ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

STIMULATING CHURCH GROWTH THROUGH SCRIPTURALLY-BASED BUSINESS STRATEGIES: TARGETING CHURCHES
PLATEAUED OR DECLINING IN ATTENDANCE

A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY COMMITTEE

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

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BY

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CONTENTS

[CONTENTS iv](#_Toc351044089)

[ABSTRACT ix](#_Toc351044090)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xi](#_Toc351044091)

[LIST OF FIGURES xiii](#_Toc351044092)

[Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION 1](#_Toc351044093)

[Context of the Project 1](#_Toc351044094)

[The Problem 1](#_Toc351044095)

[The Purpose 4](#_Toc351044096)

[Definition of Key Terms 4](#_Toc351044097)

[Description of the Proposed Project 5](#_Toc351044098)

[Scope of the Project 5](#_Toc351044099)

[Phases of the Project 6](#_Toc351044100)

[Phase 1—Research 7](#_Toc351044101)

[Phase 2—Planning 8](#_Toc351044102)

[Phase 3—Implementation 10](#_Toc351044103)

[Phase 4—Evaluation 11](#_Toc351044104)

[Phase 5—Writing 12](#_Toc351044105)

[Chapter 2: BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE REVIEW 13](#_Toc351044106)

[Introduction 13](#_Toc351044107)

[*Imago Dei*: Humanity’s Reflection of God 14](#_Toc351044108)

[Understanding the Biblical Concept of the Image of God 14](#_Toc351044109)

[Imago Dei as it Relates to Free Will 16](#_Toc351044110)

[Imago Dei as it Relates to Work 18](#_Toc351044111)

[Imago Dei as it Relates to Kingship 19](#_Toc351044112)

[Imago Dei as it Relates to Reproduction 21](#_Toc351044113)

[Imago Dei as Reflection through People of the Bible 22](#_Toc351044114)

[Historical Understandings of the Meaning of the Image of God 23](#_Toc351044115)

[Community: A Reflection of God’s Triune Nature 25](#_Toc351044116)

[Empowerment through Community 27](#_Toc351044117)

[Community in the Life of Christ 28](#_Toc351044118)

[Growth—God’s Plan 44](#_Toc351044119)

[Biblical Emphasis on the Importance of Financial Health in the Church 49](#_Toc351044120)

[What the Bible Says About Money and Possessions 49](#_Toc351044121)

[How Christians Should Use Their Money 52](#_Toc351044122)

[How Christians Should Invest Their Money 54](#_Toc351044123)

[Stewardship through the Creation of a Will 56](#_Toc351044124)

[Conclusion 57](#_Toc351044125)

[Chapter 3: GENERAL LITERATURE REVIEW 58](#_Toc351044126)

[Introduction 58](#_Toc351044127)

[Closing the Back Door 59](#_Toc351044128)

[Identify Barriers to Church Growth 59](#_Toc351044129)

[Physical Facility 59](#_Toc351044130)

[Church Leaders 61](#_Toc351044131)

[False Assumptions 63](#_Toc351044132)

[Expecting Too Much Too Soon 63](#_Toc351044133)

[Address Vision Limiters 64](#_Toc351044134)

[Problem Solving Emphasis 65](#_Toc351044135)

[I’m Busy Enough Now 65](#_Toc351044136)

[Lockstep Vision 65](#_Toc351044137)

[Grow Until You Can Survive 66](#_Toc351044138)

[Generic Stand-Alone Church 67](#_Toc351044139)

[“No Vacancy” Sign 68](#_Toc351044140)

[Fortress Mentality 68](#_Toc351044141)

[The Restoration of Our Golden Era 68](#_Toc351044142)

[Closing the Back Door 69](#_Toc351044143)

[High-Visibility Event 70](#_Toc351044144)

[Win the War against Reversion 71](#_Toc351044145)

[Facilitating the Retention of First-Time Guests 73](#_Toc351044146)

[Intentionality in Plan 74](#_Toc351044147)

[Identify First-Time Guests 75](#_Toc351044148)

[The Communication Card 75](#_Toc351044149)

[Who are the First-time Guests, and What are They Thinking? 77](#_Toc351044150)

[Develop a Plan for Ministering to First-Time Guests 80](#_Toc351044151)

[The Role of First Impressions 82](#_Toc351044152)

[Planning for the Return of First-Time Guests 87](#_Toc351044153)

[Effective Assimilation of New Attendees into the Local Church 92](#_Toc351044154)

[Assimilation through Friendship 93](#_Toc351044155)

[Assimilation through Tasks/Roles 94](#_Toc351044156)

[Assimilation through Small Groups 96](#_Toc351044157)

[Sharing 96](#_Toc351044158)

[Study 97](#_Toc351044159)

[Support 98](#_Toc351044160)

[Service 98](#_Toc351044161)

[Assimilation through Spiritual Growth 98](#_Toc351044162)

[Conclusion 99](#_Toc351044163)

[Chapter 4: DESCRIPTION OF FIELD PROJECT 101](#_Toc351044164)

[Preparation of the Project 101](#_Toc351044165)

[Personal Experiences 101](#_Toc351044166)

[Finding Churches to Participate in the Project 103](#_Toc351044167)

[Execution of the Project 104](#_Toc351044168)

[The Basics of the Project 105](#_Toc351044169)

[Tracking Visitors and Regular Attendees 105](#_Toc351044170)

[Establishing a Follow-Up Plan 106](#_Toc351044171)

[Implementing an Answering Service 107](#_Toc351044172)

[Implementing the Project at Church A 108](#_Toc351044173)

[Implementing the Project at Church B 111](#_Toc351044174)

[Implementing Project at Church C 112](#_Toc351044175)

[Implementing Project at Church D 114](#_Toc351044176)

[Results of the Project 115](#_Toc351044177)

[General Observations 115](#_Toc351044178)

[Results at Church A 117](#_Toc351044179)

[Results at Church B 119](#_Toc351044180)

[Results at Church C 122](#_Toc351044181)

[Results at Church D 124](#_Toc351044182)

[Summary of Results 125](#_Toc351044183)

[The Project’s Contribution to Ministry 128](#_Toc351044184)

[Chapter 5: PROJECT SUMMARY 130](#_Toc351044185)

[Evaluation of the Project 130](#_Toc351044186)

[Keys to Project Effectiveness 130](#_Toc351044187)

[Keys to Project Improvement 134](#_Toc351044188)

[Implications of the Project 136](#_Toc351044189)

[Recommendations for the Southern California District Council of the Assemblies of God 137](#_Toc351044190)

[Recommendations for Future Study 139](#_Toc351044191)

[Conclusion 140](#_Toc351044192)

[APPENDIX A: INVITATION LETTER TO PASTORS 142](#_Toc351044193)

[APPENDIX B: PASTOR AND CHURCH PROFILE 143](#_Toc351044194)

[APPENDIX C: CHURCH GROWTH BUSINESS CONCEPTS CHURCH GROWTH PROPOSAL FOR CHURCHES UNDER 200 144](#_Toc351044195)

[APPENDIX D: GETTING TO KNOW YOU ... (A LITTLE BETTER) CARD 148](#_Toc351044196)

[APPENDIX E: WELCOME CARD—FRONT AND BACK 149](#_Toc351044197)

[APPENDIX F: SAMPLE “MISSING IN ACTION” (MIA) LETTER 150](#_Toc351044198)

[APPENDIX G: SAMPLE FIRST-TIME GUEST LETTER (WITH CONTRIBUTION) 151](#_Toc351044199)

[APPENDIX H: SAMPLE FIRST-TIME GUEST LETTER 152](#_Toc351044200)

[APPENDIX I: SAMPLE SECOND-TIME GUEST LETTER 153](#_Toc351044201)

[APPENDIX J: SAMPLE THIRD-TIME GUEST LETTER 154](#_Toc351044202)

[APPENDIX K: SAMPLE SECOND-TIME GUEST LETTER (WITH CONTRIBUTION) 155](#_Toc351044203)

[APPENDIX L: SAMPLE THIRD-TIME GUEST LETTER (WITH CONTRIBUTION) 156](#_Toc351044204)

[APPENDIX M: SAMPLE THIRTY-DAY FOLLOW-UP LETTER 157](#_Toc351044205)

[SOURCES CONSULTED 158](#_Toc351044206)

ABSTRACT

Most Assemblies of God (AG) churches in the United States experienced either a plateau or a decline in attendance during 2011. This statistic has caused concern at the local, district, and national levels of the Fellowship. One of the largest denominations in the world, with significant growth overseas, the AG now realizes that the home base needs attention regarding church growth. This project provides hope that the 6,000 AG stagnated churches can grow.

The purpose of this project is to help pastors of plateaued or declining churches experience measureable growth in attendance through the implementation of proper business strategies for accounting and visitor retention. The biblical-theological literature focuses on how the image of God, community, and financial health in the local church can help a church grow. Review of the contemporary literature provides research regarding “closing the back door” ((facilitating the retention of first-time guests and assimilating new attendees into the local church). The project thoroughly tested these concepts in four churches of varying sizes, backgrounds, ethnicity, and settings.

All four participating churches experienced growth ranging from 6 to 86 percent. Evaluation of the project reveals that growth cannot take place without a cultural change in the church that focuses primarily on the church’s attitude toward and treatment of first-time guests. The church must identify first-time guests and express genuine courtesy and hospitality to these people. The churches utilized an intentional and detailed plan for following-up on visitors; growth ensued with the implementation of the project plan.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The opportunity to study at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary ( AGTS) has been a highlight in my ministerial career. In the early 1970s, I had been waiting for the Seminary to open, and I attended my first class in January 1974. Dr. Melvin Hodges, Dr. Stanley Horton, and Dr. Anthony Palma were some of my first instructors. Their input into my life has been invaluable to me all of these years.

After more than thirty years, I returned to AGTS to work on my doctoral studies. The Seminary has a pattern of choosing great leaders such as Dr. Byron Klaus, President; Dr. Stephen Lim, Academic Dean; and Dr. Cheryl Taylor, Director of the Doctor of Ministry program. As Project Coordinator, Dr. Lois Olena served well beyond the call to duty. In the times that I wondered about continuing in the program, she spoke an encouraging word. I reaped countless benefits from her persistence.

The library and technical staff provided an immense amount of help in the research process. Their patience with me and their instructions on how to use the library resources were invaluable. Keith Jones assisted me many times with technical issues, and his willingness to help was repeatedly evident.

Dr. Deborah Gill encouraged me to take the course, “Following the Footsteps of the Apostle Paul.” The time my wife and I spent in Turkey was a treasured experience. We were privileged to travel to a part of the world we had never visited. The fellowship that Dr. Gill and her husband, Jan, lent to the trip made the experience even more enjoyable.

Dr. David Clark, my biblical adviser, provided insights that assisted me in thinking through important issues. The personal experiences of my project adviser, Dr. Michael Clarensau, brought insight and depth to this paper.

Susan Meamber served as my editor throughout the entire project. She not only provided professional expertise, but inspired me with hope in the midst of the journey.

My wife, Joy, finished her doctorate in education in 2006; therefore, she was very sympathetic to the challenge of writing a project of this magnitude. She lent a helping hand along the way and never complained about the time I spent on the project. She also spent nine months in Springfield, away from our children and grandchildren, so I could work on this degree. In addition, she traveled with me to visit the churches in the project. She provided me with continual support and encouragement. I could never ask for a more supportive wife.

LIST OF fIGURES

[Figure 4.1. Church A: Attendance 2009. 117](#_Toc344422090)

[Figure 4.2. Church A: Attendance 2010. 118](#_Toc344422091)

[Figure 4.3. Church A: Attendance 2011. 118](#_Toc344422092)

[Figure 4.4. Church A: Attendance 2012 119](#_Toc344422094)

[Figure 4.5. Church B: Attendance 2009. 120](#_Toc344422095)

[Figure 4.6. Church B: Attendance 2010. 121](#_Toc344422096)

[Figure 4.7. Church B: Attendance 2011. 121](#_Toc344422098)

[Figure 4.8. Church B: Attendance 2012. 122](#_Toc344422099)

[Figure 4.9. Church C: Attendance 2009. 123](#_Toc344422100)

[Figure 4.10. Church C: Attendance 2010. 123](#_Toc344422101)

[Figure 4.11. Church C: Attendance 2011. 124](#_Toc344422102)

[Figure 4.12. Church C: Attendance 2012. 124](#_Toc344422103)

[Figure 4.13. Church D: Attendance July-October 2012. 125](#_Toc344422104)

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

# Context of the Project

Currently, I serve as a consultant to pastors and churches mainly in the Assemblies of God (AG) in Southern California. I assist pastors in the preparation of their individual tax returns by applying current Internal Revenue Service (IRS) laws to the tax return submitted by clergy members. Due to my professional designation as an Enrolled Agent, when pastors and churches are audited, I represent them before the IRS or provide assistance with various accounting needs. This consists of helping pastors and churches design the best accounting methodology for their ministries. Furthermore, I present lectures for people seeking ministerial credentials at the School of Ministries for the Southern California District Council of the Assemblies of God. During these seminars, I teach the use of proper business strategies for both personal and church applications. Currently, I also serve as the Presbyter for the Desert Section of the AG. As presbyter I supervise the pastors of the District Affiliated churches in the section and give oversight and representation to the General Council churches in the section. At all levels, I help individuals learn and implement suitable business strategies for their specific ministry context.

# The Problem

Most AG churches in the United States have an average attendance of less than 200. The Assemblies of God U.S. Vital Statistics for 2010 show the following figures: 84 percent of churches average less than 200 people, 64 percent less than 100 attendees, and 35 percent fewer than fifty people.[[1]](#footnote-1) Of that number, 17 percent of the churches have plateaued, and 41 percent have declined in attendance.[[2]](#footnote-2) Based on these percentages, it is likely that more than 6,000 Assemblies of God churches under 200 people in attendance are not growing. This is unacceptable for one of the largest denominations in the world. Pastors, districts, and General Council leaders within the AG must address this lack of growth.

Statistics indicate that churches that implement basic business procedures experience greater growth than churches that ignore these principles. In fact, the magnitude of careless business procedures among Assemblies of God churches with attendance under 200 is astounding. For instance, about 42 percent of all churches do not answer their telephones during normal business hours.[[3]](#footnote-3) Most churches do not cover their telephones during the time most potential visitor’s call, which is Saturday afternoon and early Sunday morning.[[4]](#footnote-4) Almost 50 percent of churches do not have a Web site and, of those that do, only about 15 percent provide people an opportunity to donate money or pay tithes online.[[5]](#footnote-5) Many churches fail to keep their Web site current. Almost no Assemblies of God church recognizes current giving when visitors make contributions to their churches on any given Sunday.[[6]](#footnote-6) Few churches have systematic plans for tracking and following up on first, second, and third-time guests.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Many churches under 200 have weak accounting practices, which negatively impacts giving within their churches. Most churches have not implemented written plans regarding appropriate segregation of duties for accounting cycles nor do they issue quarterly financial statements (which can increase giving by 6 percent).[[8]](#footnote-8) Churches under 200 often fail to use good strategies to stimulate church attendees to be good stewards. They neither provide instruction on stewardship before offerings nor use current attendees’ testimonies about the miracles that God has done in their lives through tithing and giving to missions.

Rarely do churches under 200 take attendance each Sunday. Therefore, they cannot follow up on regular attendees who are absent. They fail to use nametags so everyone who attends can become better acquainted with each other, which is key to assimilating people into the local fellowship. Many small churches fail to use “email blasts” to regularly communicate with those who attend their services. Often, pastors do not have formalized methods of personally speaking with families in the church at least every three months to assess their spiritual needs and to maintain connection.

 As pastors proactively take steps to assimilate people into churches, the congregations will experience growth, as well as retain people who would otherwise leave unnoticed. Therefore, investment in the acquisition of basic principles of business can positively impact churches numerically. Such efforts could also create a greater sense of belonging, which, in turn, translates into people staying in churches for long periods of time.

# The Purpose

The purpose of this project is to help pastors of plateaued or declining churches experience measureable growth in attendance through the implementation of proper business strategies for accounting and visitor retention. This study should prove that by implementing appropriate business strategies in a local church, the congregation will increase in attendance. While this project will only measure Sunday morning attendance, it is expected that the income of the church will increase as the attendance increases. Pastors will be given information on how to increase church finances by providing biblical teaching on financial health.

# Definition of Key Terms

*Segregation of duties in the accounting cycle*: a means of managing church funds that provides accountability by having different people, unrelated to each other, conduct each stage of the accounting process.

*Email blasts*: simultaneously sending email announcements to everyone on the church’s email lists.

*Financial Statements*: reports that show (1) the income and expenses of the church during a specified period of time, and (2) the assets and debts of the church, along with the amount of money in each fund as of a given date.

*Systems thinking:* a holistic approach to analysis that focuses on the way a system’s constituent parts interrelate and how systems work over time and within the context of larger systems. The systems thinking approach contrasts with traditional analysis, which studies systems by breaking them down into their separate elements.

*Best practice:* a method or technique that has consistently shown results superior to those achieved with other means and is used as a benchmark.

# Description of the Proposed Project

## Scope of the Project

I will send a survey to eighty Assemblies of God churches in Southern California to determine which churches have less than 200 in attendance, and to discover whether their attendance had either plateaued or declined for the past three years. The survey will also determine pastors who wish to participate in the project. Out of the responses, I will select four churches in the Southern California District of the AG to participate in the project. I will complete the selection process by January 2012.

An electronic spreadsheet will be available by December 2011, which will permit the local churches to input data on each attendee, including names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, gender, birthdates, and areas of ministry interest. Pastors and other church officials will be educated on how to operate the church’s electronic spreadsheet and how to do the weekly input. They will also learn how to take attendance, produce weekly reports and name badges, and send out first, second, and third-time guest letters.

As project director, I will visit each church one Sunday per month to ensure that each person fully understands the project and properly implements its guidelines. The project will run for a year, although I will gather meaningful data after three months for project reporting. Each project will be evaluated by entering the church’s historic data of attendance and income for the past three years into an electronic spreadsheet. The historic data will be entered on a month-by-month basis. Based on the information entered, I will make projections as to the levels of attendance for the next twelve months. For instance, if the attendance declines at the rate of 0.5 percent for three years, the project would indicate the expected attendance for the next year. As I place the actual attendance into a comparison chart, I will record and report the differences for the project.

Once I determine the differences between expected attendance and actual attendance, I will assess if the differences are statistically sustainable. If a church experienced statistically sustainable growth, it will indicate a successful project. If a church does not grow or indicates a decline, I will also report those results.

The project will focus on churches with an attendance of 200 people or less. It will primarily examine how business strategies in retention can help a church grow. It will not address other factors that could result in growth, such as evangelistic efforts, special speakers, use of specific preaching techniques, community outreaches, and so forth. The expected rate of annualized growth should range between 3 to 5 percent.

## Phases of the Project

The project will include five phases: research, planning, implementation, evaluation, and writing. A timeline has been developed for each phase to help assure that the appropriate amount of time will be available for each phase as the project proceeds.

### Phase 1—Research

The research phase will be divided into two major categories. The first section will provide a biblical-theological review regarding God’s plan for growth in each church. The second section will provide a general literature review regarding how the implementation of church growth strategies, coupled with business strategies, can help a church grow.

#### Biblical-Theological Literature Review

The Biblical-theological Literature Review will focus on three main themes: (1) *imago Dei*—humankind’s reflection of God; (2) community—a reflection of God’s triune nature; and (3) a biblical emphasis on the importance of financial health in the church.

As one understands the fact that God created humanity in His own image, one can truly comprehend the great doctrines of the Bible. This chapter will focus on how free will relates to a person’s ability to follow God in every area of life, including church growth. Furthermore, the chapter will address the issue of work, an aspect of the *imago Dei*, and how it impacts the growth of the church. The communal aspect of being made in God’s image provides an understanding of how God wishes for His people to communicate with Him and fellowship with one another. Chapter 2 will examine the value and empowerment of community and how it relates to God’s plan for growth.

The second chapter will also emphasize the importance of financial health in the church by studying what the Bible says about money and possessions. The research will address the proper use of money, wise investment strategies, and stewardship through the preparation of a will. Believers must see the relationship between stewardship and church growth.

#### General Literature Review

The General Literature Review will focus on three key issues: (1) the importance of closing the back door, (2) converting first-time guests into second-time attendees, and (3) helping new attendees come into a personal relationship with Christ and become assimilated into the local church.

Closing the back door is integral to church growth. Research will focus on identifying the physical barriers to church growth as well as unveiling the attitudes necessary for church leaders to develop in their quest for church growth. Turning first-time guests into second-time attendees is one of the important aspects in any church growth program. Chapter 3 will discuss practical ways to welcome first-time guests as well as illustrate the importance of contacting first-time guests subsequent to their visit. As church leaders understand the thought processes and responses of first-time guests, they can increase the likelihood of the first-time guest returning for a second visit.

All church growth programs require an intentional plan for assimilating new attendees into the church community through the development of friendships and coming to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Chapter 3 will address ways the church can increase assimilation through friendship, tasks, small groups, and spiritual growth.

### Phase 2—Planning

The planning phase of the project will include preparing an outline of the operation of the program, developing parameters for program participants, contacting potential participant pastors to determine their interest in the project, and interviewing those pastors to explain the program. I will also develop all the material that will be needed in order for each church to execute the program each week.

Parts of the program have been developed over a period of time, often times through trial and error. This project helped me focus on putting the program into written form. The concept of using the various forms contributes to the success of the program. Once all the concepts are formalized, I will write an easy-to-follow outline for pastors and church leaders.

The project will determine which churches need help. To acquire this information, I will survey the General Council church’s vital statistics to discover which churches could benefit most from a biblically-based business strategy to stimulate church growth. Based on the results of the survey, I will target the neediest churches because my goal is to help churches that do not have resources to help themselves.

Initially, I will send out a survey letter to approximately eighty pastors in an effort to locate churches that need assistance and are located within a couple hours from my home. The goal is to generate at least four potential churches to participate in the project. When a pastor indicates interest, he or she will receive an interview form as a means of providing necessary information for determining eligibility to participate in the project.

Once four churches have committed to participating in the project, I will conduct an interview with the pastor and provide a practical explanation regarding the program. During this initial meeting, we will set a date to launch the project and provide training.

In preparation for the project, I will design various forms and letters for the church to use as they implement the project:

* Registration Card
* Welcome Card.
* Missing in Action (MIA) Letter
* First-Time Guest Letter
* First-Time Guest Letter (with Contribution)
* Second-Time Guest Letter
* Second-Time Guest Letter (with Contribution)
* Third-Time Guest Letter
* Third-Time Guest Letter (with Contribution)
* 30-Day Follow-Up Letter
* Excel Database Spreadsheet for recording attendance and other information

### Phase 3—Implementation

The implementation phase will consist of training, launching the program at a Sunday morning service, and following up after the Launch Sunday with more training and feedback. Furthermore, I will attend each church one Sunday morning per month in order to monitor the program and provide additional training. Each week’s current attendance, along with historic attendance information, will be entered into an electronic spreadsheet.

The training will involve meeting with the pastor and his or her staff to teach them how to use the Registration Card on Launch Sunday and the Welcome Card once the system is in operation. Other training will focus on how to use the Welcome Card, how to follow-up with visitors, how to use the nametag system, and how to input the data collected from the Registration Card or Welcome Card into an electronic database. By recording Sunday morning attendance, the church can easily acknowledge visitors and contact regular attendees who have missed service.

