

Building the Body of Christ

A Study of the Assimilation Of Members Into The Christian Congregation.

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By Charles Westra

This past week I was faced with one of the most heart wrenching experiences that a pastor can face. An inactive member passed from this life. As if that is not bad enough (from a human perspective), he had taken his own life. The hours spent with the family were not easy ones. The situation raised many questions in my own mind. When was the last time that I had visited this man? When was the last time that he had been in worship? Could I really call him a member (an active part) of our congregation? More importantly, was he a part of the Church? Needless to say, there were some serious doubts. The whole situation has intensified my resolve to continue what has become an area of focus in our congregation in the past year. We have a need to work continually to integrate all new members into the life and activities of our congregation. That makes the assignment of this paper a timely one for me. I have been helped by the reading. I hope that I can share some of that helpful information with you.

I would like to break that process down into 4 major areas of discussion. They are: 1) *Identifying the problem and the challenge*; 2) *Pre-membership assimilation*; 3) *The reception of the new member*; and 4) *Ongoing efforts to assimilate*.

Before entering the first area of discussion I think it is important to point out that I am making an assumption. This discussion of assimilating the new member assumes an ongoing outreach effort in the congregation. It is the fact that God is blessing the proclamation of his word that makes assimilation necessary. It only makes sense that once we have brought people into contact with the word of God that we will plan to keep them there and take them deeper.

I. Identifying the Problem and the Challenge

I believe that in a paper of this sort we do well to begin with our focus firmly on the Word. Some might call a paper on assimilation a practical paper. As such we might expect to talk about practical matters of ministry like ushers, greeters, the personality of the pastor, etc. Some of those things will enter into our discussion. And yet, our focus from start to finish is on the Word of God. As we consider assimilation, we realize that our goal is to assimilate the sinner to the Kingdom of God. Conversion and growth will only occur as we lead people into the power of God's revealed message.

Do we face a challenge in integrating each new member into the life and activities of our congregations? I am sure that all of us might answer that differently. Our struggles might be of varying degrees. I would be the first to say that this is certainly a challenge for our congregation. In his book, "Assimilating New Members," Lyle Schaller speaks of two different circles that are present in your congregation. There is an outer circle that represents membership in the congregation. That circle is not all that difficult to enter. You pass the required study requirements and you gain entrance into the congregation. There is another circle inside the circle of membership. That circle represents the real fellowship of the congregation. Inside that circle are the people that really feel a part of the congregation and are actively involved in the life and operation of the church. While it might be easy to enter into the first circle, Schaller states that it might be much more difficult for a person to find their way into the second circle. I think that we have all seen that in our congregations. There are those people that just never really seem to fit in. At times it may be due to a lack of effort on the part of the congregation and at other times it might not. In either case, the new member may run into a barrier that keeps them from the word. I have had great struggles with this in the history of our congregation. There have been many that have said that our congregation was the most friendly and open congregation that they had ever seen (many of them had not seen too many others). We have also seen people leave our congregation because they felt that they were excluded and it was not a friendly atmosphere for someone on the outside looking in. In this case I would say that perception is reality and we need to be constantly aware of the perception of visitors and new members.

Do we face a challenge? As a Synod last year we gained 6,718 members through adult confirmation and profession of faith. We lost 8,322 that either joined other churches or were simply removed from our fellowship. That would suggest to me that we are facing a challenge. The numbers (for what they are worth) are not quite so severe for our Cottonbelt Conference. We gained 168 members through adult confirmation and profession of faith. We lost 94 to other churches and removals. This trend is not something new. In the manual for the 5th evangelism workshop (Assimilation and Retention) it is noted that from 1986-1990 the WELS average for back door losses was 2.64%. The outlying districts had a much higher percentage (4.75%). Our South Atlantic District was above that with 4.90 %. One could argue the point that there are a higher number of back door losses in the districts that have a higher concentration of missions. By their very nature, those churches are more focused on outreach. As more new people are brought in, the incidence for the loss of those new members goes up. If true, that tells me that we also face a greater challenge as we face the task of assimilation in our congregations.

