

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

INTENTIONAL PRE-MEMBERSHIP ASSIMILATION IN MID-SIZED CONGREGATIONS
IN THE MIDST OF A DECLINING CHURCH

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Abstract

You have pounded the streets. You have practiced good friendship evangelism. Your hard work is beginning to bear fruit. The people you invited to come to worship at your congregation are there! Now what? How can a congregation do everything possible to not lose/scare away this new worship visitor? How can it do everything possible to make sure to give that person a real, lasting connection to the means of grace? These are questions which are even more pressing in a culture where more and more people are leaving the Christian Church in America. These are also all questions which can be answered when a congregation has an intentional assimilation program. This paper will specifically take an in-depth look at mid-sized congregations in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and pre-membership assimilation methods which hold promise for them.

INTRODUCTION

There is much to learn when a person moves into a new culture. This is especially true when someone moves to a new country. There are many things to which a person must adjust. If the vernacular is different from the place which they came, they will have to learn how to speak the new language at least well enough to accomplish daily tasks. They will have to get used to new foods which can at times be drastically different from what was eaten in their previous culture. They will don new styles of dress lest they stick out like a sore thumb in their new home. They might have to adjust from living in a Christian-dominant society to living in a Muslim-dominant society, or vice versa. They will be surrounded by new customs and rituals that have deep historical roots in the place in which they now live. They will have to acclimate themselves to new weather patterns in many cases. These are all things that people must adjust to if they are to be assimilated into a new culture. On one's own this can be an extremely daunting task.

However, consider the outcome if a local were to take the new person under his wing and teach him about some of the things that would help him navigate his new home. He could patiently help teach him the language. He could explain to him the new dishes that he eats and help him dress in a way that is culturally acceptable as they ventured out in public. He could help him understand the new customs and rituals that he witnessed taking place all around him.

Which of the two scenarios will have a higher assimilation success rate? The obvious answer is the latter scenario. A person lovingly reaching out and guiding someone through the cultural assimilation process will make it much more likely for him to actually become fully assimilated and comfortable living in this new place.

Many of the same things could be said of assimilation into a local congregation. For those of us who have grown up in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) it is hard to identify with newcomers to our churches. However, they face many of the same struggles and fears of people who are being assimilated into a new culture. After all, they are being assimilated into a new culture! It just is not a new culture based on geographic location. While people are capable of being assimilated into a new congregation on their own, the research done for this paper¹ shows that people are much more likely to be assimilated into and stick in a church when there is a conscious effort by the people of a congregation to bring these new people into the fold and to cement those connected to the congregation as fully functioning members.

Before we start talking about assimilating new people into a congregation, we must have a common definition of the term assimilation. Some have defined the starting point of a person's assimilation into a congregation as the moment that they are confirmed as members of the congregation.² Others identify the starting point as the first time that a person comes into contact with your congregation.³ I tend to agree with the latter's opinion. For the purpose of this paper, I have defined assimilation as the intentional process of turning first time guests into active members by connecting them to the means of grace and removing any obstacles from their path. There is an urgent need for intentional assimilation in every congregation regardless of size, however, this paper will focus on assimilating members into mid-sized congregations.⁴ This

1 Mostly reading on the topic of pre-membership assimilation paired with some surveys of current WELS pastors.

2 This is the definition given by Joel Heck in his book on New Member Assimilation.

Joel Heck, *New Member Assimilation: Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1988, 9.

3 This is the view given by Nelson Searcy in his book on assimilation.

Nelson Searcy and Jennifer Dykes Henson, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully Engaged Members of Your Church*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2017, 9.

4 I have identified mid-sized congregations as congregations which have between 100-300 baptized souls. This size congregation accounts for 40% of congregations in WELS.

paper will also focus solely on pre-membership assimilation methods. This paper will explore why there is such an urgent need for intentional assimilation. It will also seek to outline a theology of assimilation and methodology. Finally, it will conclude with an in-depth look at pre-membership assimilation practices that hold promise for mid-sized congregations.

BACKGROUND IN WELS

Assimilation is a topic which has not been written about much inside WELS circles. Pastor Donn Dobberstein, director of the Commission on Adult Discipleship, spoke of assimilation as being the “ugly stepdaughter” of the WELS for many years.⁵ I think he had a good point. When one searches “assimilation” on Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary’s essay file there are only six hits. One of those is Pastor Paul Spaude’s senior thesis⁶ from 2017 where he spoke specifically about different methods of teaching Bible Information Class as a part in the assimilation process. Before that, the most recent paper written on assimilation came in 1998 by Pastor Charles Westra.⁷ It has been over twenty years now since anyone has tackled the topic of assimilation in our circles. The majority of the books on assimilation which exist in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library are also from the previous millennium. There are many things which have changed in our society over the years including the way that people approach the church. With that in mind, it seems appropriate to revisit the topic of assimilation in our churches, specifically mid-sized churches.

While many things have changed, it is important to note that one thing has remained the same. Our God has not changed, and he will never change. The principles which he has laid down in Scripture continue to rule everything which we do as we seek to win souls for Christ’s kingdom. The Holy Spirit is the only one with the power to win hearts for the gospel.⁸ He is the

5 Email (Donn Dobberstein), personal communication, 5 July 2018.

6 Paul Spaude “Using Andragogy to Integrate Assimilation and Bible Information Course,” n.d., 39.

7 Charles Westra “Building the Body of Christ,” n.d., 11.

I understand the irony present here. However, I did not realize that my father had previously written a paper on this topic until after I had chosen it as the topic for my senior thesis.

8 “Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3).” All Bible references in this paper will come from NIV 2011.

only one that can grant success to our efforts.⁹ This truth will always be kept in mind throughout this paper even as I explore human methods in which we can be his faithful servants by intentionally assimilating new people into his Church.

⁹ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

A DECLINING CHURCH

Every article and book which I read on assimilation started with a common theme. That theme is that Christian churches in America are struggling. The number of people attending any church on a Sunday morning is declining. This is not a new phenomenon. The books on assimilation which were written in the 1980s stress it just as much as the articles I have read from this decade. In an article written for churchleaders.com, Kelly Shattuck cites research done by David Olson, director of church planting for the Evangelical Covenant Church, and claims that this decline is more pronounced in mid-sized congregations than it is in small, family-sized¹⁰ churches or in large, “mega” churches.¹¹ However, this seems to be difficult to validate with statistics. Even if it is not more pronounced in mid-sized congregations, there is no doubt that church attendance is declining across our country as a whole. Shattuck reported that only 17.7% of the population was regularly attending a church in 2004.¹² That number is down from 20.4% in 1990 and 18.7% in 2000.

