

# Assimilating New Members: Building Rolls or Saving Souls?

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Imagine that you have been invited to a birthday party by some friends. When you arrive at your friends' house, they invite you in, but after that no one there concerns himself with you at all. No one introduces you to strangers; no one says hello; no one even acknowledges that you exist. Obviously you wouldn't enjoy yourself very much. In fact, if you were invited to that same house for a birthday party the next year, chances are you wouldn't go.

This situation probably comes very close to picturing what Lyle Schaller saw as a problem in many Christian congregations. It just wouldn't be right to invite someone to a birthday party and then treat them that way. The same is true in a congregation, Schaller insists, "it is not Christian to invite a person to unite with a specific congregation and then not accept that person into fellowship of that congregation..."<sup>i</sup>

With this statement I believe Schaller has begun to lead congregations on the right track toward assimilating new members. First and foremost, the motivation for wanting prospects to *become* and *remain* members must be correct. When Schaller says that "it wouldn't be Christian..." he is suggesting that there is a higher motivation for making new members feel welcome than noting that otherwise your congregation becomes part of the 40 percent member loss statistic and your church will begin to shrink. Schaller indirectly says that if 1 percent of your members were being lost out the "back door" *this* would be a tragedy because it *simply isn't Christian*.

The question, then, that I am asking is this: When we view the "chore" of assimilating new members, do we consider this a process of building rolls or saving souls? In answer to this question allow me a rather lengthy quote by Pastor John Huebner whom I feel the Lord has truly blessed with a mind that has all the marbles in the correct place. In his vivid style he captures in words what many of us feel in our hearts.

Maybe there are a couple of "thorns in our flesh" who we wish would transfer to a sister congregation or maybe even to one of the other synods so that there might be a more equitable distribution of agony...but none of us would even permit in our hearts the secret desire that a soul might end up in hell. It is embarrassing to have to report statistically that a member has fallen away. But the real pain is inside, when one realizes that lips which have tasted the precious blood of our Lord, a mouth that has expressed the sheer holy joy of praising God, a heart that was once lit by the fire of the Spirit of God—that none of those things are any more. God calls his believers His treasure (Mal. 3:17). When someone is a treasure that person is still very important, even if the finish is tarnished.<sup>ii</sup>

Since these new members are God's treasures, I don't think WELS pastors or seminary students have any trouble answering the above question with "saving souls!" The difficulty comes in using this truth as we set up our principles and programs for assimilating new members.

First, let us consider the principles which should be understood regarding the integration of new members. One principle is that there is a proper understanding by the pastor and the congregation members of what the terms integration and assimilation (used interchangeably in this paper) mean. To begin with they mean more than that a name is written on the congregational register or a new adult signs the constitution. These terms deal with *feelings*—the

*feeling* that a new Christian has that he is truly a member of this congregation and the *feeling* that a congregation has that this new person is one of their members. At first this may seem self-evident, but I'm sure many church "dropouts" would agree with Schaller that "in many congregations it is easier to become a member than it is to be accepted and made to feel so."<sup>iii</sup>

Another principle to keep in mind is that the main purpose of the church is evangelism; assimilating the new member is only the tail end of this entire process. Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 16:15, and Acts 2:8 make this sufficiently clear. The church is a witness to the good news that Jesus is the World's Savior. As people come to know the Lord Jesus as their Savior, they are naturally drawn to those who are of a like mind (Acts 2:42). They come together to share their faith and love, to worship together and to sing praise together (Acts 2:44-47). If we attempt to deal with the problem of assimilating new members apart from the entire picture of evangelism and congregational purpose, then we are doing what Pastor Huebner says is dealing with the problem in a "band-aid fashion." To truly treat the whole disease we need to keep in mind that reaching out through evangelism, welcoming new members, assisting new members to grow in Christ, and our attitudes toward inactive members are all "part of the same cloth."<sup>iv</sup> They all deal with saving souls—evangelism.

A third noteworthy principle is to recognize what the problem is when there is difficulty in integrating the new member. Although we shy away from judging the heart, there is some truth to Arthur Graf's startling conclusion: "Some members stray from the church because they were never converted."<sup>v</sup> Saving souls means that we honestly recognize this possibility and deal with it rather than becoming offended because it suggests that I as their teacher may have failed or the Holy Spirit did. The fact of the matter is that "most Americans have a sentimental liking for the name of Jesus Christ, even when they have very little idea of Who He is."<sup>vi</sup> Some may join for that reason, some because a "group" they are in joined, some because Mom or Dad made them or their spouse did. This must be recognized.

In this same area is another matter which cuts us to the quick, but which we do well to recognize as a problem. This is the lack of visible love in a congregation. Note the qualifier: "visible." Again, I will not descend to judging a congregation's hearts, but at the same time I will not deny the facts. The "answer that pops to the surface most often" when asking the question of reasons for "dropouts" is this: "Members disappear from church rolls when no one cares enough to do something about it."<sup>vii</sup> This may or may not be intentional, but it continues to happen. Maybe part of the problem is that we picture Christ's church as full of agape love and find it hard to believe that through the years "a church *can become* a holy huddle of self-interested members (emphasis mine)."<sup>viii</sup> The principle is that visible love helps to assimilate members. Failing to admit that there is a lack of love may cost the loss of a soul.

