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TITLE: Keeping People Long-Term: Small Group Ministries

AUTHOR(S): James W. Moss Sr.

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There are three challenges to retaining new people in a church. The first challenge is to get a visitor to walk through the door for the first time. The second challenge is to get that visitor to come back for a second or third time. The third challenge is keeping the visitor long-term.

The need for relationships

Two things have to happen to a new attendee for that person to stay long-term. First, new attendees must have at least two friends in the church besides the pastor or other staff person. We use the term "friend" so casually. We say, "How are you doing, friend?" to someone we haven't seen or been in contact with for three years. A friend is someone we enjoy being with and communicating with. He or she is a person we can share our heart with without fear of recrimination. A friend will speak the truth to us in love. Most people have only five to ten true friends by the previous definition.

For a person to stay long-term, two of those friends must be in the church. They may already be in the church. If not, the church must provide opportunities for friendships to develop. If the pastor or other staff person is the only friend the new person has, that person will probably not stay. If the friendship with that pastor is so strong they stay, when the pastor leaves they will too.

Meaningful relationships are a key to keeping people long-term. I used to teach that people would travel up to ten minutes to go to church. However, relationships know no such boundaries. People will travel much further to sustain relationships with people they love and appreciate.

Loneliness is a plague in our culture. A key for a church today is to create a climate where people can find friends. Half the battle is won if two of the five to ten friends a person has can be found in their new church.

The need for a group

Second, new persons will have to become part of a small group where they are known by name, feel needed and wanted, and are missed if they are absent. This is true unless worship or the specific service they attend is less than thirty-five people. If that is the case, then that service acts like a small group and provides

the same holding power as a small group. If the worship service is larger than 35, then small group participation becomes essential to the long-term retention of new people. Frequently, those friendships will be developed within the context of their small group.

There are basically five kinds of small groups. Each kind can provide nesting places for people. They are church school classes, care groups, support groups, task groups, and athletic teams. There are four basic purposes for the existence of small groups. They are evangelism, incorporation, fellowship, and teaching.

Please remember that it will be difficult for new adults to get into a pre-existing small group that is more than two-years old. The retention of new adults in a church requires the regular formation of new adult small groups of a variety of kinds.

Many new people attend a church just long enough to decide to join. The membership class becomes their small group. They enjoy it and have fun. Then the magic moment appears. They join the church. Then they are told to find a small group. The membership class is over. Their tie to the church ends if they can't find an open small group. They will disappear in the first six months after they have joined if they don't find a small group.

Learn from your experience

Study the new members received by your church in the last seven years. How many are still active? How many dropped out in the first year of their membership? That may give you a clue as to how effective your incorporation process for new people into small groups has been.

List the attendees of your church who are not in any small group. Are there two or three dominant demographic characteristics of the people on that list (such as parents of pre-school children, married women who attend without their spouse, mature widowed, etc.). A study of this list may give insight into persons the church is not ministering to. It may also provide the beginning of a prospect list for a new class or group.

In conclusion

Remember, to keep new people long-term, they must have two friends in the church besides the pastor and be a part of a small face to face fellowship group.

James W. Moss Sr. is a church consultant who has written several articles and resources to assist congregations with welcoming and retaining new people.

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