Interestingly, even though only 17.7% of the population was attending a church, the majority of the country still identifies as Christian. According to a 2016 poll by the Barna Group, 73% of Americans identify as Christians.¹³ Barna acknowledges that this number is much higher than the number of Americans who actually practice their faith.¹⁴ There is clearly a large

10 Roy Oswald and Speed Leas. *The Inviting Church*, Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1987.

Roy Oswald and Leas Speed use this term to describe churches which worship fifty people or less on a Sunday morning.

11 Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America.” ChurchLeaders (blog), April 10, 2018. <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>.

12 Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America.”

13 “The State of the Church 2016.” Barna Group. Accessed November 13, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>.

14 The Barna Group considers any person who attends church at least once a month and says that their faith is very important to them a practicing Christian. According to them, this includes 31% of Americans.

disconnect between the number of people who identify as a Christian and the number of people who actually attend church on the weekend. Even though people say that they are Christian, this does not necessarily manifest itself in their attending of a church service. Certainly, some of this stems from our post-modern world. People often spurn the way their parents did things just for the sake of being different. This leads to people manifesting their faith in different ways. It leads to the person who “feels closer to God on the lake than he does in the church pew.” It leads to the person who reads the Bible and prays on his or her own and feels no need for corporate worship. Regardless of whether these things are right or wrong, they are evidence of the truth that many Americans do not feel the need to attend a church service on Sunday. While it can be noted that the Catholic Church is losing members at the highest rate and evangelical congregations are losing members at the lowest rate, this seems to be the reality across denominations.¹⁵

Why are more and more people leaving or changing churches in our country every year? There have been many different answers given to that question. This answer will depend on whether it is a member leaving a church they have attended for a substantial amount of time or whether it is a first time visitor deciding whether or not to return a second time. Let’s start with the former. Bob Smietana of LifeWay Research released a poll which states that the majority of people who regularly attend church cite a change in doctrine or teaching as being the only thing which would cause them to leave their church.¹⁶ This is an encouraging statistic for us Lutherans. In a church body which rests on *sola scriptura*, I would hope that the thing people take most seriously in their church is a correct teaching of the Scriptures. 1,010 protestant church-goers

15 Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America.”

16 Bob Smietana, “New Research: Churchgoers Stick Around for Theology, Not Music or Preachers.” The Exchange | A Blog by Ed Stetzer. Accessed September 10, 2018.
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2018/july/churchgoers-stick-around-for-theology-not-music-or-preacher.html>.

were asked what would cause them to change churches. 54% stated that their church changing its doctrine would cause them to make a change. This dominated the other reasons given such as preaching style changed (19%), a pastor left (12%), a family member wanted to change (10%), political views differed from mine (9%), I didn't feel needed (6%), music style changed (5%), relational conflict with someone (4%), and friends stopped attending (3%).¹⁷

It should be noted that many people who leave a congregation do not leave Christianity altogether. People often leave with the intent of attending another Christian congregation in the same geographic area. Shattuck and Olson maintain that often this is the case with people leaving mid-sized congregations and joining either small, family-sized congregations or large, "mega" churches. People often feel that the large and small congregations offer something that a mid-sized congregation does not have. "The best way I can describe it is that a lot of people believe they're upgrading to first class when they go to a larger church," Olson says. "It seems highly likely that some of the people in those mid-sized churches are the ones leaving and going to the larger churches."¹⁸ Those larger churches can offer programs and a large staff that mid-sized congregations just cannot duplicate. Ed Stetzer is quoted in Shattuck's article saying, "We've created a church consumer culture."¹⁹ People who leave mid-sized congregations for smaller ones are looking for the opposite. In this fast-paced, technology dominated world they want to form personal relationships with people that seem so hard to find elsewhere. Shattuck quotes Shawn McMullen, author of the newly released *Unleashing the Potential of the Smaller Church*, on this point. "In an age when human interaction is being supplanted by modern technology,

17 Bob Smietana, "New Research: Churchgoers Stick Around for Theology, Not Music or Preachers."

18 Kelly Shattuck, "7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America."

19 Kelly Shattuck, "7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America."

many younger families are looking for a church that offers community, closeness and intergenerational relationships.”²⁰

With attendance rates dropping across Christianity, it is even more vital that churches would do everything they can to assimilate new people into their congregation. It is imperative that a congregation does everything it can to ensure that first time visitors feel welcome and want to return a second time and many more times after that. However, that is not always the case in modern day Christian congregations. The internet is littered with articles written by people who are more than happy to explain why they refused to attend a congregation a second time. One such article was written by an anonymous author on factsandtrends.net.²¹ The article is a letter penned by the author to the pastor of a church he visited, but would not be returning to for various reasons. The author does not come out and say it, but the obvious, unstated issue is that the pastor and his church just did not care about him enough. One reason he gave for not returning was the pastor’s lack of effort in reaching out. The author filled out a pew card, introduced himself to the pastor, and showed an interest in learning more about the church, but heard nothing in return. He gave this analysis: “We must have slipped through the cracks—but a foolproof follow-up system is non-negotiable. One misstep here can bring a quick end to a promising relationship.”²² The author also complained about only being seen as a number by the pastor. He retold how the pastor showed excitement when he came to Bible class and even gave him a bar code, so they could track when he was there.²³ This would not have been an issue, he

20 Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America.”

21 “Why I’m Not Coming Back to Your Church.” Facts & Trends, April 13, 2018.

<https://factsandtrends.net/2018/04/13/why-im-not-coming-back-to-your-church/>.

22 “Why I’m Not Coming Back to Your Church.”

23 I do not know of any WELS congregations which track Bible class attendance with a bar code, but are we sometimes guilty of the same thing when our primary excitement for a new person in worship or Bible class is the padding of our stats for the statistical report?

said, if the pastor had shown interest in him as a person. The thing that stood out to me above everything else from this one-time visitor's tale is that we have to show people that we care about them as people. We have to show people that we care about their souls and their eternal destination. This should come naturally as we joyfully carry out the work which Jesus has given us to do, but we need to make sure that we make it intentional and make it very clear to everyone who walks through our doors, lest they walk out of them after one contact with us never to return again.

