NEW MEMBER ASSIMILATION:

CLOSING THE BACK DOOR THROUGH

SYSTEMIC MEMBERSHIP MANAGEMENT

A professional project submitted to the Theological School of
Drew University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
Doctor of Ministry

Advisors: Kevin D. Miller, D.Min.
Donna L. Ciangio, D.Min.

Pamela J. Stanley
Drew University
Madison, New Jersey

May 2015

DEDICATION

To God be all the glory and honor!

I would like to thank Rev. Dr. Fred Lucas and the wonderful members of the Brooklyn Community Church for their participation, enthusiasm and support of this project. I also want to extend heartfelt gratitude and deepest appreciation to my Advisory Committee Chairperson, Rev. Dr. Fred Lucas, and the members of my Advisory Committee who invested many hours working to bring this project to fruition. Their dedication and tireless energy are what made this project a success. The results, I anticipate, will impact the Brooklyn Community Church for years to come. This project would not have been completed without your business savvy and spiritual guidance.

I also want to thank and appreciate my children, grandchildren and the larger village of my family and friends for the support, patience and love that you have shown to me throughout this journey.

I dedicate this project to my husband, Bruce Stanley. Your never ending love and support have made all of this possible. You are my best earthly friend and greatest cheerleader. Each day I thank God for you. I love you!

I also dedicate this project to the memory of my mother, Mildred "Mama" Brost (1923-2015) and my brother, Zorro Brost (1954-2015). I did it! I know you are proud of me.

DEFINITIONS

Deacon - The highest ordained lay position in Brooklyn Community Church (BCC). Along with the Senior Pastor and the Ministerial Staff, the Deacons comprise the spiritual leadership of BCC. Led by a male and female vice-chairs, the Deacon Ministry consists of 29 Deacons. At BCC Deacons hold additional leadership positions such as President of the Usher Ministry, Church Attorney, President of the Security Ministry, Superintendent of Sunday School, just to name a few.

Family Ministry – Led by a president and vice-president, the Family Ministry is comprised of a team of lay and ordained servant-leaders, known as Group Leaders. The Group Leaders provide the BCC membership with spiritual leadership in the form of prayers, spiritual guidance, fellowship and encouragement. The Group Leaders work with all members to ensure that they have adequate and appropriate opportunities to engage in church life. Additionally, the Group Leaders convey the member's special needs or situations to the Senior Pastor and other appropriate ministry leaders.

New Members Ministry - The purpose of the New Members Ministry is to orientate new members to BCC's history, doctrine, beliefs and ministries and the benefits, privileges and responsibilities of membership.

Member Assimilation – Member assimilation is the process by which members of a church become integrated into the life of the church through intentional involvement in ministry, fellowship, spiritual growth and service.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

NEW MEMBER ASSIMILATION:

CLOSING THE BACK DOOR THROUGH SYSTEMIC

MEMBERSHIP MANAGEMENT

By Pamela J. Stanley

Brooklyn Community Church
Brooklyn, New York

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."
Acts 20:28[1]

Brooklyn Community Church (BCC) is an independent community church affiliated with the American Baptist Churches of Metro New York. Founder and Senior Pastor, Rev. Dr. Fred Lucas has pastored five churches in the course of his forty-two years in ministry. Organized and incorporated in September 2010, BCC held its inaugural worship service on October 1, 2010. In 2011, the first full year of its existence, 98 new members joined the church, followed by 37 and 81 in the second and third years respectively. Currently, in year four, a total of 297 souls have become members of BCC. Enthusiastic members regularly invited family and friends to church, some of which would also eventually join. Their evangelism was, in part, responsible for the rapid increase in BCC church membership.

---

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all scriptures are taken from the New International Version.

Setting up effective discipleship for new members is often challenging for a new church. Many times discipleship practices are lost in the excitement of a growing church. The lack of attention and care can leave members feeling neglected and can stifle spiritual growth. When not enough attention is devoted to monitoring church members and addressing their needs, new members may become inactive or leave church oftentimes without anyone noticing. Part of this dynamic is attributed to an ineffective assimilation process.

Stemming from the understanding of the church as a system with interrelated parts, this project seeks to examine the assimilation system at Brooklyn Community Church and create a system that supports effective new member assimilation by creating tracking mechanisms within the New Members Ministry and the Family Ministry. The ultimate objective is to enhance new member assimilation. This will begin by exploring the practices and systems of the New Members Ministry and the Family Ministry.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Church has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Throughout my childhood I held memberships at Pentecostal and Baptist churches. My parents enrolled my siblings and me in Catholic school so I was affiliated with Catholicism during my elementary and junior high school years. We did not practice Catholicism instead my parents were in search of the best education for their children. While in Catholic school we participated in the rituals required of all students such as First Holy Communion and Confirmation. Although church membership was part of my upbringing, after leaving home as a young adult, I did not join a church right away. At the time I was content attending various churches as a visitor. I did, however, support the churches that I visited by volunteering my time and tithing regularly.