There are many reasons that people leave a church. We might consider some of them to be good reasons and some of them to be bad. In either case, I think it is helpful to know what those who are leaving have to say. In his book, "Close the Back Door", Alan Harre gives various reasons why people leave a church. He points that studies have shown that specific events disrupting the life of a person are often cited as the primary reason for dropping out. This was often a move to a new community or a health problem. The change often led the person to see the church as unimportant or irrelevant. Many also cited a conflict in the church or with a church member as a reason for leaving. Family problems, changes in work schedules, transportation problems, lack of support from other family members, too busy, and many other reasons were also given.

In his study titled "My Brother's Keeper," Pastor Norm Berg offers the results of interviews with many former WELS members. He found that most of them were very willing to talk about why they left the church. He broke the responses down to categories and assigned a percentage to them. He found that 6% of those interviewed left the church for non-church reasons. 13% left because of relationship problems with others. 3% left because they were unhappy with congregational programs and services. 6% left on account of church related concerns. 32% left over personal issues and 40% left because of church teachings or doctrine. It is interesting to note that a majority left because of circumstances in their own life or over doctrinal reasons. The first of those is really outside of our control (although the church may have been able to respond to that change more quickly) and the second cannot change.

I don't think that any of us would challenge our responsibility to assimilate the new members of our congregations. In Ezekiel 3:17-21 we are told that we are responsible to warn the fellow Christian who continues in sin. Scripture makes retaining members our responsibility when it spells out our obligation to the weak. We find such references in Galatians 6:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 1 Corinthians 9:22; and Matthew 18:15. Scripture also makes reclaiming members our responsibility when it spells out our obligation to those who forsake the faith. Paul counsels the Corinthians, "Hand this man over to Satan so that his sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5). 2 Corinthians 2:5; Mt 18:16; and Luke 15:3-7 speak of the same responsibility.ⁱ

There are two parables that also speak very strongly in this regard. One of those is the parable of the Sower and the Seed (Mt 13:1ff). We see that there will be those that fall away from the church. Professor Valleskey states in his book, "We Believe, Therefore We Speak," that "Jesus indicated that we should not be surprised if some fall away. The one who received the seed that fell on "rocky places," Jesus said, "is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away." Then there is the seed that fell among thorns, "the man who hears the word but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful." Behind it all is Satan. If he cannot immediately snatch away the seed before it takes root (as he did with the seed along the path, Matthew 13:19), he will do what he can to uproot the growing plant. There have been and there will continue to be many casualties along the way."ⁱⁱ

In the second parable God tells us what our attitude should be over against those that are falling. The parable of the Lost Sheep (Mt 18:10ff) makes that clear. We are to faithfully and persistently seek to regain the

straying sheep. We see that the individual sheep is of great value to our Good Shepherd and also a source of great joy. God has given us the privilege of working in his pastures!

Professor Valleskey also points out in his book that a congregation that is aware of Satan's ploys to draw people away from the means of grace and the fellowship of believers will seek to practice preventative medicine, to close the back door, so to speak. In the remainder of this paper I will attempt to offer some practical suggestions to help us in carrying out that God-given task.

II. Pre-Membership Assimilation

I don't think that it would shock anyone to hear the statement that the assimilation process starts prior to a person actually becoming a member. We might say that the process begins with a person's first contact with the church. Here we are again in the realm of the congregation's evangelism program. The only point that I want to make is that the focus is on the word from the beginning. The efforts of our evangelism committees are to proclaim law and gospel. From our first contact with a prospect to active membership and beyond our focus is hearing and growing in God's word.

In our evangelism calls we seek to share law and gospel. We also invite to our worship services where they continue to hear law and gospel. At some point in time we try to enroll them in a Bible information class. I see this as the climax of our pre-membership assimilation. I have often wondered if we as pastors see this class for all that it is. In the first years of my ministry I believe that I saw the BIC as a hurdle that had to be crossed with a group of people before they could become a part of the congregation. At times I wanted to accomplish this as quickly as possible so that they could enjoy all the benefits of membership. I longed for them to know and participate in the joys and benefits of the Lord's Supper. I can remember having marathon sessions and meeting with some families more than once a week so that they could finish the course. I looked forward to "graduation day" when they would cross over the threshold of membership. In retrospect, it appears that "graduation day" came a bit too quickly for some. John Huebner speaks to this point in a paper titled "Integrating the New Member."