Decline in WELS

The WELS is not immune to this decline in membership and the backdoor losses that congregations are suffering across our country. We have been steadily declining in attendance and membership just like the majority of churches across all denominations. This should not come as a surprise to us. Former Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president David Valleskey pointed out in his book *We Believe – Therefore We Speak* that Jesus told us that this would be the case in his parable of the sower and the seed.²⁴ Jesus told us that the seed which fell in the rocky place is like a man who receives the Word of God with joy, but since he has no root, his faith quickly dies out when hardship and attacks come at him from the devil and the world. Then there is the seed which falls among thorns. Jesus tells us this is like the man who has faith, but all of the worries and fears of this world choke that faith out (Matthew 13:20-22). Therefore, it should not be surprising to us that our synod seems to be going through a period of decline right now and has been for some time.

²⁴ David Valleskey, *We Believe, Therefore We Speak: The Theology and Practice of Evangelism*, Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Pub. House, 1995.

Valleskey was already referring to the backdoor losses that we had in WELS when his book was published in 1995. One look at the recent WELS statistical reports show that we are still suffering losses today. In 2011 WELS had 383,506 baptized members. That number dropped to 380,728 in 2012, 376,177 in 2013, 373,022 in 2014, and 369,221 in 2015.²⁵ While that is less than a one percent annual drop in total membership, it is still a trend in the wrong direction. Some of these losses cannot be avoided. We cannot stop death and people moving away from the towns where are churches are located (hopefully this will lead to a transfer to another WELS congregation in their new town). The number that is much more concerning are the people who are leaving through the backdoor of our churches to join a Christian church of another denomination or no church at all.

Valleskey referenced a study called *My Brothers' Keeper*²⁶ which was conducted in WELS between 1988 and 1990.²⁷ The purpose of the study was to look into backdoor losses in WELS and find the main reasons that people were leaving WELS congregations. They surveyed former WELS members over the two year span and came up with six top reasons which people gave for leaving their WELS congregations:

1. Non-church-related reasons, including relocation – 6%.
2. Relationship with others (conflicts with pastor, teachers, members) – 13%.
3. Unhappiness with congregational programs and services (worship, educational, fellowship, counseling) – 3%.
4. Church-related concerns (perceived lack of care on the part of the pastor, teachers, and/or congregation) – 6%.

25 These statistics were taken from the WELS annual statistical reports.

26 Norman Berg ed., *My Brothers' Keeper* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991).

27 David Valleskey, 274.

5. Personal issues (personal and family problems, job and leisure interests, apathy, health, transportation) – 32%.
6. Disagreement with church teachings (specific doctrines and practices) – 40%.²⁸

The breakdown of the percentages in this study seem to match the percentages referenced earlier in this paper from George Smietana's study of churches across denominations.

WELS Survey Results

I conducted my own survey of twenty WELS pastors from mid-sized congregations from across the country.²⁹ The survey had two purposes. One of the purposes of the survey was to gauge the reasons that people are giving today for leaving a congregation. The other purpose was to observe the things that are being done by congregations which are assimilating members well as well as things that are not being done by congregations which are not assimilating members well.³⁰

28 It is interesting to note the similarity and difference between this statistic and what Smietana found. The similarity is that in both cases the majority of people listed doctrine and teaching as the main factor in whether or not they will leave a church. However, in other Christian churches it is specified as a change in doctrine or teaching. This would indicate a congregation which is actually changing its doctrinal stance on a topic. Obviously, the doctrine taught in WELS cannot and will not change. When a person cites a disagreement in doctrine as the reason for leaving a WELS congregation, they are either stating that they did not know the WELS teaching of a doctrine in the first place or some experience in their life has made it impossible for them to continue to believe that particular teaching of doctrine.

29 Thirteen of the pastors surveyed filled out the survey and returned it. It should be noted that the surveys did not provide the results for which I was hoping. While it did provide some insight as to some reasons why people are leaving congregations in WELS, it did not provide much insight into the connection between this reality and pre-membership assimilation. This is likely my fault. Better questions should have been crafted.

30 I came to identify congregations which were assimilating members well and congregations which are assimilating members poorly by combing through the last five years of the annual statistical reports put out by WELS. I started by narrowing my search to only mid-sized congregations. I identified the congregations which were assimilating members well as the churches which retained the highest amount of their members. It was a little trickier to identify which congregations are not assimilating members well. Since deaths and transfers to another WELS congregation are outside of our control, I did not count them. I also did not count removals toward the loss total, since removals can often be a sign of health in a congregation where proper church discipline is taking place.

Four of the thirteen surveys returned to me indicated that most people who leave their congregation leave because “they simply lost interest in the church.” Three of the thirteen stated that most of the people who leave their congregation leave because “they want to attend a church which offers more programs.” This matches with the information given in Shattuck’s article that many people are leaving mid-sized congregations to go to large churches which have the manpower and the resources to offer more programs. Other reasons given for leaving were “they disagreed with some of our church’s doctrine” and “they left because of a conflict with a called worker.”

At the end of the day, the reason that someone decides to leave a congregation becomes somewhat insignificant. In the best case scenario, they leave and go to a heterodox church where they are still connected to the means of grace and inside the Holy Christian Church.³¹ In the worst case scenario, they cut themselves off from church altogether and from the means of grace. It is clear that we are losing members and visitors³² out the backdoor, and we must do something to remedy the problem. Joel Heck states, “Effective assimilation will have a major positive effect on the future number of backdoor losses. It will take some years for the impact to be felt, but the assimilation of new members into the life of a congregation can help prevent many of the losses that occur each year.”³³ This starts with the first contact that a new person has with our congregations. However, before we look at pre-membership assimilation practices which can be implemented in a congregation, we must establish a theology of assimilation to ensure that

The stat which I really focused on was “released to another Christian church.” If that number was more than fifty percent of a congregations losses, I put them in the category of congregations which were assimilating poorly.

31 The one true Church in which every person who puts their faith in Jesus as their sole Savior from sin belongs.

32 It is harder to track the number of visitors who worship with us once or twice and never return, since it does not show up on any statistical report. However, personal experience in congregations which I have attended and in which I have served have made it clear to me that this is an issue.

33 Joel Heck, 10.

everything which we do is done in line with God's Word and with his will for us in carrying out his Great Commission.

THEOLOGY OF ASSIMILATION

Assimilation is not a term which is found in the Bible. Therefore, it can be difficult to nail down an exact theology to go along with it. However, the Bible has a lot to say about our responsibilities and our obligations to our fellow man, both believers and unbelievers. Charles Westra pointed out many of those responsibilities and obligations in his paper. He pointed out that we are responsible to warn the fellow Christian who continues to sin, to encourage the weak, and to reach out to those who forsake the faith.³⁴ I would add the responsibility that we have to reach out to the unchurched. As we look at those different responsibilities and obligations, it is clear that assimilating new people into our congregations is one way to fulfill our duty in those areas of our Christian lives.

