, he moves into a new home called the body of Christ. "...many as we are, we are one body in Christ and individual parts of one another." (Romans 12:5) One shot of faith is hardly enough to last through the whole day, much less the whole life. Our faith needs nourishment and support. In addition to putting us into the invisible Church, God in His wisdom has seen our human frailty and needs and has established the visible church. For the sake of review and to undergird some of the premises upon which this paper is based, it would be wise here to include some of what Pieper says about the local church:

What, however, is the relation of the local churches to the Church Universal? The Church Universal and the local churches are not two different churches or two kinds of churches, but the Church Universal consists of all the local churches plus those believers who are prevented by circumstances from joining some local church. When we speak of a Christian congregation, or local church, we always mean only the Christians or believers in the visible communion. The congregations, too, consist only of believers. As the wicked and hypocrites do not belong to the Church Universal, so they are no part of the congregation, either. This is the clear teaching of Scripture. When Paul writes to the congregation at Corinth, he addresses "them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Cor. 1:2).

...is the formation of congregations or membership in already existing congregations left to the option of the Christians, or is it God's will and ordinance? This question is of great practical importance because there have at all times been people who, while they claimed to be Christians, declared that they were free to join or not to join a congregation, that this was an adiaphoron. (This prompted Walther's brochure of 1880 Of the Duty of Christians to Join an Orthodox Congregation.) We maintain: 1) Because it is the will and order of God that Christians who dwell in one locality should not merely read God's Word privately, but also fellowship with one another, hear God's Word publicly preached, to that end establish the public ministry among themselves, and after its establishment make use of it; and 2) because it is the duty not only of the individual Christian, but also of the congregation to admonish and reprove the sinning brother, the whole congregation is enjoined to exercise Christian discipline; and 3) because in particular the

celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar is not merely a church custom, but a divine order for the exercise of brotherly communion (1 Cor. 10:17; 11:17-21, 33): therefore the formation of Christian congregations, and membership in them, is not a human, but a divine mandate. Accordingly, our Church accepts no "resignation" from membership in a Christian congregation, because neither individuals nor a whole congregation have the authority to grant a dispensation from a divine institution. (Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Concordia Publishing House, 1953, pp. 419, 420, 421)

I would guess that all of our constitutions have articles covering the privileges and responsibilities of membership that speak about hearing and receiving God's Word, partaking of the Sacraments, exercising responsible stewardship, and living godly lives. If all our people are aware of everything that is included in that, one would think that all you have to do is read the constitution at the last membership class and there will be no more problems, as long as they say "yea and amen" to them at the outset.

But as we all know, 'tain't necessarily so. Ultimately, each of us is responsible for our sins, including the sins of neglect. So are my children responsible for their own. But if I did not teach my son that it is wrong to sneak a pack of bubble gum into his coat pocket when "nobody was looking" (and enforce that sense of sin with some extra admonishment to his backside), then I also share my son's responsibility for his sin. Likewise, if we leave something out of the training of our people at the outset, and do nothing to see that they stay with Christ, then perhaps we also share their neglect when it happens.

There is a natural tendency in every organization to place survival goals and institutional maintenance at the top of the agenda. That means that we are more concerned than we ought to be that the budget is met, that we can show a plus under the membership-gained column, and that we give the appearance of a "going" congregation.

A typical result (of this) is that a congregation begins to seek new members in order to perpetuate that institution, rather than to be responsive to the needs of the people that congregation is seeking to reach. The typical result is an effort to "sell our church" to that prospective new member rather than to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of that individual. One result of this is the members tend to assume that when a new member unites with that congregation they have consummated that sale. The contents of this volume (his book) are based on the premise that frequently it is easier to become a member of a Protestant congregation than it is to be accepted into the fellowship of that community of believers. (Schaller, Assimilating New Members, Abingdon, 1978, p.19)

There has been much talk lately about how easy it is to get into as well as out of a marriage. It seems to suffer from some of the same problems as the church is--inactivity within.

Churchmanship does not necessarily accompany membership. One does not become a good member of the organization by joining it any more than he becomes a good husband by getting married. To be a good husband a man must assume responsibility for a home. He must learn to pay light bills, adjust to the ways of a woman, care for sick children, maintain good relations with the neighbors, and subordinate his personal needs to the welfare of all without losing the glorious glow of his wedding day. To be a good churchman he must do essentially the same: attend to the daily responsibilities of the church family without losing his sense of joy in being a part of it. (Walker, Enemy in the Pew?, Harper and Row, 1967, p. 157)

Is every single member in your congregation well integrated into it? Is there an excellent sense of community there? Could you say that you are satisfied that everybody is pulling his weight in a responsible and contributing manner? Are all your people of God working daily and hard to extend and strengthen His kingdom? Is there no one in your congregation who at this moment is in danger of loosening the bonds of faith? I will not embarrass you by asking you to respond. We know the answer to the question.

When I first accepted this paper, I had in mind several ideas I was going to elaborate upon-- simple suggestions that could be used to make new members feel and be more at home in the congregation. But as I have read and thought about all this, it seems more and more to me that the matter is too complex for any kind of treatment like that. And I submit here that we are being short-sighted if we are looking for ideas, methods, programs, or other helps that would just get a new member into our congregation, acquainted with a few people and active in a group or two, and attending church fairly regularly at the outset. There are a number of things we can do along those lines. But before we get into them, we must first understand why any of them are needed in the first place.