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

I would agree with the points made. I have extended the length of our BIC twice. The course has gradually transformed over the years. Experience has taught me that there were things absent from the course that I was using. 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. For the past two years we have had at least one member in each class that we have held. That also gives the members of the class at least one contact with an existing member of the congregation. I have been amazed at the bonds that have been formed. I see people 3 and 4 years later that are still very close as a result of the time that they spent together in adult instruction. I have also seen that people become an instant care group of sorts. They feel a bond with one another and a responsibility toward one another. There have been several times that I can remember a member of a former class asking me about a classmate that seemed to be drifting. They felt a responsibility to go to that person and seek to help.

I have changed another way that I approach the BIC. I used to run one class right after another with only a 2 or 3 week break between them. Once again, my rationale was that I didn't want anyone to wait any longer than they had to before entering membership. I now take a longer break between classes. It gives us an opportunity to focus our evangelism efforts for a longer period of time on the start of the new class. In general, that results in a larger class. This can also help in the assimilation process. There are more people that they

know fairly well from the start. I heard one other pastor say that he goes to even greater lengths to foster fellowship among those in class. He assigns coffee and doughnut detail to a member of the class each week. They take a break in the middle of the class for refreshments. While coffee and doughnuts are not going to take anyone deeper into the word, they may be helping to meet someone's basic psychological need for fellowship and acceptance.

I am sure that I state the obvious when I say that we set ourselves apart from many churches by demanding a comprehensive course of instruction prior to membership. I believe that it also says something about our church body. As we approach assimilation we are approaching it from the proper perspective. We are seeking to plug someone into the word. In our BIC's we will want to give the prospective member a thorough grounding in the chief teachings of Scripture. In addition to this I believe that the BIC offers an opportunity to begin the assimilation process into the local congregation. In his book Professor Valleskey offers a number of suggestions for topics to be covered in the pre-membership class to help in this process. His first suggestion is to spend time on basic Bible study. If we are going to ground these people into the word they must be given some help in basic Bible study. This might well include some help as far as principles of Biblical interpretation. Certainly Professor David Kuske's book, "Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way" offers some excellent material that we could incorporate into our classes. This seems extremely important to me. I hear people say again and again that there are so many different interpretations of the Bible's message. They often find great difficulty in knowing who is giving them the truth.

An overview of Bible history is also suggested in the area of Bible study. I think there is a tension here that many of us face in the mission setting. We find that not only our adults in BIC don't know Bible history but their children who land in our youth confirmation classes don't know it either. I fear that at times I confirm people that have a very shallow understanding of Bible history. I am not sure that I have an answer to that dilemma. It is always my hope and my encouragement that Confirmation marks a beginning of ongoing Bible study on the personal and congregational level. I have also used portions of Tom Kock's adult course that I think does a very good job of teaching the chief parts using Bible stories.

Professor Valleskey also points out that it is important that we give them some practical hints for personal Bible study. Most of them are brand new to this. They don't know where to start. They have likely had no family devotional life to this point. We set out the People's Bible series with other devotional materials for them during the class. We try to have enough so that they, can borrow one or more and look through them.

I consider Professor Valleskey's next suggestion to be critical. He points out that we need to lead them to an understanding of Lutheran worship. I believe that we have taken steps to lead our visitor through the worship service and yet I doubt that they have a real appreciation for the beauty of our liturgical worship. The BIC offers the opportunity for us to educate them in the meaning and focus of our Christ centered worship service. An understanding of our service and the church year can only make their worship more meaningful.

The principles and practice of prayer and the principles of stewardship are also suggested. Once again we have to remember that in many cases we are working with those who have been unchurched. It is not likely that they have been active in their prayer lives. It would go completely contrary to the sinful nature for them to be good stewards. We cannot expect that to happen by itself. We can only expect changes if we lead them into God's word where they will encounter his life changing message. He will change their hearts and lives.