In my mid-twenties I became a member of a "mega" church. Their array of ministries offered congregants a variety of opportunities to serve. I volunteered in the bookstore, the audio ministry and as church receptionist. Likewise, my daughter volunteered in the children's nursery. Serving the church was a fun time to meet people and share stories about work, school and home life. Those of us who served formed a tight bond through prayer and friendship. I enjoy being a part of the church body and serving. As such, I naturally assimilated in the churches where I have held membership. In fact, without prompting, I would seek out ways to grow spiritually and get involved.

I realize now that the ability to "naturally" assimilate was God's grace and my early calling to ministry.

My understanding of the importance of new member assimilation developed over the course of several years as I watched people join church, become excited and then, for reasons unknown, leave church. Specifically, I witnessed this at one of my former church settings. The continuous cycle of people joining church and then leaving was concerning to me and other congregants. As Christians, we felt the church should attract and retain members, not lose them. On the one hand, we knew there were legitimate reasons people regularly join and leave churches. Relocation and marriage are two understandable reasons to leave one church to join another. Others choose to leave because of unresolved conflict with leadership or other members, and some sought more opportunities to serve or for better ministries for their children. For those reasons and a variety of others, the church membership continually fluctuated; this is a reality of church life.

Still, in my former church, there remained a concern for those who had "slipped through the back door". The phrase "slip through the back door" is used to describe how church members leave church without anyone following up or noticing. Something didn't feel right about how the church conducted business as usual while people continued to leave church. This lack of congregational care raised my consciousness about assimilation processes.

Congregational care in many churches is done using the "group" model. "Groups" are known by various names such as "small group", "cell groups" or "classes".

The class system used at my former church was first introduced by theologian and the

father of Methodism, John Wesley. The concepts of the class system were designed to be

implemented within a small group of people that met regularly "for personal supervision

of their spiritual growth. The meetings consisted of prayer, testimony and sharing of

challenges and growth."[1] The class system model focused on spiritual growth and

discipleship.

In many church settings, small group ministry or class system is necessary

because oftentimes it is impractical for one pastor or the ministerial staff to attend to the

unique and specific needs of everyone in the congregation. In my former church, class

leaders were appointed by the pastor with the primary responsibility of keeping track of

members by calling them when they did not attend church or church activities, during

hospitalizations, serious illness or if there was a death in their family. In this system, the

class leader's role provided one-on-one pastoral care to the members and then

communicate any special needs to the senior pastor or appropriate church leadership.

The intended outcome is to help members fully assimilate by utilizing prayer,

relationship building, and spiritual development through preaching, bible study and

ministry participation. This process is managed in various ways and ideally, is designed

to complement the uniqueness of each ministry context.

In my former church setting, class leaders were also responsible for collecting

quarterly class dues that were assessed by the local church. Conscientious class leaders

---

[1] Alison Morgan, Note, Michael Henderson, *"A Model For Making Disciples: John Wesley's Class Meeting,"* accessed January 30, 2015, www. ttp://www.alisonmorgan.co.uk/Henderson%201997.pdf.

would remember and acknowledge their class members' wedding anniversary, birthday and other special events. My first class leader was thoughtful and nurturing. The care she provided my family and me helped us develop a bond and connection to the church that made us feel we were a valued integral part of the congregation. This life changing connection was the starting point for our involvement in active ministry and, most importantly, our spiritual transformation.

For these class leaders a telephone call each week or a few times per month was the summation of the monitoring system and the only requirement from leadership. The class leaders generally completed the required weekly call to members within their assigned group. The calls, however, were not enough to sustain membership or promote discipleship. Further, this minimal system did not prevent members from becoming inactive and slipping away from church. In my former church setting I served as a licensed local preacher and was in the process of completing the requirements for deaconate ordination. In addition, I held several leadership positions in the local church and within the episcopal district. So I had extensive familiarity with congregational care and the responsibilities of the class leaders. As such, I made several observations about how this process worked.

First, the majority of the group leaders were seventy to eighty years of age. Their ages were not the problem – in many ministry settings seniors hold key positions and are vibrant and dedicated participants in building God's kingdom. The challenge for the seniors in this ministry setting was learning to relinquish their sometimes harsh and unfair judgments of members who were less than forty years of age. One of the quickest

ways to inhibit or stop church growth is by not providing relevant ministry or marginalizing youth and young adults. Studies confirm that the generations most likely to leave church are Generation Z and Millennials (those in their upper teens and ages 20-39). When developing assimilation and spiritual activities for any age group, and for the Millennials in particular, it is useful to acquire an understanding of their particular language, lifestyle, concerns and issues which are naturally quite different than those born decades before them.

Earl Creps explains the process of older people gaining a better understanding of the current generation as "reverse mentoring". Reverse Mentoring, he asserts, "assumes a completely opposite perspective on learning. While acknowledging the proven value of the older-to-younger approach (teaching down), it provides the vital complement of a younger-to-older method (teaching up)."[2] Reverse Mentoring is a paradigm shift that, when put into practice, will create a learning curve – for some it will be a steep learning curve, because as Creps observes "reversing the traditional dynamics [younger to older learning] feels unnatural to some, especially older leaders."[3]

Second, the senior leadership of this church had no desire to learn technology or promote its use to communicate with members or to facilitate ministry efficiencies. Similarly, and not surprisingly, the group leaders were not well versed in the use of technologies such as text messaging, electronic mail and social media. Technology, no matter how effective or efficient, does not replace face-to-face meetings, however,

---

[2] Earl Creps, *Reverse Mentoring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 17.

