

Attracting and Assimilating the Unchurched in the 21st Century

A Mission Portland Study by David D. Durey

Participating Churches in 2000:	Average Worship Attendance (9/31/00)
<u>Christian Life Center</u> (W)	766
<u>City Bible Church</u> (NE)	3000
<u>City Harvest Church</u> (WA)	450
<u>Crossroads Church of Christ</u> (NE)	675
<u>East Hill Foursquare Church</u> (E)	5500
<u>Faith Center Church</u> (WA)	500
<u>Good Shepherd Community Church</u> (E)	3000+
<u>Greater Portland Bible</u> (SW)	1074
<u>Mt. Olivet Baptist</u> (N)	1400
<u>New Beginnings Christian Center</u> (NE)	3000
<u>New Heights Church</u> (WA)	3000
<u>New Hope Community Church</u> (SE)	1700
<u>Portland Christian Center</u> (SW)	1790
<u>Rolling Hills Community Church</u> (SW)	2875
<u>Sunset Presbyterian Church</u> (W)	2300

The 15 Participating Churches are located in seven regions of the metropolitan area:

N – 1	North Portland
WA – 3	Vancouver, WA
SW – 3	Southwest Portland
SE – 1	Southeast Portland and Oregon City
NE – 3	Northeast Portland
E – 2	Gresham and Boring
W – 2	Northwest Portland and Aloha

These 15 leading churches represent nearly 10% of the weekly worship attendance of the Portland area. The following are the combined key statistics for the participating churches:

Weekly worship attendance	34,436
Weekly number of visitors:	532
Annual number of conversions:	5381
Annual number of new members:	2477 (many don't record membership)
Weekly Adult Education attendance:	4284
Weekly small group attendance:	11,270

Introduction

Rick Warren, author of [The Purpose Driven Church](#), says, "Assimilation is the task of moving people from an awareness of your church to attendance at your church to active membership in your church" (309). In America over the past several decades, the church has generally failed to "go and make disciples" of unchurched people in fulfillment of the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19-20). When the church has attracted newcomers, they rarely stay. Herb Miller contends that in the average congregation in America, only 12 percent of first-time visitors return the following Sunday and eventually become members. A few congregations have 20 or 25 percent retention but rarely would any church surpass 30 percent ([How to 1](#)). How can Christian congregations improve at attracting and assimilating the unchurched?

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify transferable principles drawn from investigating several churches that have been successful in attracting and assimilating unchurched people through outreach, evangelism, newcomer welcome, visitor follow-up, new Christian follow-up, discipleship, and mobilizing and equipping for lay ministry. Five research questions were created to help identify the principles and practices used by churches to attract and assimilate unchurched people: (1) What principles and practices used by these churches have been most successful in attracting and evangelizing unchurched people? (2) How do these churches welcome and follow up unchurched visitors and new converts? (3) How do these churches provide an opportunity for new people to gain a sense of belonging? (4) How do these churches see that people are discipled into fully-devoted followers of Christ? (5) How do these churches help people take up the responsibility to serve in personal ministry?

This study was conducted in cooperation with Mission Portland. Utilizing a multi-case approach, fifteen leading churches were selected from among the fifty Portland, Oregon/Vancouver, Washington area churches that have the highest weekly worship attendance. An on-site interview was conducted with the senior pastor or an associate pastor. In addition, each church provided printed materials and interviews with three new Christians who had been successfully assimilated into the church within the past twelve to twenty-four months. These new Christian interviews provided a valuable "outside-in" perspective that served as a corrective to several of the responses offered by the church leaders.

Context of the Study

The cities of the world and our nation have become the modern day mission fields of the world because that is where the people are. In 1900 only 10 percent of the world's population lived in

urban areas. By the late 1990s approximately 50 percent of the world's people were urban dwellers. In the United States 90 percent of the population live in urban settings (Dennison, [City](#) 13-14). The 50 largest metropolitan areas of America alone account for a population of approximately 150 million people (Thomas "Largest" par. 10).

This study was conducted within the Portland, Oregon/Vancouver, Washington metropolitan area. According to bizjournals.com demographic journal, the greater Portland metropolitan area ranked twenty-second among America's largest metropolitan areas in 1998 (Thomas "Largest" par. 10). From 1990 to 1998 Portland was the seventh fastest growing metropolitan area in America with 19.83 percent growth in population (Thomas "Largest" par. 2). Projections for the year 2020 indicate that the greater Portland area will remain one the America's largest and fastest growing urban centers (Thomas "Projected" par. 3).