The final suggestions offered are in the area of spiritual gifts and evangelism training. I would see these as critical to the assimilation process. Later in this paper we will discuss in greater detail the importance of a new member becoming involved in the life and activity of the congregation. That happens when they are a part of the work. Professor Valleskey suggests a study of 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12:1-8 at some point in the class. Lead the people to see that it is God's will that they serve him in accordance with the gifts that have been granted to them by the Spirit. It goes without saying that if we are to lead people to identify their gifts and encourage them to use them we must provide opportunities for that to happen. We will discuss that more later. I have found that at times these new people are the greatest resource that we have in evangelism. They are often excited about what they have found and they are ready to share it. It makes very good sense that we would provide some basic evangelism training for these new members. We like to make them familiar with a law

gospel presentation and make them aware of the opportunities for service in the area of outreach in our congregation. I am very excited when I see an adult class that seems to be blending well and is excited about class. Last week I noticed that one of the members of our current adult class was helping to put our service folders together for Sunday. Another was helping to set up our preschool on Sunday after our second service and they cleaned the kitchen after the church cleared out. I truly believe that a great deal of the assimilation process takes place before a family ever becomes members. There is no doubt in my mind that our adult instruction courses are the key in that process. It is there that we begin the process of leading a new Christian or a new member deeper into the word. As I have stated, that is the key to the assimilation into our congregation and more importantly into the kingdom of God.

III. The Reception Of The New Member

Every source that I read emphasized the importance of a meaningful reception into the congregation for the new member. I am inclined to think that this is very important for us here in the South Atlantic district. Our churches vary in size but none of them are what we would call an extremely large church. It is very important that we make our new members feel a part of the group because they are not going to get lost in the crowd. If they feel like they are on the outside it is likely that they will feel like they are there alone. I think that it is also safe to say that we require more than most churches to gain membership in our congregations. This all points me to the importance of making the entrance into the congregation a meaningful experience. I believe that John Huebner expresses this well in his paper:

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 in 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 transfers at the same time, using the vow of the confirmands as their own vow of rededication.ⁱⁱⁱ

I would have to admit to you that we do not do each of the things suggested here but I don't think that you can miss the point that is being made. It is important to provide a meaningful entrance into our congregation. The day of confirmation is a big day and we should treat it as such. There are other practical suggestions that I think can help us in this effort. I know that many churches have a receiving line following the Confirmation service. This certainly gives each member in church that Sunday the opportunity to put a name with a face. It also allows the congregation to take note of the newer members so that all members might become a part of the assimilation process. You might consider a new member picture board. We are not doing this at the present time but I certainly think that it is a good idea, especially for the larger churches. It gives every member an easy opportunity to know and welcome the new members. The WELS Evangelism workbook titled "Assimilation and Retention" offers several other suggestions. One of those is the new member dinner. I think that this is also an outstanding idea. It offers the opportunity for your new members to meet others in the congregation. I have heard of churches that have the church council and their wives cook and serve for the new member dinners. A brief program describing the structure and activities of the congregation might well be in place. The Assimilation and Retention handbook also suggests assigning a new member sponsor immediately upon a new member's entrance into the congregation. They suggest to arrange a sponsor that would match the new member in age, personal interests and general background. They suggest one year for the length of sponsorship. No matter how we do it, I believe that there are certain materials that we want to get into the hands of a new member. It is important that we begin to open the lines of communication so that the prospect might

make the transition to an active member. We would like our new member to have a copy of our most recent plan for ministry. I think that it is important for them to be familiar with the mission of the congregation and the plans that the congregation has to carry those plans out. That plan for ministry also has a copy of our congregational budget. I feel that it is good for them to know the commitment that we have made to carry out the work which God has set before us. We also just finished a new pictorial directory in our congregation. For the next year or two we will include that with the materials given to the new members. We take steps to let the congregation know who these new members are and it only makes sense to give the new members a resource to put names with faces. Many congregations would also give new families a copy of their constitution. I am sure that this could be very helpful. I find that our plan for ministry is more important and pertinent. I think a constitution can be a fairly intimidating document to the average person. I have found that outside of the lawyers among us there are not too many people interested in reading through a constitution. We have had new members who have expressed an interest in the constitution (we don't hide the fact that we have one) and then we certainly provide a copy.

