

The Silent Enemy of Assimilation

by Allen Ratta

The Loud Backdoor

Every church has two back doors. One backdoor squeaks loudly as a core member of the church that is deeply involved and has many relational connections walks out. They may be leaving on good terms but many in the core notice and feel a sense of loss with their passage. If they are leaving on bad terms, the squeaking of this backdoor can be deafening.

The Silent Backdoor

The other backdoor is largely a silent one, as a steady stream of unconnected people exit, still looking for a place to belong and serve or to have their needs met. The reason this backdoor is silent is because these people are unconnected. Few or none are close to them. They are unlikely to be involved in ministry, certainly not in key ministry positions. No one feels the pain of their absence. There is a generalized sense of malaise as people wonder where that one couple went and the senior pastor struggles with why worship attendance remains flat.

The Silent Backdoor In Growing Churches

Ironically, the silent backdoor can be a bigger problem in growing churches and, by the way, larger churches. The faster a church grows; leadership tends to focus on the many obvious successes. The steady increase in attendance numbers can blind leaders to severe systemic failures within the church. The equation is simple. Newcomers to the church are visible (they are there) and it feels good to think about them. The silent exodus is invisible (they are not there) and it does not feel nearly as good to think about all the people who have come and gone.

The Big Deal

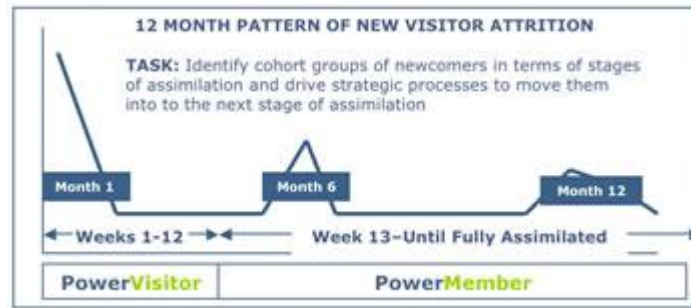
One might counter at this point, who cares about the backdoor? We are growing! However, lost and wandering souls are certainly worthy of deeper reflection. How much celebration is appropriate when a church, is doing far less than it should to connect people to the Body of Christ?

The Pastoral Perspective

The Good Shepherd is the highest and best model for every aspiring pastor. One wonders, how Jesus would respond to the unaddressed silent backdoor that plagues so many churches. The art of shepherding is largely lost in our modern world of industry, technology and marketing. Jesus, appealing to the common values held by the shepherds of his day, asks the following rhetorical question. *What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?* NASB Luke 15.4. Here lies the true pastoral perspective.

Stewardship

Pastors who pray and labor for large streams of visitors should perhaps ponder more carefully what they ask for. Every soul that enters the front door of a church carries with it a great pastoral responsibility. They often require significant hands-on care for a significant period of time before they are fully assimilated into the church. Churches that do a great job in marketing need to make a commensurate investment in developing first-rate visitor retention systems that demonstrate a high level of commitment to newcomers. This is the vision behind our ministry solutions of [PowerVisitor](#) (high touch retention over the first 12 weeks) and [PowerMember](#) (high-touch retention on an ongoing basis until newcomers are fully assimilated). Experience teaches that each ministry requires a different strategic approach. As shown in [part three](#) of this series, the graph below illustrates the scope of the task along with the typical pattern of newcomer attrition.



A Disturbing Trend

There is a disturbing trend in some circles that perceives church growth apart from the full mantle of pastoral care and responsibility. Some serious reflection is in order. It is possible, with a strong consistent marketing plan, to significantly increase the numbers of people who will come to "check you out." Statistically speaking, the more visitors who visit, means that more will stick. The next logical step is to direct great energy and resources towards creating a worship service experience where even greater numbers will stick. None of this is necessarily bad.

The problem arises when pastoral perspectives are reduced to that of a numbers game. With large visitor volumes it is possible to enjoy the "easy pickings" of those who jump in and become excited new adherents to the church. All appears well except to those who hear the bleating of those streaming out the silent backdoor.

Applying a Pastor's Heart

Pastors who possess the heart of the Good Shepherd will have a keen eye to develop responsible and competent ministry systems that proactively work to connect all newcomers. The pastoral mantle incorporates a passion for those would otherwise come and soon fall away for lack of intentional care. May we all rise to the high calling as under-shepherds and reflect the heart of the Good Shepherd as we seek to pastor all those for whom Christ died.

Top 4 Signs of a Big Silent Backdoor Problem

1. Lack of Attendance Increase Relative to Visitor Volume

Add up all those who visited your church in the past year. Multiply the total number of visitors by .20 (20%). Add that number to your previous year's year-end attendance. If present attendance is lower, you have a big back door problem. A 20% visitor retention rate is considered the minimum for a growing church. With intentionality we have several churches using our ministry solutions that enjoy visitor retention rates around 50%.

2. Lack of Required Investment in Visitors

Ask the following ministry design questions. Do you have a ministry in place that sustains contact with visitors over the first twelve weeks? Do you differentiate between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd time visitors and make appropriately greater investments for repeat visitors? Do you have failsafe mechanisms in place where you are sure all visitors are contacted and a plan to reassign them to someone else when they are not? Are you able to increasingly discern the needs and interests of your visitors so you can proactively mobilize increasingly accurate interventions to connect them to the right people and ministries in your church? Do you have contact people identified for every ministry which might be a path of involvement for visitors? Do you have an ongoing means to identify a visitor's interest in either ministry involvement or leadership and a failsafe mechanism that will proactively initiate calls from your contact people to the visitor? Can you identify cohort groups of visitors

3. Lack of Feedback

Ask the following ministry design questions. Do you have a reliable feedback

mechanism that helps you to understand how your church is actually being perceived out outsiders? Are you able to rate your ?first impression? ministries (those ministries which your visitors may most often come into contact with and judge your church on that basis) and determine which ministries are rated low by your visitors? Feedback is critical to the ongoing development of ministries that are truly effective in reaching newcomers. Without it you can be certain that you have blind spots and

4. **Lack of Differentiated Strategies**

With over 10 years of experience working with thousands of churches in the area of assimilation we have learned that there are two distinctly different strategies required to close the silent backdoor. The first task is what we call the ?initial connection.? This, in most cases, happens during the first twelve weeks. It takes a high-touch approach by numbers of people to fast track a visitor into a meaningful connection in the church. The second and more difficult task is what we term the ?long term connection.? We employ a proven long-term one on one approach where newcomers feel a pastoral care connection and feel known and cared for in the church community. This provides the basis for long term feedback that leads to well targeted assimilation interventions.

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