

How to Avoid Dropping the Assimilation Baton

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Success in team sports eluded me as a kid. I warmed the bench when I played football. I didn't make the baseball team because flying baseballs scared me. After I wore bright orange socks and sandals to the basketball tryout, the coach told me I need not return. But . . . I could run. I joined the track team and ran the middle distance races and relay races. The key to a relay race win hinged on a successful handoff of the hollow metal baton from one runner to the next. Relay races give spectators some of the most exciting track events, as well as some of the most disappointing when a runner drops the baton.

Successful assimilation of new people into the life of your church parallels a relay race. It takes team effort and a clear handoff of new people from one level of involvement in the church to the next. Without an intentional plan for this process, a church can drop the "baton" and lose a prospective member. However, if a church will align its assimilation steps, it can increase the number of new people it keeps.

Our church discovered four simple steps that increased the number of newcomers who stayed. We strategically calendar this four step process three to four times a year and take great care that we don't "drop the baton" between each step. If you keep good records and execute this plan, you will keep the newcomer "baton" in firm hands. Regardless of your church size, you can adapt these four steps to increase the number of people who will make your church their home.

Step 1: Throw out an “outreach net.”

Jesus often used a fishing metaphor to describe evangelism. The fishermen in Jesus’ day didn’t fish with Zebco© reels, graphite rods and invisible mono-filament line. Instead, they used simple nets. Well-maintained nets would yield a good catch. Torn nets would not because the fish would slip through the tears.

An “outreach net” is a well-planned event targeted to encourage seekers to visit your church. A well planned, publicized and executed Easter service or Christmas presentation will reach many seekers. Seeker sermon series can serve as excellent outreach nets as well. We promote our seeker series with quality mailings and encourage our members to invite their friends. We calendar these series to coincide with the two highest church attendance seasons, Easter and Christmas, and with the times people set new routines, September (when school begins) and January (when people make resolutions).

A good outreach net will bring new people to your church. However, we realized that without a name and an address from the newcomer, we couldn’t help them continue through the assimilation process. So, we designed a simple card we call a “Feedback Card.” In our net events we encourage everyone, guests and members alike, to fill out the card with their comments and contact information. We then build a database from the guest’s cards from which we send invitations to the next assimilation step.

Step 2: Offer a “sampling event.”

My wife Sherryl loves to shop at a local big box warehouse store. I don't like to shop, but will stop by on occasion to eat . . . for free. These large stores provide free food samples at several booths throughout the floor area. If I plan my visit around lunch, I can "sample surf" and enjoy a full-course meal complete with meats, vegetables and dessert from the sample tables. If I'm starved, I'll take my daughter and after I eat my "one-sample-only-please" sample, I'll ask her to get a sample and then give it to me. Ok, I know what you're thinking! But the silver-haired ladies with the hairnets at the booths don't say you can't share. When these stores provide these samples they pay off because many people buy the item they just tasted.

A church "sampling" event provides that same experience for newcomers. They can sample before they buy. We call our sampling event the Pastor's Newcomer's Brunch. We promote it as a no-strings-attached opportunity to check us out. A service team with a heart for people and an eye for excellence carries out the brunch. They provide tasty food (of course), an attractive setting, and a small gift for the attendees. After the meal, our pastor and his wife overview our church, share engaging stories about the church's history, interact with the guests and share the gospel.

As the reception concludes, the pastor will ask for written feedback on a "Next Step" card. He encourages the attendees to take the next step into either our new believer's class or into the next step in the connecting process.

Most who attend leave with a "sweet taste" in their mouths. They like what they experience and many continue through the assimilation steps. Depending on their written

response on the Next Step card, we put them in a database we use to invite them to the following step.

Step 3: Create a “Velcro© process.”

In the early 1940's, George de Mestral, a Swiss inventor, took his dog on a walk. When he got home, he noticed that cockleburs covered both his dog's coat and his pants. His curiosity about what made cockleburs stick led to the discovery of Velcro©, an indispensable item we all use to make things stick together.

A Velcro© process is a series of classes (or small group meetings) that last long enough to help new people begin to “stick” in your church. We call our process *Connexions* which incorporates three, two-hour interactive classes. We cover our vision, mission, values and strategy in *Connexions 1*. We cover the spiritual growth process in *Connexions2*. *Connexions3* concludes the process with missions, evangelism and service.

In *Connexions1* we provide an attractive binder that holds class notes and brochures about the church's ministries. Each class includes videos, discussion, lecture, ice-breakers and a light brunch. We hold these classes on three consecutive Sunday mornings because we've discovered people will more consistently attend at this time than at other times. When we conclude the first two classes, we ask the attendees to complete a Next Step card to get their feedback and to encourage them to continue the process.

Connexions culminates in *Connexions3* when we challenge the attendees to sign a membership covenant. The newcomers who progress this far can now make informed decisions to join based on what they learned in the classes, and most do.

We modified the base path course material from Saddleback Valley Community Church to fit our church. Visit your local Christian bookstore store or Christian book web sites and you'll find other class options you could use in your church setting.

Assimilation does not end with a name on your church roll. The first three steps only begin the process. When you build this next step into the culture your church, you will maximize spiritual impact.

Step 4: Link the new member to a “greenhouse.”

I once raised pansies from seed in my basement. I created a greenhouse with hi-intensity lighting, a watering system and seed-bed warmers. This environment created a healthy place for my seedlings to grow before I planted them outside.

True community develops in your church's “greenhouses.” Every church member needs a place where he or she can belong, gain ownership and experience spiritual growth. Your Sunday School ministry and/or your small group ministry will serve as your “greenhouses.”

You can effectively “pass the baton” to a greenhouse if current small group or Sunday school class members will attend the *Connexions* classes. If a small group member will reach out to build relationships with the new people, it can ease the newcomer's transition into a group. When you enmesh a newcomer into a greenhouse, your church will reach assimilation's capstone and experience a fresh vibrancy.

If you incorporate these steps into your church's ministry and make a clean handoff between each step, you'll surprise yourself at how many new people you will enfold into your church family.

Suggested sidebar: How to increase attendance at your assimilation events.

Do you feel frustrated when 20 people sign-up for an event and only 10 show up? This simple process lifted our attendance to 70-80% of sign-ups.

Step 1: Send the person a quality written invitation two to three weeks prior to the event.

Step 2: Call those you invited and personally ask if they will attend. Do this about 10 days prior.

Step 3: Send an attendance confirmation letter to those who said they'd attend about five days prior to the event. Include a preprinted ticket to the event. In your confirmation letter, explain that they will need to bring the ticket when they come because food will be bought based on the number of tickets mailed. When you refer to the food purchase and enclose the ticket, it creates a greater sense obligation for them to show up. We let anyone who shows up attend, with or without a ticket, but we don't publicize that.

Step 4: The day before the event, call those that confirmed with a pleasant, “Looking forward to seeing you” reminder. Don’t skip this one!