This last statement leads to the next principle regarding how we view the problems which we see. Human nature leads us to be fatalistic: the problem has always been here, we can't change it, so why try. This, of course, is a copout and it doesn't really face up to reality.

We are so familiar with this record of failure that we are in danger of accepting it as something to be expected—like the wasteful prodigality of nature. But there is no law of nature to excuse it. It is the direct result of our careless and unrealistic practice. This is shown by the fact that congregations which give exceptional attention to the care of new members often keep more than 90 per cent of them loyal and enthusiastic.<sup>ix</sup>

Another view is to suggest that these people never really intended to be members. First of all, this flies in the face of I Sam. 16:7 that only God knows their hearts. Secondly, it too is a

copout. And, thirdly, it again denies the fact that “not one person in fifty joins the Church without expecting to make a success of it.”<sup>x</sup>

Finally, the problem is improperly viewed when in dealing with inactive members we always try to determine what is wrong with *them* rather than asking questions regarding what is wrong with *us*, how *we* failed them, what are *we* doing wrong.<sup>xi</sup>

Many of the principles which have been listed so far have dealt with the problem negatively. Now I will list some possible solutions in a positive manner based on the four “R’s”: Redirection, Realization, Rearrangement, and Removal.

The first “R” is redirection. The thing to be redirected is our motivation. It is essential in assimilating new members that they know we are more interested in saving souls than in building rolls. Simply put, we must love people, not numbers. “No one is more exemplary in his love for people than our Lord who visited with, healed and served, and spoke the message of love and the kingdom of God in such a way that throngs followed Him.”<sup>xii</sup>

The second “R” is realization. Our assimilation will be less affected by roll-call coldness when we realize who our prospective new members are. They are part of the *ekkleesia* which means they have been called out of a world of sin. Has the Holy Spirit called them into a world of lovelessness and calculation? They are also by rebirth part of the *koinonia* which automatically suggests acceptance and love and concern from all around (Acts 2). At the same time we need to remember that while we seek to unite them with us, they are always individual people. “‘They’ can never fully become ‘we.’ We have to know how far we should go in effecting the unity we seek.”<sup>xiii</sup> Lastly, we need to realize that new converts do not instantly forget the rest of their life. “People who join the church are pursued by old habits and associations and states of mind. Unless the church people can surround them with loving and protective care, many will be lost.”<sup>xiv</sup>

The third “R” is rearrangement. I’m not speaking here of the church interior or structure, but of rearranging our point of view. Among his fundamental principles of church growth, George Peters lists as number one “A Church grows to the degree it is able to move from a state of introversion to extroversion.”<sup>xv</sup> Or as Paul said to the Philippians: “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others (2:4).

The fourth “R” is removal. Any barriers we may inadvertently (or purposefully) have set up to the integration of new members are to be removed. Peters’ church growth principle number two states “A Church grows to the degree that it is able to overcome barriers that would naturally inhibit the expansion of the Gospel.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Having dealt with the principles which I see as important in dealing with assimilation from a saving-souls viewpoint, I now proceed to the application of these principles, i.e., integration *programs*. I offer this disclaimer. There are far too many programs for me to offer even a byte of the computer-mass. Therefore I will present a few of the programs which I felt dealt with some of the problems raised by my principles and that show a soul-saving concern.

Earlier I mentioned that some people are never integrated because they are never converted. Realizing that only the Holy Spirit can work true conversion, a pastor should nevertheless seek to *remove* all barriers from the Holy Spirit’s path. Unfortunately, in many churches a barrier to the Holy Spirit is the simple fact that too much time is spent on “programs” which do not include the preaching of the Word. “A church grows best where the gospel is clearly, relevantly, and persuasively preached, Jesus Christ is most honored as Savior and Lord, and the Holy Spirit is believed and obeyed.”<sup>xvii</sup> I know this may sound ironic, but I’m suggesting as a “program” the preaching of the pure Word—Law and Gospel. It seemed that in many of the

books which I read dealing with church growth and assimilation of new members, the placing of Christ and His Word in the forefront was far too infrequent. Christ is the strongest unifying factor a congregation has. Without Christ all the programs in the world will not effect a complete assimilation of anyone to God's church. Schaller even recognized this when he listed "Theological Stance" as one of the unifying principles of a congregation. Yet I appreciated Pastor Huebner's comment on this:

I think Schaller downplays this too much. Faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to Him as Lord and Savior are a very strong unifying factor—the strongest of all, and certainly stronger than Schaller seems to want to allow. As our appreciation and love for Him grow, so will our love for His work and other people... There is no real unity unless we find ourselves to be united with each other on the basis of what we teach and profess to believe.<sup>xviii</sup>

Following up on this thought then also comes an emphasis on instruction for the prospective member. "It is startling to recognize that many churches do more to prepare little boys to become tenderfoot scouts than they do to prepare adults to enter the eternal church as disciples of Jesus Christ."<sup>xix</sup> Maybe pastors should ask themselves these questions: How long do I instruct new members in doctrine? How well have they learned these doctrines by the time they are received as members? Have there been evidences of sincerity in church attendance, faithfulness in class attendance, bringing children to Sunday School? Have I spent time introducing them to Christian responsibilities, Christian stewardship, the liturgy, the service, the congregation's responsibilities toward them? Is my program an organized and well-prepared program?

Another program which I strongly endorse is one which keeps track of the soul condition of new members as well as old. "As the treasurer's books are audited meticulously to make sure that every penny is accounted for, so we should be equally concerned to give a careful accounting of the souls that God has committed to our care in the congregation."<sup>xx</sup> This shows a soul-saving mindset. I feel Sweazy has an excellent idea for implementation of this when he suggests that "the official board of every church must annually devote at least one full meeting, with no other business, to its methods of caring for those who join the church."<sup>xxi</sup> A congregation willing to do this is saying to people that they are most important, barring none.

The next step in the program is how to deal with new members in order to demonstrate an interest in their soul. Almost unanimously the experts say this can be done through personal encounter. Letters and invitations may get the point across says Sweazy, but they "never bring anyone."<sup>xxii</sup> People want to be dealt with face to face. In fact it may take more than one face to face visit before anything begins to happen. "The greatest weakness of evangelism in the past," Sweazy cautions, "was that it stopped too soon." "Christian lives are never mass produced. A great number of personal encounters are required."<sup>xxiii</sup> This can be carried out in various ways, but probably the most common is the "sponsor" method. This method utilizes members who live nearby or have common interests to make regular visits to new members until "they" feel a part of "us."

One final program I see as quite helpful is the use of groups within the congregation. There is considerable controversy as to the expediency of such groups. Some insist they are detrimental to congregational life due to the threat of cliques, while others suggest they are the only true means of entrance into the fellowship circle of a congregation. I would like to dispense with the "experts" here and offer my own analysis. If these groups indeed remember their place, namely as auxiliaries of the church with the purpose of furthering the Gospel through Christian

fellowship and service, then I find myself at odds with those opposed to them. Let us return for a moment to the opening illustration. It so happens that recently I did attend a friend's birthday party and I was among people who for the most part were strangers to me. Fortunately, the host had a panoply of party games in store for us which required a *group* effort. Naturally we had to either work together and get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses or we would lose. Who wants to lose? In the church, men's clubs, ladies' guilds, pioneers, youth groups are like those "group" games. These offer opportunities for becoming acquainted that church services and gatherings simply do not allow. These groups are not ends, but they certainly are a proper means to the end of integration and fellowship. Here is also a place for individuals to show that they are more interested in souls than rolls.

New member assimilation is a difficult subject because it has so many variables. I attempted in this paper to direct the reader's attention to what I feel are the *starting points* of working toward the integration of new members. From here the reader could branch out in many different directions and use many different programs. My advice would be to use Sweazy's *Effective Evangelism* or Graf's *The Church in the Community* for concrete, step-by-step procedures. Above all, I urge the reader to answer one question before he begins: Are you interested in building rolls or saving souls?

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<sup>i</sup> Lyle Schaller, *Assimilating New Members*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1978, p. 16.

<sup>ii</sup> John Huebner, *Integrating the New Member*, Florida Conference, South Atlantic District, WELS, Dec. 24, 1979, p. 2.

<sup>iii</sup> Schaller, p. 73.

<sup>iv</sup> Huebner, p. 6

<sup>v</sup> Arthur E. Graf, *The Church in the Community*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965, p. 172.

<sup>vi</sup> George E. Sweazy, *Effective Evangelism: The Greatest Work in the World*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953, p. 208.

<sup>vii</sup> Charles S. Mueller, *The Strategy of Evangelism*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965, p. 74.

<sup>viii</sup> George W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 227.

<sup>ix</sup> Sweazy, p. 207.

<sup>x</sup> Sweazy, p. 207.

<sup>xi</sup> Sweazy, p. 207.

<sup>xii</sup> Schaller, pp. 116-117.

<sup>xiii</sup> Huebner, p. 4.

<sup>xiv</sup> Sweazy, p. 231.

<sup>xv</sup> Peters, p. 209.

<sup>xvi</sup> Peters, p. 209.

<sup>xvii</sup> Peters, p. 210.

<sup>xviii</sup> Huebner, p. 8.

<sup>xix</sup> Sweazy, p. 224.

<sup>xx</sup> Waldo J. Werning, *Vision and Strategy for Church Growth*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1977, p. 67.

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<sup>xxi</sup> Sweazy, p. 215.

<sup>xxii</sup> Sweazy, p. 232-233.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Sweazy, p. 206, 216.