Based on the population and growth of the Portland metropolitan area and its relatively strong church involvement, Portland is representative of the majority of America's larger metropolitan areas. Portland is also a city that faces challenges that are common to large urban areas. Therefore, whatever practices and principles are discovered to be effective in Portland will likely be transferable or adaptable to churches in the top 250 metropolitan areas of the United States, all of which have a population of 100,000 or more (Thomas, "Rankings" par. 4).

Population and Sample

The fifteen churches selected for this study represented a balance between denominational and independent churches and range in attendance from around five hundred worshipers per weekend to over 5500. Seven churches have denominational affiliation and a combined worship attendance of over 15,400. Three are Pentecostal, two are Baptist, one is Church of Christ and one is a United Presbyterian, a mainline denomination. The eight independent churches have a worship attendance of approximately 15,600 and are made up of three evangelical community churches, four independent charismatic churches and one Bible church.

From a theological perspective there is again a balance, this time between Pentecostal/charismatic and Evangelical/non-charismatic churches. Seven congregations represent the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions with just over fifteen thousand people attending weekly worship. The eight evangelical, non-charismatic churches have a worship attendance of over sixteen thousand. What is true of all fifteen churches is that they are clearly theologically conservative and evangelistic.

Each church provided interviews with three new Christians who had been successfully assimilated within the previous twelve to twenty-four months. The total number of interviews was forty-five. The number of married couples and single adults and the number of men and women were very balanced. The dispersion of ages represents a bell curve. Just two young people were in high school or recent graduates. Twenty-seven of the new Christians were young adults in their twenties to mid-thirties. Another twenty-seven individuals were in their middle adult years, approximately thirty-five to fifty-five years old. Finally, three were senior adults fifty-five or older. However, the ethnic make-up of the new Christians interviewed was predominantly Caucasian. Only four persons were African American, and one was Hispanic.

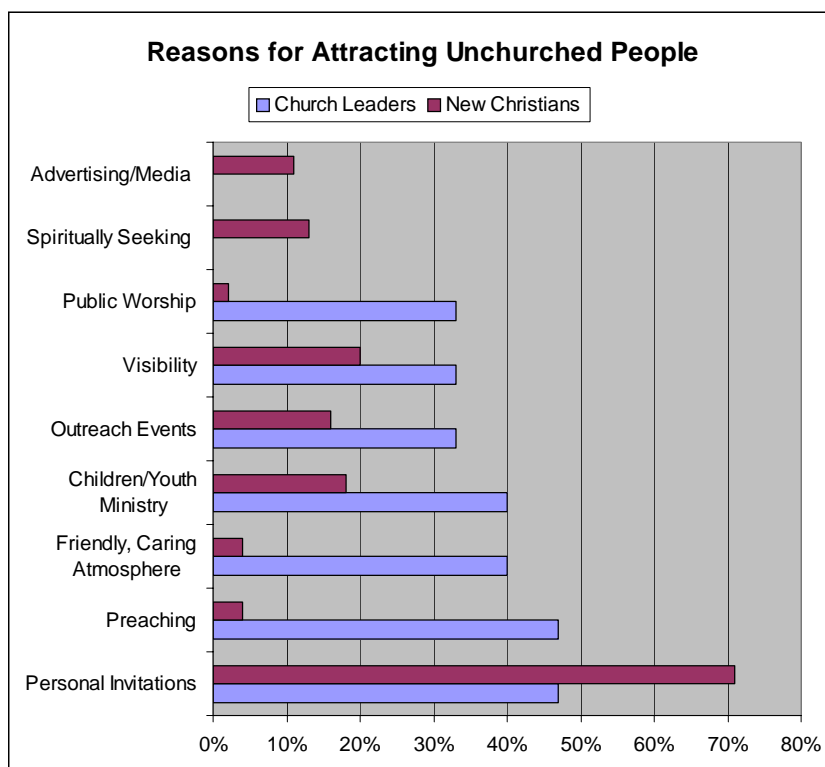
Major Findings

The major findings of this study can be categorized in three areas: personal relationships, intentionality, and small groups. First, personal relationships were the most significant reason why unchurched people were attracted to and stayed in the church. Second, these churches were intentional in reaching lost people, welcoming visitors and providing a pathway for spiritual

formation. Finally, the practice of providing small groups was found to be the most effective means of helping new people form significant relationships and grow spiritually.