[3] Ibid.

without utilizing technology, it is next to impossible to regularly communicate with church leaders and members; especially baby boomers, young adults and the youth.

Third, church leadership sanctioned class leaders to conduct fundraising through their individual assigned groups; this was not acceptable as many members complained that the only time they heard from their class leaders was when they were soliciting money.

Finally, the church ministries did not allow room for the formation of new ministries or the reshaping of current ministries. In other words, what you saw was what you got. When new members expressed a desire to participate in ministry, they would be "shoe horned" into what already existed. This type of ministry model did not allow flexibility or promote creativity. Additionally, new ideas and suggestions were not valued, instead they were perceived as disruptions to the status quo. Inviting members to participate in discussions about how to improve ministry does not suggest that churches make continuous and random changes to suit everyone's individual needs but, complete inflexibility leaves no room for members to utilize spiritual gifts or for the opportunity to create new or alternative ways to minister.

Several members including myself met with the pastor to offer suggestions to enhance assimilation for the congregants who seemingly had few options to engage in church ministries in ways that were relevant to them. To facilitate these suggestions, congregants were willing to invest additional time, energy and the financial support to implement new ministries and to increase opportunities for current members to connect with each other and become assimilated into the life of the church. However, questioning

the status quo and recommending new and innovative ministry ideas was generally not greeted with enthusiasm.

Consequently, the suggestions fell on deaf ears and eventually did not come to fruition because the majority of the money collected by the church was committed to the required denominational support. For a small church with limited human and financial resources, mandatory fundraising activities left little time to discuss, plan and implement strategies for the retention of new members or the creation of new ministries. Author Julia Duin describes how fruitless activities and programs that lack spiritual emphasis are not enough to keep people coming to church. To that point, Duin says, "New fads and programs come and go, but mediocrity and lack of God just seem to go on forever. And so quietly, sometimes without anyone even noticing, they [members] slowly slip out the doors, never to return."[4]

At this particular church setting, the class system, which was initially designed to assimilate members and encourage spiritual growth, was modified in such a way that actually drove members away and, consequently, countered church growth. This was troubling. Even more troubling was the lack of response from the church leaders. For the ministry leaders and others impacted by this situation, their concern grew into frustration. I and others saw this as congregational neglect and disregard of scripture which says: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them not because you must, but because you are willing as God wants you to be, no pursing

---

[4] Julia Duin, *Quitting Church: Why The Faithful Are Fleeing* (Colorado: Bondfire Books, 2013), 18.

dishonest gain, but eager to serve." [5] In the end, nothing was done to improve the assimilation process for new members. As a result, members continued to leave the church dissatisfied and spiritually unfulfilled. Eventually, I would also leave the church.

As I grew spiritually, it became clear that the expectations I had of church were deepening because I was no longer satisfied with passive or superficial membership. I realized that I was being led in a different spiritual direction. My challenge was to find out where I was being led and why. I've often heard that God doesn't waste any of our experiences. This would prove true as my theology of assimilation would be further developed in my next ministry context.

Assimilation, as described by Pastor and author Rick Warren, is "…the task of moving people from an awareness of your church to attendance at your church to active membership in your church." Warren went on to say that "the incorporation of new members into your church fellowship does not happen automatically. If you do not have a system and a structure to assimilate and keep the people you reach, they won't stay with your church. You'll have as many people going out the back door of your church as coming in the front door."[6] In fact, "…it is the church's responsibility to take the initiative in assimilating new people into the congregation."[7] When not enough attention is devoted to monitoring church members and addressing their needs, many become inactive or leave, oftentimes without anyone noticing. This dynamic is attributed to an ineffective assimilation process.

---

[5] 1 Peter 5:2.

[6] Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 304.

[7] Ibid.

The Brooklyn Community Church is a newly formed independent community church affiliated with the American Baptist Churches Metro New York. BCC held its inaugural service on October 1, 2010. I came to BCC in September 2010 during my third-year as a Masters of Divinity student-intern from New York Theological Seminary. BCC served as the ministry site where I would complete the supervised ministry portion of the program. In May 2011 I became a member of BCC.

Currently I serve BCC as Pastor for Church Administration and Development. In 2011 – BCC's first full year - 98 new members joined BCC, followed by 37 and 81 in the second and third years, respectively. Enthusiastic members regularly invited family and friends some of which would also eventually join. Their evangelism was, in part, responsible for the rapid increase in BCC church membership. Currently, in its fourth year, a total of 340 souls have become members of BCC. In early 2010 the BCC New Members Ministry was officially organized and BCC conducted its first four-week membership class. All of the members, who had joined up to that point, had an opportunity to participate in the new members class.

The Family Ministry was also organized during 2010. Like small group ministry and the class system, the Family Ministry is comprised of lay and ordained servant-leaders, referred to as "group leaders", who provide members with spiritual leadership in the form of prayer, spiritual guidance, fellowship and encouragement. The group leaders also monitor new members to ensure that they have adequate and appropriate opportunities to engage in church life. The group leaders are assigned entire families as well as individual members.