Each church will need specific training regarding the implementation process for Nametag Sunday. On this day, the church must provide additional volunteers to help attendees acquire their nametags. Volunteers will assist visitors at a separate table. Volunteers and staff need particular training to assist in this process. I will attend the church on the Sunday they designate as Nametag Sunday so as to provide assistance in the process. On the Monday following Nametag Sunday, I will instruct staff members on how to enter the Sunday attendance into an electronic database. Once the information is placed into the electronic spreadsheet, I will train the staff about how to process the information. This will include using the data to create follow-up letters to guests as well as contacting regular attendees who were absent.

Furthermore, the church leaders will receive training regarding other personal touches that can help create community within the church. These practical tips not only improve existing relationships within the church, but also provide opportunities to assimilate new people into the life of the church. Although some of these techniques are simple, they can have a profound impact on people. Chapter 4 will provide details regarding assimilation tips.

### Phase 4—Evaluation

The evaluation process will take place in two phases. First, the weekly attendance of each church will provide a means to monitor the project’s impact on a weekly basis as well as an overall perspective of the entire project. After the completion of the project, the attendance records will provide a means by which to measure the church’s growth over the duration of the entire project. The evaluation will compare the attendance of the church at the beginning of the project to its attendance at the end of the project. The churches will participate in the project for three months to one year. The final evaluation will indicate whether or not the project created an increase in the weekly attendance.

Second, I will compare the weekly attendance with the attendance from the previous years as a means of identifying attendance trends. Since the project is targeting churches that have plateaued or declined in recent years, it will be quite important to consider the trends in attendance. The trends will predict what the current attendance should be based on previous attendance records. For example, if morning worship attendance for the past three years was 100, ninety-five, ninety, respectively, for the same Sunday on the calendar (for instance, the first Sunday in February), attendance would be expected to be eighty-five for the first Sunday in February for the current year. If the attendance is ninety-two for the current year, this indicates a 2 percent increase over the past year and an 8 percent increase over the expected attendance based on the trend. Statistical charts will illustrate the attendance for the previous three years and the current year. I will use the trend measurements whenever possible.

### Phase 5—Writing

The writing phase of this project will begin with chapter 2, the Biblical-theological Literature Review, which I will write in July and August of 2012. Chapter 3, the General Literature Review, will be written in September of 2012. I will write chapter 4, Description of the Field Project, in October of 2012. Chapter 5 will be written by the end of October 2012. I will develop the project prospectus, which provided clarity to the project initially, into chapter 1, which I will write last.

Chapter 2: BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

# Introduction

In order to create and implement scripturally based business strategies for churches that wish to grow numerically and financially, one must understand what the Bible teaches on these subjects. God is not silent about growth. The DNA found in every aspect of the physical world helps leaders understand that God has revealed the DNA for church growth throughout Scripture. God helps church leaders learn from His Word and directs them through His Spirit to achieve the optimal growth for each church.

This biblical-theological literature review will demonstrate how important church growth is to the Triune God by addressing three main issues. The first section will discuss how growth, an intrinsic aspect of the *imago Dei*, the image of God, is seen in church growth. The second section will address the importance of community in the process of church growth. Section three will focus on the importance of financial health in the church, which serves as one of the most important gauges for church health.

Jesus said, “I will build my Church” (Matt 16:18) and made provisions for believers to participate with His plan by giving wisdom, power, and the Holy Spirit to accomplish the task of building His Church.[[9]](#footnote-9) Jesus taught His followers to pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (v. 10). As church leaders and believers follow Him, God will answer that prayer and individual churches will reach their maximum potential.

## *Imago Dei*: Humanity’s Reflection of God

Scholars discuss the three verses of Genesis 1:26-28 more than almost any other verses in Scripture.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’

The Word of God seems to assume that the reader would readily know and understand the meaning of the phrase “image of God.” James McKeown, in his study of this phrase, assumes that “discussions on the image of God have become quite complicated, but presumably the concept was clear to the writer and to the first readers. We may assume that the writer expected the readers to know what the image of God meant or to understand its meaning by reading the book.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Nevertheless, the verses themselves give little definition as to what it means to be made in the image of God. A study of the biblical concept of the image of God, therefore, seems necessary.

## Understanding the Biblical Concept of the Image of God

Study of the Hebrew term for “image” (*selem*) yields little insight. The Old Testament uses this Hebrew word seventeen times and four times in reference to being the “image of God.” The other thirteen usages refer to things other than God. Genesis 9:6, declares, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed for in the image of God has God made man.” While this verse helps clarify that the image of God was not completely broken after the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, it sheds no further light on what it means to be made in the image of God.

The Old Testament also uses the Hebrew word *demut*, translated likeness, twenty-five times, but only twice does it refer to God (Gen. 1:26; 5:1). The other uses of the term carry a variety of applications and meanings. Genesis 5:1 refers to God’s likeness: “This is the written account of Adam’s line. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God.” One can further note that Scripture uses both *selem* and *demut* together when speaking about Adam and Seth. “When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth” (v. 3). When compared to Genesis 1:26, this verse reverses the order of “likeness” and “image,” which clarifies the insignificance of the word order.

Understanding the meaning of the “image of God” seems elusive and indescribable. Jacques B. Doukhan states:

to seize the exact meaning which lies in each word of the text is hardly possible. The author is free and therefore he may use his words with connotations of his own, and even use the same word with various shades of meaning with the text. Recent works in linguistics have brought out this living character of the *parole*,[[12]](#footnote-12) making the lexicon no more the primary reference tool but reducing it to a secondary supporting tool.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Karl Barth expressed a similar frustration over the interpretations of many scholars concerning Genesis 1:26 when he said,

We might easily discuss which of these and the many other similar explanations is the finest and deepest and most serious. What we cannot discuss is which of them is the true explanation of Genesis 1:26. For it is obvious that their authors merely found the concept [of image] in the text and then proceeded to pure invention in accordance with the requirements of contemporary anthropology.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The image of God, although a very difficult concept to verbalize, relates to various aspects and qualities of human life. Based on the biblical understanding, the *imago Dei* becomes evident in humankind through their work, kingship, free will, and reproduction. The following section will address each of these concepts.

### Imago Dei as it Relates to Free Will

Between the Fall of Adam and Eve and the second coming of Christ to restore order and usher in God’s glorious reign on earth for a thousand years, Scripture indicates that *imago Dei* in its fullness has always been possible. Paul explained: “This Good News tells us how God makes us right in His sight. This was accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, “It is through faith that a righteous person has life” (Rom. 1:17, NLT). Paul explains that humanity’s sinful activities place people in an unacceptable position before God.

But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who push the truth away from themselves. For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put this knowledge in their hearts. From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God. Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. The result was that their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead. Instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people, or birds and animals and snakes. (Rom 1:18-23, NLT)

Paul, in essence, explains the image of God by declaring that since God created the world, God placed knowledge of himself in each person’s heart. Harry R. Boer sheds light on this concept: “It would then seem to follow that the point of describing some entity as the image of God would be to convey knowledge of God.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Furthermore, Paul explains how one can be made in the image of God and then choose not to follow God’s commands. When people choose not to worship God or give Him thanks for everything He has given them, their minds become confused and dark.

When God gave humanity the ability to make choices, that free-will was absolute. God never rescinds a person’s ability to accept or reject God’s plan. After studying the subject of *imago Dei*, Boer, a Reformed Theologian, changed his Reformed position. He identifies the problem of rejecting free-will: “The Reformed doctrine of predestination did not merely split the numerical mass of individual human beings into two absolutely disparate parts. It bifurcated the human *race,* dividing the *imago Dei* into two eternally irreconcilable segments: the elect and the reprobate.”[[16]](#footnote-16) He also states that, as people in the Reformed churches persist in their study of *imago Dei*, their theological positions about free-will has changed:

It is encouraging to note how at the beginning of this century so unsurpassed a Reformed theologian as Herman Bavinck distanced himself from the election-mercy/reprobation-justice motif of these post-Reformation creeds. His disapproval of it bordered on censure. It is ‘all too simplistic and meager,’ he writes, to say that in the eternal state God reveals his righteousness exclusively in those who are lost and his mercy exclusively in the elect.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

A person, made in the image of God, can do things that do not please God because He gave humankind the ability to choose to do wrong. Ronnie Rogers, asserting the free will of man, believes that “an essential component of the *imago Dei* is libertarian free will with contrary choice. As far as the fall of man, this means that whatever choice Adam did in fact make, he could have chosen otherwise.”[[18]](#footnote-18) God longs for people to love Him of their own free-will. As a person studies Scripture with the thought of harmonizing the different areas of theology, the more one realizes that Scripture becomes its own best interpreter.

God portrays himself through the uniqueness of each individual. Genesis 1:27 clearly declares that God created humankind in His own image. From theologians to artists, God desires to show His image through people dedicated to God and His purposes. God delights in letting His image shine brightly in His people so that the whole world can see His image. For instance, Job, a righteous man, faces extremely trying circumstances, which ultimately provides a means for other people to witness the image of God (Job 1:6-8). Hebrews 11 also enumerates many heroes of the faith who, through difficult circumstances, allow the light of God’s image to shine brightly to the world around them.

### Imago Dei as it Relates to Work

The *imago Dei* can also be connected to the work God asked humankind to do. In Genesis 1:26, God, either speaking inside the Godhead or to the heavenly host, says: “‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”’ Shortly after God creates man, He tells Adam: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:28). Boer insightfully states: “There appears to be an intimate relation between the image in which Man was created and the work he was given to do. Just as ‘image’ relates mankind to God as a personal being, so the commands to exercise dominion and to subdue the earth relate Man directly to God’s creational work.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

God leaves man in charge of His creation. Every invention of humankind since God created humanity in His image is made possible by God, who created the world. God left humanity with both the challenge and opportunity of discovering all He had placed in His creation. God delights in watching humankind as they discover various facets of created order; He endows people with the ability, through research and study, to uncover the mysteries of creation. In this process, people have the God-ordained opportunity to give Him thanks and praise. All truth and knowledge come from God. The hidden treasures of the Universe come to light as people closely align themselves to the image God has placed inside their soul.

### Imago Dei as it Relates to Kingship

In relationship to work, God commanded humankind to rule. Scholars link the Hebrew word for “rule” (*rada*)with kingship. According to Robert Davison, “Context is the safest guide to meaning and image and likeness are defined by what follows, to rule.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Strong linguistic evidence exists to indicate that being made in the image of God infers ruling over the dominion that God placed under man’s care. H. D. Preuss concludes that the meaning of the likeness to God in Genesis 1:26 “emerges only from the broader context (v. 28) and is explained as a cooperative sharing in dominion.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

The New Testament broadens the understanding of ruling with God. Revelation 20:6 declares: “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.” Before the Fall of Adam and Eve, God instructed them to rule over His earthly creation. After the second coming of Christ to this earth, during the millennium, people who participated in the first resurrection will reign with God as priests. Humankind can only reign in the Millennium because God created people in His own image. In whatever ways the image of God was damaged through the Fall, God will restore at His Second Coming.

This concept of rule is further seen in 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” The Greek word for “royal” (*basileion*) means king.[[22]](#footnote-22) As people created in the image of God, the New Testament illustrates that believers receive empowerment to accomplish His will in His name. K. S. Wuest states, “The Levitical priesthood were only priests. Believers in this dispensation are king-priests, associated with the Lord Jesus who is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, a king-priest.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Exodus 19:6 also describes the people of Israel with the phrase “kingdom of priests.”

### Imago Dei as it Relates to Reproduction

As part of the *imago Dei*, God not only gave humankind the ability to rule, He also gave humanity the ability to create through reproduction. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’” (Gen. 1:27). Just as God created through speaking His word, He enabled people to create through reproduction. Nico Vorster indicates that “humankind’s creation as male and female on the one hand indicates a biological potential to multiply and rule, and on the other hand the social capacity to communicate and cultivate.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Thus, humankind becomes a creating agent.

Currently, the world population stands at over seven billion. If one considers the number of people who have already died, the number of humans who have lived on earth since the Garden of Eden would be approximately 108 billion.[[25]](#footnote-25) Tom Smail indicates that humankind is to “become many, in order that they may express their likeness to God in the different ways in which they exercise the authority over his creation.”[[26]](#footnote-26) In essence, God created the world; then, He created people in His own image and instructed them to fill the earth and take care of what He had created.

### Imago Dei as Reflection through People of the Bible

All of the major events and people in Scripture are tied to the understanding of the *imago Dei*. Abel understood that he was made in God’s image when he offered an acceptable sacrifice to God. Luke 11:50-51 lists Abel as the first prophet; Hebrews 11 identifies Abel as the first notable hero of the faith. As a man created in the *imago Dei*, Abel’s life still instructs people in how to live by faith in God’s image (Heb. 11:4). Enoch, the seventh from Adam, had so much of the *imago Dei* flowing through his life that the author of Hebrews declares that Enoch pleased God (Heb. 11:5) to the extent that God translated him to Heaven without experiencing death (Gen. 5:24). Hebrews 11 lists Enoch as the second hero of faith; as a prophet, he prophesied about the Second Coming of Christ (Jude 14). Noah’s life reflected so much of God’s image that God selected him to survive the flood and become the father of all humankind. “Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God” (Gen. 6:9). Ezekiel listed Noah as one of the three most righteous people of all time (Ezek. 14:14).

Abraham’s life exemplified so much of the *imago Dei* that his name is mentioned seventy-two times in the New Testament. He followed God not knowing his final destination and believed God concerning the birth of Isaac even though his wife was barren. God credited righteousness to Abraham when he willingly chose to offer Isaac on the altar. Abraham was known as a friend of God (James 2:21-23). The *imago Dei* was so evident in the life of Moses that Moses spoke to God as a friend speaks to a friend (Exod. 33:11). God called David a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). God promised King David that his throne would endure forever and, Jesus, often called the son of David, fulfilled this promise (2 Sam. 7:13).

## Historical Understandings of the Meaning of the Image of God

For the past 2,000 years, theologians have tried to figure out the difference between “image of God” and the “likeness of God” in human nature. Origen viewed the image of God as something given to humankind at Creation; at a later time, humanity received the likeness of God.[[27]](#footnote-27) Irenaeus later developed his own theological understanding:

The image was the human’s natural resemblance to God, the power of reason and will. The likeness was a *donum superadditum*—a divine gift added to basic human nature. This likeness consisted of the moral qualities of God, whereas the image involved the natural attributes of God. When Adam fell, he lost the likeness, but the image remained fully intact. Humanity as humanity was still complete, but the good and holy being was spoiled.[[28]](#footnote-28)

One can easily see how these different views came into being. Theologians, wrestling with reconciling how man could be made in God’s image and then afterwards completely fall into sinful behaviors, sought various explanations. If, as some scholars suggest, God gave likeness to humankind at a later time, it would help explain how a person made in the image of God, like Adam, could revert to a sinful state.

John C. Collins reveals that this initial explanation of the difference between “image” and “likeness” has no textual support:

As theologians continued to examine the text, they began to realize that previous theologians had made an error. Since about the time of the Reformation, scholars have recognized that this [image/likeness distinction] does not suit the text itself. First, there is no ‘and’ joining ‘in our image’ with ‘after our likeness.’ Second, in Genesis 1:27 we find simply ‘in God’s image’; and finally, in Genesis 5:1 God made man ‘in the likeness of God.’ The best explanation for these data is so say that ‘in the image’ and ‘after the likeness’ refer to the same thing, with each clarifying the other.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Following the Reformation, scholars developed three basic views regarding *imago Dei*—the image of God in man: substantive, relational, and functional.[[30]](#footnote-30) The following provides a summary of these three views, as described by Millard J. Erickson, in his book, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*.[[31]](#footnote-31)According to the substantive view, each human reflects some substantial God-like characteristics. Erickson believes that humankind mirrors God’s essential image and nature.[[32]](#footnote-32) Other scholars, such as Calvin and Luther, believe that humanity lost most of the *imago Dei* at the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.[[33]](#footnote-33) However, after the Fall, a small amount of God’s image remained in humankind.

The relational view states that a person must be in a personal relationship with God in order for the *imago Dei* to reside in his or her life. The true image of God in humankind can only be found as individuals develop a relationship with God. Therefore, people who do not know God in a personal way do not have the image of God in their lives.

The functional perspective of the image of God differs from the other two views in that it believes that the *imago Dei* only resides within a person when he or she does what God has requested. Genesis 1:26 represents God’s command to humanity; God commanded humankind to rule over the fish of the sea, birds of the air, and the animals on the land. Furthermore, God commanded Adam to name the animals and rule over all of the earth. From the functional perspective, when humanity rules over creation it provides the best expression of the *imago Dei*.

# Community: A Reflection of God’s Triune Nature

The desire to be in community stems from being made in the nature of a triune God. Gilbert Bilezkian writes, “Buried deep within every human soul throbs a muted pain that never goes away. It is a lifelong yearning for that one love that will never be found. Our mourning is for the closeness that was ours by right of creation. Our grief is for the gift lost in the turmoil of rebellion.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Scripture establishes the community of the Godhead. God the Father created the heavens and earth, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters, and God the Son spoke light into the world (Gen. 1:1-3; John 1:1-4). On the sixth day of creation, God spoke animals into existence and formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed the breath of life into him.

God gave Adam the job of naming every living creature. While all of the living creatures had mates, Adam did not. Therefore, God created woman from man and brought Eve to Adam. According to Genesis 2:24, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” God gave humanity the community experienced within the Godhead. People long to regain the community they lost in the Garden of Eden through sin, which can only be found in the Lord Jesus Christ. As Bilezikian states, “God could not reproduce himself and create another God since he is absolute and, therefore, unique. But God did the next best thing. He created beings in his image. This was the closest he could get to giving of himself without compromising his own divine nature.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

God chose to replicate himself through humankind; later Jesus prayed “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21). Three times in John 17, Jesus requests that His followers be one with God like Christ is one with the Father. In John 10:30, Jesus says: “I and the Father are one.” The Greek for one (*hen*)could be either a masculine, feminine, or neuter word. God chose neuterindicating that God’s image for community is possible for everyone. God desires that humanity be in community with Him just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in community with each other. This applies equally to the church and individual Christ-followers as Scriptures instruct believers to be holy just as God is holy (Lev. 20:7; 1 Pet. 1:15-16).

## Empowerment through Community

When God’s people are in community with the triune God, as He intended, they can accomplish the things He has empowered them to do through His Word. Jesus sent His disciples out into the world to proclaim God’s Kingdom, heal the sick, raise the dead, and drive out demons. Jesus affirms the closeness of community by saying: “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8). Christ not only brings believers into community with the triune God so they can experience wonderful fellowship through prayer and meditation, but also for the purpose of accomplishing His will on earth as it is in heaven. God’s intent is to bring believers together so they can grow. Mike Clarensau observes: “A growing church isn’t a bad thing. In fact, that’s the plan Jesus had when He launched the Great Commission. The book of Acts tells of no spiritual islands, where small gatherings of saints simply existed in spiritual isolation.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Jesus empowers His followers to accomplish the miraculous. After Peter affirms Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus authoritatively declares: “You will have complete and free access to God’s kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven” (Matt. 16:19, *The Message*). Furthermore, Jesus encourages the power of prayer in the community by stating, “If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you” (18:19, NLT). As if that is not enough authority, Jesus encourages His disciples by stating that mustard-size faith will move mountains and transplant the sycamore tree into the sea (17:20; Luke 17:6). Jesus continues this line of thinking by astounding His disciples by telling them that they will do even greater things than what He has been doing (John 14:12).

## Community in the Life of Christ

Upon beginning His public ministry, Jesus intently focused on creating a community of believers who would not only follow in His footsteps while He lived on earth, but to establish a self-perpetuating community for all eternity. He empowered His disciples both for the present and the future when He will inaugurate a new millennial community. Jesus not only spoke about community, He established community. Leonardo Boff appropriately states:

Jesus did not select the Twelve as founders of future churches, Jesus established the Twelve as a community; as messianic, eschatological church. The apostles are not to be understood first and foremost as individuals, but precisely as the Twelve, as messianic community gathered around Jesus and his Spirit.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Jesus illustrates the importance of community by how He used His time. Howard Snyder brings this into clear focus: “Jesus Christ actually gave more time to preparing a community of disciples than to proclaiming the good news.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Recognizing the importance of perpetuating the gospel until the end of the ages, Jesus primarily focused attention on His disciples. He took advantage of teaching them heavenly concepts through the use of parables. If they did not understand the parables, He privately explained their meanings to them. Multiple times Christ revealed the plan for His death, burial, and resurrection to His disciples. Julie A. Gorman rightly asserts that “the Gospels show truth and life as seen through the eyes of the community in which He invested His life and energy. Who He was is revealed to them. How He taught and lived is experienced by them.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

Jesus did not minimize the individual characteristics of His disciples, but trained them to work together because He realized the importance of community among the Twelve. Ralph T. Morton recognizes that the most significant part of Jesus’ training was not with the disciples as individuals, but the disciples as a mutual unit.[[40]](#footnote-40) When the Twelve worked together as a group the whole was greater than the sum of each working individually. Following the death of Jesus this became especially evident as the disciples met together and rehearsed the loneliness they felt—both individually and as a group. After Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples stayed together as a group. Jesus even appeared to the disciples and continued to instruct them (Mark 16:9-18; Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-29; 1 Cor. 15:5-8). After the departure of Judas, Scripture refers to the “eleven disciples.” One of Jesus’s most well-known commands was spoken to the eleven remaining disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

After Jesus’ ascension to heaven, the angels address the eleven as “Men of Galilee” (Acts 1:11). The importance of the group was so significant that a few days after the ascension of Jesus, a study of the Old Testament scriptures determined that someone must be appointed to take the place of Judas (Acts 1:21-26). “Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:26).

Scripture affirms the importance of a group’s effectiveness to accomplish the will of God on earth. The Old Testament teaches: “Without guidance, a people will fall, but there is victory with many counselors” (Prov. 11:14, CEB). Solomon bemoans the folly of being alone: “How miserable are those who fall and don’t have a companion to help them up!” (Eccles. 4:10, CEB). Throughout the Bible, one can identify many passages that speak of the importance of working as a community to accomplish God’s work. In the Epistles, one can see the emphasis of community through the “one another” passages:

* Giving honor to **one another** (Rom. 12:10);
* Living harmoniously with **one another** (Rom. 12:16);
* Admonishing **one another** (Rom. 15:14);
* Waiting for **each other** (1 Cor. 11:33);
* Demonstrating equal care for **one another** (1 Cor. 12:25);
* Serving **one another** (Gal. 5:13);
* Lovingly bearing with **each other** (Eph. 4:2);
* Being subject to **each other** (Eph. 5:21);
* Forgiving **one another** (Col. 3:13);
* Bearing burdens of **each other** (1 Thess. 5:13);
* Giving comfort to **one another** (1 Thess. 5:11);
* Building up **each other** (1 Thess. 5:11);
* Maintaining peace with **each other** (1 Thess. 5:13);
* Doing good to **one another** (1 Thess. 5:15);
* Confessing to and praying for **each other** (James 5:16);
* Exhibiting hospitality to **each other** (1 Peter 4:9).