UNDERSTANDING "WE" AND "THEY" AND WARMLY ACCEPTING "THEY"

I once attended a leadership training course, in several segments of which each of us had to stand before the group and relate incidents from our lives with lessons learned, etc. Before we went up in front of the group, though, we knew that no matter how we did, the whole group would clap at the end. The purpose of that was to build confidence. Some did well, some did poorly, but always came the same sound of clapping. Afterward, I wondered... "did they clap because they had to, or did they clap because they recognized my superior ability?" I will never know. But I see now that the confidence-building approach is merely an artificial way of "commoning" everybody. Putting it differently, it was a way of trying to bring everybody to everybody else's level, or at least to a level at which we felt more comfortable among the rest.

Ron Willingham, who designed that course especially to help train laymen for leadership roles in the church, recognizes that we are all singulars in a plural world. This type of pluralism manifests itself in what Schaller calls the "we--they" syndrome. It is a type of polarization whereby we find ourselves thinking in terms of "we" and "they", recognizing that "we" are different than "they" are. The title of this paper recognizes such a distinction. New members are different than we are, so we want to find ways to lessen the distinction. Actually, we want to eliminate the distinction so that "they" become "we". We all have a need to "belong".

...the feelings of individual status and group membership (or "belonging") are among the most important factors contributing to the morale of the members of a group. When the channels of communication are restricted, the restricted members of a group tend to feel isolated or rejected. (Ruch, Psychology and Life, Scott, Foresman and Co., 1963, p.387)

The difficulty in all this is that "they" can never fully become "we". We have to know how far we should go in effecting the unity we seek. I don't want to think exactly as you do. If we all were the same, this would be a boring place. God splashed this world with a tremendous variety of things and colors and potential. Even His special creation--man--comes in a variety of colors, moods, wills, and ways of looking at things. Jesus prayed that this variety of colors, moods, wills, and philosophies might be one "As You, Father, are in Me and I in You, let them be in Us so that the world may believe You sent Me." (John 17:21) Jesus and the Father were one in a very marvelous way--a perfect union of will and thought and purpose.

We do not aspire to a unity of being. We are not and never can be the same. I am sure there will be sinless personality differences even in heaven. Yet we do desire a sense of unity... the kind that Jesus prayed for... a sense of coming together and being together. And today we are celebrating the fact that God has brought us together through faith in His Son Jesus Christ into His family called the Church. He calls this family His children and we get to call Him Father. "For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26)" And because you are sons, God sent into our hearts the Spirit of His Son, who cries, "Father!" What a joy to possess membership in such a family! This spirit-worked faith unites us at the same time in an intimate bond with all other believers. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28) "We saw and heard It, (the Word of Life), and we tell you about It so that you too will have It in fellowship with us. Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." (I John 1:3)

As soon as we start talking about this family of God, we have to talk also about how it shows, how we recognize it. And that is where our local congregation comes into the picture. For it is there that we can use the Means of Grace, pray together, worship our great Lord together, encourage and exhort one another, and do all the other things that come under the title of fellowship in its deep and fullest sense.

But the problems come when the human differences, the fears, apprehensions, personality differences, and things like that enter into the picture. And these are in sharpest focus when a new person comes into the group. Now there is a "they" (or a "he"). Even while standing alongside of that person and worshipping in the Communion liturgy, one can still detect a sense of "other". I suppose this would be quite evident if a single Black person were to sit in the front pew. I wonder how many people would sneak a peek to see how the "other" acts, or looks, or dresses, or forms words with the lips, or any of the many differences there are among humans. What I am saying is that even while celebrating our oneness, there is still a sense of "other".

Some of that is felt by the "we" and some by the "they". I'm new here. This is the first time you will be able to judge my work, and thus, me. So in a sense, I am on trial. I know how I thought and acted after several years in my old conference when somebody new came in--there were those same human reactions of "we" and "they". The "we" may feel threatened: "Why did he come here? Is he going to bring some new heresy? Is he going to spy on us? Is he going to try and show us up?" And the "they" ("he") feel quite vulnerable: "What do they say about me? Is my hair too long? Do I sound too dumb or too much like I'm putting on airs? Will they notice that I only have one vested businessman's suit?"

Remember when you first met the woman who is now your wife? Unless it was a surprise thing, you probably tried to dress your best, used Scope, and washed the car. Now, years after you have gotten to know each other, have been accepted by each other and have come to trust each other with your vulnerability--you pick your nose, leave your underwear on the bedroom floor, and do other perhaps even more gross things in her presence. But you can only do that because you are accepted for what you are, you made yourself vulnerable and were received instead of being shot down. You feel safe with her.

In effect, that's what happens when someone outside comes into the congregation. There are the same kinds of testing, feelings of being threatened, and feelings of vulnerability. And even though there is a recognized and jointly celebrated sense of oneness in Christ, it takes time and exposure to one another before that initial introductory period can be left behind and the human relationship can grow and develop into the kind that St. Paul developed with his flocks.

I would guess that the people in his congregations also had the same kind of feelings toward each other, judging from the spirit and tone of his letters. Read Romans 16 for a good picture of this. I know one person who did not develop these kinds of relationships with fellow members. He tried to work in the congregation. But he became less and less effective as time went on.

What we must keep in mind is that there is a large difference between a person getting confirmed (or transferred) and being formally accepted as a member in the congregation--and being actually accepted among the members. One may be particularly enthused after coming out of the adult class, all ready for some good Bible study and some fellowship with the people, only to find that he is not accepted for one reason or another. Gradually the person may drop away, worshipping less and less, unless the situation is corrected or other factors come along that alter the situation. Among those factors would be a personal growing faith and love that is able to work in spite of the conditions, by the grace of God, and thus something great grows out of a potentially bad situation.