The increased number of new members joining BCC was both a blessing and a challenge. With each new member came new needs. The rapid rate at which BCC had acquired new members created the need to create an intentional system of managing our new membership. The core purpose of the system would encourage new members to become active and be engaged in church life. This process would not rest on a few people, instead, it would be built into a church-wide culture. In that sense, ministries and ministry leaders would act as one team that would share information and make congregational care a priority accomplished through teamwork.

The Congregational Growth and Development study area provided me an opportunity to develop my understanding of effective assimilation, how church processes impact the new member experience, and how those factors help or hinder church growth. At BCC, I am one of three instructors for the New Members Class. As such, I have discovered that new members not only want to grow, they expect to grow and expect the church to show them how. I also discovered that new members are willing to invest the time and energy needed to uncover their gifts and are willing to use their gifts, passions, experiences and talents to serve the church and to become engaged in church life. This project is entitled "New Member Assimilation: Closing the Back Door through Systemic Membership Management" as it will focus on enhancing and systematizing the assimilation processes within the New Member and Family Ministries. This approach will include research on assimilation, membership retention and membership databases.

The New Members Ministry and the Family Ministry lay the foundation for new member assimilation because they are the first ministries that have the initial contact with

new members. As such, both ministries play a crucial role in new member assimilation and it is from these two ministries that the BCC assimilation system will emanate. The envisioned system would empower ministry leaders to minister to members in relevant and meaningful ways, support information sharing by using technology and to place priority on congregational care accomplished through team work.

This type of congregational care dispels the notion that the pastor or ordained clergy are solely responsible for the care of the church. Instead, this system helps the church take care of the church.

As a growing church, it is crucial to assimilate new members early in their membership. Stemming from the understanding of the church as a system with interrelated parts, this project seeks to create a system that supports effective new member assimilation by creating tracking mechanisms within the New Members Ministry and Family Ministry. Utilizing technology and other processes, this system will monitor the spiritual and temporal needs of the membership and assist in engaging new members in ministry and in the life of the church. Most importantly, the system will be designed to prevent members from getting "lost in the crowd", becoming inactive and, possibly slipping away from the church unnoticed.

To accomplish this, first, the Advisory Committee and I will meet with the New Member Ministry and Family Ministry teams to gain an understanding of the current assimilation practices for new members. The Advisory Committee will then explore assimilation by discussing their responses to the following questions:

1)	What is the role of leaders in assimilation?

2)   How do BCC's systems and processes support or hinder new member assimilation?

3)   What systems and processes should we keep, improve, revise and remove?

Second, in preparation for this project I organized the data received from a BCC Focus Group that convened in July 2013. The Focus Group was asked to answer three questions and discuss their responses. The questions were: 1) why had they left their former church? 2) why had they decided to join BCC? and 3) how long had they been a member at their former church? In anticipation of the start of this project, I used this discussion to raise their consciousness about assimilation and to reflect on how assimilation – good and not so good – impacted their former and current church experiences. I will share national data on the reasons people leave church and compare it with the responses from the focus group to determine if the national data aligns with the responses from the focus group.

Third, in order for assimilation to have maximum impact, ministries cannot operate independent of each other; instead they must see themselves as one part of a whole system whose sole purpose is to facilitate spiritual transformation.   Coordinating the interrelated parts is known as system and process thinking. Church leadership consultants Dan Rick and Evelyn Burry, describe a system as "an interrelated group of processes that connect to accomplish a particular goal or outcome."[8] Characterizing the individual aspects of a system, Rick and Burry go on to say: "…components of a system may include people, resources, raw materials, information, tools, gifts and skills. Each

---

[8] Dan R. Dick and Evelyn M. Burry, *Quest: A Journey Toward A New Kind of Church* (Nashville: Disciple Resources, 1999), 59.

process in a system uses these component parts as inputs to transform them into something new… and when one part or process of the system is affected or changes, it affects the entire system." [9]

In 1 Corinthians 12:12 the Apostle Paul uses the "body" as the metaphor for the church. In that scripture he says: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many pats form one body, so it is with Christ." Understanding the church as a body "symbolizes the organic, systemic, interrelated nature of the church."[10]
In order to optimize the work of a system, its parts must be synchronized and communicating.

I will explore how systems and process thinking can positively impact assimilation. Processes are not built on robotic compliance, instead the ultimate goal is to facilitate spiritual transformation and growth. The New Members and Family Ministries have the first and most impactful connection with new members. We will adopt processes to facilitate their collaborative approach to assimilation.

Fourth, with the assistance of a sub-committee, I will research and recommend a content management system (database) that will manage and disseminate the myriad of membership data associated with a growing church.

---

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 61.

CHAPTER 2

CHURCH SETTING AND MINISTRY CONTEXT

The Brooklyn Community Church

"…behold I will do a new thing." Isaiah 43:19a

The Brooklyn Community Church (BCC) is an independent community church affiliated with the American Baptist Churches Metro New York. Founder and Senior Pastor, Rev. Dr. Fred Lucas, has been in the preaching ministry for 42 years. With 26 years of pastoral experience, Rev. Fred has held pastorates at five churches. His integrity and commitment to empowering people within the church and the community, as well as his business expertise, positioned Rev. Fred as a sought after speaker and consultant on church administration, strategic church growth, affordable housing, community and economic development and church building improvement projects. In 1997 Rev. Fred transitioned from full-time pastor to Founder and CEO of the Faith Center for Community Development (FCCD).[1]

In the spring of 2010 Rev. Dr. Fred Lucas received the "divine green light" to return to Brooklyn and start a new church. During the summer of the same year, Rev. Lucas stepped out on faith and shared the vision for this new church with a small group of family and friends. There were several reasons that attracted this small group to the BCC vision.