Personal Invitations

First, the significance of personal relationships is illustrated by the fact that when asked, “What attracted you to this church?” over 70 percent of the new Christians interviewed responded by saying it was a personal invitation (see Chart: Reasons for Attracting Unchurched People). Christians need to be like Andrew who went and found his brother Simon Peter and invited him to come and see Jesus (John 1:40-42). Miller states, “Invitations are the way churches open their doors” (How to 31-32). Consider the research conducted by Church Growth, Inc. of Monrovia, California. When more than 42,000 Christians were asked, “What or who was responsible for your coming to Christ and your church?” over 75 percent said that it was a friend or relative (Arn and Arn 45-46). Several church leaders elaborated that the primary means of attracting unchurched people is the life and witness of those who already attend. First, mature Christians are encouraged to build relationships with the unchurched and extend personal invitations to the church and to Christianity. Second, new converts often reach their unsaved friends through their testimony and the witness of a changed life. Executive Pastor of East Hill Foursquare Church, Marc Gale, explains, “Our people are our tool for evangelizing. What God has done in their lives is an example for the people that they are around—in families, in neighborhoods and in the workplace. Our members either extend an invitation to their unchurched friends or these friends visit East Hill because of what they see the Lord has done in our member’s lives.”



Like attracts like

When the church leaders were asked to describe those that were being attracted to these churches the principle of “like attracts like” was a major factor. “Explosive growth occurs when the type of people in the community match the type of people that are already in the church and

they both match the type of person the pastor is.” Warren declares, “You will attract who you are, not who you want” (Purpose 175-177). Churches in this study generally reflect their community and regional demographics—socially, economically, and ethnically. Bill Towne, associate pastor of Rolling Hills Community Church, comments, “We just did a survey in the Spring that compared our body to the community within five to seven miles of us and we were really identical in demographics.” The churches that are seeking to be multiracial have used the “like attracts like” principle by hiring a multiracial pastoral staff.

Relational outreach

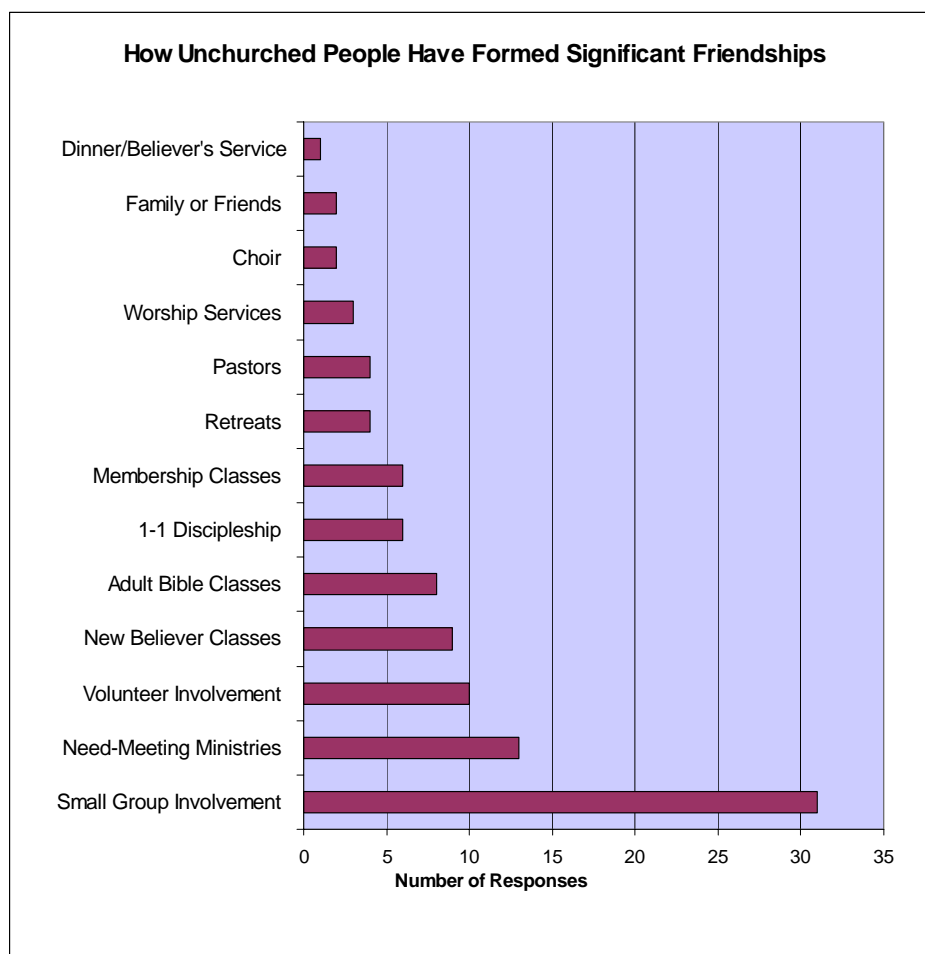
These leading churches primarily use relational ministries to mobilize their members for outreach. Most people become Christians and enter the church through webs of relationship—common kinship, common friendship, and common association. This provides the most effective means of assimilating new members into the church through the use of existing relationships (Arn and Arn 40-53; Neighbour 61). Eleven churches reported using invitational events where members are encouraged or even required to bring friends. Nine churches use small groups to connect with the unchurched. Thirteen churches reported using personal outreach or relational evangelism strategies. Four churches seek to develop relationships through need-meeting ministries such as groups for young mothers, sports ministries, and support and recovery classes. Another relational strategy used by three churches is the Lighthouse Movement that emphasizes praying for your circle of influence, caring for them and finally sharing the gospel with them. Only three churches mentioned outreach strategies that were not service oriented or relationally based.