Integrating (or not integrating) a new member doesn't start on the day he is formally received into membership. It starts with the attitude the congregation has toward any new person of his type (young, old, aggressive, introverted, whatever). Then comes the first contact that person has with the people. It may be when a neighbor invites him to church, when he comes to the pastor for counseling, when he drops in one Sunday to see what the church is like as compared to a sister congregation on the other side of town--or countless other encounters. Beginning with that first impression, a solid picture of that congregation begins to emerge from the newcomer's mind (as well as a picture of that person in the congregation's mind). It does not suddenly change when he is standing in the welcoming line after church on confirmation day. All the smiles from the people who nearly froze him before with their faces appear for what they really are. And the integration (or non-integration) process continues on, actually for as long as that person belongs to that congregation.

And that is why I couldn't suggest "10 easy ways to hold a member after you've once hooked him". Any congregation that has an attitude like that is going to find out that more people are going out the back door than are coming in the front. When we are dealing with the question of how to integrate new members, we have to look at the whole picture of 1) REACHING OUT TO THE UNCHURCHED (and the attitude behind it), 2) WELCOMING THE NEW MEMBER INTO THE CONGREGATION, 3) CONTINUING TO ASSIST THE MEMBER TO GROW IN CHRIST UNTIL OUR LORD CALLS HIM OUT OF THE CONGREGATION, and 4) HOW WE FEEL AND ACT TOWARD THE INACTIVE MEMBER. ---all these are part of the same cloth. And when we accept all those things as being part of the total picture, then we are going to be able to deal with the whole situation in more than just a band-aid fashion.

The kind of people you wish to reach, the attitude which you show toward the new people who walk in, and the intensity with which you will strive to assist each new person as well as older member in living and growing in Christ in your congregation depend upon a number of factors, one of which is the answer to this question: WHAT HOLDS THIS CONGREGATION TOGETHER? Schaller puts it this way:

Every long-established congregation is organized around one or more principles which weld a loose collection of individuals into a cohesive group. Once a congregation passes the 35 to 50 mark in worship attendance, this glue becomes an important factor in understanding the distinctive characteristics of each congregation. As time passes one form of glue is often replaced by a new organizing principle which rallies people together and unites--or reunites--them as one fellowship. Whenever one of these

components referred to as glue disappears, either it is replaced or that congregation begins to diminish in vitality, enthusiasm, size, and outreach.

Once a congregation passes the 50 to 65 level in worship attendance, one or both of two patterns begin to emerge. In some congregations the ratio of participation to size begins to decline as the membership figure climbs. (Note: for our purposes we shall define an active member as someone who regularly worships and partakes of the Lord's Supper, works at leading a godly life, accepts the doctrines of the Bible, and is active in growing personally in Christ and helping to extend the kingdom-JPH) The larger that membership total, the lower the ratio of worship attendance to membership. In other congregations this pattern is at least partially offset by one or more forces that tend to increase the cohesiveness of the group. When the congregation reaches the 70 to 100 level in worship attendance, it usually is very helpful to examine the sources of this sense of unity. It is even more important to consider this factor when a congregation begins to decline in outreach and size.

In addition to the variable of size, a second consideration necessary to understand this concept is the distinction between a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and a commitment to one particular congregation. The first does not necessarily generate the second of these two loyalties, and this distinction can be seen very clearly in scores of churches where there is no reason to question the Christian commitment of members, but many of them clearly do not feel a strong sense of belonging to that particular parish. (Pieper might argue with him on this)

The congregation with twenty or thirty or forty members is small enough that it can be glued together by the two great commandments of Jesus--the love of the Lord and the love of the members for one another. By contrast, however, the congregation with two hundred or more members usually is far too large and much too complex to function as a "large small group". The sense of unity needs additional reinforcement as the size of the congregation increases.

Another way of stating this is to ask the question, What is the basic organizing principle that holds a congregation together? Answering this question often will throw some light on concerns about the participation or lack of involvement of the members. (Schaller, pp. 22,23)

Schaller has written a great deal of helpful information. I would recommend his book because of his insights. But you have to be careful when reading him--he tends to downplay the only real and solid foundation a faithful Christian congregation can have--true fellowship in Christ, based on His Word. It is also true that other factors are often present among fallible human beings. To deny that would be to bury our heads in the sand. Of the following "glues" or "organizing principles" that help hold a congregation together (he admits this is not an exhaustive list and I've done some changing), you could find nearly all among our congregations. Of course, we have been responding to them all along. Sometimes we respond by encouraging them, sometimes by saying "I wish we didn't have this and I hope we grow out of it", and sometimes by saying, "we don't have any of this here". Let's look at the list:

- 1) The nationality or ethnic-language factor. (don't we still have a few First German Lutherans around?)
- 2) The Denominational Factor (we encourage our people to look for our synodical churches, confident of our doctrinal unity nation-wide; we try to instill in them an awareness of Synod)