---

[1] Rev. Dr. Fred Lucas, *Biography,* Brooklyn Community Church.

First, they knew Rev. Lucas as a man of God whose integrity earned him respect in ecumenical and business circles, with elected officials and within the community. Many in this small group had been pastored by Rev. Lucas in the past and some had known him for up to thirty years. Second, they knew him to be a visionary-leader with the ability to bring vision to fruition. Third, many in the small group were not spiritually happy at their church, were not satisfied with the church leadership and, for some time they were considering new places of worship. For those reasons, this small group was excited that Rev. Lucas followed the call to once again pastor in Brooklyn. The macro vision for BCC was that of a non-denominational, autonomous, independent community church organized, managed and governed by the local congregation. The BCC mission statement would eventually be drafted to read this way:

> Our mission is to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ through the spiritual, intellectual, cultural and social empowerment of individuals, families and communities. On a daily basis, we seek to accomplish this through personal witness and dynamic Holy Spirit-led, Bible-based, out-of-the-box, community-focused, contemporary preaching, teaching, and ministries of love and compassion.[2]

> In the months that followed, the group organized ministries and appointed

---

[2] Brooklyn Community Church, *Brooklyn Community Church Sunday Church Bulletin,* One Pierrepont Plaza, Suite 1302, Brooklyn, NY 11201.

church leaders. This included the incorporation of the Brooklyn Community Church and the election of the senior pastor, an associate pastor, deacons, trustees, church attorney, treasurer and church clerk.

"...now it shall spring forth…" Isaiah 43:19b

In October 2010 Rev. Dr. Arlee Griffin, Senior Pastor at Berean Baptist Church, and, long-time friend and colleague of Rev. Fred, invited BCC to hold its inaugural worship service at Berean. At that service, more than 200 people were in attendance and during the altar call, eighteen people joined the church; including the small group of family and friends that Rev. Fred first shared the vision for BCC. These new members became known as the BCC Founding Members. After the inaugural service, BCC continued to meet at Berean for an evening worship service on the first Friday of each month. By then BCC had grown to thirty members. BCC continued to utilize Berean's sanctuary and, in February 2011, transitioned to a weekly Sunday afternoon service, which met at 4:00 p.m. Two months later, Sunday school was organized and began holding classes at 3:00 p.m., just before the worship service. In essence, Berean Baptist Church assisted in the birth of BCC and would continue to be the worship site for BCC until October 2012.

Initially, BCC's weekly Bible study met in space provided by Pastor Curtis Whitney at Mt. Sinai Baptist Church, Brooklyn, NY. In April 2011, BCC rented conference room space for Bible study in the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Plaza, also

known as "Restoration". Described as "the nation's first community development corporation", Restoration leases retail, office, meeting and multi-use spaces.

It is also the home to a four-year college, an art gallery and the Billie Holiday Theater. Known as a "major destination for commerce, education and culture"[3], Restoration is where BCC would eventually lease space for its administrative offices, which would be the hub of all church work and where weekly bible study, ministry meetings and administrative operations would occur.

In 2011, Rev. Fred and several BCC members began the search for a church building and, after visiting a number of Brooklyn churches and much prayer, they felt led to a church in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. The new church building is located on a cul de sac alongside Fort Greene's historic Charles A. Dorsey Public Elementary School 67 (P.S. 67) and a public library. The church building, school and library are surrounded by the Ingersoll and Whitman Public Houses. Negotiations are currently underway to acquire the church.

Until then, BCC needed to secure a worship site. Several BCC church leaders and members met with the principal of P.S. 67. The school's presence in Fort Greene dates back to the 1800's when in 1847 a group of African-Americans opened Colored School No. 1 – which is now P.S. 67. Described as "the first independently led educational initiative for Black Brooklynites"[4], and the first public school for African-Americans,

---

[3] Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, "Home Page", accessed November 12, 2014, http://www.restorationplaza.org.

[4] Project Matters: A Joint Project of City Lore and the Municipal Art Society, "Places That Matter," accessed November 12, 2014, http://www.placematters.net/node/1857.

Colored School No. 1 would be renamed after its longest serving Principal Mr. Charles A. Dorsey.

To accommodate Bible study and Sunday worship services, BCC rented the cafeteria and auditorium at P.S. 67. On Sunday, November 12, 2012 at 11:00 a.m., BCC held its first Fort Greene worship service.

Today P.S. 67 continues to be the worship site for BCC. The cafeteria is utilized for Sunday church school, new members class, Sunday after-service fellowship, praise dance rehearsals and youth ministry. The auditorium serves as the sanctuary.