A friendly, caring welcome

The importance of personal relationships to newcomers is illustrated by the fact that when asked, “Why did you stay?” over 77 percent of those interviewed responded in the combined categories of friendliness and caring, new relationships, or small group involvement (see Chart: Why The Unchurched Stay). Fifty-three percent of the responses specifically indicated the importance of the church being friendly and caring. One new Christian said, “I think I’ve stayed because of the love that they have showed me and that they have cared.”

Relational groups

These churches provide relational opportunities beyond corporate worship for members and newcomers to establish and maintain vital friendships and Christian fellowship. Assimilating new people into the church takes place naturally when you assist them in developing a circle of friends, joining a group or class, and finding a meaningful way to serve others (McIntosh, Exodus 146; Martin; Orr 6; Schaller, Assimilating 76-77). Church leaders and new Christians both stated that small groups were the most effective at connecting newcomers into vital relationships. Other connection ministries included midsized groups such as adult bible classes, newcomer and membership classes, need-meeting ministries, and new believer’s classes. Also, some people connected through one-on-one discipleship and volunteer ministry (see Chart: How Unchurched People Have Formed Significant Friendships).



Relationships and spiritual growth

Finally, the key to successful nurture of new believers is relationship (Stutzman 59). Seven responses were suggested by 20 percent or more when the new Christians were asked, “What has helped you grow spiritually?” Personal Bible reading and preaching/corporate worship were the only two responses that were not high relationship contexts. The others were ministries where personal relationships and growth were combined: one-on-one discipleship or mentoring, Christian basics classes, adult education classes, seminars for spiritual formation, and small groups.

Intentionality

These fifteen leading churches illustrate the power of intentionality. They are mission driven, purposeful, and focused in their ministries. They serve as examples of how churches must organize and operate with intentionality if they are to successfully attract and assimilate unchurched people.

Reaching lost people

Rather than organizing themselves to just serve the “saints,” the common theme for these churches is reaching “lost people.” Most of the churches do not have a highly defined “targeted group” though ten churches have identified a general target. For example, New Beginnings Christian Center is seeking to be a multiracial congregation with at least 50 percent non-white,

yet pastor Makowski states, “We don’t have a targeted group; we are trying to reach them all. You can come into our church and find an executive sitting next to a guy all tattooed up and just out of prison.” Paul MacLurg of New Heights Church illustrates the attitude of these churches, “We are after unchurched people, people who are lost, who don’t know Christ at all.” This intentional focus on reaching lost people is demonstrated through the eight methods of mobilizing members for outreach discussed in the section on personal relationships.

Visitor welcome

These churches expect visitors; therefore, they prepare for “company.” Collectively, the church leaders provided a checklist of eighteen different items that help create a welcoming atmosphere for guests. In addition to stationing greeters at every door, several churches have roaming greeters that identify guests who need to be escorted to the nursery or a class. Many churches provide an “Information Center” near the main entrance and have printed materials available explaining the various ministries offered at the church. They often provide printed maps of their facilities in addition to mounting directional signs throughout the building. Several churches also provide a separate hospitality center for guests. Over half of the new Christians interviewed said that the friendliness and caring of the church was a major factor in why they stayed. During one new Christian interview at Crossroads Church, I met a spouse who is still investigating Christianity. He regularly attends worship services and volunteers at the church’s Food Bank. He powerfully illustrates the welcoming atmosphere that these churches provide to unchurched people, “Everybody has embraced us, from Pastor Tom to the greeters. You don’t feel like an outsider you feel like a family member. It’s not just talk. I think that’s very important.”