- 3) Personality and Magnetism of the Minister
- 4) Specific, attainable, measurable, highly visible and unifying task (In my former congregation we built a school by ourselves. 110 members, including the young people were involved. We worked hard at our task. As we worked alongside one another, seeing our prayers and hopes visibly realized, talking about it among ourselves, the closeness became very visible. Some of the families even decided to send their children to our school, even though they had been already committed to the public school before the project started. Our mission congregations have a similar experience as they work together and see the congregation reach out in ministry to the community and also see their first building go up, their congregation grow, and other signs of growth among themselves.)
- 5) Kinfolk ties (These can sometimes be so strong that nobody ever wants to even try to enter the fellowship circle.)
- 6) The "Enemy" (The public schools, integration, pastor, liberalism, society, etc.).
"The widespread use of this principle is one of the most persuasive, pragmatic proofs of the validity of the doctrine of original sin" (Schaller, p. 28)
- 7) Social class (Can you name the church to which very many high society people belong? Shortly after Dwight L. Moody was converted, he filled a pew of an aristocratic Boston church with street boys. Some of the snobbish members resented this and when Moody was presented for membership, the board suggested he "think it over and pray about it for a month". According to the story, the board thought they would never be bothered with Moody again. But they failed to reckon with his sincere dedication. The next month he came before the board. They asked him, "Did you pray about it?" "I did," Moody solemnly replied. "And did the Lord encourage you to join our church?" "Yes," said Moody, "He told me not to feel bad about it because He has been trying to get into this church Himself for the last 25 years.")
- 8) Crisis (People work hard against a common disaster; problems develop if you come on the scene after it's over.)
- 9) Group life (This refers to small groups, Bible study groups, youth groups, ladies groups, etc. Church Growth people all over are hailing this as the best possible means of attaining true congregational unity, integration and at the same time, getting a lot done in the kingdom.)
- 10) "Community" building (Things like marriage encounters, camping weekends, things where the major result is that the group grows more closely together.)
- 11) Theological stance (I think Schaller downplays this too much. Faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to Him as Lord and Savior are a very strong unifying factor -- the strongest of all, and certainly stronger than Schaller seems to want to allow. As our appreciation and love for Him grow, so will our love for His work and His other people. This leads us back to our understanding of fellowship in Christ. There is no real unity unless we find ourselves to be united with each other on the basis of what we teach and profess to believe. And the only way we can find a common ground is to come together in our God's word, accepting it for what it claims to be -- inspired by God Himself, holy, clear, and the only unerring basis for our doctrine and belief.)
- 12) Program and ministry (Attracting people with a music program or youth ministry, or bus ministry, old folks fellowship, etc.)
- 13) Place and building ("architectural evangelism")
- 14) Heritage and nostalgia (We have a congregation in Upper Michigan where I think there is only one member under 50)
- 15) Liturgy (Sometimes a strong factor among us, arousing strong feelings; some have switched churches to find a liturgy where everything wasn't so modernized)
- 16) Congregational life-style (If there are a lot of young families active in the congregational life, more will be attracted.)

Far more important than building a complete list of all possible organizing principles in unifying a large collection of individual church members is a different question: Which of these organizing principles (unifying factors) tend to cause potential members to feel excluded? (Schaller, p. 36)

It is interesting to note that among some of the things Schaller lists as ways to keep people from joining are short pastorates, long-term financial subsidies from the synod, being active ecumenically, keeping the business agenda centered on maintenance of property rather than on ministry, trying to appeal to everybody, and taking an attitude of responsibility transfer. ("We'll welcome them if they'll come--they know we are here")

In principle, we would like to appeal to everybody--it would make me very happy if some day every single person in the area around the church would be members. But we just aren't all the same. And that is why people who do not speak English, Blacks, the deaf, liberal Christians, atheists, young single adults, the very wealthy, hippies, the very poor, Baptists, avowed homosexuals, abortionists, etc. would probably immediately sense a feeling of "other", of "not belonging".

The current "church growth" movement recognizes this plurality and says that basically you can either narrow your congregation to one basic group or people and start churches all over town that will appeal to the other groups (like having babies--one every 9 months); or else start cells and small groups within your congregation so there is something for everybody.

When we take a close look at our local congregation, observing the many differences, the human personalities involved, the vast range of backgrounds, the variety of ways of looking at and dealing with even a matter so insignificant as "what color would we paint the fellowship hall?"...it is with a great deal of wonder and awe that we give honor and glory to our God for having called us together in Him. What power the Gospel really does have! It is truly a miracle that we are one in Christ.

The church is actually a rather loose association of many small units, knit together by a common faith in a very uncommon God. The best symbol for a congregation is not a rock, to show massive unity; the best symbol might be the honeycomb. A honeycomb is many separate cells glued together to make an unit. So is the congregation. It is literally e pluribus unum, one out of many. The "one" is there, but so are the many. The "one" is a miracle of the Holy Spirit. The "many" is the normal condition of human beings in any massed association. But they never lose their individuality.

People normally rebel at massing and are uncomfortable when forced to do so. A splendid filmstrip illustrating this point may be purchased from the American Baptist Convention. The filmstrip is entitled, "Let's Face It!" Among other things it tells why people are repelled by large groupings unless mass gatherings are for a spectator event like a ball game, concert, or movie. This is one thing that makes the congregation such a phenomenon. It is the only association of a voluntary nature that regularly gathers people into the unnatural association of large numbers. Other associations do it for a while, or when faced with a difficulty, or while gathered in annual convention. Only a Christian congregation performs this feat week in and week out through the year. What we are saying is that the congregation regularly does what human nature and considerable experience indicates is impossible. Even so, we must not be confused by its apparent oneness.

Let us clearly understand what a local congregation really is. It is many smaller units bound together in one. Each one of these smaller units is a face-to-face group, of modest number, which will not grow beyond an almost predictable size. When any internal group reaches a certain size, either the attendance stabilizes (even when membership increases), or there is a ferment to divide. The maximum size of any group depends on the degree of interchange the members desire or the group provides. It must also be noted that people do not gather together with people of dissimilar taste (that's why smaller congregations have more personality problems than larger congregations), or in inter-congregational groupings with whose

objectives they are not in sympathy. When people are forced into unnatural bandings, interest will be dissipated, friction will develop, and unhappiness becomes common fare. Remember: A congregation is really many smaller cells, cells like Sunday School teachers, church council, men's group, youth fellowship, ushers, altar guild, and trustees, fitted together into one. Together they make a congregation without ever losing their individual identity. (Mueller, The Strategy of Evangelism, Concordia, 1965, pp. 50, 51)

We now see that before we can be most effective in intergrating new members into our congregation, we must first recognize the human factors that unite us, deal in a positive way with the dividing factors, and constantly work at developing an attitude toward each other of acceptance, love, warmth, and unity in Jesus Christ, based on His Word. This is not a one-shot program called "Let's Unite This Year" or something. It is something that we must continually be doing. When it is done in a God-pleasing way, then our congregation becomes stronger for it, more viable in adjusting to our real, human needs, and more fit for reaching out to the nonmember, new member, and inactive member alike with the great and wonderful Gospel of salvation.