I don't think that there is any secret to what we are trying to accomplish with a meaningful reception into membership. We would like the new member to feel like they are a part of the fellowship. Thinking back to Schaller's two circles within the congregation (outside circle representing membership and the inside circle the fellowship of the congregation), we are trying to bring all new members into an active role within the congregation and into that inner circle of fellowship.

IV. Ongoing Efforts at Assimilation

As I have approached assimilation in our congregation I have found a particular challenge. From the time that a person becomes a prospect to the time that they are received into membership they receive a great deal of personal attention. That attention comes from evangelism callers, pastor, vicar and others. It is likely that they are visited every 2-3 weeks. That contact intensifies during BIC. The pastor and vicar see them each week. We know what is going on in their lives and we have occasion to talk with them at length. It is not at all unusual that we stay around for 30-60 minutes after class. There are some that stay to talk about specific questions or concerns and some that just like to talk. In many cases that individual attention decreases dramatically once they are received into membership. Suddenly they are no longer the guests of honor. They are just another member of the congregation. They find it difficult to get a moment to speak to the pastor Sunday morning because he is preoccupied or has gone on to another round of guests and visitors. For this reason and for many others I think that we have to focus our congregations on an ongoing effort at assimilating our new members after the reception into membership. There are many way that we might seek to do this.

The first, and in my opinion the most important, is to offer sufficient opportunities for growth in the word. I have said it before and will say it again. The continuing application of God's word, law and gospel, is the key to the proper assimilation of a new member. We must seek to provide ongoing, meaningful opportunities for growth in God's word. I suppose that it goes without saying that this begins with our worship services. The preparation for our sermon and worship service each week deserves our highest priority and attention. Each week we are leading people into the very presence of God. There we bow before his throne in humility and there we rise as forgiven and restored children to bring to him the very best that we have to offer. Each week we have the opportunity to take a portion of God's word and expound that word. Week after week we face the challenge of applying that word to our lives and the lives of those that gather before us in worship.

It is always our hope that there will be other opportunities to lead people deeper into the word. There have been numerous times that I have heard a new member say that they miss BIC. I have been asked on more than one occasion what I have in mind for the next step. It is nice to have an answer. The WELS Evangelism Handbook (V) on Assimilation and Retention suggests the "Training Christians For Ministry" curriculum. I have tried that with our people. It was my experience that while it was outstanding material, it didn't really offer the next step that I was hoping for. You may have answers of your own. I am interested in further discussion on your ideas for an ongoing curriculum that builds upon our BIC. If we don't come up with the definitive answer we might assign it as a future paper/ presentation for our adult discipleship commission in the future.

We will also want to offer sufficient opportunities for our people to grow in the word outside of the Sunday morning service and Bible study. I must admit that this is an area of great personal struggle for me and as a result, for our congregation. At this point we offer no weekly mid-week Bible study. We did have a mid-week study several years ago. We found that attendance was not all that high. Many of our members are young families with small children. We (leadership) felt that it might make more sense for us to work harder at encouraging participation on the part of the whole family on Sunday and putting materials in the hands of the people for regular devotions in their homes. We were hearing young parents telling us that the one thing that they didn't need was another night away from their children. With busy work schedules, hectic lifestyles, etc. there seems to be precious little family time without another night out of the home for Bible study. I also find a tension in this regard between nurture and outreach. There is a balance that we must find but that balance is not always easy. As a rule, we (vicar and myself) have calls or classes each week on Monday through Thursday nights. When you throw in the necessary meetings (building, school feasibility, council, etc.) that doesn't leave an abundance of ministry time. In our congregation we don't want to lose the mission mindset that has maintained an aggressive approach to outreach. At the same time, that does little good if we are not providing sufficient opportunities for growth in the word once they have become a part of our fellowship. This may offer another area of discussion for us at the conclusion of this paper. I don't think that any of us would disagree that a person's involvement in God's word is the key to the assimilation process.