Value of Community

God never intended for people to take living in community lightly because it is a biblical concept rooted deeply in the *imago Dei.* “The whole church … finds itself in the three theological images drawn from Scripture: the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Spirit. All churches view themselves as a community of the people whom God has addressed in Jesus Christ and who respond in faith and love.”[[41]](#footnote-41) For the Early Church, community was not optional, but rather a command that would make it possible to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Gerhard Lohfink indicates that “such ‘upbuilding’ was equally enjoined in everyday living as in the liturgical setting as each shared a hymn or lesson or revelation so that all might be enriched to grow.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

For people raised in a Western culture, living and working in community presents a formidable challenge and shock. In the United States, in both the secular and Christian organizations, the leader is responsible for all of the activities of a group. Businesses and churches alike look for an outstanding leader to either rescue them from failure or take them to new heights. Charismatic pastors, who usually lead mega churches, have the capacity to lead the church into significant growth. However, when the charismatic leader leaves, the church must acquire another charismatic pastor who can sustain the growth; otherwise, the church might experience a decline in attendance, financial income, and/or prestige. The New Testament never illustrates this pattern. Quite the contrary, as James Thompson aptly states:

Whenever individualism tended to break down the community, Paul seems to have reminded his readers that God had called them into a “fellowship” (1 Cor. 10:16). Where the “strong” within the community wanted to ignore the “weak” Paul reminded them that God had called them into a Christian community (Rom. 14:1-15:13).[[43]](#footnote-43)

If one person sinned, it encumbered the whole church; in other words, the community expressed concern about sin. If the church leader sinned, correction came during a public meeting so the entire community could learn from the individuals’ sin. The Apostle Paul encouraged believers to avoid suing one another and encouraged the use of internal arbitration. In essence, the community should handle all of its own affairs. Gorman declares that “domination by hierarchical tiers of authority, as evident in the world system, found no place in God’s ‘new order.’”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Community life necessitated the trustworthiness and growth among all of its members, not just a few select leaders. If a person received inspiration from the Holy Spirit, they would share it with the community and allow everyone to judge whether it came from God. The community must immediately deal with any threat to its unity. New Testament theology presents this radical concept of community as normative.[[45]](#footnote-45)

One cannot understand the Scriptures and God’s plan of salvation for humankind without the study of community and how it relates to God’s image in humanity. “The church is the community of disciples who are called and sent to do in history what Jesus did in his ministry now that he is physically absent.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Jesus held a high view of community, so much so that He promised to be present in a unique way when they gathered in His name. Jesus declared, “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (Matt. 18:19).

Matthew 18:19-20 emphasizes how Christ relates to His people through community. Although Christ interacts with individuals, hears the prayers of individual people, and sends His angels to watch over people, His divine plan is to work through individuals who work together as a community.

The authentic religious heritage of Judaism and Christianity is primarily a communal and not an individualist one. It shows how we are to be *together* in the world, not just how to be good individuals. It reminds us that ‘who is my neighbor?’ is our most fundamental kind of question. It is the way we have learned from Christ.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Therefore, believers must consciously develop the biblical concept of community.

While community is God’s plan for His people, it does not happen automatically. Searching to be part of a God-given community is worth the effort, but simply attending a church does not suddenly bring a person into a community. Depending on the size of the church, a person may need to seek intentional avenues that lead to inclusion in the community. A major part of this project is helping churches develop community for everyone who walks through the door. A church must purposefully develop a community plan for those who already attend the local assembly, but also develop a plan to include newcomers. Mihailo Temali, in his book *The Community Economic Development Handbook*, talks about strategies and tools to revitalize one’s neighborhood. Although he is addressing a secular audience, churches could utilize many of his ideas. The following list illustrates some of the ideas Temali proposes for building community that one could use in the church:

* Keep the focus on making a difference to regular people who attend your church.
* Keep your church open and inclusive, and remember to have fun.
* Keep momentum by spreading the word about your results.
* Get past conflicts as quickly as possible.
* Do the basic management of your church well, so you don’t get bogged down in it.
* Make things happen so that many people can take credit for and take pride in their church.
* Focus on projects that bring people together.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Church leaders should not be afraid to use scripturally based business strategies to reach their generation for Christ. Jesus confirms this principle in the parable of the unjust steward. Before a terminated employee actually left his job, he negotiated with his employer’s customers to reduce their debt. The employee hoped that this would secure good treatment for him by these people after his termination. To his surprise, his employer commends him for this shrewdness. Jesus then summarizes the event by these words:

Now here’s the surprise: The master praised the crooked manger! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior (Luke 16:8-9, *The Message*).

While scholars and Christians alike struggle with this message, Jesus taught His followers the importance of using all means to reach this generation for Him. T. C. Butler puts this into perspective for people in the twenty-first century:

Jesus put the parable in context. In this world the children of light—those who have become lamps letting God’s light shine through them often are much more foolish in their dealings with other people than are the secular people who have no concern for God. God’s people should be as dedicated to living out kingdom living with other people in this world as the people of this world are in living out their own values to their own advantage in this world. The world’s citizens, however, are only of this age. They have no future beyond the here and now. Children of light will shine through all the ages of eternity. Live now so you are assured of eternity.[[49]](#footnote-49)

The Apostle Paul reinforces this concept when he declares, “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). Clearly, the church must use every means possible to reach the people for whom Christ died. Peter Metz identifies the importance of marketing the services of the church to unsaved people in the local community:

Today, churches are discovering that it isn’t enough to offer energizing, uplifting worship services and dynamic ministry programs that sustain and support those looking to grow in their faith. Churches are learning that they also must be successful marketers if they hope to attract those in their community who aren’t connected with a church but would benefit from what a church can bring to their lives.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Some Christian leaders believe they should not use modern technology, but rather rely on a particular type of church service to minister to the people who come their way. Romans 10:14 declares, “How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?” This statement behooves believers to discern the various methods God would have His people use to spread the gospel message with the lost and dying people who have never heard about Jesus. It may include translating the Scriptures into all languages for distribution on the printed page or in electronic media. Churches might avail themselves of signs, attractive buildings, websites, Facebook, YouTube, and phone answering services while other churches might use servant evangelism as an effective tool.[[51]](#footnote-51) The goal is to identify the most effective ways of reaching people in one’s community who do not attend church and have not found faith in Christ.

As the church seeks to reach the unchurched with the gospel of Jesus Christ, God will help them reach their goals. God will equip church leaders with creative ideas that will help them successfully reach and disciple people within their reach. Karl Vaters encourages leaders to pursue their goals: “Each church has its own mission and shouldn’t try to duplicate the mission of another church.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Churches that vigorously pursue available tools for evangelism will quickly learn that the Eternal One himself will provide the necessary assistance along the way.

The earliest Christians understood that by following the teachings of Jesus they formed a new type of all-encompassing community. S. Scott Bartchy provides a good description of the community life experienced in the Early Church:

The community they formed was redefined as a radically inclusive group in which all human beings were now called to honor this God primarily by obeying God’s will regarding how they treated each other. And in the Acts of the Apostles the nature and purpose of God’s *ekklesia* (‘assembly’ or ‘church’) is displayed both by such a radical inclusivity and by the giving of honor and aid to all followers of Jesus.[[53]](#footnote-53)

In the twenty-first century, the church must understand the critical nature of the theology of community because it counters the rugged individualism of the American people. Once understood, the local church will make significant strides in reaching their region for Christ. This will require the studious pursuit of true biblical methods to reach the current generation. The Twelve disciples understood this when prioritizing their daily schedule by declaring, “We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Paul reaffirmed the importance of study when he instructed Timothy, “Make an effort to present yourself to God as a tried-and-true worker, who doesn’t need to be ashamed but is one who interprets the message of truth correctly” (2 Tim. 2:15, CEB).

People genuinely represent the generation and location in which they were reared. Generally speaking, Americans tend to think that the individual reigns supreme. This rugged individualism comes as a result of the influence of family upbringing, sermons, society, theology, personal studies, and a myriad of other forces. For most Americans, community, as taught in the Scriptures, may present a new paradigm. Proper understanding and implementation within the local church will result in a church that grows in a fashion similar to the growth of the New Testament church.

The New Testament does not illustrate a perfect church, like the church in Corinth that needed significant help in the maturation process. Interestingly, Paul usually addressed his epistles to a particular church. Although he periodically recognizes individuals, his instructions focus primarily on the church as a community. First Corinthians 1:10 states, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.” Prior to this strong admonition, Paul compliments the Corinthian church in a variety of ways (1 Cor. 1: 4-9), but verse nine provides the key to understanding community: “God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship (*koinonia*) with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” In order for God’s people to be in fellowship with Christ, they must also be in fellowship with each other.

Most studies of the word *koinonia* (fellowship) recognize it as having two aspects—divine and human—but that these two aspects represent two sides of the same coin. Communion with Christ entails fellowship with other believers and true community with other believers is not possible without communion with Christ.[[54]](#footnote-54) Paul then tells the church at Corinth that God has provided for them to be blameless when Christ returns by participating in community with the other believers in the Corinthian church. Christ creates this maturation process by insisting that each person put aside his or her own individualistic rights for the sake of harmony with each other and communion with Christ. God was bringing the Corinthian church into spiritual maturity through the development of unity of mind and purpose. Christ longed for the Corinthian church to grow, both spiritually and numerically. As the believers submitted to the lordship of Christ, they would experience a new day of growth and prosperity.

Communities are not static and, even biblically based communities, can move away from their original moorings. Amos Yong insightfully states that “false ideologies can capture the hearts and minds of the communities, even communities of faith. Community needs to be transformed by the Spirit and checked by the Word.”[[55]](#footnote-55) The New Testament reveals that a number of church communities faced great spiritual danger. Paul begins the third chapter of Galatians by saying, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (Gal. 3:10).Paul realized that the believers, having begun in the Spirit, were in danger of going back to the Mosaic Law and trying to observe its commandments.

John, in his letter to the church at Ephesus, rebukes the believers for forsaking their first love. He chastises the believers saying, “Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (Rev. 2:5). Jesus warns the community of believers at Pergamum who tolerated false teachers in their community saying: “Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:16). Jesus also warns the church at Thyatira who tolerated Jezebel, a self-proclaimed prophet whose teaching led the believers into sexual immorality. Jesus pronounced judgment on Jezebel: “I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely unless they repent of her ways” (Rev. 2:22). Jesus makes a profound statement when He tells all communities of believers the outcome of rejecting God’s Word: “I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds” (Rev. 2:23). Communities of God’s people are also held accountable if they deviate from God’s plan.

God’s eternal laws of sowing and reaping also apply to the community of His people. The community of believers at Sardis was found to be in the hands of God. The church at Sardis had a reputation of being a strategic church, but it had fallen into a place of spiritual chaos. Christ asked this church to wake up, honestly assess their spiritual condition, and finish the work He had asked them to do (Rev. 3:2).

The church in Laodicea succumbed to compromise because the believers faced difficulty in rejecting the temptations and allurements of the world. Christ rebuked them for being lukewarm. Their pride blinded their eyes and they did not even realize how far they had drifted from God’s plan for their community. Jesus tells them, “You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Rev. 3:17). Some modern-day churches display a similar attitude. Gary McIntosh sees a similarity between the seven churches in Revelation and the North American church today: “Roughly three-fourths of established churches in North America are either declining or on a long-term plateau. Such churches are ineffective at making disciples—at least new disciples—and function with a lack of fruitfulness and hope.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

The unity of a community can be destroyed—not easily, but it is possible. Leonardo Boff illustrates how this can happen within a community of faith:

When the church forgets the source that gives it birth—the communion of the three divine Persons—it allows its unity to become uniformity; it lets one group of believers by itself assume all responsibilities, keeping others from participating; it allows its confessional interests to prevail over the interests of the reign; in short, the river of birth waters is in danger of becoming a stagnant pond. We must be converted to the Trinity to recover diversity and communion, which create the dynamic unity that is ever open to new enrichment.[[57]](#footnote-57)

A community of faith must vigilantly assess its progress so as not to drift from doing God’s commands. Yong appropriately states that “theological interpretation is a communal enterprise to discern the Spirit, to understand the Word, and to be transformed by the Spirit and the Word.”[[58]](#footnote-58) The community of God must always stand on the Bible as its final authority.

A community that serves God does not appear overnight, but rather develops when God’s people understand that by working together they can more effectively accomplish His will than they can alone. Vaters make an interesting observation: “When Jesus said ‘I will build my church’ maybe what Jesus had in mind was a world littered with churches of all sizes, shapes and styles to meet needs of all size, shapes and styles.”[[59]](#footnote-59) As people created in the image of God, believers participate in a community inspired and directed by God himself. Boff, discussing the development of community, declares, “If we take as our starting point that the Blessed Trinity is the perfect community and that the communion of the divine Three makes them one God, then we will see another type of church emerge. It is fundamentally community.”[[60]](#footnote-60) In essence, living in community with other believers reflects the community demonstrated within the Godhead.

The community of believers established by God, often referred to as the church or bride of Christ, will last forever. Community, as established by God when He created humankind in His own image, will endure for both time and eternity. Jesus discussed the end of time and predicted, “The time is coming—and is here—when the dead will hear the voice of God’s son and those who hear it will live” (John 5:25, CEB). Bilezikian, addressing the individualistic notion of believers, points out that salvation’s culmination comes as a community:

Unfortunately, many Christians think of their salvation after death as a solo flight to heaven, where they will make individual entrances at the pearly gates. The Bible teaches precisely the opposite—that is the passage of believers into eternity will take the form of one mass migration from this world into the next.[[61]](#footnote-61)

In keeping with God’s command, humanity has multiplied and filled the earth. Currently more than 7 billion people live on the earth today. Of the billions of people who have lived throughout all the ages, Matthew 7:13-14 declares that only a “few” people will find the narrow path that leads to eternal life. Nevertheless, Revelation 7:9-10 creates a mental image of a great multitude of believers comprising the community in heaven: “After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language” (Rev. 7:9a).

Christ will gather the community of believers to himself at the Second Coming as promised in Acts 1:11 when the angels told the disciples: “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” The Thessalonian believers feared that they had missed the Second Coming, but the Apostle Paul assures them by describing the events surrounding Christ’s return. First, he assures them that the “dead in Christ will rise first;” then “those who are alive and left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:17a). He concludes with the promise: “And so we will be with the Lord forever”
(v. 17b). The community God envisioned from the very beginning will truly last forever.

The celebration in heaven will commence with what Revelation 19 calls the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. Jesus, the groom, will be joined by the community of believers, the bride of Christ for this glorious occasion. “His bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear [Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints]” (Rev. 19:7-8). After God destroys the old heaven and earth by fire, Revelation 21:2 describes the “Holy City, the new Jerusalem, [as] coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” In verse 3, God promises to dwell with His bride forever.

Bilezikian describes three lessons, based on Revelation 21:1-22:5, as it relates to the church as community.[[62]](#footnote-62) First, the passage describes the lavish beauty of the New Jerusalem, which serves as an eternal showcase of the grace of God for His people. The church, God’s bride and community, are recognized as the centerpiece of history. God’s great investment of himself in the person of His Son paid royal dividends; Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary culminates in this glorious celebration of God’s community in eternity. Second, God’s dream of a community of oneness like that found in the Triune God becomes a reality. God has obliterated all the evil that entered the world in the Garden of Eden. Behold, all things become new, with one exception—the church, God’s community, the bride of Christ. Third, God forms a new community that lives forever in harmony with God. As people respond to God’s gracious gift of salvation, they fulfill the Lord’s Prayer by accomplishing God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.

## Growth—God’s Plan

All healthy children grow. From birth onward, parents can see the growth of their children. In fact, they expect their child to grow; if the child does not grow, the parents become concerned. Only by measuring growth periodically can one know the exact amount of growth. Some years a child grows more than other years, but growth is a normal part of life.

God planned for humankind to grow. After God created Adam and Eve, He said, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28). After the Flood, when God destroyed all living things (except for Noah and his family), He repeated these same words to Noah and his three sons as soon as they left the ark: “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1). The Hebrew words for fruitful (*Paruw*), increase (*uwrbuw*), and fill (*uwmil’uw*) are the exact same words used in both verses. God intended humankind to grow numerically. Since the Flood, the world population has increased dramatically. At the time of Abraham, the world population stood at 27 million. By the time of Christ, the population numbered approximately 200 million. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the world-wide population stood at 1.6 billion; in 2012, the population stands at over 7 billion people. Scholars estimate that 108 billion people have lived on earth. Today’s population is 6 percent of the number who have ever lived.[[63]](#footnote-63)

The Bible illustrates the importance of keeping track of humankind’s activities. God uses numbers, from Genesis to Revelation, to help track His dealings and interactions with people and His creation. As Jesus sent His disciple into the marketplace, He warned of persecution and difficulties. However, His commission also included a promise of protection. Jesus declared that when a sparrow falls to the ground, His Father knows it; He even numbers the very hairs on each person’s head. Jesus concludes by saying, “So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:31).

One must periodically measure growth to determine the amount of change over a given period of time. Churches that do not keep track of growth cannot know where they should be in God’s plan. Clarensau identifies the importance of measuring church growth: “So how is your church doing at assimilating its guests? Churches need times of assessment, too. A church’s ability to retain its guests reveals much about it effectiveness in reaching people.”[[64]](#footnote-64) When recording growth, one must use the numbers accurately. An old adage says, “Figures don’t lie, but liars do figure.” Measuring growth requires accuracy and an unbiased opinion.

Scripture uses numbers to show both the passage of time and to indicate growth. In fact, Scripture begins with an account of the seven days of creation (Gen. 1). Numbers play a large role just in the story of Noah and the ark (Gen. 9):

* Noah is 600 years old when he enters the Ark.
* Eight people enter the Ark.
* The animals are taken into the Ark by twos.
* The clean animals are taken by seven.
* Seven days after they enter the Ark, it begins to rain.
* It rains for forty days.
* Waters flood the earth for 150 days.
* Ark rests on Mt. Ararat on the seventeenth day of the seventh month.
* Mountains become visible on the first day of the tenth month.
* After forty more days, Noah opens a window of the Ark and sends out a raven.
* Noah waits seven more days and sends out a dove.
* Noah sends out another dove seven days later.
* Another seven days pass and Noah sends out the dove that does not return.
* First day of the first month, when Noah is 601 years old the water had dried out.
* On the twenty-seventh day of the second month, the earth is completely dry.

God used numbers to record the ages of people and used lists to preserve the genealogical record of the bloodline from Adam to Christ. Various Scriptures record the population of Israel and the number of people available for warfare in Israel (Gen. 5; Num. 1-3:49; 1 Kings 20:27; 1 Chron. 12:23-27; 2 Chron. 17:14-18; Matt. 1:1-17). On one occasion, counting the people of Israel became a sinful activity (2 Sam. 24:10). One can succumb to pride in God’s accomplishments. The church at Corinth even became prideful over the spiritual gifts God gave them (1 Cor. 4:6-7).

Consequently, leaders must use the accumulation of data to analyze the church’s growth cycle and project future plans. A church should appropriately celebrate their growth much like what occurred after Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost when 3000 people were added to their number (Acts 2:40). The church celebrated again as growth continued: “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). In the Old Testament, God commanded His people to have celebrations to remind them of His love and care for them. McIntosh notes that “Israel was to practice these celebrations even when they were in difficult situations. As you work to revitalize your church, keep the same idea in mind. Whenever you have the smallest of triumphs, celebrate them.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

The book of Revelation makes abundant references to numbers—too many to list in this chapter. However, the following list highlights how God used numbers to list events and record growth:

* Seven churches of Revelation (1:10)
* Twenty-four elders who worship God (5:8)
* 144,000 servants of God from all the tribes of Israel (7:4)
* A great multitude of God’s people worshiping Him that no one could number (7:9)
* Saints of God reigning with Christ for a 1000 years (20:4)
* Size of the New Jerusalem (21:15-18)

One cannot help but notice the repetitive use of certain numbers. Mark Verman believes that the repeated use of certain numbers in Scripture serves as a mnemonic strategy.[[66]](#footnote-66) The numbers three, seven, ten, twelve, and forty occur so frequently in Scripture that one should not ignore their use.[[67]](#footnote-67) Many scholars attach particular meaning to certain numbers—such as seven refers to holiness while the number ten represents a completed mission or “seven times ten expresses completeness and holiness.”[[68]](#footnote-68) In Scripture the number seventy seems significant:

* Relatives of Jacob going to Egypt (Gen. 46:27)
* Seventy elders in Israel are mentioned five times (Exod. 24:1; 24:9; Num. 11:16, 24, 25).
* The length of life for a person (Psa. 90:10)
* Captivity of Judah (Jer. 25:11)
* The number of times we should forgive someone—seventy times seven (Matt. 18:22)

Although numbers may carry symbolic meaning, they also have a specific purpose. Scripture does not use numbers lightly and the business world relies heavily on numbers in business transactions. Mark Galli puts the biblical use of number in perspective:

The Bible is a book of numbers: six days a week for regular work and a day for rest. Tithing is not just a guideline. In the parable of the lost sheep, we’re taught that a one percent attrition among believers is too much. It is easy to poke fun at our preoccupation with numbers, but there are good reasons to take seriously discipleship by numbers. One obvious example: numbers hold us accountable. Accountability is one of the sacred words of our world.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

Ultimately, the church should be held accountable for its growth just as a business must account for its growth.

# Biblical Emphasis on the Importance of Financial Health in the Church

The Bible talks about money and possessions more than any other subject.[[70]](#footnote-70) When it comes to discipleship, placing one’s finances on the altar of dedication usually comes last. If one’s affections toward God begin to wane, it is usually the first thing a person takes off the altar. People often misquote 1 Timothy 6:10 by saying, “Money is the root of evil.” The passage actually states, “For the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (emphasis added). The Bible makes a major distinction between money and possessions themselves and the wrong handling and inappropriate attitude toward money and possessions.

Approximately 86 percent of a person’s total wealth is not cash; therefore, believers must develop a biblical perspective regarding the use of their money and possessions so as to glorify God through their resources. This section will address four basic concepts regarding money and possessions: (1) building a biblical understanding about money and possessions, (2) integrating biblical principles into daily life, (3) making wise investments, and (4) being a good steward through the creation of a will. Ultimately, God is the giver of all things, but believers should leave a lasting testimony that illustrates their love for God.

## What the Bible Says About Money and Possessions

Many authors tackle the topic of biblical teaching regarding money. This is a robust subject since 2,350 verses in the Bible address the subject of money; this is twice as much as what is written about faith and prayer combined.[[71]](#footnote-71) One’s attitude about and management of money provides an image of one’s character. A person begins to squirm when confronted by personal issues pertaining to how he or she manages money—such as tithing, generosity, wealth, and possessions.

Jesus spoke freely about money and possessions, especially in the Synoptic Gospels. In Luke 4:18-21, Jesus reads from the book of Isaiah and announces that the prophetic words of Isaiah were being fulfilled. Snodgrass clarifies the issue: “Jesus’ messianic mission is summarized as the proclamation of good news to the poor and that it carries allusions to Jubilee release.”[[72]](#footnote-72) Jesus frequently taught about money and possessions with an unambiguous focus on a person’s attitude and giving to less fortunate people. Both the Old and New Testaments instruct God’s people to be generous to the poor, orphans, widows, and aliens (Deut. 15:7-8; Psa. 41:1; Prov. 14:31; Matt. 19:21; Rom.15:26, James 1:27). Mariam Karnell summarizes God’s perspective: “God is one who cares for the poor and the defenseless, and he calls for the same behavior from his people.”[[73]](#footnote-73)

Other biblical writers also focus on one’s attitude toward wealth and possessions. For instance, the book of Proverbs frequently addressees the importance of caring for people in need (Prov. 14:31; 17:5; 19:17; 21:13; 22:9; 28:27; 31:20). A number of verses in the book of James focuses on giving directions about the rich, poor, widow, and fatherless (James 1:9, 27; 2:1, 14; 3:13; 5:1). The Apostle Paul speaks about how important it is for Christians to use their money to support the poor and people in ministry (Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4; Gal. 2:10). Paul Trebilco, in his book *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, concludes that material possessions and wealth, in general, was a real issue in the early Christian community.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Luke, in his Gospel and the book of Acts, mentions money or possessions in almost every chapter. In the parable of the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30), Jesus gives a lesson on how the wrong attitude toward money, and even greed itself, will keep a person out of God’s Kingdom. What a person does with money indicates his or her feelings about God. Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell everything he had and give it to the poor. Upon hearing this, the man went away dejected. Jesus declared, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24). This not only astounded the rich young ruler, but also His disciples. Randy C. Alcorn puts the issue into perspective by declaring that “greed isn’t a harmless pastime but a serious offence against God. Greed is money worship, a violation of the first commandment to have no other gods other than the one true God.”[[75]](#footnote-75) When a person places the love of money ahead of God, that attitude severs one’s relationship with the Lord.

Jesus wants His followers to understand the proper value of money. Jesus says, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). Jesus never despises the rich for being rich. Instead, He encourages everyone who has possessions to use them wisely in God’s Kingdom. God, on the other hand, always rebukes anyone who hoards. Snodgrass notes that God rebuked the people of Israel for “gathering more manna than they needed. In the elastic and liberal economy of God, six days of labor stretches to seven days of provision.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Malcolm Irwin insightfully states, “Jesus’ words directly contradict our society’s assumption that our identity is determined by our possessions.”[[77]](#footnote-77) In the parables, Jesus spoke harsh words to people who hoarded their talents—even to the extent that these people could not enter His kingdom (Matt. 25:26-30). In today’s culture, worshipping money is easy; however, it will keep a person far away from God and what He desires to do in a person’s life.

## How Christians Should Use Their Money

God requires that Christians use their resources wisely. Larry Burkett declares, “Poverty is not God’s norm, but neither is lavishness.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Giving should be both systematic and intelligent. Systematic giving means that the believer gives regularly to the work of God on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2). Followers of Christ should regularly support their local church so it can maintain an effective witness in the community. Giving should also be intelligent. Everything a person possesses comes as a gift from God and each person is accountable to God for tithing regularly from his or her income. Intelligent giving includes careful stewardship of everything one possesses. For instance, a person should know how an organization uses its funds because many charities consume a large percentage of their total income on administrative expenses while only a small portion of the funds actually support their selected cause. When a person gives intelligently, it can produce positive outcomes.

The Bible teaches that followers of Christ must recognize their financial responsibility to their own family. The Apostle Paul states that if a person does not support his or her own family, he or she is worse than an infidel (1 Tim. 5:8). A person’s own family may include wife, children, parents, and others who are closely related. The church does not carry the responsibility of supporting widows if she has a nephew who could provide the needed assistance (1 Tim. 5:4).

The Old and New Testament commands giving to the poor and less fortunate (Deut. 15:7-8; Ps. 41:1; Prov. 14:31; Matt. 19:21; Rom. 15:26; James 1:27). Arthur Simon insightfully addresses the value of accountability in giving:

The word from the Bible is both encouraging and alarming. It tells us that God’s bounty may indeed be received with thanksgiving, but with the blessing comes accountability. Part of that accountability is an obligation to share with great generosity so that those without basic necessities will also have a place at the table.[[79]](#footnote-79)

Followers of Christ enjoy the privilege of asking the Holy Spirit to direct them as they give to individuals in need of financial assistance. As one’s sensitivity to God’s voice increases, one will become aware of people who could use assistance. Abraham J. Malherbe reassures believers as they learn to give to the needy: “By enjoying wealth in the way intended by God, believers lay up for themselves as treasure a firm foundation for a secure future.”[[80]](#footnote-80) The Bible teaches that when a person gives to the poor, he or she is actually lending to God (Prov. 19:17). God never runs out of ways to bless His children as they learn to give to the needy.

The Bible also teaches that believers experience joy in giving (1 Chron. 12:40;
2 Chron. 30:24-26; Acts 20:35) and that God loves to see people give cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:7). Nothing can replace the good feeling one enjoys when helping another person through giving. Even the secular world understands the joy in giving. Michael Norton, Harvard Business School professor who researches the psychology of happiness, says, “Spending on friends and loved ones offers longer-term bang for the buck. The reason? Such pursuits enhance the feelings of meaning and social connection that undergird happiness.”[[81]](#footnote-81) The Apostle Paul records the words of Jesus, which are not recorded in any other place in Scripture: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

## How Christians Should Invest Their Money

The Bible addresses the importance of properly investing one’s money. In the parable of the talents, Jesus gives instructions to the person who refused to invest his master’s money: “Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest” (Matt. 25:27). God expects believers to be wise stewards of the resources He places in their hands. Ron Blue identifies the following five biblical principles regarding wise investing.[[82]](#footnote-82) First, a person must establish written financial goals. Proverbs 21:5 provides great direction: “The plans for the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.” Therefore, Christians should write down their financial goals and plan the steps to implement them. Second, a person should save and invest before spending. This requires setting aside a designated amount for investment prior to purchasing non-essential items. The wisdom of Solomon declares, **“**Put your outdoor work in order and get your field ready; after that, build your house” (Prov. 24:27). Third, a person must keep a long-term perspective. Luke provides a great example: **“**Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it” (Luke 14:28)? Having noble financial goals encourages a person to put aside some things in order to systematically attain long-term goals. Fourth, a person should diversify his or her portfolio. Ecclesiastes 11:2 illustrates this point: “Divide your portion to seven, or even eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.” Fifth, a person should not incur more risk than he or she can afford. This requires that one invest what he or she has rather than borrowing to fund investments. Ecclesiastes 5:13 supports this idea: “I have seen a grievous evil under the sun, wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners.”

 Christians should invest their financial resources in venues that bring eternal results. This includes investing into the lives of people—to either bring them to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, disciple believers, or to help people in need. For the Christian, this type of investment lays up treasures in heaven. After Jesus spoke the parable about the rich fool, He instructs His followers with these words:

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke 12:32-34)

When Christians invest in the things God considers important, God makes certain to care for their needs in this life while also storing up treasures in heaven.

## Stewardship through the Creation of a Will

The Apostle Paul, writing to Timothy, says, “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it” (1 Tim. 6:6). Jesus, in the Parable of the Rich Fool, tells the story of a person who amassed a great amount of wealth in his lifetime and then died. Jesus concludes by asking, “Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:20-21). Planning for one’s final act of giving through the creation of a will illustrates wise stewardship and a heart for the things of God. Whether individuals leave a small or large portion of their estate to the work of the Lord will depend on many circumstances. However, Christians can ensure that their final act of giving enriches God’s Kingdom by returning to God through planned giving. If Christians die without a will (intestate), they cannot leave anything to the work of the Lord.

The Bible declares, “Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them” (Ps. 127:3-5). Truly, children are a parent’s greatest assets and should be protected and provided for in the event that the parents die before the children reach majority age.

# Conclusion

God’s Word provides a solid foundation for developing a healthy perspective toward money, wealth, and possessions. Adhering to these guidelines will benefit an individual because obedience to God’s ways always results in supernatural provision. Systematic and intelligent giving allows believers to give generously, yet wisely. As one’s earnings increase, a person should learn wise investment principles. Prayerful consideration, accompanied by trustworthy counsel, can help an individual determine the best course of action. Finally, believers can exercise good stewardship by creating a will. In so doing, the person will protect his or her family, name an executor/trustee, and have the privilege of blessing God’s Kingdom by designating a portion of his or her wealth to God’s work.

No subject in the Bible or in life generates greater interest than money. Thus, Christians should lead the way in teaching and demonstrating how to manage money in a godly fashion. Each day, believers encounter new opportunities to use the money God has entrusted to them. With the Holy Spirit’s guidance and wisdom, people can learn to live by God’s principles of wealth while also helping people in need. A good prayer when considering how best to use the money that God has placed into one’s care is: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

Chapter 3: GENERAL LITERATURE REVIEW

# Introduction

This chapter will review key contemporary literature regarding closing the back door ((facilitating the retention of first-time guests and assimilating new attendees into the local church) and methods of church growth. Most church growth methods focus on implementing new programs within the local church, such as developing a particular ministry or encouraging servant evangelism. The church must continuously find effective means by which to make the local community aware of its presence. This chapter will further review literature that seeks to identify biblically-based business principles that will stimulate church growth.

Most churches in America are not growing. Gary McIntosh observes: “It is estimated that in the United States between three thousand and four thousand churches close their doors each year. An additional thirty thousand to forty thousand are on the pathway to closure within the next decade if they do not establish a new direction in ministry.”[[83]](#footnote-83) The literature reviewed in this chapter focuses primarily on assisting plateaued or declining churches in order to make the necessary changes to recapture growth. McIntosh states: “We actually know very little about change and what we know is changing, and we can be sure that the future is going to be different from the past.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Churches that choose not to change the way they conduct God’s business generally continue to decline both in attendance and every other means by which one measures growth within the church. If declining churches do not embrace change, they will join the ranks of churches that close their doors.

Intentional action steps can interrupt the life cycle of a church from commencement, growth, maturity, decline, and closure. A wide variety of actions can intervene and reverse the downward slide of a church, but if a church does not desire to change the current way of doing business, the church has little hope. The goal of this literature review is to show the local church how to foster the necessary changes in order to become vibrant once again.

# Closing the Back Door

## Identify Barriers to Church Growth

Keeping the front door open while keeping the back door closed, church leaders can create a stimulating and growing church. First, church leaders must identify the barriers that keep people from entering the front door. Barriers to church growth come in many forms and must be identified and dealt with before a church can develop an open front door while making sure the back door remains closed.

### Physical Facility

Carl F. George believes that a major “step in implementing vision is to tackle the blockage problem.”[[85]](#footnote-85) Church leadership should first analyze the current facility to identify ways in which it could serve as a hindrance to growth. For instance, people often choose not to attend a church if they do not have adequate parking. George, in identifying this superficial, yet important issue, believes that “your most crucial capacity determiner stems from your parking availability, not your seating capacity.”[[86]](#footnote-86) The average car carries two people when it arrives at church.[[87]](#footnote-87) Therefore, if the church auditorium seats 120 people, the parking lot should accommodate sixty parking spaces. If the church plans for continued growth, it must maintain a ratio of one parking space for every 1.75 to two people in attendance. Parking plays a critical role in church attendance; no matter how many other things the church does correctly, it will never outgrow its parking capacity.

A significant barrier to growth exists with regard to the church’s facilities. Many church consultants subscribe to the 80 percent capacity rule;[[88]](#footnote-88) Nelson Searcy, on the other hand, believes that people consider a church full when it is filled to 70 percent capacity.[[89]](#footnote-89) If an auditorium, on average, is filled to more than 70-80 percent of its capacity, people feel overcrowded. Church attendees may be willing to worship in very tight seating arrangements a few Sundays a year (Easter and Christmas); however, over a period of time, they may decide to go elsewhere. Searcy observes that

as church leaders, we love full rooms, so we say, ‘Pack ’em in, there’s still a few seats!’ But the truth is that when a room reaches 70 percent of its seating capacity, it’s full. Period. People stop inviting their friends because they perceive there is no more room. Some regular attendees stop coming because it is hard to find a seat.[[90]](#footnote-90)

Another facility concern centers on the size of the auditorium compared to the size of supporting rooms for nursery and children’s activities. An obstacle can arise when the auditorium seats 200 people, but the nursery and other rooms for children only accommodate ten children. If a church desires to attract young families, it must provide ample room for nursery care and children’s ministry.

A church must find creative ways of overcoming barriers pertaining to their facilities. For example, a church could add another service on Saturday or Sunday, neighboring businesses might allow people to park in their parking lot during service times, staff and some members could park farther away and be shuttled back to the church. George suggests an innovative solution:

If you are short on Sunday school space, install two Sunday school seasons, one before and one after the worship. If your auditorium is small, then offer two worship services with Sunday school in between. If you are tight all the way around, think about holding Sunday school and worship simultaneously. Send everybody from the first hour home and then repeat the process for the second hour. By creatively using your existing space without enlargement, you can increase your membership by 50 percent or better.[[91]](#footnote-91)

While issues pertaining to a church facility seem petty, the American culture demands quality facilities that comfortably accommodate people without feeling overcrowded or inconvenienced. Therefore, the church cannot ignore the importance of providing an environment that extends a warm welcome to both visitors and regular attendees.

### Church Leaders

Church leaders can also create an obstacle to church growth. Many pastors assume a position intent on making significant changes, based on their personal perception of what needs to take place. In the process, they fail to build relationships before casting vision. Donald W. Morgan faced an enormous challenge when he assumed the pastorate of a church that dated back to 1635. Located in the eastern part of the United States, which some people identify as a spiritual wasteland, the church and its denomination had been in decline for a number of years. His immediate predecessor pastored the church for thirty-five years and, upon retirement, remained in the community and church. Morgan identifies a key concept:

If you want to know why many would-be-church leaders fail, here’s the key: They are so caught up in their own ideas and vision, they don’t value what was there before them. They come with lofty dreams, but they make no allowance for the importance of a sense of continuity. They throw out the baby with the bath water, as the saying goes.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

Leaders must provide a sense of continuity to the past—even in the midst of change. Alan Nelson and Gene Appel caution church leaders: “Your role as a change agent requires that you honor those who love the ‘old’ ways. Too many leaders and progressive types err when they do not arrange for a respectful memorial of the things they are about to change.”[[93]](#footnote-93)

Pastors, who become stagnant in their personal life, can become a hindrance to the growth of the church. Therefore, church leaders should implement a plan for continual self-development. If one’s church has plateaued or stagnated, the pastor should consider participating in various activities that will further his or her growth. As Searcy clearly declares, “Growing churches are led by growing leaders. So if you’ve stopped progressing personally, your church is not far behind.”[[94]](#footnote-94) Pastors and church leaders can proactively participate in a variety of personal growth plans that will reinvigorate their life and church. A pastor could begin reading on various subjects related to his or her current ministry, or attend conferences and seminars that will further his or her understanding regarding church growth. Most importantly, the church leader can seek out a mentor who could offer encouragement, while also pointing out blind spots or areas for growth. Ultimately, “personal development is essential not only for your own health and balance, but also for the growth of your church.”[[95]](#footnote-95)

### False Assumptions

False assumptions often serve as an obstacle to church growth. Church leaders must dedicate themselves to producing true disciples of Christ; therefore, they must examine their preconceived ideas about how to grow a church. George Barna identifies a few “comfortable assumptions,” which, by themselves, may be inaccurate:

1. All it takes is good preaching to produce true disciples.
2. Using the best curriculum money can buy will grow people spiritually.
3. Hiring competent staff is sufficient to move the process along.
4. Placing a large proportion of people in small groups generates true disciples.[[96]](#footnote-96)

False assumptions regarding how to grow a church can easily steer the church leadership in the wrong direction.

### Expecting Too Much Too Soon

Another barrier to church growth is expecting too much too soon. Before growth ever takes a quantum leap, it usually begins with thoughtful preparation and progresses slowly. Sam Walton became the wealthiest person in America. However, he started his first dime store in 1945 and waited seven years to open his next store.[[97]](#footnote-97) After twenty-five years, his business had grown to thirty-eight Wal-Marts. The big growth streak came after twenty-five years of diligent work. Between 1970 and 2000, Wal-Mart exploded to over 3,000 stores and $150 billion in revenues.[[98]](#footnote-98) Walton declares: “Somehow over the years people have gotten the impression that Wal-Mart was just this great idea that turned into an overnight success. But it was an outgrowth of everything we’d been doing since 1945. And like most overnight successes, it was about twenty years in the making.”[[99]](#footnote-99)

## Address Vision Limiters

When a church leader does not have a vision, goal, or dream for his or her church, that leader will accomplish very little. The Apostle Paul spoke of the importance of being obedient to the vision that God had given him (Acts 26:19). When a church leader has limited vision, he or she settles for less than great. Jim Collins indicates that “good is the enemy of great is not just a business problem. It is a *human* problem. If we have cracked the code on the question of good to great, we should have something of value to any type of organization. Good churches might become great churches.”[[100]](#footnote-100) George identifies the following ten vision limiters that can create a barrier to church growth.[[101]](#footnote-101)

### Problem Solving Emphasis

When the church leaders’ primary responsibility focuses on solving problems, most of their energy is consumed with keeping the aquarium clean rather than serving as a fisher of men. If evangelism does not remain at the forefront of the church’s mission, growth will not be sustainable. Peter F. Drucker describes the importance of problem solving, but also realizes that once the leaders had solved the problem, things return to the status quo, which ultimately inhibits one’s ability to take advantage of new opportunities.[[102]](#footnote-102)

### I’m Busy Enough Now

Church leaders can easily become exhausted, which leaves minimal interest in ministry expansion or new projects. The current ministry feels so overwhelming and tiring that envisioning additional outreaches or ministry seems like a burden. Delegation cures this problem; as a leader delegates responsibilities and trains others, the entire church benefits through numerical as well as spiritual growth.

### Lockstep Vision

A church leader can limit the growth of his or her church by adhering to a lock step mentality. This type of leader chooses to imitate what other church leaders do. When this pastor hears about a new program at another church, he or she will implement the same program. While this approach may produce some success, ultimately, it obscures the church leaders’ own talents and abilities. Comparing oneself with another is futile; both the church leader and the congregation suffer with this approach. The Apostle Paul succinctly warns church leaders and believers regarding this common error: “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise” (2 Cor. 10:12).

### Grow Until You Can Survive

Sometimes a church leader wants his or her church to grow so it can enjoy financial comfort. Initially, this seems like a noble goal and many church boards fall into this trap. Once they reach “comfortable” they simply focus on maintaining their current status. George says that a “church with a sizeable endowment account is almost impossible to motivate to grow.”[[103]](#footnote-103)

Thomas J. Stanley and William D. Danko provide a very tangible illustration of this concept in their book, *The Millionaire Next Door*. Oftentimes, wealthy families give their adult children money so as to make their lives more comfortable. Stanley and Danko’s study indicates that eight out of ten times, adult children of affluent parents had less annual income and fewer assets when measured against their peers because they no longer felt the need to save or to work hard. Parents’ good intention of making their children’s lives more comfortable actually compromised both the integrity and initiative of their children, as summarized by Stanley and Danko:

What is the effect of cash gifts that are knowingly earmarked for consumption and the propping up of a certain lifestyle? We find that the giving of such gifts is the single most significant factor that explains lack of productivity among adult children of the affluent. All too often such ‘temporary’ gifts affect the recipient’s psyche. Cash gifts earmarked for consumption dampen one’s initiative and productivity.[[104]](#footnote-104)

Churches that fall into this trap look for ways to meet the church budget by encouraging staff members to work for abnormally low wages, asking the pastor to work a second job, or encouraging the pastor’s spouse to work outside the church. At times, the church will rely on generous relatives or outside donors to ensure that the normal church staff expense places a smaller drain on the church budget. While extra income seems good, in the end, it permits the church to survive by being smaller.

### Generic Stand-Alone Church

Initially, the generic stand-alone church appears to be the ideal. It can afford a pastor and part-time secretary, a part-time custodian, a part-time music minister, and a part-time children’s minister. Building debt is small and well managed. In this situation, the church leader must identify and avoid the danger of “having arrived.” Church leaders who become too comfortable with their current situation often forget that change is part of the growth cycle. They must purposefully place themselves in uncomfortable positions so as to make the necessary changes for church growth. James Collins and Jerry Porras, organizational experts, speak of ways to “put thorns in our laurels.”[[105]](#footnote-105) When tempted to sit back and relax when action is required, the thorns in the laurels create pain and move the leader to action. “Researchers abide by the principle that if it is real, you can measure it.”[[106]](#footnote-106) Churches, in like manner, must experience measureable growth. If the church is not growing, the pastor must lead the church into a path for growth.

### “No Vacancy” Sign

When the parking lot and sanctuary are full, church leaders can easily justify putting out the “No Vacancy” sign. Although the church enjoyed a growth spurt and increased momentum for a season, the church can choose to reject new occasions for evangelism. Former growth causes the church to miss new opportunities to fulfill the Great Commission, the very purpose of the church. Collins and Porras state: “Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great. Is the disease of ‘just being good’ incurable?”[[107]](#footnote-107) These authors clearly believe the disease is curable, but in order to accomplish greatness within the church, a pastor must become intentional and focused on moving the church from good to great.

### Fortress Mentality

Church leaders who espouse the fortress mentality believe they are the pastors of the only true church. These leaders draw a tight circle around themselves, and the groups they pastor, by teaching a gospel that excludes most people. While it produces a fierce loyalty, people who need help cannot join. Only a correct understanding of the message of Christ can cure this mentality.

### The Restoration of Our Golden Era

Living in the glory of the past, often called the “good old days,” can be most detrimental. John F. Kennedy said: “Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past are certain to miss the future.”[[108]](#footnote-108) People often experience difficulty in letting go of certain aspects of the past. Older people, in particular, face greater difficulty letting go of the past because they have so much to let go. Anatole France summarizes the problem of letting go: “All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.”[[109]](#footnote-109)

All church leaders encounter the challenge of letting go of the past. After Ezra rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, they dedicated the new temple to the Lord (Ezra 3:10-13). While many people rejoiced on that dedication day, another group of people remembered the glory of the previous temple and wept (v. 12). Church leaders need all of God’s wisdom to keep people from weeping over the loss of the past so that they can rejoice over the present victories.

### Closing the Back Door

People who have purposely dropped out of church are one of the most difficult groups to get back in the church. Church leaders should identify and monitor the church’s visitor-retention ratio and the visitors to total attendance ratio in order to keep people from quietly slipping out the back door.

Visitor retention and assimilation represents a major aspect of church growth. Jonathan Gainsbrugh states: “The Back Door War can only be won through a thorough understanding of assimilation.”[[110]](#footnote-110) Gainsbrugh identifies seven back doors that church leaders can close through assimilation: (1) the pre-visitor, (2) the visitor, (3) new converts, (4) the new member, (5) the regular member, (6) the inactive, and (7) the drop-out. Each first time guest who lives in close proximity to the church could potentially come back and find a place in the church community. Consequently, the church leadership must construct means by which each newcomer can become a part of the local church.

### High-Visibility Event

Some church leaders focus solely on special events to increase attendance. This could include events such as a revival, a Halloween alternative, or a Christmas pageant. Although special events increase attendance temporarily, the gain does not produce long-term growth. Usually, churches do not provide adequate follow-up after a special event; therefore, first-time guests never assimilate into the church. If a church hosts a special event, but does not implement a means of following up on newcomers’ attendance, the church can assume that the visitors saw it as a one-time event. Based on a survey of more than 500 churches, Thomas Rainer, in *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church*, determined that special events rated 2.9, which equaled “Only Slightly Important.”[[111]](#footnote-111) While special events hold some value, without proper assimilation systems, they do not present the most effective means for making disciples of Christ.

## Win the War against Reversion

Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin believe that “there are only two ways to grow a church: we must bring people in the ‘front door,’ and we must keep people from going out the ‘back door.’”[[112]](#footnote-112) Church leaders can easily lose focus on the mission or vision of the church by not stopping to analyze and refocus along the way. People come to a church in three ways: (1) birth, (2) transfer from another church, or (3) conversion. In like manner, people leave a church in three ways: (1) death, (2) transfer to another church, or (3) “reversion”—when people slowly drift away from the church and do not identify with another church.[[113]](#footnote-113) Of the three reasons for leaving a church, reversion comprises the largest percentage.[[114]](#footnote-114) Thus, church leaders must develop strategies to bring people to Christ and assimilate them into the life of the church. This will effectively open the front door of the church, while reducing the amount of people who quietly slip out the back door.

On average, 6 percent of a church’s total attendance leaves each year because of reversion.[[115]](#footnote-115) A church should determine to reduce this attrition by 50 percent through the implementation of effective assimilation and retention strategies. Furthermore, the church should continually measure its success rate in reversing the reversion rate.

A church leader must constantly refocus in order to stay focused. Holly Green states: “When an organization lacks a clear destination, it usually has many ill-defined ones. They think they are doing the right thing, but directions change and someone forgot to realign them.”[[116]](#footnote-116) With the many daily demands on church leaders, they must prioritize their agenda so as to retain their current congregation. The task of closing the back door requires diligence and continual focus.

A church cannot expect to win the war of the back door easily; however, the reward for winning is great. Harold Smith, President of Christianity Today International, speaks about the necessity of renewed focus and vision. When he became president in July 2009, no one anticipated the “perfect storm” that was reshaping the media industry.[[117]](#footnote-117) The vision of Christianity Today International in 1956 declared:

a ministry that could engage, encourage, and equip pastors, church leaders, thought leaders, academicians, and culture makers so compellingly through quality content that was journalistically excellent in every way: accurate, creatively presented, fair-minded, intellectually sound, theologically orthodox, irenic, clear, accessible, church-supporting, and Christ-honoring.[[118]](#footnote-118)

After reviewing these goals, he began the process of analyzing everything they did to determine unnecessary components and start new processes that would ensure the goals would be met in the twenty-first century. Smith, regarding these recent changes, illustrates the importance of refocusing the vision:

Our recent cutbacks have forced a renewed focus on those publications and related websites directly tied to Graham’s original vision, beginning with CT and *Leadership.* This ministry-wide sharpening has already redirected our creative energies and resources to finding new ways of taking our award-winning core content into ever-expanding ministry venues.[[119]](#footnote-119)

Every church leader should approach closing the back door of their church with this type of diligence along with the adoption of assimilation strategies.

# Facilitating the Retention of First-Time Guests

Assimilation purposes to help the church provide an easy but thoughtful process whereby a first-time guest becomes a fully engaged and responsible member of the body of Christ. Assimilation of new members into the local church creates a sustainable growth pattern for the church. The implementation of assimilation strategies in the local church will result in healthy growth that comes by way of new converts rather than transfer growth.

Proverbs 18:24 declares, “A true friend sticks by you like family” (*The Message*). Generally speaking, first-time guests come to church seeking friends. Clarensau comments: “What would happen if a church acted like Jesus? How would their experience of us change if they came in our doors and felt like we wanted them to be there?”[[120]](#footnote-120) People attend church because they long to make connection with other people. This being the case, it begs the question: Why do people have such difficulty making connections when both the church and the individual generally want the same thing? Tim Dolan articulates the harsh reality:

I have never come across a congregation that bills itself as the ‘unfriendly church.’ Every congregation likes to think of themselves as friendly and welcoming to visitors. And yet, from my own experience and from talking to others, I have found that churches are not always as welcoming to first time visitors as they like to think they are.[[121]](#footnote-121)

## Intentionality in Plan

Church leaders must create intentional avenues whereby to welcome first-time guests. This intentional approach begins before the guest even visits the church. The church’s Web site, for instance, should be geared for people who log onto the site for the first time by readily providing services times, directions to the church, and a means by which the person can contact the church via email and/or phone. The intentionality at the church starts from the moment the first-time guest pulls into the parking lot, and continues until he or she becomes a part of the body of Christ and joins the church as a member. The church should also provide signs so that as first-time guests approach the church property, they can easily locate the church. Dolan created a friendly environment for first-time guests by dedicating three front row parking spaces for visitors. He believes this accomplishes two goals: “It made it easier for visitors to find a parking space in an otherwise full parking lot. Even more importantly, it communicated, in a very tangible way, that we expect visitors each Sunday. Visitors are important enough to us to have their own dedicated parking space.”[[122]](#footnote-122)

First-time guests represent part of the treasury that God gives to a local church. Searcy says: “Did you have any first-time guests at your church last week? Those guests were God’s gift to you. How did you receive them? Did you show the Giver your appreciation? Did you treat those gifts as they deserved to be treated by having a plan in place to integrate them into the life of your church?”[[123]](#footnote-123) Preparing for assimilation is the key to being successful in reaching the people God sends to your church for the first time. The Bible declares, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things” (Matt. 25:21). When the church prepares to welcome first-time guests, God will certainly send first-time guests to those services. Creating an assimilation plan requires study regarding effective processes, as well as trial and error as one develops a plan for reaching the people God sends to the church. W. Edwards Deming states: “It is not enough to do your best; you must know what to do, and then do your best.”[[124]](#footnote-124) Part of any new program includes implementation as well as adjustments along the way so as to make the plan fit the unique needs of the church. Identifying effective assimilation programs based on successful models definitely makes sense.

## Identify First-Time Guests

Searcy indicates that a healthy church should expect five guests for every 100 regular attendees.[[125]](#footnote-125) If a church does not approximate this ratio, the leaders should examine other areas. However, a church should anticipate guests and focus on identifying each new person who attends the church. When a church has first-time guests, but fails to create a plan for identifying the guests, it willfully allows a valuable person to quietly slip through the cracks without making connection to the church.

### The Communication Card

Research indicates that the use of a Communication or Connection Card provides the most effective means for identifying first-time guests.[[126]](#footnote-126) At some point in the service, a church leader asks everyone to complete this card. Some churches insert the card into the weekly bulletin while other churches distribute the card during the service. Usually, first-time guests prefer not to be singled out from regular attendees; thus, everyone is encouraged to fill out the Communication Card. Rick Warren, based on his experience, learned that “when people feel self-conscious, they raise their emotional defenses. Since we want to communicate to the unchurched, our first task is to reduce their anxiety so that they drop their defenses.”[[127]](#footnote-127)

When correctly implemented, churches find that approximately 80 percent of first-time guests will turn the card in at the appropriate time.[[128]](#footnote-128) Churches create many interesting ways to encourage people to fill out the Communication Card. Some churches make it a fun time during the service, while others offer a gift (like a Starbucks card) to the person whose Communication Card is drawn. Clarensau observes:

The gift should be viewed as the first step toward an intentional relationship. By giving the church my contact information, I am yielding my anonymity and expressing my willingness for the connection to continue. Those who do so to receive a gift have demonstrated that any reluctance they feel about being known is smaller than their desire for the free gift.[[129]](#footnote-129)

Setting the technique aside, the goal is to collect as many Communication Cards as possible.

Dale Carnegie, in his classic work, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, helps leaders identify means for influencing the behaviors and attitudes of other people. Therefore, leaders must attempt to put themselves in the place of a first-time guest and make them feel comfortable in this new environment. Carnegie suggests the following ideas: (1) be sincere— do not promise anything you cannot deliver; (2) know exactly what you want the other person to do—do not make them guess; (3) tell them what benefits they will receive when asking them to do something for you.[[130]](#footnote-130) Carnegie’s principles readily apply to first-time guests in the church.

### Who are the First-time Guests, and What are They Thinking?

Although it is always difficult to put yourself into someone else’s place, one should make every attempt to do so. According to Roy Oswald, “a crisis or transition usually propels an individual to go out and search for a church family. Fifty percent of those in our study had just geographically relocated and were looking for a suitable church in their new community.”[[131]](#footnote-131) Based on that information, a church can construct a program that will make at least fifty percent of their first-time guests more comfortable. Often when people first relocate, they have not set up normal housekeeping activities. Dolan tells a very interesting story of how one couple used their gift of hospitality to welcome guests:

One congregation I read about was able to identify 200 people who joined that congregation primarily because one couple made it their ministry to invite visitors to brunch in their home. Here is the great thing about inviting people to brunch: it doesn’t matter if they come or not. It is not actually eating the meal that makes the impression on visitors, but the fact that some cared enough to invite them. Being invited to someone’s home for a meal is the single best way I know to make a positive first impression. That is important, since a congregation only has one opportunity to make a first impression.[[132]](#footnote-132)

Since fifty percent of first-time guests have recently relocated, the church could prepare gifts that would help the first-time guest get settled into their new community. This could include “A Guide for New Residents,” which includes referrals to professionals like doctors, dentists, lawyers, and accountants. It could also include references to local handymen, auto mechanics, or construction workers as well as coupons to local businesses and restaurants. The guide should also include pertinent information about the ministries of the church.

When planning how to welcome first-time guests, make sure to include everyone in your congregation. In other words, create a team approach for this project. Laurie Beth Jones lists three things that a church needs to remember when endeavoring to get the whole church working together and behind important projects:

1. Keep things simple—reminding your team of the business they are really in.
2. Hold everyone responsible for customer satisfaction—making service the ultimate priority.
3. Release the genius of your team—freeing them to use their highest gifts.[[133]](#footnote-133)

Part of serving first-time guests well is making sure that everyone in the church understands that first-time guests are the key to continual and sustained growth in the church. Furthermore, Jones emphasizes the importance of turning work into a cause, as this helps people develop a passion for the task—even the task of welcoming first-time guests properly.[[134]](#footnote-134)

When first-time guests walk into the church, they are some of the loneliest people on earth. Research conducted by George Gallup Jr. concludes that Americas are some of the loneliest people on the planet.[[135]](#footnote-135) How is that possible when three-fourths of Americans live in metropolitan areas and two-thirds of those Americans choose to live in the suburbs?[[136]](#footnote-136) American families and individuals participate in so many activities that the activities themselves keep people from forming the social contacts they really need. Consequently, the average family or single individual who has just relocated felt somewhat lonely before they moved. Now, in the midst of their new environment, the loneliness seems exacerbated. The church can capitalize on meeting this lonely person’s needs by helping the person feel wanted, loved, and respected. Randy Frazee, recognizing this need, encourages the church of the twenty-first century to “do more than add work to an already overbooked society; it must design new structures that help people simplify their lives and develop more meaning, depth, purpose, and community.”[[137]](#footnote-137) The church must not smother or ignore their first-time guests, but rather welcome them as if they were a guest in one’s own home. Introduce the guests to other people with the thought of connecting the person to other individuals who may have a common interest. Offer guests refreshments, hand them a bulletin, and escort them to a seat. After the service, greet the guest by name, wish them a good day, and invite the person to come back next Sunday or to enjoy other ministries of the church.

 The fragileness of first-time guests cannot be overstated. Gainsbrugh comments: “Ethology is the study of the repetitive, territorial, and habit-forming characteristics of people. Ethologically, the most fragile of all church-folk is the first-time guest.”[[138]](#footnote-138) Gainsbrugh lists several ideas to help the first-time guest enjoy a stress-free encounter with the church: (1) establish first-time guest parking, (2) provide a Hospitality and Information Booth by the main entrance, (3) place greeters at the doors to personally welcome first-time guests and help them know where to go, (4) greet guests after the service by hosting a Visitor’s Reception where each guest receives a small gift, or where the guests have their photo taken, or a hospitality team hosts the first-time guest to lunch.[[139]](#footnote-139)

First-time guests are God’s gift to the local church; therefore, the church should be ever mindful of treating a first-time guest as if Christ himself had entered the church. Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird comment: “People bring their friends when they are excited about the church—they find it attractive and are convinced that others will as well.”[[140]](#footnote-140) Matthew 25:40 declares, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” When an individual or church feeds the hungry, gives a drink to the thirsty, treats a stranger with kindness, gives a needy person clothing, or visits the sick or imprisoned, it is as if it was done unto Jesus himself. Christ promises to build His church, and when the church family welcomes first-time guests well, Christ nods with approval.

## Develop a Plan for Ministering to First-Time Guests

An old adage declares, “If we fail to plan, we plan to fail.” Bill Hybels recognizes the importance of creating a plan: “At a certain point people need more than vision. They need a plan, a step-by-step explanation of how to move from vision to reality.”[[141]](#footnote-141) Because first-time guests are so critical to the church’s growth, one cannot leave this area of ministry to chance. Ed Stetzer emphasizes that each church should have a Welcome Coordinator who “organizes greeters, ushers, and other volunteers who make gathering with the church a warm and friendly experience for guests. Greeters help attendees feel welcomed and wanted. Volunteers must be able to tell arriving guests where to go and what to do.”[[142]](#footnote-142) He highlights the importance of having friendly and knowledgeable volunteers who can meet every conceivable need—from the location of the First-Aid kit to the location of all the buildings and ministries of the church. Stetzer enlarges the tasks for greeters to consider:

1. Greet first-time guests in the parking lot
2. Clearly mark all entrances
3. Provide nametags for all attendees
4. Assign “seat shepherds” who sit in a specific area each week to connect guests with nearby members to make them feel welcome[[143]](#footnote-143)

A church must intentionally develop its greeters and ushers so this vital component of visitor retention can help visitors feel a warm welcome when they attend the church. McIntosh comments: “Find the people who are positive thinkers and give them opportunities to be cheerleaders.”[[144]](#footnote-144)

### The Role of First Impressions

Turning first-time guests into second-time attendees should be the goal of every church. Shweta L. Khare, from Career Brights, states: “‘The first impression is the last impression,’ may or may not be true, butfirst impressions last. … Within the first three seconds of a new encounter, you are evaluated … even if it is just a glance”[[145]](#footnote-145) In coaching executives, Jill Bremer also emphasizes the importance of first impressions:

Impressions are based upon instinct and emotion, not on rational thought or in-depth investigation. When you step into a room, people make subconscious decisions about you. Within about thirty seconds, they’ve judged your economic and educational levels, your social position and your levels of sophistication and success. After about four minutes, they’ve also made decisions about your trustworthiness, compassion, reliability, intelligence, capability, humility, friendliness and confidence.[[146]](#footnote-146)

The power of a first impression can never be overstated. Searcy presents a sobering thought: “Seven minutes is all you get to make a positive first impression. In the first seven minutes of contact with your church, your first-time guests will know whether or not they are coming back.”[[147]](#footnote-147) Before the first-time guest participates in worship or listens to the sermon, the guest has decided whether or not he or she will come again. The worship and the sermon may validate their decision, but worship and the sermon alone will not be the determining factor on whether or not to return the following week.

The person subconsciously sizes up a multitude of issues as he or she makes a decision. Bremer, noting the complexity and power of the human subconscious, declares: “Most of us float through life unaware of its influence; our subconscious is constantly shaping our thoughts, experiences, reactions and opinions.”[[148]](#footnote-148) In *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*, Timothy D. Wilson observes:

The mind operates most efficiently by relegating a good deal of high-level, sophisticated thinking to the unconscious, just as a modern jetliner is able to fly on automatic pilot with little or no input from the human, ‘conscious’ pilot. The adaptive unconscious does an excellent job of sizing up the world in a sophisticated and efficient manner.[[149]](#footnote-149)

Since people quickly make evaluations, church people must prepare for encounters with first-time guests. The procedures for welcoming first-time guests in a way that will encourage them to become second-time attendees should be written out, well-planned, and flawlessly executed. Mark L. Waltz observes: “Before our guests arrive, we need to envision the experience we desire for them. If we can see that experience clearly, we can create a road map to lead them there.”[[150]](#footnote-150) Since one cannot keep first-time guests from making quick decisions about the church, it behooves the church to capitalize on its understanding of first impressions and the role of the subconscious so as to create an effective means of welcoming first-time guests. The goal is to increase the retention rate of first-time guests with the ultimate goal of moving them to become both followers of Christ and members in the church.

Statistically speaking, eight out of ten churches score poorly when it comes to their treatment of first-time guests.[[151]](#footnote-151) First impressions are so critical that the church must get it right the first time. When churches understand the intrinsic value of first impressions, first-time guests will be more inclined to attend a second time. Therefore, the church must purposely choose to make first-time guests a high priority so as to experience greater visitor retention.

The first-time guests do not focus on making logical decisions based on the sermon’s theological correctness or the type of worship. The first-time guest subconsciously measures the church’s mood and the friendliness of the people they have encountered. In light of this information, Searcy summarizes four components of the pre-service: (1) Greeted—welcome guests with a smile; (2) Directed—simply and politely show the guests where they should go; (3) Treated—show the guest respect, and surprise them with comfort food or drink; (4) Seated—lead the guest to comfortable and appropriate seating.[[152]](#footnote-152)

At a rudimentary level, first-time guests assess the grass, the parking lot, the signs, and the overall appeal of the building.[[153]](#footnote-153) Knowing the importance of appearances, church leaders should strive to make their facilities look as good as possible. It is the first opportunity for the church to do more than what the first-time guest expects by investing 100 percent effort into this task. Waltz comments: “To be a ‘Wow!’ an experience must be unexpected.”[[154]](#footnote-154) Simple touches, such as providing directional arrows, a flower garden or a water fountain, can create a “wow” factor that captures the person’s attention. Highlighting one area can illustrate how much the church cares about the first-time guests’ perspective of the church. One county required a new church to include extensive landscaping. Initially, the church chaffed at the extra expense; however, the church received the “Desert Beautiful Award” awarded for three years due to its striking beauty.

Once the first-time guests have entered the church building, the greeter will make the most important impression on the first-time guest. Gary McIntosh comments, “Initial contacts with people play a major role in guests’ thoughts about a church. Are church members outgoing and approachable?”[[155]](#footnote-155) The greeter should know how to smile, as nothing can replace an infectious smile. Smiling can actually be taught and some churches even have smile warm-ups before the church service begins. Paul Ekman, Professor Emeritus of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California Medical School in San Francisco, declares: “We can pick up a smile from 30 meters away. A smile lets us know that we are going to get a positive reception and it’s hard not to reciprocate.”[[156]](#footnote-156) While smiling plays an important role, greeters must be genuinely friendly people, so select people who already demonstrate that attribute.

Giving first-time guests more than what they expected is the key to encouraging them to be second-time attendees. Rainer talks about interviewing a couple at one of his study churches in Florida. Their expectations had been far exceeded. Rainer records their conversation as follow:

When we arrived at the Sunday school class, a couple met us at the door. They talked with us and introduced us to others. Then they sat with us during the Sunday school. After Sunday school they asked if they could sit with us during the worship service. We just left them a few minutes ago and they’ve invited us to lunch next Sunday.[[157]](#footnote-157)

Rainer goes on to comment about the effectiveness of the well-organized greeter ministry of the Florida church: “Even the greeters in the Sunday school class are trained to sit with visitors and to ask to sit with them in worship services. And the church offers to reimburse any member who takes a first-time guest to lunch.”[[158]](#footnote-158)

Many first-time guests hold prejudices or preconceived notions regarding the church. Oftentimes, first-time guests have visited a number of other churches. Searcy identifies the challenges of meeting the needs of first-time guests: “Most of the people who walk through your door have been burned by the Church, by negative press about the Church, or by a friend or family member in the name of religion.”[[159]](#footnote-159) Therefore, church leaders must find ways to overcome possible prejudices people hold onto as they attend a church for the first time. Potentially, the first-time guest did not receive a warm welcome at another church. Although not a business seeking to make a profit, the church can encourage repeat business by learning from successful business principles. Ken Blanchard, in *Raving Fans: A Revolutionary Approach to Customer Service*, shares three secrets for planning for repeat customers. One of the secrets that can significantly help church leaders is to “deliver your vision plus one percent.”[[160]](#footnote-160)

The church can help break down prejudices and preconceived notions by providing a guest reception where the guests can partake of simple foods, such as coffee, milk, and a light snack. Amazingly, food has the ability to make a first-time guest feel comfortable and at home. Simply holding a cup of coffee or a cup of water in one’s hand while with a crowd of unknown people can make a person feel at ease. Food is one thing that all people have in common; therefore, it can break down barriers and make a person feel more relaxed.

When serving food, always plan generously. Do not limit the food to first-time guests, but make it available to everyone who comes to the guest reception, as this encourages the first-time guest to join the group by enjoying the food. McIntosh observes: “A staff reception for new guests helps people gain some basic knowledge of the church and staff.”[[161]](#footnote-161) This is the church’s opportunity to welcome its guests, so never charge a fee or provide a receptacle for donations. Utilizing the first seven minutes effectively can dramatically increase visitor retention.

### Planning for the Return of First-Time Guests

Turning first-time guests into second-time attendees should be the goal of every church. The follow-up for first-time guests should begin soon after the guests leave the Sunday morning service, but no later than Monday. Although assimilation rates vary from church to church, Rainer conducted a study of 287 churches to identify visitor retention rates. His study focused on identifying the percentage of first-time guests who returned for a second visit. His results indicate the following:

Lower-assimilation churches in the study 50.8%

Higher assimilation churches in the study 74.4%

All churches in the study 62.6%[[162]](#footnote-162)

All churches aspire to be high assimilation churches, but Rainer summarizes, in one word, how a church can become a high assimilation church: expectations.[[163]](#footnote-163) Rainer lists three comments by visitors regarding high assimilation churches:

1. “Unlike some other churches we visited, this church seemed to act like the Christian faith really mattered.”
2. “We were met by greeters everywhere we turned. We never lost our way. It is easy to see that this church expects a lot of it members.”
3. “Everything about the church told me that the people cared, that they took their faith seriously.”[[164]](#footnote-164)

The high assimilation churches became the high expectation churches. First-time guests understood that God truly meant something to the attendees and members took their jobs very seriously. Furthermore, the first-time guest understood that membership in that church meant something. If they were to become members, they would also be assigned something to do at the church.

Not all first-time guests have the ability to be second-time attendees in the near future. However, all first-time guests should be treated well. The church should categorize first-time guests based on their location to the church. All churches have first-time guests who may be out-of-town guests of members or were passing through and dropped in to attend a service. The church should send out-of-town guests a letter, email, or other form of communication thanking them for their attendance, and stating how much they gave in the offering, if they gave a gift. The letter should also invite the guest to return to the church the next time they are in the area. Often first-time guests will return to an out-of-town church for another visit if they were treated well. One never knows if the guest plans to relocate to the area in the near future.

The church should create a well-thought out plan for contacting first-time guests who could potentially return for a second visit. Searcy lists three things to consider when constructing a follow-up plan for first-time guests: (1) fast, (2) friendly, and (3) functional.[[165]](#footnote-165) The current generation expects fast service; therefore, while still fresh in their minds, the visitors should receive multiple contacts from the church starting on the Monday following their Sunday visit. The communication with the first-time guest should be friendly, personal, and warm, yet functional. The visitor packet provided should provide simple, straightforward, and useful information, including a genuine invitation to return to the next service. Including a small surprise would exceed the guests’ expectations.

Churches use a variety of ways for following up with their first-time guests. Rainer indicates that “99.1 percent of the high-assimilation churches had a systematic plan for visitor follow-up.”[[166]](#footnote-166) Some churches begin the follow-up by inviting their first-time guests to a meal following the morning service. Other churches suggest that people visit the guest at their home on Sunday afternoon. Despite the variety in plans, almost all churches plan to begin with a contact on Monday. Churches that are most effective in follow-up to first-time guests make four contacts the first week. The contact information can be gathered from the following sources: (1) Communication Card, (2) Children’s Check-in Information, or (3) offering records—if the guest gave by check, generally the check will include their name and address, or if they used the offering envelope, it might include their contact information.

The first contact should be made by email, if an email address is available. Searcy’s research indicates that the best time for the email to arrive is between 2 and 3 p.m. on Monday, as by that time the person will have read their other weekend email and might be getting a little bored by that time of the day.[[167]](#footnote-167) The email should be friendly, informing the first-time guest about an upcoming church event along with an invitation to attend the church in the near future. Searcy also uses a first-time guest online survey with four questions:
(1) What did you notice first? (2) What did you like best? (3) What was your overall impression? (4) How can we pray for you?[[168]](#footnote-168)

The next contact should be a personal phone call.[[169]](#footnote-169) Keep this call simple; this is not the time to gather a complete history of the family. The third contact should be a handwritten note to the first-time guest simply thanking them for their attendance, offering to help in any way, and inviting them to attend church the next Sunday. The fourth contact should be a personal visit to the home with a small gift, such as homemade cookies. This visit should only last about 30 seconds at the door. If no one is home, leave a personal note along with the gift. Rainer observes: “Almost every church in my study insisted on a personal follow-up visit by the pastor, other staff, or a layperson. A visit from a layperson was deemed most effective by the visitors we interviewed; however, a pastor was involved in personal visits 67.6 percent of the time.”[[170]](#footnote-170) Using the four contact methods described above should result in 74 percent of first-time guests becoming second-time attendees.

One can send a one-month follow-up letter to individuals who did not return sooner. The unchurched are not used to going to church on Sunday. They may have been perfectly happy with the service and the treatment they received. However, their Sundays already have a full schedule of events and, for them, attending once a month may seem normal. Clarensau says: “Contacts should be ongoing. The church should not assume that a guest who plans to return will always do so the following week.”[[171]](#footnote-171) A one-month follow-up letter shows that the church really does care about them. Include a gift like a CD or a Starbucks card. Searcy comments: “When you make the effort to contact them a month later, not only do you remind them of their initial experience, but you also show them once more that they matter to you. It is a level of connection they are not expecting, but will be glad to receive.”[[172]](#footnote-172)

Persistence is important in bringing people to faith. The business world understands how important it is to be persistent in winning new business. Thomas S. Argyle, vice-president of sales for Union Oil, held the responsibility of winning major accounts for his company. When he went after a major account, he kept going back until he obtained the account. He was asked, “What happens if you keep going back and they never sign up?” He thought for a moment and said, “That never happened.”[[173]](#footnote-173) Jesus taught about the importance of importunity when He encouraged His followers to be persistent when asking for something with a good and noble goal (Luke 11:8). Quite honestly, a church rarely makes too many contacts.

# Effective Assimilation of New Attendees into the Local Church

Once the first-time guest becomes a second-time attender, the church leader must focus on the process of bringing that person to the saving knowledge of Jesus, if that commitment has not already been made, and introducing them as members of the local church. Searcy observes: “When your guests return for a second look, you’ve won 80 percent of the battle of gaining new regular attendees and have drastically increased the chances that they will begin a journey with Christ.”[[174]](#footnote-174) Sometimes friends pressure a first-time guest to come to the church, but when the first-time guest comes the second time, it is based on a personal choice. Church leaders should be grateful to God when a person comes back a second time, as it indicates God’s reward for diligent retention efforts. When church leaders partner with God to reach the unchurched, they can expect a significant harvest.

When a person comes back a second time, it indicates that the assimilation plan works. People come to church for the first time for a number of reasons; when they come back a second time they are looking for relationships with other people.[[175]](#footnote-175) They enter the church the second time hoping that someone will remember them as a person and maybe even remember their name. Gainsbrugh says: “If a visitor is remembered the following week when he returns as a second-time guest, he or she may give you ‘ten points’. However, if a greeter somehow remembers their name and face, it gets the ‘gold ring’ or 25 points of ‘bonding glue.’”[[176]](#footnote-176) The best way to help the greeter remember a person’s name is to have multiple contacts with that person. When a church is staffed with the correct number of greeters, each greeter has more time to take a personal interest in the first-time guest. Remembering someone is a key point to helping the second-time attender know that building a relationship at this “new church” is a possibility.

Rainer theorizes, “When assimilation takes place in a church, the pastor, staff, and other leaders are working fervently. Effective assimilation requires hard work. And the leaders must be visibly at the forefront of the efforts.”[[177]](#footnote-177) Effective assimilation requires knowing who attended the morning worship service and having a well-thought out program to reach each person who came as both a first and second-time guest. McIntosh and Martin, in their book, *Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church*, list four ways to effectively assimilate new attendees into the local church: (1) assimilation through friendship, (2) assimilation thought tasks/roles, (3) assimilation through small groups, (4) assimilation through spiritual growth.[[178]](#footnote-178)

## Assimilation through Friendship

While one cannot have too many friends, if a person has one true friend in life, he or she is fortunate indeed. Most people long for a true friend. Therefore, one of the most important things a church can offer people seeking a new place of worship is friendship. Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud. A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature.”[[179]](#footnote-179) McIntosh and Martin state: “Assimilation begins right at the heart of our need for relationship.”[[180]](#footnote-180) Church leaders must help new people in the church move from casual friendships to relational friendships where they experience a sense of belonging and accountability. When the local church does not help new attendees transition into meaningful friendships, people live with an unmet need. Alan Loy McGinnis observes:

People with no friends usually have a diminished capacity for sustaining any kind of love. They tend to go through a succession of marriages, be estranged from various family members, and have trouble getting along at work. On the other hand, those who learn how to love their friends tend to make long and fulfilling marriages, get along well with the people at work, and enjoy their children.[[181]](#footnote-181)

Church leaders must understand the importance of creating an environment in which new attendees can easily make new friends in the congregation. Win Arn and Charles Arn indicate that each person needs at least seven friends in order to stay in a church.[[182]](#footnote-182) When people find a true friend at church, they willingly sacrifice for one another while also enjoying the mutual benefits of nurturing one another spiritually.

## Assimilation through Tasks/Roles

In a perfect church, each member would have a specific task to accomplish. A task includes any job inside the church with kingdom purpose. Each member should only do one job; otherwise, fewer members will have opportunity to participate in the ministries of the church. Carl S. Dudley believes that boredom serves as the primary reason for why people leave the church.[[183]](#footnote-183) Barna further emphasizes the importance of involvement when he poignantly states: “Unless you become involved in the activities of your church, you will never truly feel satisfied with that church.[[184]](#footnote-184) Win Arn, a church growth expert, provides a means by which to measure the importance of each person’s involvement in the church. Performing tasks not only ensures the accomplishment of Kingdom work, but also ties individuals doing the tasks to one another. Arn’s research indicates that a declining church has twenty-seven tasks per 100 people and that each individual usually performs more than one task. This, in essence, limits the total number of participants. A plateaued church reflects a ratio of forty-three tasks to 100 people in attendance. However, growing and healthy churches demonstrate a ratio of sixty tasks for every 100 people in attendance, with almost no one doing more than one task.[[185]](#footnote-185)

People should not be assigned tasks just for the sake of keeping them busy. Frank Tillapaugh, pastor of Bear Valley Baptist Church, observes that a healthy church creates jobs by looking for new opportunities for effective ministry.[[186]](#footnote-186) When the church serves as Jesus did, it reflects God’s heart, for the “Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). The Apostle Paul also teaches on the importance of spiritual gifts and how everyone should participate in the ministry through the body of Christ. “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor. 12:7, 12, 27). The old adage, “Many hands make light work,” clearly applies in the context of the ministries of the church. Leaders must help congregants work together in the kingdom of Christ. A children’s song summarizes this concept very well: “When we all pull together, together, together. When we all pull together, how happy we’ll be. For your work is my work and our work is God’s work; when we all pull together, how happy we’ll be.”

## Assimilation through Small Groups

Groups of twelve to fifteen people provide the type of fellowship intrinsically needed for quenching the human need for community. The Early Church met regularly in homes for several centuries. Although the church cannot return to the era of the Early Church, it illustrates the importance of carving out time and creating opportunities for people to meet together in small groups. McIntosh and Martin indicate that “church growth studies have found that for a church to assimilate new people effectively it must have an average of seven small groups for every one hundred adult members.”[[187]](#footnote-187) Furthermore, they identify four essential ingredients that add to the assimilation mix: (1) sharing, (2) study, (3) support, and (4) service.[[188]](#footnote-188)

### Sharing

Charles H. Spurgeon observed: “A good character is the best tombstone. Those who loved you, and were helped by you, will remember you when forget-me-nots are withered. Carve you name on hearts, and not on marble.”[[189]](#footnote-189) A small group must create an environment where people can share on an intimate level. Whether an individual is facing difficult life circumstances or celebrating life’s victories, a small group offers the community in which to express these situations. McIntosh and Martin comment: “We were created in God’s image with a yearning to commune with God, and with other relational beings. We long to know and to be known on levels transcending the superficial plane.”[[190]](#footnote-190) When people communicate on an intimate level, it enables believers to more easily fulfill the Scriptures’ admonition to carry one another’s burdens and, in this way, fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). When a person shares the details of his or her life with a Christian friend, it not only serves as a catharsis for the person sharing, but also encourages the listener to intercede for the friend’s needs.

### Study

As people study theBible together, they become better followers of Christ. Dwight D. Eisenhower observed: “To read the Bible is to take a trip to a fair land where the spirit is strengthened and faith renewed.”[[191]](#footnote-191) Towns, Stetzer, and Bird believe “discipleship best happens in community.”[[192]](#footnote-192) When believers study God’s Word together, they not only renew their minds, but also permit the Spirit to challenge them for duties of service. As a result of Bible study, people experience changes in every area of their lives. Their work ethic improves; their minds are transformed. Consequently, the Spirit of God directs every part of their day. The daily renewal through the Word of God creates excitement and individuals in the group are encouraged to a life of excellence through their corporate efforts.

### Support

Providing support for a friend in need could require sacrificial giving. On other occasions, sharing valuable life experiences can help a friend realize they are not alone in life. William Feather comments: “Nothing happens to you that hasn’t happened to someone else.”[[193]](#footnote-193) As people become better acquainted, they more readily share experiences that help create a new filter for life. People long for genuine and loyal friends who will readily help during the difficult times of life. Christians, above all, should make sure their actions match their words, as that will lead to an abundance of friends.

### Service

Genuine believers should exemplify the quality of service by meeting the needs of other people. As a small group, believers can accomplish extraordinary things for God. God himself makes an incredible promise to people who care for the less fortunate: “Mercy to the needy is a loan to God, and God pays back those loans in full” (Prov. 19:17, *The Message*). John Wesley says: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can and as long as you can.”[[194]](#footnote-194) New opportunities will present themselves as small group participants seek God’s direction regarding service to other people in need.

## Assimilation through Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth, like all growth, generally comes gradually over time. Individuals can encourage spiritual growth by purposely developing a Bible reading plan, participating in regular Bible study, and being in close association with people in a small group who also desire to grow spiritually. At the age of seventy-five, someone asked Henry Wadsworth Longfellow how he continued to write so well. He pointed to an apple tree full of blooms and said, “That is a very old apple tree, but the blossoms this year seem more beautiful than ever before. That old tree grows a little new wood each year, and I suppose it is out of the new wood that these blossoms come. Like the apple tree, I try to grow a little new wood each year.”[[195]](#footnote-195)

God desires that every believer reach full maturity in Christ. If a believer stops growing spiritually, it indicates a separation from the source of life. Jesus expresses this relationship: “Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can’t bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can’t bear fruit unless you are joined with me” (John 15:4, *The Message*). Therefore, full maturity occurs as both the church and its individual members live in close connection to the Lord. Jesus’ goal is to assimilate new members to the body of Christ and into the fellowship of a local church. Inside this protective setting, God’s people receive encouragement, nourishment, and blessing.

# Conclusion

Initially, a plateaued or declining church must desire growth and willingly change its non-growth habits so as to encourage growth. The next step involves education regarding church growth. This could include self-education along with the use of a church growth consultant who can help the church assess the barriers that inhibit current growth and apply basic formulas or principles that will encourage growth. Areas for review should include adequate parking, size of auditorium, and proportionate classroom space.

Growing leaders lead growing churches. Therefore, church leaders must make assessments to identify personal weaknesses that inhibit church growth. Growing leaders engage in continual self-education and receive mentoring by other qualified leaders. As church leaders grow, they discover blind spots that reduce the effectiveness of church growth and become aware of basic vision limiters. Church leaders must always keep their eyes on the goal by developing strategies to bring people into the church as well as creating policies that help assimilate these new people into the life of the church.

One of the most important goals for church leaders includes reaching first-time guests. First time-guests should receive VIP treatment such as a special parking place, an appropriate gift, refreshments, and, most of all, a warm greeting and introduction to other people. Retention of first-time guests requires an aggressive follow-up plan so as to contact the first-time guest up to four times during the first week after their initial visit. Churches that display high expectations and persistence in this area usually have a high retention of first-time guests.

The ultimate goal of the church is to assimilate new attendees into the body of Christ and into the local church. The assimilation process requires the development of friendships within the church, personal involvement in the ministries of the church, participation in small group ministries where individuals can share, study, support, and serve, and spiritual growth through an on-going connection with Christ.

Chapter 4: DESCRIPTION OF FIELD PROJECT

Chapter 2 provides a theological basis for using business strategies to stimulate church growth. Chapter 3 underscores the necessity of examining the successes gleaned by other church leaders from their own endeavors to promote church growth. This chapter provides description of the field project in terms of its preparation, implementation, and assessment. Ministry leaders can implement the details and procedures of this pilot project in order to facilitate meaningful ad Christ-like growth in their own congregations.

# Preparation of the Project

## Personal Experiences

Preparation for the project actually began when I accepted my first pastorate in 1968. During my five-year tenure, the attendance doubled and the financial income tripled. However, my lack of training in church growth strategies, along with the absence of a mentor, made the growth an exercise in shear willpower. Although my first two churches had a seven-year history of decline in common, the second church was an even greater challenge than the first.

The second church, which I began pastoring in 1975, struggled with internal discord, so for the first year, the attendance declined sharply. Although I worked as hard as I had at my first pastorate, the attendance experienced a period of non-growth for the four years following the decline. At the end of ten years, the attendance had doubled; however, I had learned very little about church growth principles. The third church I pastored was one I had started in 1985. The church grew over a period of twelve years. At this point I had some ideas of how to grow a church, but they were vague.

In 1998, I launched my inquiry into church growth when I became the first director of the Southern California Founders Fund (SCFF). The SCFF was created by the Southern California District Council Assemblies of God to assist those who attended their churches to develop an estate plan. It provided an opportunity for individuals to prepare a will, gift annuity, or charitable remainder trust. The SCFF was also responsible for making loans to member churches. It worked in partnership with the General Council Assemblies of God Financial Services Group. During my eight years with the Founders Fund, I visited more than 150 churches. In addition to helping the churches develop their planned giving, I made observations and drew conclusions about why some churches were growing and others were not.

Because the first church I pastored could not afford to pay a full-time salary, I obtained a tax preparation business. At that time, I did not know that this would prove to be a mandate from God to stay in the business world. When I moved to Springfield, Missouri to attend the Assemblies of God Seminary in 1973, I worked at Gospel Publishing House as a supervisor in the Customer Services Department. I ensured the correct handling of adjustments to customers’ orders and assisted with collections.

Once again, because of the size of my second church, I continued in the tax preparation business. I also started taking courses in business at California State University San Bernardino, receiving the equivalent of a Bachelor of Arts in business.

I planted a church in 1985 while working for a large CPA firm for the next two years. In 1987, I started my own tax preparation business, which has grown to preparing more than 1,000 tax returns in addition to offering bookkeeping and payroll services as well as representing individuals before the IRS. We have four full-time employees with additional employees during tax season

In 2006, I served as executive pastor assisting my son in establishing a church plant. During the following two years, I developed a plan for turning first-time guests into second-time attendees, and ultimately to members of the church. I combined my experience with the Founders Fund, pastoral understanding, and business knowledge to develop the plan. One of my pastor friends asked me to put some of my plan in writing so he could try it, which I did. In less than a year, he enjoyed a fifty percent increase in attendance. This was one of my incentives to focus on church growth for my project. Simply applying biblically-based business strategies to a local church that was plateaued or declining in attendance produced positive results.

## Finding Churches to Participate in the Project

In December 2011, I began my search for churches willing to participate in this project. In order for a church to qualify as a participant, it had to (1) have an average attendance of less than 200 people, (2) demonstrate a three-year period of non-growth or decline in church attendance, and (3) provide historical attendance records in order to perform growth comparisons.

Throughout the search for participants, eighty churches in Southern California received a letter of inquiry.[[196]](#footnote-196) When anyone affirmed interest in participating in the project, I personally visited the pastor and his or her church. Each pastor completed a Personal Information Sheet.[[197]](#footnote-197) During the initial interview, which lasted about three hours, the pastor received a summary of the project.[[198]](#footnote-198) Initially, the program appeared simple, while in reality, gathering records and recording them required detailed explanations. In order to oversee the progress, I visited each church in the program one Sunday a month, both to help explain the program to people involved in the process and to make my own observations.

Initially, three churches in Southern California and one in Northern California opted to participate in the project. However, due to the distance from the church in Northern California, the church did not become part of the project, and another church in Southern California was added. In the end, all four churches were located in Southern California.

# Execution of the Project

After identifying four churches to participate in the project, execution of the plan could commence. Three of the churches implemented the program from February through October 2012. The church in Northern California was replaced by another church that implemented the program from July through October 2012. Due to privacy issues, each church will be referred to as Church A, B, C, or D.

To commence the project, I met with each pastor to outline the entire project by reviewing a four-page document I created entitled, “Church Growth Business Concepts: Church Growth Proposal for Churches under 200.”[[199]](#footnote-199) The two to three-hour session explained the process for implementing biblically based business strategies for church growth both in attendance and finances.

## The Basics of the Project

The project entailed a specific process whereby the church could track visitors and follow-up with guests as well as regular attendees. Involvement in the church was limited to those areas that affected the project. Suggestions regarding other areas and ministries of the church remained outside the purview of this project. The process included three basic aspects: (1) tracking the attendance of visitors and regular attendees, (2) creating a follow-up process for visitors and regular attendees, and (3) establishing a phone answering system.

### Tracking Visitors and Regular Attendees

In order to track visitors and regular attendees, the church introduced the use of the “Getting to Know You… (a little better) Card.”[[200]](#footnote-200) Each family present during the Sunday morning worship service filled out the card. The pastor set the example by completing the card as well. Musicians played softly in the background while people completed the card and ushers collected them. The church repeated this process for the next two Sundays so as to include individuals not present the first Sunday.

The following week, the church input the information collected from the “Getting to Know You Cards” into an electronic spreadsheet. Based on the list, the church prepared printed nametags for each person and distributed them to attendees the following Sunday. On the second Sunday service, people who had not yet completed a “Getting to Know You Card” were given time to fill out the card and return it to an usher.

Starting with the second Sunday service and every Sunday afterwards, the pastor allotted time for everyone to finish the Welcome Card.[[201]](#footnote-201) This weekly exercise played an essential role in the program. The pastor completed his card while the congregation filled in their cards and ushers collected the cards with the offering. The Welcome Cards provide a means of communication suitable for both regular attendees and guests. Most high assimilation churches use a similar card. One of the many advantages of doing this together as a congregation is that guests are not singled out. They simply do what everyone else is doing.

Each week, the church staff tallied the cards and recorded the attendance in an electronic spreadsheet. In order to provide accurate attendance information for each Sunday service, staff also tapped into other records. For instance, the nametags that were not picked up indicate the people who were absent. Children’s attendance was tallied by checking the sign-in records from the age appropriate ministries. Giving records also helped determine the attendance of all givers.

### Establishing a Follow-Up Plan

Each Monday, the church compiled the data collected during the Sunday morning service. If a regular attender was absent one time, but a staff member knew why, no follow-up was needed. However, if a regular attender was absent and no one knew why, the person was sent a “Missing in Action” Letter (MIA Letter).[[202]](#footnote-202) If the regular attender had been absent two or more Sundays, the church personally contacted the person with a phone call or a visit.

When a person gave an offering for the first time, it triggered another follow-up system. First, the church would send the first-time giver a “Thank You Letter.”[[203]](#footnote-203) Second, the first-time giver received three additional contacts that week: (1) an email designed to arrive on Monday between three and four p.m., (2) a phone call, and (3) a 30-second visit to his or her home with a small gift (by Friday afternoon). Each contact should extend an invitation for the person to attend the coming Sunday worship service.

First, second, and third-time guests should receive a letter from the church;[[204]](#footnote-204) if the guest made a contribution, the letter should express appreciation for the contribution.[[205]](#footnote-205) Once the guest had attended the church three times, the pastor or a staff member contacted the guest and arranged for a time to meet. The purpose of the meeting was to assimilate the guest into the local church. If a first-time guest did not return for a month, the church sent him or her an email or letter indicating that the church was still thinking about them.[[206]](#footnote-206)

### Implementing an Answering Service

A final component of the project included the establishment of an answering service to cover the church phone when the office was closed. The answering service provided basic information such as service times and church address. In addition, the answering service forwarded emergency calls to the proper staff person. All project participants received this service.

## Implementing the Project at Church A

On Tuesday, January 3, 2012, Pastor A and I met for about three hours to discuss the project. Pastor A had served on staff at the church for five years before becoming senior pastor. He had been the senior pastor for only eight months before the start of the project. This historic Assemblies of God church reached its peak attendance in the 1960s and averaged 130 people prior to implementing the project. The sanctuary seats about 275 people, and they have ample parking and educational buildings. Two-thirds of the church is white and one-third is Hispanic. The pastor is Hispanic and in his 40s. This neighborhood church is located on the corner of well-traveled streets. The church represents a family church with a variety of age groups. Pastor A expressed excitement regarding the project and we set a Sunday to begin the program.

I attended Church A on Sunday, January 15, 2012. Pastor A did an excellent job explaining the purpose of the “Getting to Know You … (a little better) Cards.”[[207]](#footnote-207) As the church implemented the project, providing a strong biblical explanation for the purpose of the program was crucial. The congregation needed to understand that people would be added to the Kingdom of God as a result of this project. Also, the pastor explained the rationale for collecting birthdates, mailing address, email, and so forth.

Since this card created the foundation for the whole project, Pastor A spent about ten minutes presenting the concept. The “Getting to Know You … (a little better) Cards” were distributed, completed, and collected. Pastor A’s explanation generated excitement within the church. While everyone completed their cards, the pastor set the example by completing his card for his family. Musicians played softly during this time.

On Thursday, January 19, 2012, my office input the information from the “Getting to Know You … (a little better) Cards” into an electronic spreadsheet. I visited Church A on Thursday, January 26, 2012 in order to train the local project coordinator on how to use the electronic spreadsheet to input the information each week.

“Launch Sunday” for Church A was scheduled for Sunday, February 12, 2012. The church had pre-printed nametags available for each person to wear. On the first Sunday of the project, approximately 2 percent of the congregation resisted the concept of wearing a nametag. However, after a short explanation, everyone wore their nametags. The local project coordinator, two volunteers, and I helped people find the alphabetically arranged nametags. The volunteers wrote nametags for people who did not have one, corrected misspelled names, and created them for first-time guests. During the service, Pastor A explained the program again and encouraged people to greet a number of people. Interestingly, the excitement level during the meet and greet time increased dramatically with the people wearing nametags. Since everyone was wearing a nametag, visitors were easily greeted. Ushers distributed and collected the completed “Welcome” Cards.[[208]](#footnote-208) These cards, along with the nametags that were not taken, formed the basis for determining service attendance. The church kept a record of misspelled names, names of people without a tag, as well as visitor information so that the information could be properly recorded for the next week.

On Wednesday, February 15, 2012, I met with the project coordinator of Church A. We discussed how to input the weekly information and how to send out the “MIA Letters,” along with the first, second, and third-time guests’ letters.[[209]](#footnote-209)

Chris Carrigan, my associate for this project, and I attended Church A on Sunday, February 19, 2012. During this special youth emphasis service, the pastor dedicated two babies. Approximately forty-five first-time guests attended this service due to the baby dedications. This high visitor volume definitely taxed the registration system. Nevertheless, fifteen people came forward for salvation that day.

On Tuesday, March 6, 2012, Pastor A, his staff, and Chris Carrigan met me at my office to evaluate the project. The project was moving along very well. On Friday, April 20, 2012, Chris Carrigan and I met with Pastor A to drop off supplies and review the project progress. I visited Church A again on Sunday, July 1, 2012 to observe the project. Ushers, greeters, and individuals doing the backroom work were all functioning well. I made my final visit to Church A on Sunday, November 4, 2012 in order to prepare a final report on their progress. The church continued on task and was doing well.

Through working with Church A, I learned that implementing the project requires more than an outline of the process. Therefore, Chris Carrigan visited the church regularly so as to help them stay on track and assist in the training of ushers on the proper treatment of first-time guests.

## Implementing the Project at Church B

On Tuesday, January 10, 2012, I received a call from Pastor B in response to my Invitation Letter to Pastors.[[210]](#footnote-210) Church B had an attendance of about thirty and had experienced continual decline over the past years. Pastor B had served as the pastor for six years, but also worked a full-time secular job. The previous pastor had served the church for approximately forty years. Although predominantly an older, white congregation, Pastor B is from Samoa and is in his 50s. This neighborhood church is located on a busy street, has adequate parking and educational buildings for their eighty-seat sanctuary. The church had recently started a Sunday afternoon Hispanic service, pastored by a Hispanic pastor.

On Tuesday, January 17, 2012, Pastor B and I met to discuss the details regarding implementing the project. On Sunday, January 29, 2012, I spoke at a combined service for Church B and the Hispanic congregation with the assistance of an interpreter. The Hispanic congregation received forty-five new members that Sunday. The Hispanic congregation attendance was double the attendance at Church B. The “Getting to Know You … (a little better) Cards” were distributed to all attendees. However, only Church B would participate in the program. Due to the combination of program participants and non-participants, the first service was a bit confusing.

Church B started the project on Sunday, February 26, 2012. Nametags were available; thirty-two people attended the service and people responded positively to wearing nametags. Chris Carrigan, my associate, helped this church each week by printing the nametags, keeping attendance records, and mailing the follow-up letters because the pastor worked full-time outside of the church and secretarial help was not available. The church could not find a volunteer to help coordinate the weekly office work.

I attended Church B on Sunday, March 4, 2012, to assist in distributing the nametags and explaining the program and the purpose of the “Welcome Cards.”[[211]](#footnote-211) Due to a lack of volunteers, Chris or I tried to be at the church most Sundays to ensure the effectiveness of the project. Sunday, March 19 and 26, 2012, Chris and I attended the morning worship at Church B as well as enjoyed lunch with the pastor after the service.

On Friday, April 20, 2012, Chris and I met with Pastor B to discuss the project. Everything was going well. When I attended the church on Sunday, June 24, 2012, some congregants expressed hesitation about using the nametags because they already knew each other. All four churches in the project required more “hand-holding” than I anticipated. However, Church B required additional support due to the lack of staff and volunteers.

## Implementing Project at Church C

Thursday, January 19, 2012, I met with Pastor C to discuss the project. Pastor C had responded positively to my project inquiry letter. We discussed the details of the project and he excitedly agreed to participate in the project. The church is located on the corner of two busy streets and near some businesses. The sanctuary seats approximately 150 people, but their parking area does not provide adequate space for their sanctuary capacity. In addition, they have limited educational buildings. This predominantly white congregation has existed for fifty years. The current pastor is white, in his 50s, and has served the church for ten years. Under Pastor C, the church experienced a record average attendance of 130 people; however, attendance had a period of non-growth for the last couple of years.

The weekend of March 4, I met with Pastor C to explain the use of the “Getting to Know You … (a little better) Cards.” On Sunday morning, the pastor explained and distributed the cards. On Tuesday, March 6, 2012, Chris Carrigan worked with the church staff to train them on how to input the data from the cards onto the electronic spreadsheet. He taught them how to print nametags and how to do the proper follow-up.

Chris Carrigan and I helped launch the project at Church C on Sunday, April 1, 2012. People only expressed slight resistance to the use of the nametags. With 145 people in attendance, the initial process created some confusion. Nevertheless, people expressed enthusiasm at being able to greet each person by name during the greeting portion of the service. As a very organized church, Church C staffed the project with adequate assistance, both on Sundays and for the office work during the week. The pastor willingly made some staffing adjustments to facilitate the process.

On Thursday, April 19, 2012, Chris Carrigan and I met Pastor C for lunch and discussed the progress of the project. On Mother’s Day, Sunday, May 13, 2012, the church had a lovely service and implemented the project in an efficient manner. A minister friend who visited the service that Sunday commented that when he called the church for service time information after normal business hours on the weekend, a person answered the phone and provided the information he needed. On Sunday, June 3, 2012, I attended the church service. Again, my observation was that the project was going well.

On Father’s Day, Sunday, June 17, 2012, the church recognized all the fathers with appreciation and a small gift. Pastor C, Chris, and I met on Tuesday, July 3, 2012, to discuss the progress of the project. Pastor C felt the project was going well. They had painted the church and were planning to open some vacant land they owned in order to provide additional parking.

## Implementing Project at Church D

As presbyter of the Desert Section in the Southern California District Council of the Assemblies of God (SCDC), I provide general oversight to all of the churches in the section. In particular, District Affiliated (DA) churches report to the presbyter. A DA church is one that is supervised by their District office. The District Superintendent appoints their pastor and board while a General Council (GC) church elects its own pastor and board. While I was away, the pastor of a DA church resigned. Consequently, I became the interim pastor of Church D in August 2011. Since I was not present at that time, Chris Carrigan became the executive pastor and another pastor joined the board. Guest speakers filled the pulpit until I returned home.

Church D, located in a rural area about one mile from the main highway, averaged between thirty and forty people each week. This white congregation has always had a white pastor. The sanctuary seats approximately 100 people and the church has adequate parking for their facility. However, they lack educational rooms and their 4,000 square foot facility did not have air conditioning, which poses a problem in a desert climate. The average attendance for July 2012 was twenty-eight. The church had been in a non-growth period in attendance, but recent months indicate a decline.

Chris Carrigan began to implement the project at Church D in August 2012. In accordance with the basic project plan, he distributed the “Getting to Know You … (a little better)Cards” and entered the data into the electronic spreadsheet. He printed nametags and recorded the attendance for each service. The church installed a sign on the main highway to point first-time guests to the church. They also designated special parking for handicap and first-time guests.

On Sunday, September 16, 2012, I attended Church D for the first time as the interim pastor. Some people expressed resistance to using nametags, so I took time to more fully explain the project. Chris Carrigan and I met on Wednesday, September 19, 2012 to organize the church office so that the project could operate more efficiently.

On Sunday, September 23, 2012, Church D implemented the project process with greater ease. I encouraged people to greet as many people as possible during the “Friendship Time.” Previous to the service, I had given one person a $10 gift card to Starbucks with the instructions to give the gift card to the seventh person who shook his hand.

I participated in Sunday services on October 14, 2012 and noted that the project was working smoothly. I preached at the church on Sunday, October 21, 2012, and monitored the progress of the project. However, this was the last Sunday the church participated in the project.

# Results of the Project

## General Observations

Unfortunately, none of the four churches followed the program 100 percent. The church with the best level of participation adopted about half of the program’s processes. The level to which the church adopted the program’s processes usually depended on the senior pastor’s involvement. As a result of implementing this project, I learned that adopting the program for church growth also required the church to change its culture and attitudes toward first-time guests.

All four of the participating churches had a weak greeter and usher staff. Some first-time guests at the two largest churches (Church A and C) occasionally arrived at the morning worship service more than one hour late and there would be no one to greet them. At first, none of the four churches had greeters available to welcome first-time guests after the first fifteen minutes of the morning worship. At the start of the program, none of the churches provided assistance to first-time guests as they made their way from the parking lot to the church building. Initially, none of the churches used a communication card or had a plan for following up first, second, and third-time guests. At the beginning of the project, none of the churches took attendance; therefore, they had no means by which to know which regular attendees were absent.

The use of nametags for the morning worship service attendees had three unexpected results for me. First, during the “Friendship Time,” there was much more excitement and conversation with both the regular attendees and the first-time guests. No matter how small the church is, an individual usually does not know everyone attending the church. Some people who consider the church their home church may come infrequently, and first, second, and third-time guests have yet to meet most of the people attending the morning worship service. With the nametags, people could easily address one another by name, which resulted in greater participation during that part of the service.

Second, the attendance began to increase even though other parts of the program had not yet been implemented. When a church becomes intentional about church growth, regular attendees become more interested in inviting their friends to attend church. Third, since all regular attendees had pre-printed nametags available, unused tags identified absentees. The church could use this information to help them connect with regular attendees who had been absent.

## Results at Church A

Church A participated in the program for five months. For three years their attendance had no-growth in attendance. The church attendance for the same five-month period in 2009 was 170; in 2010 it was 160; and in 2011 it was 166. Their average attendance for the corresponding five-month period from 2009 to 2011 was 165. During 2012, the average was 176 for the five-month period, which indicated an increase of 6 percent over the same five-month period in 2011. If you compare the last month of the project, July, the figures are as follows: July 2009 was 149; July 2010 was 127 and July 2011was 158 for a three-year average July of 145. July 2012 was 178, which indicated an increase of 23 percent. By comparing July of 2011 to July of 2012, one can identify an increase of 13 percent. Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 indicate the attendance trends from 2009 through July 2012.



Figure 4.1. Church A: Attendance 2009.



Figure 4.2. Church A: Attendance 2010.



Figure 4.3. Church A: Attendance 2011.



Figure 4.4. Church A: Attendance 2012

## Results at Church B

Church B was in the program for twelve weeks and, of the four churches in the program, had the most difficulty following the program, which created challenges in measure the effort of the project. Church B had experienced a no-growth in attendance for the previous three years. The attendance in 2009 was 37; 40 in 2010; and 38 in 2011. The average attendance for the same twelve week period in 2009 was 41 people; in 2010, the attendance was 43; in 2011, it was 41; and in 2012, it was 36, which indicates a decrease of 17 percent. However, as the 2011 chart indicates, there was a sharp decline with December 2011 averaging 28 people. The information for 2012 indicates an increase in attendance—from 34 people to 43 people, which is a 26 percent increase. The average attendance for the first four weeks of the program was thirty-two people; average attendance for the last four weeks was forty-one people, an increase of 28 percent. Attendance records for the four weeks before the start of the program stood at 39 people while the last four weeks of the program, attendance averaged 41 people, an increase of 5 percent. The February attendance for 2009 to 2011 was 47, while the average May attendance for that same period was 41, which indicates a decrease of 15 percent. The May attendance records for that same period indicate 41; the decrease between the averages of February compared to May was 15 percent. February attendance for 2012 was 39; therefore, the church could expect May’s attendance to be 15 percent less for 2012, which would be 34. The actual attendance was 41, or an increase of 21 percent of expected attendance. This is probably the best figure. Figures 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, and 4.8 indicate the attendance trends from 2009 until May 20, 2012.

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Figure 4.5. Church B: Attendance 2009.



Figure 4.6. Church B: Attendance 2010.



Figure 4.7. Church B: Attendance 2011.

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Figure 4.8. Church B: Attendance 2012.

## Results at Church C

Church C participated in the project for seven months. Of the four churches in the project, Church C followed the program most consistently. However, Church C had one major barrier to church growth—limited parking space. Church C had additional land to expand their parking, but this was not done during the project phase. The church had no-growth in attendance for the seven-month period in 2009 (148) and 2010 (149) and then declined in 2011 (134). Based on this trend, the projected attendance in 2012 for the same period would have been 119. However, it appears the project gave some impetus to the church attendance, producing an average attendance for the same seven-month period in 2012 of 149. This indicates an 11 percent increase over 2011 attendance and a 25 percent increase over where the trend was leading for 2012. Figures 4.9, 4.10, 4.11, and 4.12 indicate the attendance trends from 2009 through October 2012.



Figure 4.9. Church C: Attendance 2009.



Figure 4.10. Church C: Attendance 2010.



Figure 4.11. Church C: Attendance 2011.

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Figure 4.12. Church C: Attendance 2012.

## Results at Church D

In August 2012, I became the interim pastor of Church D. Because I was still working on this project in Springfield, Missouri, I had to direct the project from a distance. The church participated in the project for twelve weeks. Due to a lack of historical data, the project information only reflects the current statistics. This made the project more difficult to analyze because of the shorter period of time especially if you try to compare it to the other churches. The average attendance for the month prior to beginning the project (July 2012) was 28. Chris Carrigan, my associate, started the program in August 2012. During the months of August and part of September, the church had guest speakers.

The church quickly responded to the program with the following average attendances: August 2012 was 31; September 2012 was 42; and October 2012 (three weeks) was 52. Church D experienced a growth of 86 percent between July to October, 2012. Figure 4.13 indicates the attendance trends from July to October 2012.



Figure 4.13. Church D: Attendance July-October 2012.

## Summary of Results

This project targeted churches under 200 people in attendance because, generally speaking, churches with over 200 in attendance have already figured out a way to grow. Furthermore, this project focused on plateaued or declining churches in an attempt to avert them from becoming part of the 3,000 to 4,000 churches in America that close their doors each year.[[212]](#footnote-212) The Assemblies of God averaged 239 churches closing annually for the past ten years (2002-2011) for a total of 2,390 churches closed.[[213]](#footnote-213) The Assemblies of God has about 6,000 churches with an attendance of under 200 that are plateaued or declining in attendance.[[214]](#footnote-214) However, each of those churches, given the opportunity, could begin to grow.

God designed the church to grow because growth is an aspect of the *imago Dei*. Christ promises to build His church. Therefore, it is incomprehensible that only some churches can grow. However, church growth is never accidental, but requires careful planning and skillful and diligent execution. This project provides a proven plan to help churches begin their growth cycle.

In order for a church to become a high assimilation church with a 74 percent chance that a first-time guest will become a second-time attender usually requires a cultural and attitude adjustment regarding first-time guests, which can be both painful and time-consuming. Generally speaking, it takes two to three years for a church to become a high assimilation church.

This project focused mainly on growth in attendance without changing existing programs. However, financial growth is generally a product of attendance growth, especially when accompanied by Christ’s teaching about money. I noticed that as the individual churches began to grow, they also wanted to look at other areas in the church that needed to change in order to continue the growth—a healthy byproduct of this project.

As a result of implementing the project, each of the four churches experienced growth. Over a 25-week period of time, Church A saw a 6 percent increase in attendance. Church B, which struggled to implement the program, experienced a 21 percent growth in 15 weeks. Church C, which had the necessary staff to implement the program, enjoyed an increase of 11 percent in 31weeks. Although Church D only participated in the program for 12 weeks, it realized a growth of 86 percent. When annualizing the growth at each church, one must consider that the growth for an entire year would reflect even greater growth than the results evidences in this project. I measured the churches’ growth in a number of difference ways and reported the one that I thought well represented the individual church’s growth. I served as a consultant for Churches A, B and C, whereas in church D I served as pastor, but for a very short period of time.

Although each participating church demonstrated growth, the rate of growth varied. Each church brought a unique set of circumstances, backgrounds, and hindrances to the table. For instance, Church A dealt with the loss of both the youth pastor and music pastor during the year of the project. The pastor of Church B worked full-time outside the church and a Hispanic ministry, led by another pastor, met in his facility. The Hispanic ministry was more than twice as large as the regular congregation of Church B. However, because of internal conflicts, the Hispanic ministry disassociated itself from Church B after a short time. The sanctuary at Church C seats 150 people and attendance averages at their maximum capacity, but they only have parking for about twenty vehicles. In addition, Church C lacked educational facilities. Church D experienced a pastoral change mid-year and their attendance plummeted rapidly beginning in 2012. Structurally, Church D had become a highly dysfunctional church. Despite the challenges the churches faced, each church grew as a result of implementing the principles set forth in the project. A perfect church does not exist because every church has baggage; nevertheless, when a church desires to grow by implementing biblical principles, God will enable them to reach their goals.

The results of the project indicate that creating a plan to intentionally reach out to regular attendees and follow up with first, second, and third-time guests, truly reaps growth in a church. Unsaved people long to connect in meaningful ways to people who genuinely care. Consequently, as a church reaches out to guests and regular attendees in a loving and personal manner, the church can experience numerical growth.

# The Project’s Contribution to Ministry

This project should prove helpful on several levels. First, it will provide hope to pastors of either plateaued or declining churches. They will be able to see that the implementation of business strategies can increase both attendance and finances.

Second, leaders will learn how to assimilate both regular and new attendees into the local church. They will learn that by systematically placing people into ministry opportunities, people will enjoy a sense of fulfillment as they work together for common causes.

Third, pastors will learn methods to implement stewardship principles. In turn, this will help the church meet its financial needs and experience growth in spiritual maturity among attendees, which generates collective enthusiasm.

Fourth, because the church will have a plan for assimilation, new believers will quickly be integrated into the life and ministry of the church. New believers will be encouraged to join discipleship programs for spiritual growth.

Fifth, once churches begin to grow through the application of business strategies, a ripple effect will begin to occur. The churches will begin to look for other ways ministries could create growth. With the increased attendance, financial giving will increase, thereby enabling the church to develop its ministry to children and youth. They might begin giving more toward local and global missions, which will result in further spiritual, financial, and numerical growth. This positive snowball effect will bring both growth and enthusiasm to the local church.

Last, the Assemblies of God, in general, will benefit from this project as declining or plateaued churches begin to experience growth. Implementing the basic business principles presented in this project will reduce the decline in attendance among AG churches. As pastors experience growth first hand, they will share their experiences with other pastors, thereby creating a cycle of continual church growth among previously plateaued or declining churches. Ultimately, implementation of this project could help avoid the unnecessary closure of AG churches and break the cycle of declining or plateauing churches among the Fellowship. God desires to expand His Kingdom through the church; therefore, He has made abundant provisions for each church to grow at His determined rate.

Chapter 5: PROJECT SUMMARY

Chapter 5 brings together essential information from the previous chapters. This summary includes an evaluation of the project, viewing both keys to the project’s effectiveness and suggestions for project’s improvement. The next part includes implications of the project, followed by recommendations to leaders in the Southern California District Council of the Assemblies of God. Finally, the summary will conclude with recommendations for future study.

# Evaluation of the Project

## Keys to Project Effectiveness

While there were numerous keys to this project’s effectiveness, there are nine that I would like to highlight in this section: (1) availability and access to many churches, (2) a planned outline to follow, (3) training of staff, (4) an associate available to assist in the program, (5) forms and letters, (6) a 24/7 answering service, (7) technology, (8) nametags, and (9) offering coffee and refreshments.

The first key to the project’s effectiveness centered on the fact that I had many churches available to contact. Finding willing participants for a project can be rather challenging, but I knew or was familiar with many of the Assemblies of God pastors in Southern California. Two hundred churches reside within a two-hour drive from my home, which enabled me to fulfill my commitment of visiting each church involved in the project at least once a month. The openness of my fellow ministers made the initial contact relatively easy. Furthermore, the fact that I am a minister and pastor increased my ability to communicate with the participant pastors in familiar terms. My sensitivity to their circumstances permitted me to make reasonable requests. The pastors intuitively knew that all conversations would be held in confidence.

Second, the project enjoyed success due to the development of concepts previously implemented throughout years of ministry. The four-page outline, “Church Growth Business Concepts,” addressed the major points of the project. It introduced the project by providing statistics regarding the number of churches under 200, 100, and 50, respectively, and painting a clear picture regarding how many churches are plateaued or declining in attendance. The document also extended a sense of assurance that adherence to the program would produce at least a 3-5 percent annual increase in attendance. After capturing the prospective participant’s attention, the document laid out an easy to follow plan for use in the church.

The easy-to-understand document showed the pastor how he or she could implement the program without becoming overwhelmed. Furthermore, the overview document discussed a proven way to handle the ordinary business of the church in an efficient manner by addressing issues such as the importance of properly managing the telephone, finances, attendance, and communications. These components play a critical role in the success of the program, even though they might seem mundane or rudimentary. The creation of a sense of community in the body of Christ also received emphasis.

Although the project design anticipated the full implementation of the entire process, it soon became evident that implementing the entire program simultaneously was almost impossible. However, the project was effective even if the church could only incorporate certain aspects of the plan. While all of the parts working together would bring the most effective results, the incorporation of one aspect still brought positive results. In other words, the project did not become ineffective due to not implementing the entire process.

Third, success relied on the training of church staff and volunteers who could follow through with the processes. Initially I expected to give the senior pastor information, and he or she could implement it from that point. However, I discovered that being involved in training the greeters, ushers, and office personnel was indispensable to effectiveness. Providing continuous training through the life of the project was essential to overall success.

Fourth, the inclusion of an associate enhanced the success of the project. Chris Carrigan, who previously served as the executive pastor of a church that grew from 125 to 1,400 in attendance, provided invaluable training to the churches on a weekly basis. Also, having two different people present at the project churches on Sundays added to the monitoring of the project. Chris assisted with the tedious work of tracking attendance and preparing the analysis charts.

Fifth, the success of the project relied heavily on the forms and sample letters because they permitted each church to begin the program immediately. The carefully designed Registration Card asked just enough information to cover all the bases while the Welcome Card, used on a weekly basis, provided regular attendees and guests a means for communicating with the staff. By providing these forms and sample letters, the church did not have to create things from scratch and simplified the weekly follow-up process.

Sixth, the use of an answering service enhanced the effectiveness of the project. Implementing the use of a basic coverage professional answering service, which costs approximately $50 per month, allowed the church to forward after-hour calls to the professional answering service. They provided callers with the public service times and furnished them with the address to the church; furthermore, they could contact a staff member in case of an emergency. Most importantly, the answering service provided a “live” person to answer the calls that came during the crucial times of Saturday afternoon and early Sunday morning.

Seventh, the use of current computer and internet technology throughout the project created a means for effectively and efficiently tracking the attendance data. The ease of accessibility through Dropbox allowed staff members the ability to access the electronic spreadsheet via the Internet. The database provided a means of tracking attendance so the church could send follow-up letters to guests, as well as email blasts to regular attendees.

Eighth, the simple act of wearing nametags played an amazing part in the overall success of the project. Each week, the church staff generated nametags for all regular attendees. First-time guests received a temporary nametag, and the following Sunday they would have their nametag available—along with regular attendees. Nametags were the first visible part of the project, as well as the first step in implementing the project. Interestingly, church attendance started to grow with the simple addition of wearing nametags.

Almost all churches incorporate a “friendship time” when people greet one another during the worship service. Based on my observation, as soon as people began to wear nametags and could actually recognize everyone by name, the excitement level during friendship time increased significantly. People could greet first-time guests by name, and visitors could greet everyone by name. Regular attendees who only recognized one another by face actually learned one another’s name in the process.

It became apparent that when churches take even small steps toward growth, they begin to grow. The excitement level became contagious and members began to invite their friends to church. Churchgoers understood that if they invited their friends, their friends would be well-greeted and included in the community of the church.

Finally, insisting that each project church provide coffee and refreshments before the morning worship service contributed to the overall success of the program. The shared time of “breaking bread” provided community for regular attendees; further it supplied a great way to greet and introduce first, second, and third-time guests.

## Keys to Project Improvement

Initially, the complexity of the project was not apparent. It required an enormous amount of time, planning, and effort, but the overall endeavor brought joy. Soon after commencing the project I realized that the success of the project would require a cultural change in each church in the area of how the people welcomed, perceived, and treated first-time guests. This required more time than I originally planned in order to implement the necessary changes for the success of the project. Three specific areas could improve the results of this project: (1) greater buy-in by board, staff, and congregation;
(2) implementation of training before launching the project; (3) devoting more of my time to each church; and (4) advance scheduling of key aspects of the project.

First, the project could be improved by procuring greater support from various stakeholders before the project’s implementation. When finding churches to participate in the project, I only met with the senior pastor. In retrospect, acquiring the support of the entire church board and staff would have increased the effectiveness of the project. In so doing, the decision to participate in the project would have reflected a collective decision rather than the decision of the senior pastor alone. At the outset of the project, I did not realize how much change the project would require for the church. Therefore, casting vision for the cultural change and the outcome of the project prior to its implementation could have helped to bring greater cooperation, excitement, and participation. Furthermore, having time with the staff to help them develop a passion for the project and its intended outcomes might have encouraged them as they carried out the various new tasks.

The congregation also needed more time to catch the vision for the project. Looking back, I realize that merely informing the congregation that the church leaders had decided to participate in the project did not provide enough time for the congregation to process the information. I would recommend that church leaders allow a minimum of one month to prepare the congregation so that the people grasp the basic purpose of the project. By connecting the project to the desired outcome of more people finding Christ as Savior can provide parishioners with motivation to support and participate in the vision.

Second, church staff and volunteers needed training before the commencement of the project. The appointment of a Welcome Coordinator who would oversee the greeters and ushers would provide organizational structure as well as training for all volunteers. The training could include a trial run where all greeters and ushers perform their given roles. This would assure less confusion during the first Nametag Sunday. In each case, the church needed to double the amount of ushers and greeters used each Sunday. Therefore, the church could benefit by recruiting new ushers and greeters prior to the project launch date. In addition, office personnel needed hands-on training regarding data input, printing nametags, and keeping track of the weekly attendance.

Third, I needed to schedule more time at each church. Simply providing verbal instructions regarding the process almost never proved to have optimal effectiveness. People need both an explanation and a demonstration of how to perform their given tasks. Quite possibly, breaking jobs into smaller tasks might help people view the goal as more easily attainable.

Fourth, the project could have benefitted from scheduling the various activities of the project on a calendar from the outset of the process. The participating churches did not implement several aspects of the project simply because they were not on the calendar. In addition, allotting a realistic timeframe for the implementation of the project would produce better results. Upon receiving the pastor’s initial approval, I would recommend scheduling a meeting with the board and staff, so as to acquire a unanimous passion for the purpose and outcomes of the project, as well as to schedule the additional aspects of the process. Unfortunately, various aspects of the training on financial health did not receive adequate time for proper implementation.

# Implications of the Project

Each church can and should grow, as supported throughout the biblical record. However, many pastors of plateaued or declining churches become discouraged despite understanding the scriptural mandate for continual growth. This project extends hope to discouraged pastors by providing a simple plan by which to revitalize a stagnated church.

Another implication of the project is that any church can adapt the principles presented in this project. Whether the church numbers more than 200 in attendance and is currently experiencing growth or small and facing a plateau or decline, any church can adapt the principles of this project and expect growth. A pastor of a large church (1,000 in attendance) contacted me about implementing the project because he felt his church demonstrates a weakness in assimilating first-time guests. Through the years, this church enjoyed growth due to sponsoring major events. After experiencing a slump, the pastor recognized the need for adopting an intentional plan for assimilation. Missionaries I consulted expressed confidence that the principles would transfer internationally. The use of this plan could potentially open up a whole new venue for church growth. Assemblies of God missionaries often serve as Bible school teachers and could use this platform to teach the principles presented in this project and assist brothers and sisters around the world in the church growth movement.

The project clearly implies that leaders must possess a deep-seated desire to experience growth in their church. If asked, most leaders claim they want to see their church grow, but desire must be accompanied with a willingness to support a cultural change within the church. I believe that any pastor who willingly does whatever is necessary to have a growing church can have a growing church.

# Recommendations for the Southern California District Council of the Assemblies of God

In the Southern California District Council (SCDC) there are about 435 churches, of which almost half are District Affiliated (DA) churches under the supervision of the district. As a DA church, the district appoints both the pastor and the board. Over the past forty years, the SCDC has struggled with addressing this significant challenge. Current efforts focus on a six-year process of moving a DA church to the status of a General Council (GC) church. If a church is not able to obtain this status in six years, the district will consider closing the church and reallocating its assets to a new church planting effort.

Based on the experience gained from this project, I recognize the need for personalized care and supervision in smaller churches. Therefore, I recommend that the SCDC restructure the supervision of DA churches by appointing a director over this area of ministry. This position would free the District Superintendent to tend to other matters while delegating responsibility to the Director of DA churches. The director would work directly with the DA church’s presbyter and Sectional Leadership Team to appoint a pastor and board, when necessary.

Second, I recommend that the Director of DA churches develop a growth plan for each church. The implementation of this project in DA churches could provide a basic approach that is tailored to each specific church.

On the average, a church changes pastors about every five years, which means the SCDC will need to appoint approximately fifty new pastors and boards each year in DA churches. Consequently, I recommend that the Director of DA churches create a network of team players from within the district as well as around the country, who could step into a DA church for a period of two years. By working closely with the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, all other Assemblies of God educational institutions of higher learning, and the Department of U.S. Missions, the Director could create a network from which to assimilate teams for the open SCDC DA churches.

Third, I recommend that the District develop a financial plan to ensure the success of the new department. For instance, each DA church could be required to contribute 1 percent of their general fund each month. In return, the DA church would receive mentoring in church growth, which would ultimately increase the DA church’s income. The District DA Church Director could further provide educational information on how to develop a Christ-like giving program for the congregations of DA churches.

Last, I recommend that the DA Church Director develop a monthly celebration for the DA churches that successfully achieve GC church status. This celebratory act would encourage the new GC churches to help other DA churches in their journey. The continuous affirmation of success will encourage other DA churches in the midst of the challenges they face by knowing that success is attainable.

# Recommendations for Future Study

The best and most productive days for the Assemblies of God Fellowship may be yet to come. The Church can look forward to the great things that God has in store in the years ahead. As believers and church leaders look to the future, I recommend that they consider five areas for future study.

First, further research could observe the rate of success among diverse groups who use this project. The study could do comparative analysis on its acceptance by ethnicity, age, size, or locale. In so doing, it could determine whether this project is more suited for rural or urban churches, small, medium, or large churches, or for churches with one predominant age group. This information would create a more realistic model of what to expect when beginning the program in a particular type of church.

Second, additional research could focus on determining whether or not the churches would respond more quickly and with better results, if a team of church consultants met with the church. Would the broader exposure of expertise be beneficial to the church? Would the church experience a sense of excitement if a team of church consultants met with the staff, greeters, ushers, and office personnel?

Third, one could do additional research to identify the different phases of a church’s lifecycle with a particular emphasis on determining whether the age of the church makes a difference in its ability to grow. It would be interesting and productive to know if older churches (fifty or more years of existence) respond in the same way as younger churches (less than twenty years of existence).

Fourth, further research could focus on developing a thirteen-week discipleship course that corresponds with this project. The course of study could focus on helping new converts and new attendees become grounded in Christ. The research could identify how a discipleship course, in conjunction with the project, could contribute to the attendance growth of the church.

Fifth, one could do further research on ways to teach biblical financial concepts and correlate these teachings to the overall outcome of the project. The research could then be made available to pastors for use in instructing their congregations each week on the blessings—both corporately and individually—of financial giving.

# Conclusion

This project brought me great fulfillment because it provided a means by which I could assist plateaued or declining churches, something I have participated in for the last twenty years. Personally, I believe I benefited more than the churches; seeing growth in each church clearly made all the work worthwhile. Watching a discouraged pastor acquire new levels of excitement as he or she watches the church grow creates a reward like no other.

The project set out to help pastors of plateaued or declining churches experience measureable growth in attendance through the implementation of proper business strategies for accounting and visitor retention. Through the implementation of basic business strategies, such as sending follow-up letters for visitors and installing a phone answering service, each of the four churches experienced growth in attendance. Anyone can replicate the simple concept of this project and expect to reap the benefit of diligently following up with visitors.

The biblical-theological research presented in Chapter 2 laid the foundation for this project by identifying how understanding the concept of *imago Dei*, community, and God’s perspective on finances dramatically impacts the church’s ability to grow. Chapter 3, the general literature review, provided insight from both the business world and the church to establish best practices that lead to church growth. Ultimately, the project infuses discouraged pastors of smaller churches with hope by presenting practical principles that one can easily implement—whether the church is facing a prolonged plateau or declining—and expect to see growth.

APPENDIX A: invitation letter to pastors

October 26, 2011

Dear Pastor,

I am working on a doctoral project at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. The title of my project is “Stimulating Church Growth through Scripturally-Based Business Strategies: Targeting Churches Plateaued or Declining in Attendance.” According to AG Vital Statistics for 2010, about 58% of our churches are declining in attendance or their attendance has plateaued. I believe God has helped me to develop a plan to assist churches in their desire to grow. I believe any church can experience a 3 to 5 percent growth by utilizing these practical ideas.

I am looking for four churches to implement these ideas. The plan is designed to be for a year; however, it will be monitored by me for three months which will include a monthly visit from February through April, 2012. While there is no cost to participate in the Project, I will be looking for churches that can answer “yes” to the questions below.

If you are interested in being part of the Project, I would be delighted to communicate with you. Please give me a call at 760-391-2954 or email me at: Richard@pdtax.com. If you do not qualify for the Project, but know someone that may, please feel free to pass this information on to them.

Your friend in ministry,



Richard G. Varnell, D. Min. Candidate

1. The church I pastor has less than 200 people in attendance.
2. The church I pastor has either declined or plateaued in attendance for the past three years.
3. I have records that show the church’s attendance and financial giving for the past three years.

APPENDIX B: pastor and church profile

Date:

Name:

Home Address: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Email:

Cell:

How long have you pastored your current church?

Your educational background: (Circle what applies):

High School

College: 1 2 3 4

BA

MA

Doctorate

What subjects are your degrees in?

How many years have you held a ministerial credential?

Name of Church:

Address of Church:

Church Website

How long has this church been in existence?

Attendance: Last year\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, 2nd Year\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, 3rd year\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Total income: Last year\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, 2nd Year\_\_\_\_\_\_, 3rd Year\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C: church growth business concepts
church growth proposal for churches under 200

The following program is designed for churches with an average attendance of 200 or less in their Sunday morning service. According to AG U.S. Vital Statistics 2010, about 84 percent of churches average under 200—64 percent less than 100 and 36 percent under 50. About 18 percent of churches are plateaued, 42 percent grew by one or more, and 40 percent declined by one or more. Christians who are entrusted by God to administrate His church should use all available resources to do the very best job possible (Luke 16:8). If your church is not growing, this program will generally produce a three to five percent growth annually. Follow this program for one year. Measure the results. Track the last three years of attendance and income. Based on that, project what your next twelve months should be. Implement the following program prayerfully and see the growth that God has intended. This program, when properly implemented, is designed to take one to two hours a week of the pastor’s time.

1. **Telephone**
2. Staff the office, with volunteers if necessary, to answer the phone during normal business hours (8am-5pm M-F)
3. Employ a professional answering service to answer your telephone 24-hours a day, 7 days a week when you are not in the office. They will screen your calls and pass on to you the calls that need the most urgent attention. The cost is usually about $100 a month.
4. Assure the pastor, or another responsible person, answers the phones, especially from Saturday noon through the end of the morning worship time. This can be done by forwarding the church phone to a cell phone. This is the time when most people call the church for directions or service times for the Sunday morning service. Engage, if possible, the inquirer on the telephone. Introduce yourself; find out their name and something about them. Then ask them to introduce themselves to you when they come to church.
5. **Finances**
6. When receiving the offering, publically ensure that it is obvious to all that the funds are being handled by people unrelated to staff, and that the funds are safely guarded.
7. Giving is an important part of worship. The importance of giving should generally be emphasized by the pastor.
* The funds are used to bring people to Jesus.
* Giving is an act of worship and visitors should not be excluded.

The pastor can prepare at least a minute or two devotion about giving before the offering is received. There are books that give suggestions for 52 weeks of biblical instruction regarding giving. Restricting giving to a certain group of people or to a particular fund may hinder the Holy Spirit from pouring out His blessings on the entire church. God’s people are always blessed when they generously give to His work. For special projects, let the people see what they are giving to. For example, let the church send the entire youth group to youth camp. Bring the youth up before and after camp. The same can be done for children, missionaries, building fund, etc. There are some people in each service that want to give more than their tithes. They are waiting for the pastor to challenge them.

1. Occasionally, have a testimony (live or video) using someone who has been blessed by giving.
2. It is imperative to have proper accounting methods and segregation of duties when managing all the finances of the church.
3. Set up your accounting software to recognize first-time contributors. They should receive a welcome from the church along with recognizing any offering they gave. This is also important for second and third time visitors.
4. Give a contribution report every three months as opposed to just once a year. This alone may increase the giving to the church by up to six percent.
5. Have the previous year’s financial statements publically available. There are great programs that can display the financial reports so that they are easily understood.
6. Have monthly financial statements for each board meeting that show current, year-to-date, and at least the previous year’s records for comparison.
7. Teach a series using the book *The Blessed Life*
8. **Attendance**
9. Use nametags for everyone. Print nametags ahead of time for regular attendees. Be sure that your “attendance table” is well staffed. Nametags that were left over will usually indicate those who were absent.
10. Take attendance each week. There are at least five ways to determine who attended your Sunday morning worship service with almost a hundred percent accuracy rate:
	1. Ushers should take a head count of people in the main sanctuary, along with a count of those meeting at the same time in other areas of the church campus.
	2. Each week print out an attendance list of attendees for the previous week. Highlight recent visitor’s names so that those at the “attendance table” may be able to greet them by name. As people receive their nametags, check off their names.
	3. Before receiving the offering have an attendance book with sign-in sheets at the end of each row and encourage everyone to sign in.
	4. Have sign-in sheets for adults and children involved in children’s activities.
	5. Use the giving record as another source to determine who attended the worship service.
11. I use Excel to track names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, birthdates, anniversaries, and age categories, as well as track attendance each week.
12. No later than Monday, prepare a plan on the best way to contact the “regulars” who were absent.
13. Also, have a plan to contact first, second, and third-time attendees. You may want to use professionally written letters for this purpose. First, you may send out a letter or email, then a phone call. If you want an 80 percent return rate, take a small gift of bread, cookies, etc. around Friday or Saturday to their home. Spend no more than 30 seconds at their door. If they are not home, leave the gift and a personal note. Also, be sure to have special postcards for children that visit. Children’s teachers should also telephone visitors. On your visitor cards, ask a question about how that person knew about your church. Capitalize on that information.
14. **Communications**
15. Have a website for your church and update it weekly.
16. Build an email list to communicate quickly with the church family. Use it weekly.
17. Around Friday or Saturday once a month, or at least once a quarter, the pastor should telephone each family that regularly attends and take prayer requests. This permits the pastor to stay in contact with each family and often generates information not normally available. The church can use the information to effectively minister to that family.
18. **Create “Community” each week in the Sunday morning time. Some suggestions:**
	1. Have coffee and refreshments available before, during, or after the Sunday morning worship time. Some churches take a seven to ten minute “break” after the offering is received and encourage everyone to fellowship. This is also a great time for the pastor and staff to greet visitors as well as regulars.
	2. Take time to greet visitors and encourage them to complete the visitor information card. If there are special visitors, introduce them at this time.
	3. Once a month provide a meal following the worship service at no cost to those who participate. This could be pizza from Costco or Sam’s, hamburgers and hot dogs, sandwiches, etc.
	4. Have enough ushers to seat people who arrive late, and to escort visitors and their children to the children’s place of worship.
	5. Have outings every month or two for the seniors.
	6. Add one or two positions to your board for people from outside your church to give you that extra set of eyes.
	7. Send postcards to people with birthdays or anniversaries approaching; even better, make a personal telephone call to them on the actual date of celebration.
	8. At least annually, have a member appreciation event.
	9. Some churches follow the “three minute rule”, which means regulars are encouraged to greet visitors following the Sunday morning service for at least three minutes before they visit with friends.

APPENDIX d: GETTING TO KNOW YOU ... (A LITTLE BETTER) CARD



APPENDIX E: WELCOME CARD—FRONT AND BACK

**BACK**

APPENDIX f: SAMPLE “MISSING IN ACTION” (MIA) LETTER

Date

Dear

We missed you!

If there is anything that we can do to be a blessing, please let us know. My personal email is pastorvarnell@gmail.com or you can reach me on my cell phone at (760) 391-2954. We have many tools at our disposal to help in time of need. My goal, as your pastor, is to be a blessing you.

I pray you are having a blessed week. Please, let me know if there is anything I can do to be of assistance.

Warmly,

Matthew Varnell

Senior Pastor

APPENDIX G: SAMPLE FIRST-TIME GUEST LETTER
(WITH CONTRIBUTION)

Date

First-Time Guest,

Street

City, State Zip

Dear First-Time Guest,

I am thrilled you chose to visit us at Desert MultiChurch this past weekend! It has been my experience over the years, that God often has a specific reason for bringing people to visit our church. Perhaps it was a timely message they needed to hear, or perhaps they were or are at a point of need in their lives. Maybe a family member, friend, or co-worker invited them. Whatever the reason for your visit, I am so glad you came. We are committed to being responsive to any needs that you or your family may have. We are dedicated in all that we do to provide an atmosphere where people can grow closer to God and to each other.

I also want to say that we truly desire to meet your needs and the needs of your family. Please let us know if there is any way we can better serve you.

I also want to thank you for your contribution of $100.

Lastly, I’d like to invite you to join us again this weekend at our 10:00 AM Sunday service. If you have any questions about our church or about the many ministries we offer, please feel free to call the church office. I hope to see you again this weekend!

God Bless You!

Richard Varnell

Senior Pastor

APPENDIX H: SAMPLE FIRST-TIME GUEST LETTER

Date

First-Time Guest,

Street

City, State Zip

Dear First-Time Guest,

I am thrilled you chose to visit us at Desert MultiChurch this past weekend! It has been my experience over the years, that God often has a specific reason for bringing people to visit our church. Perhaps it was a timely message they needed to hear, or perhaps they were or are at a point of need in their lives. Maybe a family member, friend, or co-worker invited them. Whatever the reason for your visit, I am so glad you came. We are committed to being responsive to any needs that you or your family may have. We are dedicated in all that we do to provide an atmosphere where people can grow closer to God and to each other.

I also want to say that we truly desire to meet your needs and the needs of your family. Please let us know if there is any way we can better serve you.

Lastly, I’d like to invite you to join us again this weekend at our 10:00 AM Sunday service. If you have any questions about our church or about the many ministries we offer, please feel free to call the church office. I hope to see you again this weekend!

God Bless You!

Richard Varnell

Senior Pastor

APPENDIX I: SAMPLE SECOND-TIME GUEST LETTER

Date

Second-Time Guest

Street

City, State Zip

Dear Second-Time Guest,

I was delighted that you chose to visit us again at Desert MultiChurch! I hope that this means that you saw something on your first visit that you liked. If you are looking for a church home, I understand that it can be a challenging process, as it is one of the most important decisions you will make for you and your family.

Whatever your circumstances, I am committed to helping you connect with lifelong friends and to find a place where you can spiritually grow and express your gifts and talents. The passion of our church is to see you realize all of God’s purposes for your life and to develop into the full potential of what He has for you.

If I can help in any way, please feel free to give me a call this week.

Thank you again for giving us the opportunity to minister to you and your family. I look forward to seeing you at church this next Sunday.

God bless you,

Matthew Varnell

Senior Pastor

APPENDIX J: SAMPLE THIRD-TIME guest LETTER

Dear Third-Time Guest,

I want to personally thank you for joining us once again at Rock House Community Church. I would like you to feel free to avail yourself and your family to all of the resources we make available to our attendees and Members. I want you to know that as life happens, I or one of our caring staff will always be available for counseling, prayer, hospital visitation, or anything else you might need.

I would like to personally invite you to attend our next Membership 101 class. It’s not just about becoming a member (though we would be honored should you decide to join), but is a tremendous resource describing who we are and what we are about. Our next Membership 101 will be next Sunday, September 11, immediately following the 11 a.m. service. Childcare will be provided as well as lunch, on us! You may sign up by checking the appropriate box on your Welcome Card, by calling our Office or stopping by the Information Center before or after any of our weekend services. I look forward to seeing you there!

If you are new or returning to church attendance, I would like to encourage you to do three things:

* 1. Buy and read a One Year Bible (available at our store, local Christian Bookstore or Amazon).
	2. Take 15 minutes every morning to pray before you get going for the day.
	3. Make a friend from church. Go to a small group, attend a football party, volunteer to usher or help in a children's class. Whatever you enjoy doing, find a way to do it with a new friend from church.

Again, thank you for joining us again at Rock House Community Church. I look forward to

being a friend and your pastor for many years to come.

Warmly,

Matthew Varnell

Senior Pastor

APPENDIX k: SAMPLE second-Time guest LETTER
(with contribution)

Date

Second-Time Guest

Street

City, State Zip

Dear Second-Time Guest,

I was delighted that you chose to visit us again at Desert MultiChurch! I hope that this means that you saw something on your first visit that you liked. If you are looking for a church home, I understand that it can be a challenging process, as it is one of the most important decisions you will make for you and your family.

Whatever your circumstances, I am committed to helping you connect with lifelong friends and to find a place where you can spiritually grow and express your gifts and talents. The passion of our church is to see you realize all of God’s purposes for your life and to develop into the full potential of what He has for you.

I also want to thank you for your contribution of $100.

If I can help in any way, please feel free to give me a call this week.

Thank you again for giving us the opportunity to minister to you and your family. I look forward to seeing you at church this next Sunday.

God bless you,

Matthew Varnell

Senior Pastor

APPENDIX L: SAMPLE THIRD-TIME guest LETTER
(with contribution)

Dear Third-Time Guest,

I want to personally thank you for joining us once again at Rock House Community Church. I would like you to feel free to avail yourself and your family to all of the resources we make available to our attendees and Members. I want you to know that as life happens, I or one of our caring staff will always be available for counseling, prayer, hospital visitation, or anything else you might need.

I would like to personally invite you to attend our next Membership 101 class. It's not just about becoming a member (though we would be honored should you decide to join), but is a tremendous resource describing who we are and what we are about. Our next Membership 101 will be next Sunday, September 11, immediately following the 11 a.m. service. Childcare will be provided as well as lunch, on us! You may sign up by checking the appropriate box on your Welcome Card, by calling our Office or stopping by the Information Center before or after any of our weekend services. I look forward to seeing you there!

If you are new or returning to church attendance, I would like to encourage you to do three things:

1. Buy and read a One Year Bible (available at our store, local Christian Bookstore or Amazon).
2. Take 15 minutes every morning to pray before you get going for the day.
3. Make a friend from church. Go to a small group, attend a football party, volunteer to usher or help in a children's class. Whatever you enjoy doing, find a way to do it with a new friend from church.

I also want to thank you for your contribution of $100. Again, thank you for joining us again at Rock House Community Church. I look forward to being a friend and your pastor for many years to come.

Warmly,

Matthew Varnell

Senior Pastor

Rock House Community Church

APPENDIX m: SAMPLE thirty-DAY FOLLOW-UP LETTER

Date

First-Time Guest

Street

City, State Zip

Dear First-Time Guest,

I appreciate you visiting Desert Assembly of God for the first time last month. I hope that you found our church both friendly and able to meet your spiritual needs. I want everyone that attends Desert Assembly of God to have a wonderful worship experience and to find a personal encounter with God.

If you are interested in meeting new people, I want to invite you to a special lunch we are having this next Sunday following our morning worship service. We will be meeting at noon and this would be an opportunity for me to get to meet you personally. I hope that you will be able to attend.

Please have a wonderful week, and I look forward to seeing you in the near future. Please feel free to give me a call if you should have any questions.

May God’s good blessings be with you!

Yours most sincerely,

Richard Varnell

Senior Pastor

P.S. I have enclosed a music CD that I think you will enjoy.

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