I read recently that even John Wesley, who early on advocated perfectionism, later softened on that advocacy, realizing that where humans are on this side of heaven, there are also sinful human nature, the world with its unagedly view of things, and the old alienator himself, Satan, hard at work trying to bring down everything our Lord would have us build up. The disciples argued who would be greatest among them (a classic case of "me"-"him") in heaven. (Luke 22:24) Jesus had a tremendous amount of patience with them--a good thing to remember when we also slip. And the early church also had those problems. They had to call a convention (Acts 15) to decide how they were going to deal with the question of whether or not the gentiles ("they") had to be circumcised ("we"). Of course you know the answer--"NO". They affirmed their unity in Christ and at the same time accommodated divergent needs inside that bond of unity. And St. Paul must have had his hands full with the Corinthians, always urging them to put aside their divisions. (1 Cor. 1:10, 3:3, and 11:18) Even the women could not always get along, as is evidenced by his urgings to Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2).

So we, too, realize the presence of problems in our midst. One of the most burdensome, though, is the member who joins and then after a while falls away from the Lord in whom he professed faith.

A missionary from India tells of a member of his church who became inactive. He called on the man and asked what had happened. The disturbing answer was expressed like this: "When I first visited your church, every one spoke to me. Members of the parish called on me. They seemed eager to share the Gospel with me and concerned for my soul's welfare. But as soon as I was baptized and entered the church, this interest disappeared. No one prayed with me. No one came to speak with me about Jesus Christ. No one wanted to share with me the joy of the Christian faith. I got the impression that all they really wanted was my name on the membership rolls." (Mueller, p. 74)

Of course this says something about both congregation and the individual--how they perceived themselves over against each other. How would you react if this happened in your congregation? How would your congregation respond if you brought the man's response to your voters meeting? Would the response be in the form of a question?

"What's wrong with these people who come forward and unite with the church in apparent sincerity and then drop out? Why do these people behave that way? What is there about people that causes them to want to join a church, but not be willing to take any responsibility? Why is it some people insist on being members of a church, but they won't participate in any program or activity or group in that church?"

The best response to these comments is that they are very, very poor questions. They are poor because the wording transfers the responsibility for the present state of affairs from us to them. That is a loser.

All we have direct control over is what we do or do not do. We do not have direct control over what they do or do not do. Therefore a better question to ask is, What did we do or not do that may have helped create this set of conditions? While this may be a very threatening question to raise, it can be a far more constructive approach than speculating about what is wrong with them. (Schaller, pp. 116, 117)

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Our congregation is a family. Jesus said "If you do what My Father in heaven wants, you are My brother and sister and mother." (family) (Matt. 12:50)

This family of God is not the ordinary type of family where outsiders are not welcome (you don't usually add another room to your home so you can house people who come in off the street). This is a family that is looking for those outsiders and wants them to join the family. As Christians, we know that every stranger who walks into church has already been invited: first of all, by the Lord's gracious invitation to come to Him for rest and relief; and secondly, by the very presence of the church building itself which calls to every passer-by to come in for worship and comfort and communion with God. (Huebner, conference paper: "How to develop a warm, friendly spirit in a congregation!", 1970, p. 6)

Can we be more effective? Are there some ways in which our unity in the word and our joy in Christ can be more visibly portrayed? What can we do in order to effectively maintain and heighten the sense of unity in our congregation, so that once a person becomes a member, he will perceive that being a member means becoming and always remaining active in the congregation? How can all of us, both old and new members, reach out to those people who stay in bed or go fishing on Sunday; or to those who never appear at fellowship functions, never volunteer when needed, and usually ask "do I have to"? when asked to do something?

There are obviously some things that can be done because there are some who are doing them. One of those who defected from the Jim Jones cult before the tragedy, said she had found the warmth of the community attractive.

Ever since her departure, (Miss) Mills says, she has been "looking desperately" for a similar environment. "In no church (which I visited) did more than perhaps the usher and one greeter say hello to me," she said. Reflecting upon her first visit to People's Temple, she said, "I felt like I had died and gone to heaven." (Christianity Today, Jan. 1979 issue, I think)

As I see it, there are three things we can do to help integrate new members into the congregation:

- 1) Provide an atmosphere of acceptance in the Gospel--a warm, loving, non-threatening, caring, and understanding fellowship.
- 2) Give them a reason for belonging--something of substance.
- 3) Give them something meaningful to do.

A NON-THREATENING FELLOWSHIP

Fellowship is not a distinctively Christian word. It is possible to say that where christianity is at work, fellowship is broken as often as it is made. Jesus pointed out that even thieves and sinners have a nice relationship with each other. (Matt. 5:46,47) Some may understand Christian fellowship as "just getting together over at church". And many seem to want that - to meet with congenial friends, fill the time with something (preferably without having to use the Bible" because there are so many books in it that I always forget which is Old Testament and which is New") so they don't get bored, and enjoy the cozy feeling of belonging to such a wonderful group. But Christian fellowship is that deeper thing that was mentioned earlier in this paper - a demonstration of our unity in Christ on the basis of the word of God. In both the worship service and in small groups where the word of God is shared and applied, where forgiveness is asked and received, there is Christian fellowship. And there, too, will be the spirit of love, caring, and understanding that was mentioned earlier. Once we have an idea of how a newcomer feels, know some of his needs, then we can be better equipped to fill them. And we will do that because we love our Lord and thus also the new member. May our fellowship be the kind that was shown in D.L. Moody's church in Chicago:

One cold January day a greeter stood at the front door to receive a latecomer who was a small, uncared-for boy. The youngster's cap was missing. His coat was too small and was held together at the neck with a safety pin. He wore no socks, and his shoes had belonged to someone else first. His legs were blue from the wind which came with numbing coldness off Lake Michigan.