Responsibility to reach out to the unchurched

One could argue that this responsibility belongs in a paper that focuses on evangelism and not one that focuses on assimilation. I would answer that the two are so closely connected that it is impossible for there not to be some overlap between the two topics. Jesus had a heart for the lost. He made that very clear in Mark 1:38-39.³⁵ “Jesus replied, ‘Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.’ So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.” Jesus did not come from heaven to earth to gather a little group of people around him and then cease all contact with

³⁴ Charles Westra, 2.

outsiders. Instead he went from village to village, so that more and more people might come to know him and believe in him as their Savior from sin.

He passed this responsibility on to us in his aforementioned Great Commission. “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’” (Matthew 28:18-20). That responsibility is not fulfilled with a one-time action. We cannot say that we have carried out the Great Commission just because we invited someone to come to church and they actually showed up. We have a responsibility to continue to reach out to these people after their first visit and even after they become members as we aim to assimilate them into our local congregation. As an interesting note, the Barna Group conducted a poll in March of 2018 to discover how many regular, church-going Christians were familiar with the Great Commission. When asked “Have you heard of the Great Commission?” 51% of people responded “No.” 25% responded “Yes, but I can’t recall the exact meaning.” 6% responded, “I’m not sure.” Only 17% of polled Christians responded “Yes, and it means...”³⁶ This has interesting ramifications for our assimilation efforts. It could be that Christians understand the biblical concept of reaching out to others with the gospel but have never really been taught about the Great Commission specifically. It could also be that Christians do not understand the biblical concept of reaching out to others with the gospel at all. Either way, it is clear that pastors can and must do a better job of teaching their people about the responsibility that we have as Christians to reach out to the lost and the

36 “51% of Churchgoers Don’t Know of the Great Commission.” Barna Group, Accessed September 10, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/half-churchgoers-not-heard-great-commission/>.

unchurched. If a congregation does not have a heart that wants to welcome in new people in line with God's Word, the task of assimilating people into a congregation has failed before it even begins. However, when our people understand this responsibility and are eager to fulfill it, assimilation will begin to take place naturally with the new people in a congregation.

Responsibility to warn fellow Christians in sin

When a Christian continues in unrepentant sin, it is the responsibility of his brothers and sisters in Christ to warn him of God's impending judgement. God points this out to us through Ezekiel where he even goes so far to say that the one who fails to proclaim God's warning will have that person's blood on his or her hands.

17 "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. 18 When I say to a wicked person, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their life, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. 19 But if you do warn the wicked person and they do not turn from their wickedness or from their evil ways, they will die for their sin; but you will have saved yourself. 20 "Again, when a righteous person turns from their righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before them, they will die. Since you did not warn them, they will die for their sin. The righteous things that person did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. 21 But if you do warn the righteous person not to sin and they do not sin, they will surely live because they took warning, and you will have saved yourself (Ezekiel 3:17-21)."

There is an urgency and a gravity to God's words. This is a literal matter of life and death. Those who fail to turn from their sin will face eternal death and separation from God, while those who repent of their sin and place their trust in Jesus as their Savior will live forever. Assimilation plays an important role in this process. The pointing out of sin best takes place within a Christian congregation where bonds of trust have been formed between fellow Christians. How will someone who is not a member of your family or a member of your congregation respond if you

point out a certain sin present in their lives? More than likely, they will tell you to mind your own business and question your right to judge their actions. However, in a congregation, there is an understood responsibility among believers to watch out for each other and to point out sin when it is present. If we fail to assimilate people into our congregations and give them those types of relationships with fellow Christians, those people will be missing those important relationships which God intends for us to have to hold us accountable to one another and to God's commands. They will also be missing those important relationships which God intends for us to have to be built up through the gospel shared with us by our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Obligation to the Weak

Scripture also points out the obligation that we have those who are weak and struggling in the faith. "And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else (1 Thessalonians 5:14)." Paul emphasizes our obligation again in 1 Corinthians 9:22. "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, urges us to pay special attention to the weak. We are to show them patience and make sure that we do what is good for everyone. Paul even became weak in order to win the weak. He was willing to go to whatever lengths necessary to make sure that weak brothers and sisters in the faith became and remained connected to the means of grace. We share this same responsibility. When a person begins attending a new congregation, they can often be described as someone who is weak in the faith. Part of assimilating that person into the congregation will be to do "whatever is good" for that

person in order to ensure that we can connect and keep them connected to the means of grace. The same can be said of a member of your congregation who is struggling with his or her faith regardless of how long he or she has been a member. The difference between whether that person seeks counsel within your congregation or decides to go and try to find it somewhere else could depend on how well they have been assimilated into the congregation.

Responsibility to those who forsake the faith

Christians also have a responsibility to reach out to those who have forsaken the faith. Paul speaks this way in his letter to the Corinthians, “Hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord (1 Corinthians 5:5).” We are not to simply give up on those who have walked away from church. Even then our job of assimilating people into the local congregation has not ended. In fact, it could be said that this must be a time that we intensify our efforts that these fallen away Christians might be reconnected to the means of grace. Jesus also shows his intense desire to reclaim wandering Christians in his parable of the lost sheep found in Luke 15:3-7.

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

What a privilege it is to work along with the Holy Spirit in bringing lost sheep back into the flock and to be the cause of heaven rejoicing. We can and must continue our assimilation efforts

even after people have wandered away from the church. God-willing the Holy Spirit would use us to help bring them back into the church.

Example set by the early Christian Church

The Holy Spirit's power was on full display on Pentecost. He filled the apostles and gave them the special ability to speak in the languages of all the people in Jerusalem that day (at least fifteen different languages!). Peter preached a powerful sermon where he cut the people's hearts with the law and comforted them with the gospel. The result of his preaching and the work of the Holy Spirit through it was that three thousand people came to trust in Jesus as their Savior from sin that day (Acts 2:1-41). This left the early Christian Church in an interesting situation. They had just gone from a group of less than one hundred people to a group of over three thousand people. How would Jesus's followers assimilate this massive group? Luke gives us a glimpse into what they did in Acts 2:42-47.

