

3 Strategic Secrets to Explosive Church Growth

We are on to something. At first glance you may find yourself thinking: This isn't anything new, been there and done that. Or how about this one: There is no "one size that fits all." Actually, there is. I have found that there are major gaps in the retention and assimilation processes in churches of every size and I will bet, after you have read this, you will see the gaps in yours and have a road map to explosive growth at every level.

The Church's Back Door

The back door out of most churches is just like the song, "deep and wide," and many can be found there. But the wide-open back door is only there isn't because your front door is broken--in most cases, it's because you aren't pastoring the ones God sends you beyond the first few weeks. It's as simple as that. I offer an idea that can work at your church every bit as well as it has worked at ours.

Bottom line is this: We've been told that when people walk through our doors, they are asking four questions to determine if there will be a second visit:

First Impression: Is it clean, organized, clear directions, timely and safe?

Are there people who look like me/us--our age, our life stage, our culture?

Is there a place for me/us in your church's vision? A place to connect, to serve, to use our gifts.

Did I/we experience an encounter with God? Ultimately, they are there because they have come to a place where they believe

they need church and God in their life.

Church Growth Secret No. 1: To grow your congregation, all you have to do is pastor the ones God sends you.

If you read Acts 2, you will find the early church was doing a lot of things: breaking bread together, meeting at the temple and so much more. But if you look closely, you will find one simple sentence in Acts 2:47: "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." God is going to send you people, and for most pastors reading this, a simple look back at visitor records will show this is true for you as well, whether that's 10 or 2,000.

Church Growth Secret No. 2: You must embrace a paradigm shift.

Whether they will become a part of your congregation will not depend on their first impression—their first service, regardless of what all those studies have to say. Make no mistake, 1-4 above matter, but what will matter more is what you do in the weeks and months that follow that initial visit, and most churches don't do much beyond the first few weeks, and up until four years ago, neither did we.

Some try to attach people to small groups as quickly as possible, and that works to a certain extent, but not everyone is on that wagon, core value or not. It is still a personal choice and, to a newcomer ... a risky proposition. Then there is the approach at the front door, first impressions—welcoming and making the first-time visitor experience memorable complete with preferred parking, a host and even a special tour and reserved seating. We have had success with this and possibly left a wonderful first impression. Problem is, if it works, there is a second week that is very different than the first week, and they are now, just like everyone else, trying to find their place.

Truth is this: You can achieve an authentic and lasting connection that results in dynamic retention in four easy

steps.

You must have a place and a process of official connection.

Bottom line: If you do not have some kind of assimilation process that helps people find legitimate connection, then you are without excuse. It doesn't matter what you call it, how many weeks it lasts, or when it is offered, you have to have that place of connection. The days of the total organic connection path sounded good on paper, and maybe even in a conference.

Church Growth Secret No. 3: If you aren't collecting data on every person who visits every service and event, or from those who make a decision to follow Christ, then you are on your own, and I cannot help you.

Good luck with that. People crave structure and specifics and an actual place to go to take that next step. And we have never made a call or any kind of follow-up with anyone who did not voluntarily give us their contact information.

Process:

We have created a four-week Next Steps process at our campuses that basically does four things:

Tells you our history and what we believe.

Tells you our DNA—what makes us unique and our focus areas.

Tells us YOUR DNA—your gifts and talents and where you might be the best fit.

Connects you to your place of service and connection.

Every ministry and pastor in our church knows we have one goal for every person that walks through those doors: Do everything we can to get them to our Next Steps process. Call it anything you want. But if you can get them there, and retain them for

this four-week process, they will put down roots and start connecting in meaningful ways. And you can schedule it any way you want: one long session per month, in your Sunday school program, that's your call.

Call it what you want and design it any way you like, but you have to create and champion the process and then make it a major focus of every ministry. In our church, you cannot even volunteer in a ministry until you have completed Next Steps. Why would we have someone represent us who has not heard what we believe and indicated they are in agreement? Why would you?

Hold Ministry Leaders Accountable

There is nothing worse than taking a person through four sessions who thinks they are connected to a ministry, and then the leaders never contact them and never activate their service and actually pastor them. It should be a part of your weekly staff meetings to talk about how the different names are experiencing their place of service and connection. Celebrate that, and make it a priority.

Many of you probably have some version of steps 1 and 2 above and are thinking about checking out right about now, but you would miss the best part: divine connections.

Reach back, reach out and follow through—call centers.

This is where we have had amazing success, and this is what has made all the difference in the world for us. We found we were doing a good job with first impressions and even our initial outreach to visitors and the people who had made decisions at our altars. But in looking at the overall picture over time, there was a gap, a crack that people were falling through, a crack that led right out the back door of our church.

We found that even if people responded to our initial

personalized contact, we really didn't track them much beyond that point. They were in our e-blasts and marketing stream, but we did no personal contact or follow up. Over the course of three or four years, that meant there were thousands of people about whom we had no idea where they were and no one responsible for finding that out. These were people who voluntarily gave us their information, and we sent a welcome letter, put them in our system and moved on to the next week's batch of new names—and I'll bet most of you are doing the same thing.

Solution: the call center team. We started a good old-fashioned call center team that meets Monday or Tuesday every week to make personal phone calls and emails and to pray with people. One night a week, from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m., we call all of those people and have conversations and pray with them. We end up leaving messages for about half the calls, but we continue to call them once a month until they sign up for Next Steps.

The results have been nothing short of amazing. We put together scripts for visitor calls, altar responses and for those we are reaching back for. We also have smart cards at every phone that list all events coming up as well as specific points of contact for each life stage ministry.

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