During the meeting with P.S. 67's principal, we asked how BCC could help the school. The principal shared the various needs of the school and its students. Immediately following that meeting, BCC members volunteered to tutor students, donate backpacks, books, clothing and Kindles (electronic reading devices). Many of the children attending the school were living in the nearby Auburn Family Shelter therefore, BCC organized a Christmas party and a clothing drive for the families and children living in the shelter.

In addition, BCC hosted a "P.S. 67 Day" at BCC where the principal was the guest speaker and the school's children's choir sang. After the service, BCC prepared a special Sunday meal for the principal, the students and their families. BCC conducted this outreach without the advantage of its own church building – we were serious about outreach and wanted to fulfill our mission to "spread the gospel through…social empowerment of individuals, families and communities."[5] And, although the outreach

---

[5] Brooklyn Community Church, *Sunday Bulletin*.

was not done to gain attention, it was, in fact, a way to let the neighborhood know that a new church now resided in Fort Greene.

Fort Greene, Brooklyn

Fort Greene is one of Brooklyn's oldest communities whose history goes back several centuries. Historically, Fort Greene is where Native Americans settled and traded land with members of a loose, quasi government body known as the Dutch colony. In time, the neighborhood would be named after an American Revolutionary War Fort and General Nathaniel Greene, who supervised its construction. Situated at the foot of the East River, and where the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges would eventually stand, the Fort's purpose was to protect Brooklyn from attack during war-time in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, Fort Greene transitioned from vast farmland to private homes purchased by an influx of prominent and wealthy families who moved into the area. In time, Fort Greene would become more attractive to the wealthy residents as expanded ferry service provided access to Manhattan.

Fort Greene, known for its prominent residents, was once home to poet Walt Whitman, author Richard Wright, Novelist Truman Capote, and award winning gospel singer and Brooklyn Pastor Rev. Hezekiah Walker. It is also the current home of film director Spike Lee and the headquarters for his production company. Well-known landmarks are the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn Navy Yard and Fort Greene Park. Educational facilities include Long Island College, Brooklyn Law School, Pratt

Institute, Adelphi University and Brooklyn Technical High School – a premier high school for students gifted in math and science. The surrounding affluent neighborhoods are Brooklyn Heights, Park Slope and Clinton Hill, Carroll Gardens, Boerum Hill and Cobble Hill. There are nine churches of various denominations near BCC; seven are located within a mile, the others are within two miles.

In early 1940 the need for affordable housing precipitated the building of public housing that would be located in the Southwest section of Fort Greene. The housing units are named after prominent Fort Greene resident and poet Walt Whitman and former Brooklyn Borough President, Raymond V. Ingersoll. Known as the Fort Greene Houses, the Whitman and Ingersoll houses consist collectively of 35 buildings, 3,478 apartments and 4,781 residents. By 1960, African-American and Latino families transitioned into Fort Greene; at the same time the wealthy families were leaving the area for the suburbs.

Throughout the seventies, eighties and much of the nineties, like many urban areas – particularly the area surrounding the Whitman and Ingersoll Houses - struggled with high crime, poverty, joblessness, drugs and unemployment. Other problems that impacted the area were teen pregnancy, high-school delinquency and inadequate community services. Since then the area has experienced major revitalization and development which began in 1990 with the opening of the MetroTech office complex.

MetroTech is described as a "sixteen-acre mixed-use office campus of 11 buildings, totaling 37 million square feet of office space, around a three-acre landscaped commons. An estimated 22,000 people work at Metro Tech Center on an average day."[6]

---

[6] MetroTech BID Website, accessed November 5, 2014, http://downtownbklyn.com.

Metro Tech is headquarters for the New York City Fire Department, National Grid, New York Police Department 911 emergency dispatch system and JP Morgan Chase, just to name a few.

Rapid commercial and residential development in downtown Brooklyn increased the lure of young professionals and their families to Fort Greene and, as a result, contributed to the demographic shift in ethnic populations in the neighborhood. For many years African-American and Latinos were the dominate ethnicities in Fort Greene. In 2000 for example, African-Americans and Latinos collectively comprised 80% of the total Fort Greene population, while the White population made up 13% of the total population. Twelve years later in 2012, the total population of Fort Greene increased 12% from 38,557 to 43,548. While the White population increased by 28%, the combined African-American and Latino total population decreased by 30%. Projections for 2017 show further collective decreases of 41% of African-American and Latino populations while the White population is projected to increase to 49% of the total population.

Additionally, these demographic shifts caused an upward trend in the annual household incomes of $50,000 and above. In spite of the renewal in Fort Greene, the largest percentages of the total population are those whose annual household income is below $15,000. In Fort Greene, the dominate age groups are those 5 years and under and Millennials - those in the report identified as 25-34 years old. The report also identified

those ages 65 and older as a group that is increasing in population, although in smaller

numbers.[7]

The new and more affluent residents found the extensive renovation of long-

abandoned apartment buildings and Fort Greene's proximity to Manhattan-bound bridges

and mass transit an attractive alternative to high-priced Manhattan residential rents. Like

most Brooklyn neighborhoods, Fort Greene has a number of "corner stores" and

delicatessens. In and around the neighborhood, development such as the new state-of-the

art Barclays Sports and Entertainment Center has infused the area with economic

development. The accelerated development and gentrification saturated the

neighborhood with better grocery and department stores, an array of trendy new small

businesses and restaurants, improved mass transit and better housing.