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

First and foremost, they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." They put their focus on the most important thing. They studied and meditated on exactly who Jesus was and what he had done for them. The apostles passed down the many things which Jesus had taught to them while he was with them. This paper has stressed connecting new people and longtime members alike to the means of grace, and that is exactly what they did in the early church.

They also devoted time to fellowship. They spent time with one another and formed relationships with one another. The Greek phrase translated “together” in verse 44 is ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ³⁷ which is literally translated “in the same.” The believers were united in teaching, doctrine, and their love for one another. They gave to those who were in need and did everything with others in mind. This is the attitude that a congregation must have as it aims to assimilate people into its midst. It must have an attitude that cares about others, both their earthly and spiritual needs, and is willing to do whatever it takes to make that evident to everyone.

³⁷ Florian Voss, *The UBS Greek New Testament: Greek Bible Text, the Greek New Testament, fourth revised edition*, Stuttgart: Dt. Bibelges., 2010.

THEOLOGY OF METHODOLOGY

The responsibility and obligation of a Christian to people outside and inside the Holy Christian Church has been established. Still, to a certain extent. God has left the way that we fulfill that responsibility up to us. There is not a section in Scripture which is entitled “This is the only right way to assimilate people into the Church.” Therefore, we are largely dealing in adiaphora when we begin to discuss the methods a congregation might use in order to assimilate people into its midst. However, there are still general Scriptural principles which must be followed.

As God spoke to Joshua before he led the people of Israel into the Promised Land, he urged them to adhere to his Word. “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful (Joshua 1:8).” Whatever methods are chosen to assimilate people into a congregation, they must be sure to line up with what is written in God’s Word. This happens when Christians meditate on God’s Word and are careful to do what is written in it just as God told Joshua. Then no matter what the results are of the assimilation efforts, whether losses dramatically decrease and gains dramatically increase, they will have been successful. God’s definition of success comes when his people follow his will for them written down in his Word.

The second principle was already touched on in the previous section. That is that Christians must do what is good for everyone else (unbelievers and the weak in faith) as Paul emphasized in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. As we seek to assimilate people into our congregations, we must put the needs of the people being assimilated above our own.

The third thing we must keep in mind is the feelings of the already assimilated Christians in our congregations, so that we do not do anything which would cause them offense. This is what Paul was talking about in Romans 14:13-23.

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. ¹⁴ I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. ¹⁵ If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. ¹⁹ Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. ²² So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

There may be some assimilation methods which fall under the category of adiaphora, yet they still cause offense to some members in the congregation. One example might be the decision to throw out some old, ratty looking furniture in exchange for new furniture which will make a better impression on guests. That old furniture may have been donated by a member or relative and hold some sentimental value for them. Another example could be the decision to try something new in worship in an effort to be more visitor-friendly, but a member could become upset, because it is “not the way they have always done things.”

These can be difficult situations, because the congregation becomes caught between two principles: their obligation to the weak and not causing offense to their brother or sister in the faith. In these situations, a congregation must proceed with caution and care. God-willing, the offended member will be able to be instructed and come to see the method as an adiaphoron and something

done out of love for the people being assimilated into the congregation. These situations will have to be handled on a case by case basis.

Finally, no matter what methods a congregation decides to employ in assimilating new members, everything that it does should be to God's glory. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31)." Above all, we want to bring glory to God's name. We want his glory to be known to the very ends of the earth, so that as many people as possible might come to have a knowledge of the life-giving gospel. It is this goal that we are seeking to accomplish as we assimilate people into our congregations no matter where they are in their walk with their Savior. When these Scriptural principles are followed as a congregation seeks to assimilate new members, we can be certain that God is pleased with the work that is being done on behalf of his kingdom.

AN OVERVIEW OF PRE-MEMBERSHIP ASSIMILATION METHODS WHICH HOLD PROMISE FOR MID-SIZED CONGREGATIONS

As previously defined, assimilation is the intentional process of turning first time guests into active members by connecting them to the means of grace and removing any obstacles from their path. The need for intentional assimilation is clear from the decline taking place in Christian churches across America. A theology of assimilation and a theology of methodology has been established. Now we will take an overview look at pre-membership assimilation methods which hold promise for mid-sized congregations.

Small family-sized congregations are able to assimilate people into their congregations without much effort. Their size makes it practically impossible for them not to assimilate new people naturally. However, eventually a congregation reaches a size where this no longer happens naturally. Heck says, “Assimilation ceases to be spontaneous when the average worship attendance reaches approximately 80.”³⁸ Large “mega” churches have significantly more funds and man-power to pour into assimilating new people into their congregations. Some methods which work for smaller or larger congregations will not be as effective for mid-sized congregations. For this reason, it is necessary to take a specific look at the methods which have been effective for mid-sized congregations in the past along with some possible new methods to be experimented with in the future. If a congregation is looking to start an intentional assimilation program, it would be very difficult (some might even call it unwise) to try and implement all of the following methods at once. My suggestion would be to pick out a few and try to do them very well before deciding to implement a few more.

³⁸ Joel Heck, 10.

Website

When is the first time that a person makes contact with a congregation? It used to be the first time that he or she walked through the church doors on a Sunday morning, but that is no longer the case. In a world which is becoming more and more dominated by technology, the majority of the people will have searched out a congregation on the internet long before actually deciding to visit in person. People will draw their first impressions of a congregation based on its website. For this reason, it is imperative that a congregation maintains an aesthetically pleasing, up-to-date website which is easy to navigate.

Churchthemes.com contains an article written by Steven Gliebe which contains several essential pieces of information to include on a church website.³⁹ The first thing he lists is location. People do not ask for directions anymore. In the age of Google Maps, a church website must have an easily accessible link which will take a person directly to a navigation application, so that nothing gets in the way of him or her finding the church on Sunday morning.

The second essential piece of information Gliebe addresses is service times. This one cannot be overstated. Gliebe writes, “If the visitor can find your church but doesn’t know when you meet, they probably won’t show up.”⁴⁰ If a congregation has service times that change throughout the year, it is imperative that the service times are constantly updated. I have gone through the unpleasant experience of looking up a local congregation’s service times while on vacation only to show up at the listed time and learn that the service times had not been updated

39 “Content Your Church Website Must Have.” ChurchThemes.com, July 8, 2014, <https://churchthemes.com/church-website-content/>.

40 “Content Your Church Website Must Have.”

and I was an hour early for worship. If this happens with a visitor, they likely will not come back a second time. This is equally important for special services such as Easter and Christmas.