Visitor follow-up

Though strategies varied, every church also had an intentional plan for visitor follow-up. After attending one of these leading churches, a first-time visitor could receive a letter, an e-mail, and one to three phone calls, all within one week after their first visit. Christian Life Center in Aloha has the most thorough visitor follow-up system. They call it Care Ministry. During the first week, the Care Ministry tries to provide five touch points. On Monday, guests receive a plate of freshly baked cookies delivered to their door to express appreciation for attending Christian Life Center. On Tuesday, a Care Ministry team leader will make a phone call to each guest. A letter from the senior pastor arrives on Wednesday and is followed up by a phone call from the associate pastor on Friday. Finally, a Care Ministry team member will provide another personal phone call on Saturday. Pastor Rienas suggests that 20 percent of those who visit a church visit again, another 20 percent will never return no matter what follow-up is done. However, 60 percent of guests need nurture and follow-up if they are to return.

Spiritual formation path

A majority of the churches indicated that they had created a specific pathway for spiritual growth. Most offered this formation pathway in the form of seminars or classes. All of these churches provide specific ministries to assist in the spiritual growth of newcomers and members. Eleven churches reported that they used small groups as a primary tool for helping disciples grow. Eight churches acknowledged adult education as a significant ministry for Christian maturation. One-on-one discipleship was also mentioned. The new Christian interviews verified that, along with preaching and corporate worship, all of these ministries helped with spiritual growth.

Member expectations

These congregations have clear expectations of their members and have identified the characteristics of what they want to see in a fully-assimilated person. Regarding approaches to membership, Schaller would label these “high-commitment” rather than “voluntary association” churches ([Bridges](#) 97-103). These church leaders identified expectations that are almost identical to those listed in the review of literature. The top ten expectations were financial giving, worship attendance, small group participation, ministry involvement, some form of written or public covenant or commitment, salvation, godly living, water baptism, a commitment to unity, and a commitment to personal spiritual growth.

Small Groups

Small groups are big ministries for these leading churches. All but one of these churches use small groups as a primary ministry tool. In six churches, 50 percent or more of those who attend worship also attend a small group. Five of the fifteen churches are organized as cell churches. Church leaders mentioned small groups as an important element for each of the five research questions, but two were especially significant: gaining a sense of belonging and discipling. In other words, the practice of providing small groups is the most effective means of helping new people form significant relationships and grow spiritually.

Mobilizing for evangelism

Nine churches stated that they use small groups to mobilize members for evangelism. This is especially true of those churches that use the cell-church approach. In cell-based churches the primary concern is cell-group evangelism that results in cell multiplication. The vision of each cell is to be outward focused, not inward focused. Fellowship within the cell is always present, but it is not the primary goal (Comiskey, [Reap](#) 48). Every other cell meeting is an evangelistic outreach. This helps maintain a healthy balance between in-reach and outreach. The cells are continually hosting outreach barbecues and picnics or doing servant evangelism in their neighborhood or within their sphere of influence.