However, neighborhood residents and community leaders contend that not

everyone benefited from the rapid development and renovation. Low-income residents

and those on fixed incomes could not afford the newly renovated apartments and

brownstone houses. As a result, some residents were priced-out and displaced by high-

rise condominiums and other development. Despite the revitalization in Fort Greene, the

Ingersoll and Whitman Houses continue to be plagued by high crime, poverty,

joblessness, drugs and unemployment. These concerns remain a source of contention and

concern for those who live in the public houses as well as the community and civic

leaders. Data derived from the Ministry Area Profile listed the "primary concerns" in

2012 for Fort Greene residents as "financial, employment, affordable housing and

---

[7] Precept Group Inc., *Ministry Area Profile 2012*, Study Area: 11205, 4-5.

adequate food". Additionally, problems with "racial and ethnic prejudice and achieving educational objectives" were also identified as concerns for Fort Greene residents.[8] It is in this environment that God placed the Brooklyn Community Church.

"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

Isaiah 43:19

Brooklyn Community Church Membership

In 2011 - BCC's first full year - membership increased from 28 members to 93. In years two and three, BCC experienced an 81% increase in membership with 37 new members in 2012 and 81 in 2013. As of September 2014, membership at BCC increased by 42% or 101 additional members since 2013. In just four years, 340 souls have taken the walk of faith and become members of BCC – an average of 85 new members per year. Of our new membership, 71 people who reside in Ingersoll and Whiteman Houses have joined BCC. In 2014 the average attendance each Sunday is approximately 90 people.

	10/2010	2011	2012	2013	09/2014
Number of Members	28	121	158	239	340
Number of New Members	28	93	37	81	101
Percentage of Increase		332%	31%	51%	42%

Figure1: BCC Number of New Members (October 1, 2010 – September 21, 2014)

The congregation is comprised of the age ranges and the corresponding generation as noted in the chart below.
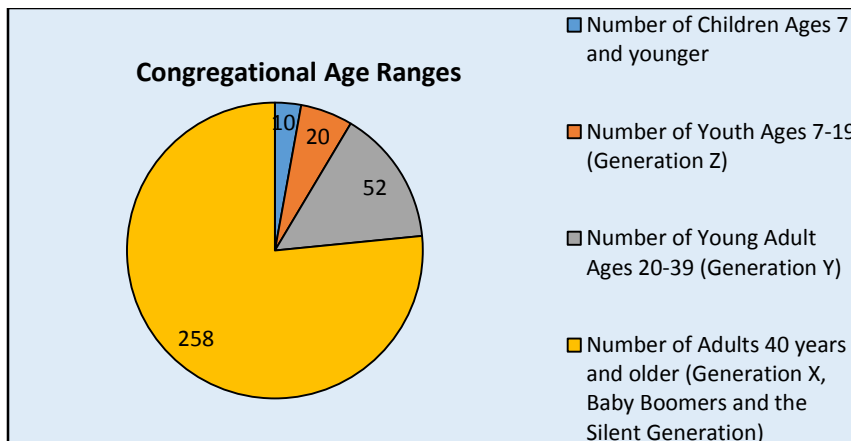
---

[8] Ibid., 16.

Figure 2 Brooklyn Community Church Congregational Age Ranges as of September 2014

Currently, BCC church records do not capture racial or ethnic demographics, however based on my personal observation, the congregation is approximately 98% African-American and 2% Latino and other. The gender composition is 63 adult males and 163 adult females. Of those who responded, new members identified their former faith affiliation this way: 83 African Methodist Episcopalian or African Methodists Episcopalian Zion, 23 Non-denominational or other, 17 Baptist, 2 Catholic and 1 Lutheran. There were 199 new members identified who themselves as Christians and 66 were new converts.
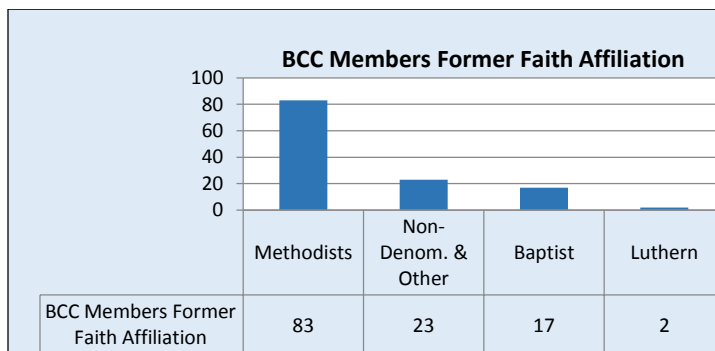

Figure 3 Brooklyn Community Church Members Who Identified Their
        Former Faith Affiliation

When asked, members indicated lack of trust of church leadership, lack of transformative spiritual growth and insufficient opportunities to participate in meaningful ministry as the top three reasons for seeking a new place of worship. During the first two years many of the new members were those who had known Rev. Fred from a former pastorate. As a result, there were built-in friendships and familiarity amongst the members who joined the first and second years. Church growth continued to increase as new members, excited about the empowering preaching, bible study and fellowship, enthusiastically invited friends, family members and co-workers.

