

CHURCH ASSIMILATION PROCESSES

McKinley's Assimilation Process

Church growth specialists have identified a receptivity scale that provides insights into various times and circumstances and responsiveness to the gospel and, thus, the ministry of the local church.

The basic insight provided by the receptivity scale is that life's change points may be and often are life's commitment points. A church keenly sensitive to the needs of its prospects and new members increases the possibility for sustained growth and assimilation of newcomers.

There appears to be a strong correlation between those same transition times and the *dropout process*. Just as change points open doors of new commitment, receptivity, and opportunity, they may also provide passages of escape and fallout for those who have been in regular attendance.

All churches have a formal or informal, identifiable or invisible, way of passage to assimilation within their own ministry context. This varies, based upon theological conviction, social orientation, and organizational structure. Some stages in the joining, belonging, and participating process are common to most churches.

Assimilation of new people is not a program, but a process. Although a wide variety of mutually-reinforcing programs may enhance the process, it is a dynamic that includes certain points of passage or assimilation change points.

Steps To Meaningful Participation

If we were to portray the assimilation process, it would reflect the following stages or steps toward meaningful membership:

1. **Awareness:** Assimilation begins with awareness. People are made aware of a local church's ministry through a variety of media and means. The church's location, physical appearance, ministry publications, community outreach, advertising, and scattered membership are all a part of the stage of awareness.
2. **Attraction:** In this stage, a person outside the church is moved from acknowledgement to acquaintance. It is important that churches utilize every feasible avenue of communication to seek personal introduction and contact with a point of need in the lives of those who are unchurched. Awareness is general in nature, but attraction is personal. The more personal and specific the point of contact, the more responsive the prospect will be.
3. **Attendance:** The first visit to a church can be the beginning or the end. A warm reception and a positive experience will often result in a repeat visit. However, if the expectation from attraction is not met with substance, the visitor may not return. At this stage, visitors are asking themselves, "Could I fit in?" and "Is there something here for me?"

4. **Association:** The period of time from attendance to association varies for each individual. Some attend and associate. Others attend and grow in their association over a period of weeks, months, and sometimes years. At this stage, the visitor has found agreement or acceptance of doctrine and belief, and is discovering immediate satisfaction through worship, ministry, and/or program.
5. **Acceptance:** It is at this point that unbelievers receive Jesus Christ and express desire for membership. It is here that believers commit themselves to a new family of faith. With acceptance, new dynamics begin to occur. The prospect's newfound status of membership is filled with expectation and desire for belonging, sharing, and contributing.
6. **Anticipation:** The new member has a high level of expectation. Early attention, involvement, and communication are important. Churches that focus upon communicating the *how, when, where, what, and who* of involvement during this stage do a wise thing. While expectations are high, leaders and members alike must seize the moment to ensure the future.
7. **Adjustment:** Following a period of heightened anticipation and expectation, there comes a time of assessment and adjustment as to what new members may realistically expect from the church and what the church may expect from them. In this stage, new members begin to settle into patterns of attendance and levels of involvement.
8. **Advancement:** When anticipation is challenged, directed, and fulfilled and adjustments are made, the result is progress and growth, both spiritually and socially, for the new member and for the local church community. At this stage, the new member moves another step upward and is considered an active and growing member. With members in this stage, a church can grow and increase in influence, fellowship, and size.

Steps Towards Dropout

Members who find disappointment at the stage of anticipation, or who fail to navigate the stage of adjustment, will not continue to step upward to advancement. They will remain on a plateau of peripheral involvement, or worse still, begin the following steps away from meaningful membership and toward dropout.

Step 1: Alienation.

Many who attend on a regular basis struggle with feelings of alienation and disassociation. In times of change, transition, and difficulty, they are likely to uproot and transplant. Some transplant to a more caring fellowship. Others uproot and wither in faith and commitment outside the family of God.

Step 2: Aggravation.

Failure to receive adequate recognition and response in a time of personal need, relational crisis, or physical disability will often intensify feelings of alienation, and will give way to aggravation and dissatisfaction. Some will voice their

aggravation. Others will never say a word, but will quietly drift away. Still others may return to the church following their crisis to provide one more chance for response. If they fail to find sensitivity, awareness, and concern, they will walk away, having made a conscious choice not to return.

Step 3: Apathy.

It is at this stage that it is most difficult to renew and to restore dropouts. They feel as though others have failed them and they feel guilt for their own failure.

Dropout Intervention

Dropout may occur at any stage in the process. Programs and ministry strategies must be developed to complement the varying stages of growth in membership.

The identification of the steps in the process of assimilation opens the door for intervention. Church members may discover that their greatest weakness is found at one particular step of this process. When this is the case, target and focal ministry programs can be added or expanded to enhance the church's ability to lead new members more effectively to the next stage of commitment and involvement.

Many churches fail at the point of attraction. They are never able to stir interest in any significant way within their community. Once inside, people do discover a caring fellowship, but growth through evangelism and, thus, assimilation may be limited by failure to attract newcomers. This may indicate a need to become involved in ministries outside the church that will invite interest in the church.

Others may fail at the stage of anticipation. A common problem for many churches is failure to deliver or follow through on the promises made to new members. Often, new members are told they will have opportunities to serve, but restrictive organization fails to provide room for involvement or advancement.

The results are disillusionment and discouragement. When this is the case, an otherwise open and outgoing congregation will experience frequent fallout of newcomers at the second and third year of membership.

The loss of members - new and old - is deceiving in large churches. There may be aggressive outreach and effective decisions, but failure to create new roles in leadership and to expand through new fellowship groups will result in the loss of members.

The front door will be wide and frequently travelled, but the back door will be equally broad and regularly used. Thus, the expansion of a dynamic program and ministry structure is vital to the assimilation process.

Keeping new families on a steady upward course requires that we develop observation points to insure their passage along each step toward assimilation.

Questions for You to Consider

- At what point in McKinley's Assimilation Process is your church experiencing the greatest results?
- At what point is your church encountering the most frustration?
- What promises does your church make to newcomers that you fail to follow through on later?
- At what point in McKinley's Assimilation Process do newcomers find the most disillusionment and discouragement?