In the area of assimilation there is also a great deal written in about involving the new member in the groups of the congregation. I don't want you to misunderstand my point here. I am not suggesting that group life in the congregation is the answer to an active member in your congregation. And yet, I do believe that it is entirely Scriptural for our members to enjoy a closeness and to gather together outside of the setting of the public worship service and corporate Bible study. I think that Acts 2:42-47 gives us a picture of the early Christian church that was active with one another on a daily basis. They gathered in one another's homes as well as in the temple courts. Paul's letters to the Thessalonians give us a strong picture of fellowship and unity among the Christians in that city.

An LCMS manual on assimilation written by the Northern Illinois District suggests the following blessings which result from involving new members in the group life of the congregation. 1) Personal spiritual growth. In group life the Scripture can be applied to issues and problems that an individual might face. It also points out that new members find that there are others in their situation and an opportunity arises to get and give help. 2) Surveys consistently reveal that those members who are in a group feel the greatest sense of relationship building and belonging in the congregation. 3) Growth in lay leadership occurs. 4) Congregational growth increases. They maintain that bridges are built to unchurched families, friends and neighbors and members are retained that might look elsewhere for meaningful fellowship and activity (in the area of growth we must use great caution and understand very clearly that growth occurs only as God grants through the proclamation of his word. We would have to admit that group life within the congregation may offer additional opportunities for the proclamation of that word).^{iv}

The same manual suggests that growing congregations average 7 groups for every 100 worshipping confirmed members. They point out that this includes boards, committees, Bible classes, choir, etc. Once again I believe that we must exercise caution. They are very close to falling into the church growth trap of focusing on methods rather than means. At the same time I think that we can see that a congregation with an active group life is more likely to involve more of its members into the activities of the congregation. I think that we can agree that it is important in the assimilation process to involve the new member in the activities of the congregation. The group life of the congregation offers an opportunity to do that.

There are many and various groups that we have even within our mission congregations. I think that we could break all these groups down into three categories. There would be fellowship groups. The major purpose of these groups would be to enhance the unity of the congregation. In a large congregation these groups might be divided up into regional zones. In a small congregation the activities might be planned for the entire congregation. We have a fellowship committee that is responsible for planning monthly fellowship for the entire

congregation. Their sole purpose is to provide an opportunity for Christians to grow closer to their fellow Christians so that opportunities might increase for mutual encouragement in the Word.

The second type of group might be the service group or committee. Their purpose for existence is simply to provide a service for the congregation. The choir would fall into this category. Most of the various boards and committees would also fit into this category. The ushers, altar guild, etc. would also fit under the umbrella of the service groups.

The third category would be the nurture groups. These are the groups that are organized specifically for spiritual growth. Each Bible study group that the congregation offers would certainly fit into the nurture group.

In his book, Professor Valleskey also suggests small groups as a separate category. I would agree with his designation. At the same time, in the mission setting I believe that most of our groups are small groups. These groups can probably be divided and categorized under the previous headings. In view of the suspicions that small groups often raise, I believe that he was simply pointing out that small group Bible studies can serve a useful purpose in our congregations. They do not have to be an ear mark of Pietism as they proved to be in the 17th century. He makes some strong points on the basis of a WLQ article written by Prof. David Kuske (volume 91, Number 2 Spring 1994, p. 127).

Involvement in groups may not be the final answer in assimilation and yet I think that it offers an indicator. The person that is actively involved in the group life of the congregation is a member that is more likely to feel a part of the congregation. Statistics would tell us that the member that feels like a part of the congregation is much less likely to become inactive or to leave the congregation completely.

It would seem that another key to a new member's assimilation into a congregation is their involvement in a role or task. There are members whose only involvement in church is participation in worship and who still remain faithful to Christ and his church. And yet, it is only natural that the Christian will seek ways to put their spiritual gifts into practice. In BIC we lead people to identify their spiritual gifts. If we are going to lead people to identify their gifts and to use them in the service of the church, it only makes sense that we are going to seek to give people opportunities to put those gifts into practice. I believe that pastors (I am thinking of myself) find it very easy to feel like we are doing more than our share. We might even be tempted to complain about the people that God has given for us to serve because they are not doing as much as we think they could be doing. The truth of the matter is that often we have either not equipped them for a task or we have not asked them to do it. We are called to equip God's people for works of service. That equipping is part of the discipleship process. As people grow in the word we must be there to offer meaningful tasks for them to carry out.