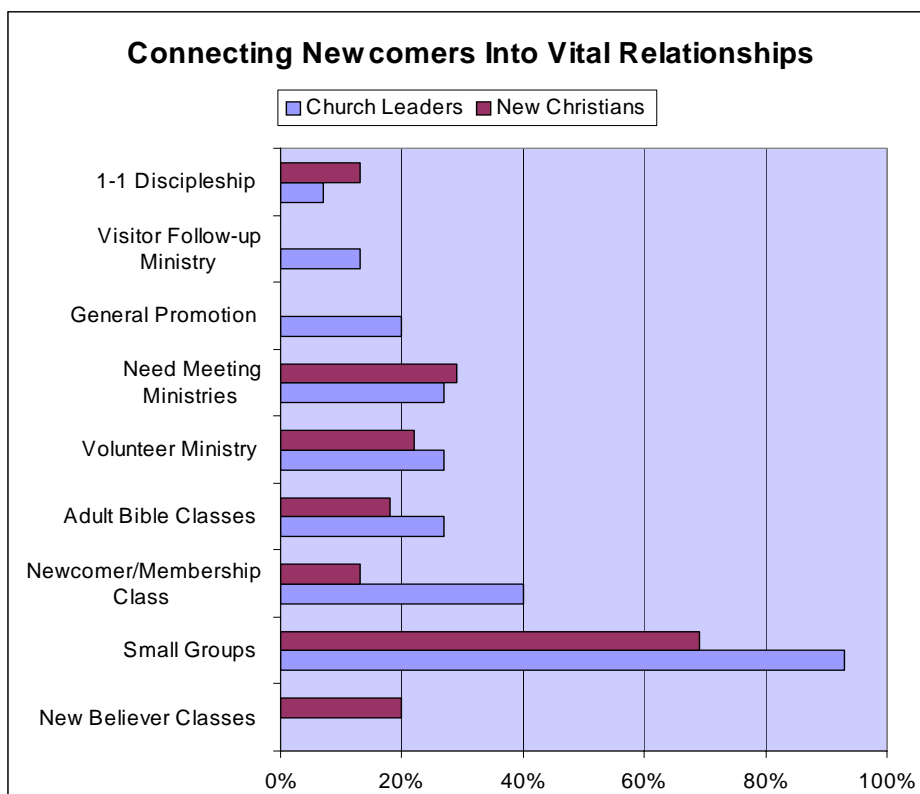
Visitor and new believer follow-up

In reference to cell-based churches, Joel Comiskey suggests that small groups provide effective follow-up for visitors and new converts that have entered the church through the worship celebrations services or other larger events ([Explosion](#) 72). Even though none of the churches reported using small groups as part of their visitor follow-up, eight of the new Christians stated that small group involvement was why they had stayed. Small groups were the primary method suggested by these churches for new believer follow-up. Three churches offered small groups that were specifically for new believers. Ten church leaders expressed that their concern was to get new believers connected into a small group or cell.

Friendships

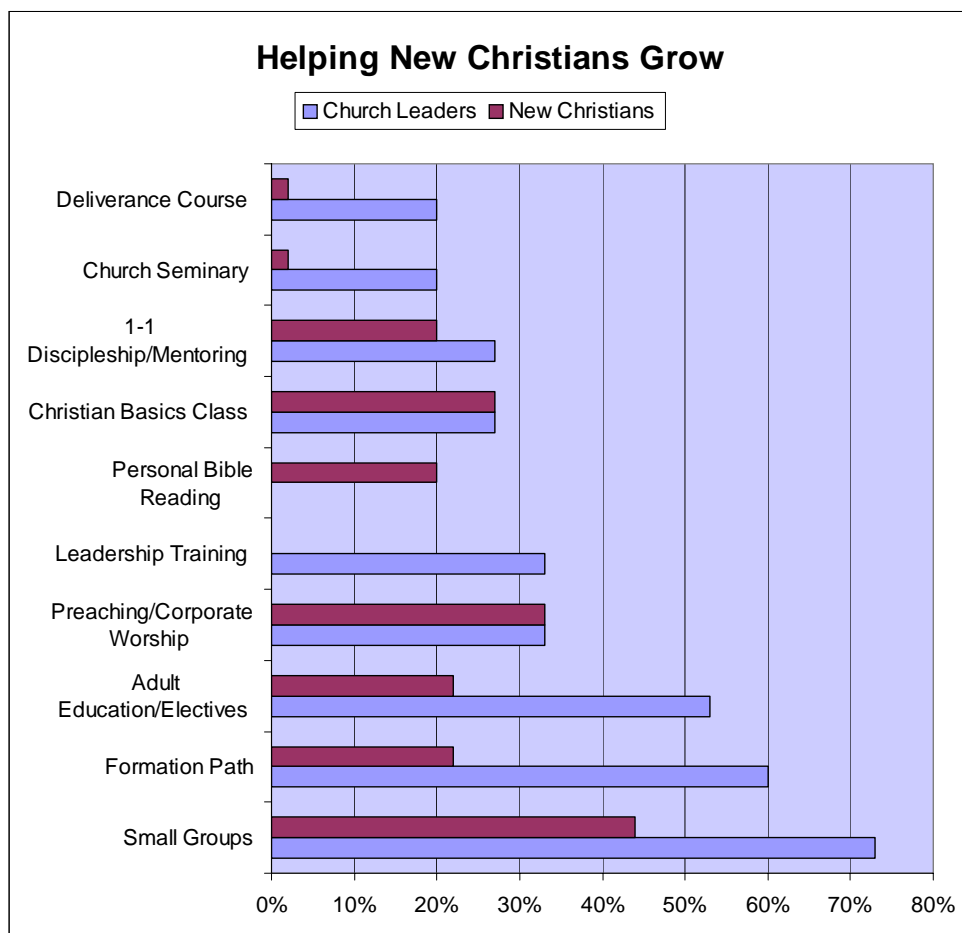
This study suggests that small groups are very effective in helping newcomers gain friendships and a sense of belonging. Many authors suggest that small group involvement should be one of the first concerns for new members (Arn and Arn 154; Schaller, “Networks”; Towns 231). Slaughter states, “We have found that people can find their way quickly out the back door of the church, if they don’t become established in a small group after the process of membership. People stay in a church because they find fulfillment through significant relationships and responsibilities. Relationships are not formed in a crowd!” (Slaughter 74). Fourteen of the churches indicated that small groups were how they sought to connect new people into vital

relationships. The new Christian interviews overwhelmingly confirmed small groups as the most effective tool for forming friendships in the church. Over 68 percent mentioned small groups, and no other response even received 30 percent (see Chart: Connecting Newcomers Into Vital Relationships). Small groups are such a high priority for nine of these churches that it is stated as an expectation of those who are members.



Spiritual growth

Small groups are one of the most effective means of helping new believers grow and mature in their faith. Howard Snyder affirms, “Small group meetings are essential to Christian experience and growth” (150). Mead suggests that one of the most successful models of small group discipleship was that of early Methodism. “Wesley’s genius invented the class meeting for adult training in discipleship. To this day, no better model of lay formation has been invented” (49). Coleman points out that Jesus also employed a small group for the formation of the twelve apostles (24-26). This study provides collaborative evidence for these statements. Eleven churches reported that small groups are their primary tool for helping disciples grow. Though eighteen different items were identified that help new believers grow, small groups were mentioned most with 44 percent of the new Christian interviews (see Chart: Helping New Christians Grow).



Entry level ministry

Small groups also provide new people with a safe, meaningful context for entry-level ministry. Those who attend a cell church begin to serve almost immediately in the context of a small group. At City Bible Church, cell leaders are encouraged to include people in service within their cells right away. Marc Estes states, “We don’t want our people to be pew warmers. We want to get them serving immediately in non-leadership roles through cells and other entry-level ministries.” At City Harvest, cell groups do ushering, greeting, and hospitality after each worship service on a rotating schedule that repeats about every six weeks. This allows the members of the cell to serve as a unit along with other cell groups. Cells also seek to find service opportunities through outreach within their neighborhood and within the community.

Implications

Portland, Oregon and the greater northwestern part of the United States have often been considered uniquely unchurched but perhaps that is not nearly so. This study would imply that Portland shares much in common with other cities and urban areas. Furthermore, these leading churches illustrate that they have been strongly influenced by the principles and practices found in the literature on church growth and church health. However, two major distinctions are identified between the practices of these churches and those discussed in church growth literature: need-meeting ministries for outreach and creating a highly define “target group.”

Need Meeting Ministries

This study does not suggest that need-meeting ministries are not effective in attracting unchurched people. In fact, East Hill Foursquare Church, one of the largest congregations in the study, has sought to touch broken and hurting people through “healing evangelism.” With the understanding that ultimately Christ is the answer, East Hill has attempted to meet the needs of people whose lives have been shattered, whether through divorce, drugs, abuse, or addictions. The church has always endeavored to be a safe and healing place for those who are hurting; however, fewer than half of the church leaders reported mobilizing members for outreach through need-meeting ministries or service evangelism, and only three churches suggested that these were primary reasons why the unchurched came. The new Christian interviews are even more revealing in that not one person mentioned need-meeting ministries as a reason that they were attracted to the church.

Target Groups

Today, many experts state that congregations that attract unchurched people often “target” the specific type of person they are trying to reach. They suggest creating a composite profile of the typical unchurched person you are trying to reach by identifying your target group geographically, culturally, and demographically by age, marital status, income, education, and occupations, then making that profile into a mythical person such as “Unchurched Harry” (Warren, Purpose 161-170; Towns 46). Warren states, “No single church can possibly reach everyone. It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people” (156). Yet, none of the churches in this study were this specific even if they claimed to have a targeted group that they were trying to reach. The common theme was simply reaching “lost people.”