A church website should also have an “About Us” section. This gives potential visitors the opportunity to learn what your church is all about. This should include a statement of belief (brief is better than long and confusing) and a section which tells people what to expect when they visit a worship service. Suggested questions to answer that Gliebe gives for this section are “What are your services like? How long are they? What is your style of worship? What is typical attire? Is childcare available?”⁴¹ Answering these questions can remove some of the anxiety and fear that exists before a person visits a congregation for the first time.

Some other things which should be included on a church’s website are upcoming special events, so that it is easy for people to know when special events are taking place and who is invited to them. Audio or videos of sermons can be beneficial for new visitors and members alike. New visitors can get a taste of what the preaching is like at the church, while members can go back and watch a sermon which resonated especially well with them or watch a sermon which they missed on a particular Sunday. A way for people to get in touch with the pastor is also necessary. Whether that is his personal cell phone number/email or a church phone number/email, people must feel like the pastor is available to them. Gliebe wraps up with four brief practical tips for content. “Be brief. Keep content current. Make finding things easy. Cross-link related pages.”⁴² If a potential prospect’s first contact is going to be with a church’s website, there can be no shortcuts taken. If there is no one in the congregation capable of putting together a website, it should be outsourced. There are many reasonably priced services online that will

41 “Content Your Church Website Must Have.”

42 “Content Your Church Website Must Have.”

run a smooth, effective website for a congregation. No congregation should allow money to be an excuse for a mediocre website. God-willing, a person's visit to the church website will excite them to come and visit on Sunday morning and make them more comfortable about what to expect.

Church Grounds

Nelson Searcy notes that most people decide within the first seven minutes of visiting a congregation whether or not they will go back again.⁴³ If this is true, it is vital that everything they experience in that first seven minutes is positive. I would encourage you to put yourself in the shoes of someone visiting a congregation for the first time and think about the impressions you would gather from the things covered in the next several sections.

The first thing a visitor will notice on Sunday morning is the building and the grounds as they pull into the parking lot. What is the immediate message that it will convey to them? Is the grass well-groomed and the building well taken care of? Is there trash scattered around the parking lot? While these things might seem trivial, they can immediately impact a visitor's opinion of the congregation. If a congregation does not care enough to keep its grounds well-kept, why should it be expected that they will strive for excellence in worship and preaching on the inside? Oswald and Leas state, "Deteriorating, unkempt and unsafe buildings are significant 'turn-offs' to those unfamiliar with the warm and loving people inside."⁴⁴

43 Nelson Searcy, 50.

44 Oswald and Leas, 40.

Clear signage is also important on the outside of your building. A sign on the road which signifies that people have arrived is not enough, but there should also be clear signs which indicate parking especially if there are spots designated for visitors. Signs pointing to the entrance can also be helpful. Many church buildings have multiple entrances, and it is not always clear which one is to be used. When a visitor knows exactly where he or she should go, it will alleviate some of the fears and apprehensions about walking into the building for the first time.

This same concept carries over to the inside of the building. Someone who has never been in your church building before should be able to seamlessly navigate the building without having to ask someone for directions. This would include clear signs for the sanctuary, the bathrooms, the nursery (if you have one), and any other part of the building to which you want to draw attention. Dave Milam says this in his article: “Your guests should be able to navigate your building without the help of a volunteer. If they can’t, take a critical look at your directional signs and wayfinding.”⁴⁵

Milam also encourages congregations to clear the clutter.⁴⁶ I have been in many WELS church buildings that should take note of this advice. If there are lots of things set up in the lobby which do not serve a specific purpose, it can be overwhelming. Remove things which are superfluous and free up space for conversation to take place between people rather than leaving the area cramped and uncomfortable. Some of these things might seem invisible to those people who have been in the building every Sunday for years, but one cannot underestimate the impact

45 “10 Ways To Reach People in Your Church Lobby.” Facts & Trends, July 31, 2018, <https://factsandtrends.net/2018/07/31/10-ways-to-reach-people-in-your-church-lobby/>.

46 “10 Ways To Reach People in Your Church Lobby.”

that some of these little things have on first-time visitors. Searcy says, “Everything speaks to first time guests – everything.”⁴⁷

Greeters

When used well, greeters can be a very effective tool at making guests feel welcome when visiting a congregation. I have been to some WELS congregations which have used greeters very well, while I have been to others at which they are more of a hindrance than a help. The problem arises when the people enlisted to be greeters are friendly, but not great people-readers. Every visitor who walks through the door is going to be different. Some will want to be engaged in conversation and learn as much about the church as possible as fast as they can. Others will appreciate a “Good morning,” but would like to simply find a seat and be left alone. The only way to distinguish between the two is to be good at reading people. An article on outreach.com describes greeters in this way, “They should be friendly but not overwhelming, able to answer any questions, and able to direct visitors to any part of the building. Above all, they need to be good people readers!”⁴⁸

The greeters will be the first people that a guest encounters when they walk through the door. They are a huge first step in making a guest feel welcome. They are a smiling face and a friendly “hello.” They are available to talk as much, or as little, as the situation demands. They are available to answer any questions and to help point guests in the right direction. Ushers can also serve as a kind of secondary greeter. They can point people where to sit (possibly even

47 Nelson Searcy, p.55.

48 “10 of the Best Ways to Make Visitors Feel Welcome to Church.” Outreach Blog (blog), June 24, 2018, <https://outreach.com/blog/welcome-visitors-to-church/>.

escort them to their seat) and offer to answer any questions the guest might have about the service. The ultimate goal is that visitors feel welcome from the time that they walk through the doors of your church and that they know that everyone there is glad that they decided to show up that morning.

Worship

The style of worship will not be discussed in this paper. While the style of worship will certainly play a role in whether a visitor decides to return or not, it is not something that a congregation can change to tailor to the exact preferences of every person who worships there. Rather, we will take a look at a few specific things which can be incorporated into the worship service with the intention of assimilating new people into the congregation. These are all things which have the goal of removing any obstacles in the way of the means of grace inside the worship service.

The first, and possibly most important, thing to do to make your worship visitor friendly is to make sure there are specific instructions about what is going on in the service. This can take place either on a screen or in the bulletin. Many people have attended a WELS church where there is no instruction given in connection with worship. The pastor simply opens up to Service of the Word or Service of Word and Sacrament and starts the service. Half of the members have it memorized and do not even use the hymnal. Try to imagine being a visitor in this setting. You would never know what to do or what is coming next. You would not know whether you should

be participating or not. This would be extremely unsettling for a visitor. Clear instructions⁴⁹ will take all of these doubts away and help a visitor feel more comfortable in worship and more able to take in everything which the worship service is offering to them, namely the message of forgiveness of sins through Christ crucified.