Scooping the boy up into his arms, the man began rubbing the legs to encourage circulation. Standing him down at arm's length, the greeter asked, "Sonny, where do you live?"

The boy reported that he lived in a certain area which the greeter quickly calculated to be approximately two miles in one direction away from Moody's Sunday school. Surprised, he shot back, "why did you do it? You must have gone by a dozen church doors this morning in order to come to our Sunday school. Why did you walk over here in the cold this great distance in order to come to Sunday school?"

With the kind of honesty a boy has when he does not know a prepared answer but only gives the first thing that spontaneously comes to mind, the lad dropped open his jaw and said, "Sir, I guess it is because they understand a fellow over here and show us Jesus." (Parrott, Building Today's Church, Baker Book House, 1973, p. 20)

SOMETHING OF SUBSTANCE

In a day and age when one's importance is measured by the things one possesses, when a recent survey shows that young people are more frightened than they have ever been, when parents are wondering "what am I going to do with my child?", when life is so cheap that you can see it blasted away in living color every evening on the TV (both news and other violence shows), in such a time this world desperately needs to hear the message that the God who created this world has made some very clear promises to us, chief among which is that He loves us with an everlasting love as shown by giving His Son. No one has any real meaning or anything of substance in his life until he finds the truth in Jesus Christ.

So let us proclaim this with a mighty voice. Proclaiming does not seem to be too popular these days. W. R. Malby has sadly described a certain preacher thusly:

"He spoke of great things and made them small, of holy things and made them common, of God and made Him of no account." And Raymond Abba writes mournfully of the sermons he hears these days. "Like rivers that wander through the desert and finally get lost in the sand," he says, "they lead nowhere."

All this is a bad sign. With some saying that today's preaching is inferior and others shrugging off all preaching as unimportant, we have a long way to go to lift this time-honored function of the clergy back to its proper position. And it is important to lift it back because, historically, the church has been no stronger than its pulpit. Its greatest days are marked by its greatest preaching. (Walker, p. 79)

Our sermons must inspire better emotions than that of relief ("whew, he's finally finished"). Think about what the great preachers have done when they finely crafted the word of God-- Jesus, Luther, Wesley, Dr. Walter Maier. Let us give every person who comes into contact with our worship service the substance of the Gospel in the most powerful and meaningful way we possibly can. And since the Gospel strikes at the very heart and core of a man, he will come back for more. Every Sunday your new members will come back and your old ones wouldn't dare miss either.

And let us teach our people what it means to worship.

Not many of us would enter a home with dirty shoes, but we often enter the sanctuary with the petty accumulations of a week clinging to our spirits. As a kind of divine courtesy, we should linger at the door long enough to clean them off. We should shake ourselves free of our social calendars, our business files, our work schedules, our animosities, and our infatuations that so regularly clutter our minds, and prepare to see God only. Someone has suggested that this may be what is meant by entering the closet and shutting the door. When we walk into the sanctuary of the church, we are closeted with God. We should shut the door against the distractions of daily life.

No one should enter the sanctuary of the church as he would enter a social hall, expecting to visit. He should not come to church as he would go to an opera house for quality entertainment. He should not approach worship as he would go to the office with a mental list of things to do. He should enter as a worshipper, prepared to humble himself before the Almighty. (Walker, p. 65)

We can help to set the mood for worship with a call to worship before the opening hymn. If you have a choir, they can sing it. But do not make the worship a common thing. It is a time when we are in communion with our God and our brothers in Christ. It is a time when our burdens are made light and our souls are refreshed. This is a grand time. And the worshippers should sense that upon walking in, all through the service, and especially at the close as they leave to put their refreshed faith into action out in the world again. Perhaps at the end of the service you might remind them to go forth with faith, loving the Lord, loving their fellow man, and seeking to share this great One called Christ.

We can help our people find something of substance not only in the sermon and worship service, but also in all our meetings, fellowship occasions, activities and all the rest. We can do this by being certain that these things are centered in Christ and His Word.

SOMETHING TO DO

A group that cannot show each member that he has something to contribute and something to gain from membership is an unproductive one and has no reason to continue. (Ruch, p. 392)

God tells us that one of the reasons He gave the gift of pastors to His Church is "in order to get His holy people ready to serve as workers and build the body of Christ till all of us get to be one as we believe and know God's Son, reach a mature manhood, and grow to the full height of Christ. (Eph. 4:12, 13) Both we and our lay people have things to do. But it is necessary that we teach them about their responsibility and train them so they can do it. It seems as if being a Christian appears to some to be about on the same level as

joining 4-H or the local country club. Life goes on pretty much as it did before. Service in the kingdom of God is treated as being optional-- "I'll be glad to do it if I get the time". We need to heighten our people's understanding of ecclesia--being called out of this world.

The adult class is the ideal place where this training can begin, where our new members (to-be) can receive a taste of the joy of being the Church. It is important that we sit down with them and share their understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Ask them to share their understanding of the word Church--and listen to what they say. If we are busy forming our own thoughts for the next time we speak, we might well miss what the person is trying to communicate. Then, using Lamp of God, guide them into a full measure of the joy of serving our Lord. Ask your new transfers to sit in on this session. Discuss frankly the problem of fallen-away members--how you realize it happens and how you hope it doesn't happen to them. Ask them what they think are the basic causes. You will probably discover that they will be actually telling you about themselves, their feelings of not being adequate for some task (and afraid to try lest they fail), the pressures on them from the outside world, their desire to have time for themselves. Respond to that in an understanding way, being concerned for their needs as well as Christ's demands. Discuss the constitution with your adult class and perhaps once a year at a voters assembly--everyone needs reminding once in a while of who we are and what we are to be about. The clearer everybody is at the outset, the more united they will be in performing the task at hand.