The WELS Evangelism handbook: Assimilation and Retention offers suggestions for us in this area. It encourages that we offer a sufficient number of meaningful roles and tasks through which the new member can become involved in and identify with the life and work of the congregation. It defines a "role" as an officially appointed or elected position (board or committee membership, usher, SS teacher, etc.). A task, on the other hand, is defined as a special, goal oriented assignment (monthly mailing out of church newsletter, church workday participation, etc.). They point out that involvement in a task such as these often helps to change a person's perspective of their church from "your" church to "our" church. The author also suggests that we maximize opportunities for new members to serve by 1) limiting terms, 2) expanding board/ committee membership, and 3) Utilizing retirees, women and youth.

In his book, Professor Valleskey expands upon that final thought. We often leave a portion of our congregations untapped. He points out that women have long served our congregations in many different roles and tasks but also points out that there may be more that could be done. He states that "There may well be other committees on which women might serve in accordance with their gifts, committees that traditionally have been comprised only of men, eg., stewardship, evangelism, property, youth. The Scriptures clearly teach that the woman should not have authority over the man (cf. 1 Timothy 2:11,12). It would have to be clear, therefore, that any congregational committee on which a woman sits functions as an advisory, service committee, not as a legislative board. Nor should a woman serve as chairpersons of a committee consisting of both men and women. With these clear scriptural principles understood and adhered to, it may be well for women of the congregation to be given the opportunity to serve in a broader capacity than has been customary over the years."

Professor Valleskey also encourages to tap into the youth of the congregation. While admitting that it might not be the answer to the complex problem of the straying of so many of our youth from the church, providing opportunities for the youth of the congregation to become more personally involved in serving within the congregation might be one way to stem the drift.^{vi}

While there are circumstances that will keep certain members from being involved beyond worship and Bible study (work schedules, health, etc.), I think that the majority of our active members would like to be involved in the work of our congregation in a meaningful way. I often think back to the new member that came to me after 4 months and expressed his desire for service. He explained that he was coming to church and Bible class every week. He didn't know what else he could do to be more actively involved and he wondered when I might consider him ready to be a part of the congregation. That man taught me something about the desire of a new Christian to serve God. He also taught me something about assimilation. A new member (also a new Christian) wants to be involved in the work of the congregation.

I believe that there is something else that new members desire as they come into the congregation. They want to be inside the communication loop. I am not sure that we have always done that effectively. It can be very easy in our present structure for the church council to carry on the majority of the work of ministry (at least the decision making portion) without a great deal of input from others. Our annual voters' meetings have not been extremely well attended in the past. We have taken some strides to correct the problem. In the past two years in the Spring of the year we meet with our entire congregation in smaller groups. In those small group settings we discuss our current ministry and potential plans for ministry in the upcoming year. We encourage the people to familiarize themselves with our ministry and to give us input for the planning process. The church council then takes that information into a planning retreat to formulate the next year's (and beyond) plan for ministry which it presents to the voters for approval. It may seem like a small issue but it gives all an opportunity to discuss and provide input to the mission and ministry of our congregation. We also have occasional open forum meetings to discuss the major issues facing our congregation. It gives the entire congregation an opportunity once again to have input to the ministry of the congregation. The voters and the church council (authoritative bodies) have the opportunity to hear input from all members.

There is one more issue that remains for our discussion of assimilation. We might see it as reactive rather than proactive. As I pointed out earlier, the parable of the Sower and the Seed tells us that there will be those that fall away. We must have a system in place to detect the inactivity of our members. Scripture charges us to reach out to those straying to lovingly return them to the fold.

The synod publication, "My Brother's Keeper," edited by Pastor Norman Berg stresses the importance of detecting early inactivity. It points to the first year as being critical for the new member. It explains that new members join with reasonable expectations. Generally, these expectations lie in three areas: fellowship, spiritual growth, and recognition of service. Those members, then, that would seem to be in danger (our human perspective) would be those who seem to have few friends in the congregation, those who are irregular in their attendance at worship and/ or Bible study, and those who have not found a meaningful way to serve in the congregation.