Practical Applications

Throughout the research, analysis, reflection, and writing, a number of practical applications continued to surface. Two relate to attraction and outreach while the other two focus on assimilation.

Encourage Personal Invitations

Churches need to provide opportunities and encouragement for members to extend personal invitations. According to Lutheran Church historian Martin Marty, one word defines the difference between churches that grow and those that do not. When a church is not growing, its members are not “inviting.” “Invitations are the way churches open their doors” (Miller How to 31-32). Church leaders must instill this as a value in their people. Leaders cannot rely on visibility or other elements of attraction. Those who attend must be inviting those who do not. Churches need to create events, ministries, and activities about which their members feel excited and to which they want to invite their unchurched friends. Worship services also need to be high quality and seeker friendly so members know they can be enthusiastic in encouraging friends to attend.

Rolling Hills Community Church is a good example of an inviting church. They offer a lot of bridge-in events throughout the year, such as drama presentations, a mother-daughter tea, and a garden tour. Also, “every weekend service we present the gospel,” states Bill Towne. “So, we encourage people to bring their friends. We try to work primarily through networks of relationships so the people we are reaching are people like us. They know that it is a safe place to bring their unchurched friends.” George Barna suggests that in successful churches, members realize that inviting people to church is just part of their responsibility. They are also expected to accompany their guests to the church activity then provide the follow-up (100).

Equip Members for Personal Evangelism and Follow-up

Churches need to equip members to share the gospel personally rather than depending on public invitations which often lack clear explanations of the gospel and can create quick uninformed “decisions” for Christ. New Heights Church seeks to equip members and lay leaders with tools that they can use to share the gospel on a person-to-person basis. Pastor MacLurg states, “Frankly, regarding the public presentation of the gospel, I’ve found that a lot of people don’t get it until someone sits down with them personally and says, ‘here’s what the Bible says about how you can know for sure that you are going to heaven, how you can be forgiven, and how to be saved.’”

If public invitations are used, then churches must provide personal contact and counsel with relational follow-up. City Harvest Church uses an “altar call” for inviting people to make a public commitment to Jesus Christ, and they have fifty altar workers available to pray with people who respond to the invitation to accept Christ. The altar worker who prays with the new convert continues one-on-one follow-up with them for at least three weeks or until they get connected in a cell group. The goal is that within three weeks, new converts will cover three simple booklets with the discipler and begin attending a cell group. Pastor MacGregor tracks the discipleship efforts of these altar workers and serves as their coach using a seventeen point “Follow-up Questionnaire.”

Small Group Formation Path

Churches should consider combining the intentionality of a spiritual formation path with the relational support and accountability provided by small groups. Warren states that “believers grow faster when you provide a track to grow on” (Purpose 335). He also acknowledges that Christians need relationships in order to grow and that believers develop best in the context of fellowship (338-339). Many of these churches provide a track for spiritual formation, but almost all of them use a seminar or classroom format rather than small groups. Small groups are where people learn and grow the best, not classrooms. At Greater Portland Bible Church, they facilitate their process of spiritual formation through basic accountability groups and ongoing accountability groups. As a new Christian moves along and begins to demonstrate the qualities of a disciple he or she is invited to a higher commitment level, which is called the “Follow Me”, stage. They continue to work on their growth process in a small group using a different curriculum for up to a year and a half. Dennis Blevins states, “As they continue to grow, we then move them into the ‘Be with Me’ stage where they begin to take on ministry leadership responsibilities.” Even at this stage, they continue in an ongoing accountability group which helps them continue to grow.

Cell-based churches also encounter challenges in helping Christians continue to mature and grow. Cells are great for evangelism and fellowship, but the cell leader must be able to provide spiritual formation for members who are at various levels of maturity. Cell-based churches must find a way of providing for the ongoing spiritual formation of group members who do not go on to be new cell leaders.

Update Membership Class

Finally, churches should provide a membership class that will spell out the expectations of a fully-assimilated member and build new relationships. The research in this study indicated that these churches had essentially the same expectations of new members as they did for those they considered to be fully assimilated in the church. The expectations of members should be made clear during the membership class. They help newcomers evaluate if they want to continue to associate with the church, and they project what newcomers can anticipate for their

future involvement within the church. Leaders should secure commitments to those expectations up front during the membership process. The commitments obtained during this phase are primarily all that can be expected. It isn't fair to allow people to join without knowing all that will be expected of them. Two important expectations that will benefit both the new members and the church are to require small group commitment and personal ministry during the membership process.

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