The second thing a congregation can do is make it very clear that giving an offering is not an obligation. This is especially important in a culture which often views the church as an organization which is out for people's money. Baptist and other non-denominational churches which demand a tithe from their people have contributed to this image of the church. Many people are scarred by this experience. It could be off-putting to someone coming from that background if they felt that it was expected for them to put money in the plate when it passed by them. At my vicar congregation, Victory of the Lamb in Katy, TX, I encountered multiple former Baptists who expressed this sentiment. They spoke of the guilt and pressure they felt from the obligation to tithe in their former congregations. They spoke of the freedom that they felt at Victory of the Lamb to give out of joy rather than out of guilt and how that encouraged them to give even more when they got to know our congregation. If a congregation makes it clear that the offering is an expression of love by the people of the congregation and not an obligation, it can go a long way in removing that stigma from those people's minds.

Finally, a congregation must find a way to gather its visitors' information. This can happen in a couple of different ways. Many congregations have a guest book near the doors of the sanctuary or a friendship register in the pews. Both of these can be effective if people are encouraged to use them. However, the latest trend to gather information has been the connection

49 These can be given either through the bulletin ("The congregation will read the text in normal type, while the pastor will read the text in bold type.") or through in-service announcements by the pastor.

card. Connection cards are small cards which go inside the bulletin and have all the basic information one would want to get from a new visitor (Names, address, phone number, email address, etc.). There can also be a section for visitors to indicate whether they are interested in things like baptism, Bible Information Class, or church membership.

It is important to encourage people to fill out these connection cards during the service. This could be something that the pastor invites people to do at the beginning of the service, so that it is on peoples' minds right away. This could be a simple statement such as "All of you have a connection card inside of your bulletin. Could you please do us a kindness and fill that out at some point during the service? This will help us know how we can better serve you."⁵⁰ Then he could bring it back up when he announces the offering. He can encourage people to drop their connection cards right in the offering plate. Another way to encourage people to fill out the connection card is to offer a gift in exchange for a filled out connection card. This could be something simple like a Bible or other book which proclaims the gospel. After the service, the pastor could instruct people to take their connection card to a table set up in the narthex where they can exchange their connection card for a gift. Receiving a filled out connection card is vital in order to follow up with visitors and continue to assimilate them into the congregation.

Follow-up

One of the worst things a congregation can do is fail to follow up with people who have visited in worship. Following up is an easy way to show that you care about people and that

⁵⁰ This will be most efficient when members and visitors both fill out the connection cards. Visitors won't feel singled out if they see everyone filling out a connection card. It might be difficult at first to get members in this habit, but if it is explained as a way to show love to the visitors worshipping on a Sunday morning, members can view it as a way to serve God and their neighbor.

everything you communicated to them on Sunday morning was genuine. The anonymous author who wrote “WHY I’M NOT COMING BACK TO YOUR CHURCH” wrote strongly about his own experience, “If you can’t bother to assertively follow up with someone who is showing active interest in your church, you clearly don’t care.”⁵¹ The beginning of a relationship between a person/couple/family and a new congregation can be a very fragile one. The point he is making is a valid one. The first few days/weeks/months after a person visits a congregation for the first time are vital, so, therefore, it is vital to start the relationship off on the right foot with an effective follow-up plan. “Taking the time to make sure church visitors feel welcome will go a long way toward making them regular attendees of your church.”⁵²

Most people agree that follow-up should happen quickly after a person visits a congregation. Outreach.com encourages pastors or congregations to send a text or an email later on Sunday to thank visitors for worshipping with you.⁵³ Nelson Searcy advises the same type of communication to take place on Monday.⁵⁴ The content of this message can be very simple. It does not need to be more complicated than thanking them for worshipping with you and inviting them to come back and worship with you again. It is short and thoughtful and shows people that they are not just a number to you. Searcy also encourages a handwritten note to be sent out to arrive at a visitor’s home on Thursday. He finds Thursday to be a good day, since that is when many people are starting to think about what they will be doing over the weekend.⁵⁵ The content of this message would be very similar to the original text/email. However, the nature of a handwritten note is much more personal than a text or email, especially in a society when snail mail is

51 “Why I’m Not Coming Back to Your Church.”

52 “10 of the Best Ways to Make Visitors Feel Welcome to Church.”

53 “10 of the Best Ways to Make Visitors Feel Welcome to Church.”

54 Nelson Searcy, 95-96.

55 Nelson Searcy, 99-100.

so seldom used. This handwritten note could be a good way for a member to get involved in the assimilation process.

Follow-up seems to be an area of assimilation where mid-sized congregations have a major advantage over “mega” churches. Pastors of “mega” churches cannot possibly make personal contact with everyone who visits their congregation on a Sunday. This is true even if there are multiple pastors on staff. For this reason, it is easy for people to feel like the pastor(s) at one of these churches does not even know that they exist. In a mid-sized congregation, the pastor can and must be sure to make contact with every person who visits his congregation.⁵⁶ This is why I would add a follow-up visit to a visitor’s home later in the week after sending the email and personal note earlier in the week. This visit could be made by anyone in the congregation, but in my experience (which is admittedly limited) this visit will be most effective if the pastor is the one who makes it. Oswald and Leas support this opinion in a mid-sized congregation. “We noted that pastoral attentiveness has less significance in the larger churches and greatest significance in congregations where less than two hundred people attend on Sunday morning.”⁵⁷ This will make a huge impression on visitors especially if they are coming from a “mega” church background. Oswald and Leas add, “Indeed, the pastor’s reaction to the newcomer is often perceived by the newcomer as the single most important contact on an early visit and may tip the balance toward moving toward or away from affiliation with this congregation.”⁵⁸

This visit can be a great opportunity to take a gift along with you to show your appreciation to the visitor. At Victory of the Lamb, each visitor received a follow-up visit from

56 This will also depend largely on the context in which a congregation finds itself. People in the Bible-belt will most likely be more receptive to a pastor showing up on their doorstep than in urban Chicago.

57 Roy Oswald and Speed Leas, 27-28

58 Roy Oswald and Speed Leas, 52.

either the pastor or the vicar and a gift bag with a loaf of fresh baked bread, a Victory of the Lamb mug filled with candy, a Victory of the Lamb pen, and a welcome folder which told a little bit about us as a congregation. Also included was a flyer for any special event which might be coming up. Over the year, I received many compliments and thanks for taking the time to visit them personally and bring a gift. Again, the goal is to make it clear to people that we care about them. Its goal does not necessarily have to be to do a law/gospel presentation with them (although that is never a bad thing!). The most important thing is that people realize that we care about them as people and that we want them to come back, so that we can continue to share the gospel with them.