In our congregation we conduct an interview with all new families at the 6 month mark. I suppose that the only purpose for this interview is to maintain our lines of communication. We are looking to assess the level of that family's assimilation into our congregation. We want to know early if there are problems so that we might act upon them before the family is gone. We also conduct an every member interview (it is supposed to be annual) that assesses the spiritual welfare of each member family in our congregation. It is called a spiritual check up. It was produced by Pastor Mark Cares. I have adapted it slightly for our situation. I have found it to be very helpful. It focuses on two area in the Christian's life—their diet and exercise. Their diet consists of the opportunities that they have given themselves for growth in the word. The exercise speaks of the ways that they have put their faith in action through service to their Savior (hopefully through the local congregation).

It also seems important to me that we have a structure in place to monitor signs of early inactivity. We should know those who are not in worship services so that we might reach out. That might happen through the staff. I am still able to sit down on Monday morning and go through our list of members to check off who was

there the previous Sunday and who was not. Each quarter our secretary then gives me an attendance graph that shows the attendance of the members. There are many ways that we can track attendance. It could happen through a friendship register that is passed through the rows. There are churches that use a Shepherd's list and each individual shepherd is responsible to track the attendance for his group. We might use the old mail box system where we note those that have not picked up their mail. I don't think it matters how we do it as long as we do it.

We are just finishing an elder training program. Our plan is that the secretary would give me a list each week of all individuals who have not been in worship for three consecutive weeks. That list would then be passed on to our elders for an initial contact. It would probably be a simple phone call to encourage and get an assessment of the situation. That would then be passed along to me for further action together with the elders. I am sure that many of you have systems that work much more smoothly. It is not the method that is important. The critical issue is that we are seeking the straying with the love and persistence that Scripture displays in the parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin in Luke chapter 15.

There is one final concern that I have in the area of the inactive member that I would like to address. It seems to me that in our congregation we have developed a plan for assimilation. We have addressed the needs of the inactive member. I am not sure that we have dealt adequately with the issue of the children in our congregation. I think that they may be overlooked in this area of ministry. I believe that we work hard at our Sunday School program and we strongly encourage participation. 7th and 8th graders must attend confirmation classes if they desire to become communicant members of our congregation. In the last year we have worked harder at the activities of our youth group and our teen Bible study. And yet, we don't do a great deal about inactivity in the high school and college years. In a sense I am not sure that we don't almost send the message that we expect it. We talk to the parents but don't always deal directly with the youth. It seems to me that the same spiritual check up that we conduct with our adults should be used with our youth. The lines of communication and opportunities for service need to be greater. Our contact with them while they are away at school should be stronger. It seems to me that we so often send our college age students away to areas that have no WELS presence and we never help the students to address the problem. I suppose that comes in the form of a confession. Perhaps it is only an admission of inadequacy. As we have looked at these problems we have looked at the necessity for greater staffing in the near future. I also raise the issue so that we can share possible remedies here at the conference level.

I have no doubt that I may have raised more questions than I have answered in the area of assimilation. Nonetheless, I thank you for the assignment. It has been a profitable one for me. I pray that you have found it helpful in some small way. It has once again reminded me of the amazing privilege that our God gives us in ministry. He has equipped us with his powerful Word and he continues to bring people to us so that we might share his life-saving message. I pray that will continue to bless our respective congregations, our district and our synod. The glory is his alone!

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ⁱ My Brother's Keeper: A Study Of Backdoor Losses In The Church (NPH: 1991) p.9

ⁱⁱ Valleskey, David, *We Believe, Therefore We Speak*, (NPH 1995) pp. 272-273

ⁱⁱⁱ Huebner, John, "Integrating the New Member" (Florida Pastor's Conference, 1979), p.14

^{iv} Assimilation: The Church Involving and Keeping Its Members, (Published by the Board Of Evangelism Services, LCMS, Northern Illinois District), p.14

^v Valleskey, p.284

^{vi} Ibid. p. 283