Don't rush your adult class in order to get them counted as members right away. Some schedule a couple of lessons a week in the hope of making it through in record-breaking time. Remember that these people are being called into a new way of living--the old habit of sleeping in on Sunday, the old temptation of put the church in the background of their lives--those things take time for the Holy Spirit to break down and replace with their new way of living as new creatures in Christ. One doesn't stop being an alcoholic in a week. Neither does a person overcome the bad habits accumulated over many years in just a short time. Cover the chief parts of doctrine well. Don't take for granted that even our WELS people know doctrine. Kersten's "the Lutheran Ethic" found that only 84% of our people agreed that "only those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior can go to heaven",

Encourage outside reading during the course of the class--get them started in the Gospel of Mark or John; suggest some easy to read devotional books such as Gockel's My Hand in His, or Give Your Life a Lift, or other appropriate books from the "family" section of the Northwestern catalogue. Suggest and make available a selection of the home study courses from Wisconsin Lutheran College. One pastor used to channel his prospective members into the regular weekly Bible class by covering one or more of the chief parts of Christian doctrine required for membership in that time slot. Another aid to getting the new members from the basics into the deep things of God would be to have a specific course that is designed to follow the adult class material. Since you obviously cannot teach the same things in your regular Bible class every year, having such a course would be an ideal opportunity to train one of your laymen to lead the course (sensitizing him to the difficulties of people who are just learning how to use their Bibles).

At the last session of your adult class, go through the procedures for confirmation day, including the reading and understanding of their vows. At that class also introduce them to your congregation, perhaps with a brief history (duplicated for them to keep), its development and future plans. You might have the president of the congregation greet them and explain how the church is operated and organized. Discuss freely what they might expect from the church--services, counseling, family support, etc. Explain what church membership means in Biblical terms--the obligations and responsibilities they are assuming. Make a day of confirmation a day of rejoicing. God has added to the Church! Make the reception of the new members a high point of the service. Take a picture of the group and post it in the narthex with their names on it and perhaps a brief introduction to each family. If possible, receive the transfers at the same time, using the vow of the confirmands as their own vow of rededication.

During or after that last class before confirmation day, you might also enlist your new people for service--asking them to work in specific areas (evangelism, greeters, ushers, altar guild, Sunday School teachers, etc.) Do not ask for volunteers unless you are not sure of someone's interest and talents. By this time, you have spent several months with them and should have a pretty good idea of the area in which their talents lie. Jesus did not ask for volunteers--he hand-picked His men and trained them for service.

Of particular interest to the new members ought to be the tasks of being greeters and evangelists. They should know and realize the importance of those areas of work in reaching out to the newcomer. One pastor and his wife visited an Ohio church. They found the front door vacated and the narthex empty. After a moment a lady carrying a baby came through the swinging doors from the sanctuary and looked at them in surprise; "Who are you," she asked, "strangers?" And she went on her way without another word or gesture of welcome.

At the same time you want to caution them about a phony kind of friendliness. Sometimes I think we are the only church in Sarasota that doesn't advertise itself as "the friendly church". "Nothing about a church is said more or means less than that it is friendly. So is your Shell dealer." (Walker, p. 128)

C. Peter Wagner has made a study of evangelism efforts. He has found that even in very well organized programs, about the maximum number of people involved is 10 per cent. From what he deduces, that is the approximate percentage of people who will have the gift of evangelist. He also believes that the effectiveness of the Christian's role as a witness for church growth decreases with that person's maturity in Christ. Usually we assume the opposite is true. He feels that the longer a person is a Christian, the more he knows about God's Word, etc., and so the better equipped he is for evangelism. But that does not mean he is more effective. Wagner gives 2 reasons for making his statement that new converts are more effective: 1) they have more contacts with non-Christians (all their friends, probably); and 2) what he calls "redemption and lift"--the process of growing in Christ and opening the gap between himself and the non-Christian. I would also add that quite often new converts or newly instructed people have a higher degree of motivation to share their faith.

I...believe that one of the primary objectives of the Christian education program of the church should be to enable every single person in the church, within one year after conversion in the case of adults or sometime before the 25th birthday of second generation Christians, to come to terms with his or her spiritual gift--to know precisely what it is and to be using it effectively.

...What is the conclusion of all that has been said? Simply this: from a combination of the 10% of the mature Christians who have the gift of evangelist with those recent converts of less than three years in the Lord in a program planned and designed for church growth. Put this together with the 90% who know and are using their other spiritual gifts, and you have developed the kind of mobilization that produces an extremely high growth potential. (C. Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Grow, Regal Books, 1976, p. 83)

Something that Donald Abdon practices also seems to me to make good sense. Rather than have several adult classes spread out at different times during the week and ending at different times, work very hard at the time your class is about to start to get all the prospects you can together into that next class. You can time it with an intensive evangelism effort. There are several benefits--your time spent in teaching is not so scattered and you can devote a little extra to preparation; you can confirm the people together; and the people in your group have had several months to get to know each other and thus do not feel so "other" in the congregation. We have approximately two hour sessions, with about a 15 minute break half-way through the evening for coffee and doughnuts. The members of the class set up a

schedule, taking turns preparing the refreshments and cleaning up everything afterwards. That gives them an opportunity to begin "doing something" and to use the facilities and be ready to help out at other functions of the congregation later on.

There are a number of other things you can do with the new member in order to help him become a stronger part and feel a stronger part of the congregation. Graf suggests three at-home visits within 2 months after a person has become a member: one by the pastor, one by at least one representative of one of the church organizations, and a visit by a friend in the congregation or a "sponsor". He also suggests annual new member dinners and other kinds of reunion services and meetings.

Concordia Publishing House puts out a little booklet called The First Step, a sponsor plan for new members. It tells how you can enlist your members in the work of nurturing new members, helping them to become involved in the work and social life of the congregation, being the "familiar face" in the crowd. The sponsors don't babysit or snoop, but are there when needed to help and encourage. They also drop off the new member packet--a folder with several pamphlets about the congregation, Christian education, etc. Sponsors should be trained in ACTIVE LISTENING and avoid constant superficial talk.

Keep in touch with your new members (as well as the older members). Communication with notes in the bulletin about what went on that week, newsletters, "nights with the pastor" (specific times when you will be in your office just for visiting), maybe a telephone call to thank them for serving the Lord in some way... those are the kinds of things that assure him that he is being thought of more and more as an important part of the congregation. Some people are too shy to speak their opinions in public. The pastor can seek these persons out privately and do the speaking for them (in an unobvious manner) at the public meetings of the congregation.

Periodically evaluate your people. Determine in our own opinion whether or not the newcomers of the past year have been integrated. If someone is beginning to appear less often at worship services and other things, do not delay--go and visit with him. You might ask him how he views his integration into the congregation--discover whether he feels a "we" or a "they". One clue is that when people do not yet feel a part of the group, they will use the expression "your congregation" when referring to the group, rather than "our congregation".

When planning your facilities, be sure you include space for fellowship activities. Here in Florida, that may mean we can plant trees or other partial shelters for congregation outside after services for meeting and talking and getting to know one another.

There are some very good ideas along the line of organizing your congregation for service. Abdon's course, put on by his Parish Leadership Seminars, Inc., is advertised like this:

What would happen if. . . .

EVANGELISM, Biblically redefined as reaching all within as well as outside the congregation with the Gospel, became the integrating principle of our total ministry?

EPHESIANS 4 became the model for pastors--to train and equip lay people for every kind of ministry?

MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES, carefully integrated with Lutheran theology, were utilized in training laymen to manage the Church's entire ministry?

THE PASTOR, as resident trainer and equipper of God's people, had effective proven methods and materials available for training congregation members in stewardship, evangelism, Bible study, and as managers of ministry?

IS IT POSSIBLE?

The concepts mentioned above were "field-tested" for a period of ten years in two parishes--one in New York, one in Indiana. One parish doubled in less than four years, the other in less than five years. Out of 280 non-worshipping, non-communing members in one parish, 240 recommitted themselves to Christ and are active again in the parish. Stewardship of time and talents showed remarkable increases as well. Stewardship of dollars increased from \$70,000 to \$171,000 in a three-year period. Bible study reached a high of 700 adults and children out of a total of 1100. Lay evangelists, trained in the parish, brought over 400 people to Christ in a four-year period.

He has many good ideas for reorganizing the congregation around service instead of maintenance of the program. There is planning for growth involved right in the structure. But what works for him may not work for you. His seminars are worth attending with a layman.

The Kennedy evangelism follow-up methods also operate from the assumption that you can't just receive a new member--he needs growth and training:

Follow-up procedures are not completed until the convert has been taught to study God's Word, to pray, to live the Christian life, and to walk with Christ. Then he is encouraged to come into the evangelism program to learn how to win others to Christ. Yet at this point the follow-up still is not complete, for he must be taught not only how to reproduce but also how to disciple his new convert until he has matured to the place where he is able to bring someone else to Christ. This emphasis of spiritual multiplication is looking past the first generation to the second. (D. James Kennedy, Evangelism Explosion--revised edition, Tyndale House Publishers, 1977, p. 14)

Kennedy also advocated the Zoning Plan for undershepherding. That involves grouping a number of families in an area under the spiritual care of trained elders or undershepherds. They would attend to the spiritual problems such as lagging church attendance, non-involvement in the Bible study groups or other organizations, etc. The pastor would be notified whenever a member starts to fall away. Schaller cautions us about this kind of program because it groups people in geographic areas, rather than according to the "glues" that link people together.

One looks at all the things on the market, all the ideas, plan, programs, helps, and resources--and it would be easy to get the feeling of the cow in the story about two cows looking at a milk truck which advertised milk that was "pasteurized, homogenized, standardized, with vitamin D added". One cow said to the other, "It makes you feel sort of inadequate, doesn't it?"

But these things are all just tools. Last year a million quarter-inch drill bits were sold at hardware stores in this country. But nobody really wanted a quarter-inch drill bit--what they needed was a quarter-inch hole. We don't need all these programs, but we can use perhaps some of them in our real goal of lifting our people above this world, into a relationship that is vibrant and real with Christ Jesus.

When James Kidd, a Scottish preacher, was moving from the old manse where he and his family had lived so long, he found it very difficult to leave. Even after the furniture had been taken out, he lingered on, walking through the empty rooms, noting the bedroom where the children were born and the study where he had prepared his sermons and talked with his church people through long hours. But suddenly his reverie was broken when Betty, their servant girl, pleaded, "Come away sir, come away. The time's up, and the other house is far better than this!"

If we can use any of these things or none of them to build up our people so that they see their "other home", where the eternal mansions lie, more clearly each week, then we are being faithful in His calling. At the same time, "this home", the local church, will look ever better to them because they will find purpose, meaning, and the solid substance for their lives which they can find nowhere else than in Jesus Christ.

People involved with their Lord will be integrated into the congregation because Christ calls that group of praying, loving fellowshiping, worshipping, and working people part of His body. That is a very good place to be while we all are waiting for our final transfer to come home.