Bible Information Class

Every pastor wants to get new people into Bible Information Class (BIC). It is in Bible Information Class that a pastor gets the best opportunity to carry out the second half of Jesus' Great Commission. "And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20a). Many evangelical churches today do not put much importance on the "teaching" aspect of Jesus' Great Commission before welcoming people into the church as members based on the length of their new member classes. Searcy recommends just a three hour class on Sunday afternoon where just the basics are covered.⁵⁹ Thom Rainer confirms that three hours is the most common length for a new member class.⁶⁰ It is easy to see why churches in WELS would be tempted to move this direction with their Bible Information Classes. It is easy to view Bible

59 Nelson Searcy, 158.

60 Rainer, Thom S. "7 Trends in Church New Member Classes." Ministry Today Magazine. Accessed February 21, 2019. <https://ministrytodaymag.com/leadership/higher-education/20516-7-trends-in-church-new-member-classes>.

Information Class as a hurdle which needs to be overcome so that new people can become members and join in the Lord's Supper and enjoy all of the wonderful benefits that come with it. However, rushing them through Bible Information Class will not do anyone any favors in the long haul, as it is explained below.

A short membership class certainly does not line up with what was done in the early Christian Church. They required three years of instruction before a person was baptized and confirmed into the church. Clinton E. Arnold writes, "Part of the motivation and concern for a lengthy process was rooted in a desire to foster solid spiritual formation and to protect these new believers against sin, heresy, and apostasy."⁶¹ They wanted to be sure that new converts were thoroughly instructed in all the teachings of the Bible before they joined in fellowship with them.

Three years might not be practical for a Bible Information Class today, but it seems wise not to rush people through instruction just so they can be done with the class. Pastors must be sure to carefully instruct. Pastor John Huebner says,

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 putting 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 the person overcome the bad habits accumulated over many years in just a short time. Cover the chief points of doctrine well.⁶²

His last sentence holds great importance. No matter how many weeks it takes, be sure to cover the chief points of doctrine well. This is the only way to be sure that new people have been instructed in all of the chief points of doctrine and are able to make a confession of faith in line

⁶¹ Clinton Arnold, "Early Church Catechesis and New Christians' Classes in Contemporary Evangelicalism" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 47, no. 1 (March 2004), 45.

Clinton E. Arnold is dean and professor of New Testament at Talbot School of Theology.

⁶² John Huebner. "Integrating the New Member." South Atlantic District WELS, 1979, 14.

with the congregation's confession of faith. As Huebner said, this extended period of study of the basics of God's Word gives the Holy Spirit time to break down their old way of living and replace it with their new way of living as new creatures in Christ. This is critical for assimilation. As a new Christian develops deeper and deeper spiritual roots from being connected to the means of grace, the less likely he or she will be to leave the congregation for spiritually immature reasons.

There is another aspect to Bible Information Class and assimilation. It offers a great opportunity for new people taking the class together to form a bond. This will be natural after spending at least an hour together every week for several weeks. Even better could be if members decide to take the class as a refresher course. The more bonds that people can form with others in the congregation during those first weeks, the better. Charles Westra writes, "I have come to realize that the longer course offers an excellent opportunity for the members of the class to develop a bond with one another ... I have been amazed at the bonds that have been formed. I see people three and four years later that are still very close as a result of the time that they spent together in adult instruction."⁶³

Full Congregational Effort

It has been alluded to throughout this paper, but it must be explicitly said that all of these methods will be most effective if the entire congregation embraces them. It goes a long way for new attenders to have a strong relationship with the pastor, but that often will not be enough. It is imperative to help foster relationships between members and the new people in a congregation.

63 Charles Westra, 3.

This was a point made by almost every WELS pastor who responded to the survey which I sent out. One of those pastors wrote, “I find that when people (as I encourage our members) go out of their way to befriend (new people) / get to know them / invite them to participate in things they are involved in at church - that produces the best results.”⁶⁴ Another WELS pastor responded, “There needs to be a core that is evangelism/outreach minded from start to finish. And that is a challenge. A challenge however that God the Spirit can mold and form his kingdom into of course.”⁶⁵ As stated above, it can be a challenge at times to foster this kind of environment in a congregation. However, people will often follow the lead of their pastor. If they see that their pastor makes assimilating new people into the congregation a priority, they will make it a priority as well. After all, it should be a priority of every person in the congregation. The best assimilation will take place when the entire congregation embraces the new people among them with open arms, rather than just the pastor. The pastor can make this evident to his people by stressing it in his teaching and preaching. He can make it an emphasis during leadership meetings and special workshops. God grant that the people of our churches would see the tremendous need there is for assimilating new people into the church and that the Holy Spirit would use them for this very purpose.

64 Survey (Anonymous by Andrew Westra), 29 October 2018.

65 Survey (Anonymous by Andrew Westra), 29 October 2018.

CONCLUSION

Upon the completion of Bible Information Class, a person's period of pre-membership assimilation has come to an end. If they agree with everything presented to them in the class, they are ready to confess a common faith with the congregation and to be received as a member. This does not necessarily mean that they have been fully assimilated into the congregation. There are many assimilation methods to be employed after a person becomes a member, but those are to be discussed in another paper.

The Christian Church in America is declining. God has given us the responsibility and the obligation to hold out his life-giving gospel to a dying world. One way which that can be done is through making sure that the backdoors of our churches are sealed shut. Our goal is that once someone comes through our front door, they will not proceed to exit through the backdoor. This can be improved through an intentional pre-membership assimilation program including the methods which have been discussed in this paper. I pray that God would use us to show his love to the world and especially to those whom he brings into contact with us and with our congregations.

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APPENDIX. SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Do you have an intentional assimilation plan in place at your congregation?
2. If so, please give a brief description of what you do.
3. In your opinion, what is the most effective method to assimilate new members?
4. In your opinion, what is the biggest challenge in assimilating new members?
5. Do you do an exit interview with people who leave your congregation (excluding people who are transferring to another WELS congregation)?
6. If so, do you ask them why they are leaving?
7. What is the most common response people give for leaving your congregation?
8. Do you have any additional thoughts on assimilating new members?
9. Name and place where you serve (Optional).