Prior to BCC moving into Fort Greene, the majority of members did not live within walking distance to the church site. Since transitioning church services to Fort Greene, seventy-six people from the Fort Greene neighborhood have joined BCC. As the church membership grew diversity widened. Members of BCC are from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds that range from Supreme Court judges to those who live in shelters. In some churches, these kinds of obvious differences could produce barriers to assimilation. Therefore, leadership is the key to maintaining an equitable atmosphere amongst church members and sets the tone of how members respond to each other. Hospitable churches generally have leaders who have made hospitality a priority and regularly practice the same. Hospitality goes beyond hello, a handshake and the customary hug; it is how we make others feel while they are in our presence. I agree with George Bullard, author and consultant of the subject of congregational transformation, when he says "congregational leaders who choose to focus on helping newer people assimilate deeply into the congregation will proactively seek out meaningful fellowship

with others."[9] The members and regular attendees of BCC were sowing what they

wanted to reap; that is, each member was determined to extend the hospitality that they

received when they arrived at BCC. So along with hello, the handshake and a hug was a

feeling of sincere warmth, welcome and brotherly and sisterly love that germinated from

each person's heart and their desire to reap the same. Visitors were greeted with warmth

and an authentic sense of community. They often shared that the empowering teaching

and preaching were refreshing and the change they were looking for.

The hospitality experienced during worship service is extended to the after-

service fellowship where new and current members got to know each other in a relaxed

and inviting atmosphere. Often, members and visitors stay until we "have to" leave

because the building is closing. After-service fellowship at BCC is vital because it

provides members an opportunity to build healthy relationships. Healthy relationships

amongst church members impact church growth and serves as a foundation for

assimilation.

In the book *V.E.L.C.R.O. Church*, authors Ken Hemphill and Mike James suggest

the ways to attract and retain members is to create opportunities for people to relate to

each other. To that point they say: "We must intentionally connect people to people so

that they experience high quality relationships."[10] High quality relationships extend

beyond Sunday by getting acquainted with people in such a way that their needs become

---

[9] George Ballard, *10 Factors of Congregational Survivability, Vitality, and Vibrancy* (Chalice Press, 2013), 204.

[10] Ken Hemphill and Mike James, *V.E.L.C.R.O. Church* (Tigerville: Auxano Press), 798.

apparent. True spiritual hospitality is practical in that it meets the day-to-day needs of people and seeks to empower them.

What was interesting at BCC is that we did not devise a "five-step plan" on how to welcome or greet people. No one put forth a project that focused on the "how to" of hand shaking and hugging. Instead, the senior pastor modeled hospitality and provided the physical and spiritual space for it to happen and the church followed suit.

The young adult and youth population also found opportunities to use their specific gifts in ministry participation for both them and their children. New converts and those who rededicated their lives to Christ were attracted to the non-judgmental aspect of hospitality found at BCC.

The prior faith experiences of the members varied as well. Many members transferred from large denominations such as Catholic, Lutheran, Pentecostal and Methodists and, as such, were "experienced" church members who were accustomed to the church environment, were active in church and solid in their belief in God. Still, church traditions, controlling leadership and inadequate ministry options rendered some of these new members with little prior experience in church leadership and ministry participation. BCC believes everyone should be given the opportunity to participate in ministry and equips all members so that they can grow into mature Christians and become active ministry participants. BCC gives life to this belief by intentionally inviting members to select and read scripture, lead prayer during church meetings and worship services, lead and organize ministries, participate in evangelism and provide input in the formation of church ministries, policies and processes. To engage members

and further their confidence in this participatory ministry, Rev. Fred would often reassure members by saying "there are no mistakes, just learning experiences and teachable moments."[11] This kind of encouragement was beneficial as it would counter wrong thinking and inaccurate teaching about lay participation in ministry. This new way of doing ministry was transformative and releasing. Like me, many felt the call to ministry but were not always sure of how to carry out the call.

Currently BCC has 23 ministries, 29 deacons and 8 ministerial staff. Members are empowered to organize ministries and in ways that members utilize their talents, gifts, experiences and passions. Initially, BCC formed the traditional ministries such as ushers, choir, Sunday school, Christian education and evangelism. Other ministries such as helping hands, praise dancers, law ministry and hospitality were formed by members who had an interest in a particular ministry (e.g. praise dancing), or by members who saw a need and filled it. For example, whenever we needed to organize a meal, a few members volunteered to purchase, set-up and clean-up after each meal. This group became known as the Helping Hands Ministry.

BCC served as an internship site for students completing the Masters of Divinity program at New York Theological Seminary. I and three other interns assisted in organizing ministries such as Christian Education, celebration of its first Women's Day, Youth Ministry and Sunday school.

During BCC's second and third years we experienced a transition in the leadership of the New Members and Family Ministries. As a growing church with a

---

[11] Rev. Dr. Fred Lucas, Founder and Senior Pastor, Brooklyn Community Church.

number of lay leaders who were new to church leadership, we reviewed our assimilation practices and administrative support systems associated with the New Members and Family Ministries. Every new members participates in the New Members and the Family Ministries during their first three months and beyond. