



IDENTIFYING WHY PEOPLE LEAVE

PURPOSE OF STUDY: Successful assimilation is not only concerned with *obtaining* new members but also *retaining* those same members. The back door deserves as much attention as the front door. There is an old saying, “Satisfied sheep stay; dissatisfied sheep stray.” This study will help us identify some reasons that members leave; it is possible we can eliminate some of these reasons in the future.

STEP 1 –Begin your analysis by making a list of the people who attended your church three to five years ago. Five years will provide the best data since it is rare for people to join and leave in the first or second year. If you must do a shorter study, you will not have the best results but you will, at least, have established a baseline which will become larger with each subsequent year. If the church is too large, then consider doing this for a specific class or department. *I suggest using a beginning age of twenty.* Children always follow their parents out the door and their inclusion will skew the numbers. It is generally unreliable to include children brought on the church bus, also. Several sources of information are available for step one:

- ◆ The church membership roll. However, this list is probably too large. Many of these folks will have disappeared years ago and no one knows where they went. Therefore, refine this list to include only those who were at least occasionally active two years ago. “Occasionally active” means the person attended several events/services during the year. Why use two years? It is hard to remember anything from five years ago and usually most churches don’t provide this kind of data on an annual basis. However, if your church has reliable data from five years ago this is great! My own church did not have such data. Therefore, we used two years since you have to start somewhere!

Think of this revised list as the most important list you will ever create! You will find many uses for it so be sure to take the time to do it right!

My church (attendance of 120) has a spreadsheet which lists every person who occasionally attends. This list includes our prospects, too. Our ushers check off the names on this spreadsheet once a month based on the person's attendance on that particular Sunday. This data is then entered into a computer spreadsheet for quick analysis so we can identify who is missing. Several absences in a row raise a warning flag and cause us to probe deeper into the situation.

In so doing we have institutionalized this process! The following pages will discuss in greater detail the importance of institutionalizing the assimilation processes. When the process is fully integrated or institutionalized, one has a more effective means for follow-up.

Suggestion: do not concern yourself at this time with discarding the inactive names from the membership roll. That process may be an item to explore in a separate effort; on the other hand, eliminating names may create an unnecessary firestorm! It is unwise to divert your attention from the primary goal of identifying absentees. To be honest, the time/effort dedicated to properly removing inactive names could often be better spent on visiting the community!

- ◆ New members list. The church office will have a list of every new member received by year into the church membership. Add these names to the list for the entire three to five year time horizon.
- ◆ Small group membership rolls. The small groups will include the Sunday School classes, discipleship classes, ladies/men's groups, the music department, etc.
- ◆ Brainstorm. Since each church is structured differently, one should consider spending a few minutes letting folks brainstorm for any additional sources of information.

STEP 2 – Identify every member/occasional attendee who has left your church over the same time frame which you used in Step 1. At a minimum this list should include every *member* you can identify. If possible, include

the occasional *attendees* as well. This will widen your findings and perhaps assist you in developing a better strategy for assimilation. Several sources are available for this step:

- ◆ Transfer list. The church office will have a list of every transfer of membership to another church.
- ◆ Deceased list. The Lord will have called home some of these people. Be sure to remove them from the list. You can't assimilate them any longer! Identifying the deceased is also important because it helps the leadership realize how many vacancies appear without anyone being at fault! Some churches may be struggling simply because they must replace an entire generation! In such a case, replacing or staying even may actually be a sign of great success!
- ◆ Memory/records. The hardest search involves those who just disappeared (not included in the two categories above). If the church's records have been recently updated, begin your search with the current Sunday School and small group enrollments. Also, select some of the church leadership, being sure to include three generations of leadership: old, middle-aged, and young to review the list and identify other names, also.

STEP 3 - Write down a reason/category each person left. One can never be certain about such reasons because people often give misleading information when they leave. Sometimes folks totally fabricate an excuse! However, the church leadership should have a reasonable guess regarding most people. Some folks may be placed in the wrong category; do not worry about this since we are looking at numbers in the aggregate rather than for any one individual. Mistakes in classification have a way of balancing out over a period of years. For the sake of simplicity, limit yourself to no more than seven broad categories. Here are some possible categories:

- ◆ Conflict with another member
- ◆ Disagreement with the church's purpose/direction
- ◆ Moving away/distance
- ◆ Death/homebound
- ◆ Marital/family issue

- ◆ Lack of *new* friends
- ◆ Finding a better program elsewhere
- ◆ Other (includes leaving for a ministry position elsewhere)

How can you measure the category “lack of new friends?” One way is to determine whether the person is still maintaining an *active* relationship with *new* friends inside the church. The emphasis is on “new” and whether any new relationships have been created since the newcomer joined the church. In many cases, the answer will be “no”. They will no longer be bowling together, shopping together, or dining together. Such a person will likely have returned to his/her former friends, including any relatives still attending the church.

STEP 4 – Identify this person’s ministry in the church. List any committees, teaching assignments, etc. in which this attendee may have participated. There is usually a close relationship between assimilation and involvement.

STEP 5 – Create a bar/pie chart showing the final numbers in each category. Why is this important? It helps you visualize what is actually taking place. No leader likes to lose a member; however, the leadership needs to realize that there are some categories which are basically beyond the leadership’s control. For example, we expect to lose the member who moves one hundred miles away! We also expect to lose someone in a divorce since it is not likely that a divorced husband and wife will wish to attend the same church.

On the other hand, some categories may be controllable by the church leadership. For example, “lack of new friends” can be improved through a good assimilation program. “Conflict with another member” can be improved through training the membership in conflict resolution. “Disagreement” with the church’s purpose/direction” can be improved by communicating the church’s biblical purpose at the time of membership and by re-emphasizing the purpose over and over again.

STEP 6 – Create a second bar chart which includes the following categories:

- ◆ Average Sunday morning worship attendance for the prior twelve months.

- ◆ Average Sunday morning worship attendance indicated above plus 50% of the “lack of new friends” total. Why half? We assume that we were able to keep half of these members. We didn’t keep all of them...just half of them!
- ◆ Average Sunday morning worship attendance indicated above plus 75% of the “lack of new friends” total. We assume that we were able to keep 75% of these members. We didn’t keep all of them...just three-quarters of them!

SUMMARY: Which of the above determined numbers would you like to see in next Sunday’s worship service? If you are a typical leader then the bigger the better!

What did you learn from Step 6? You learned the size of your back door problem in just one category! Go ahead and plug in the numbers from some of the other categories, too, that you believe are manageable. Do you like what you see?

Congratulations! You are no longer talking in the abstract but have moved to identifying precise numbers. You can now visualize specific faces that have disappeared and specific reasons they disappeared!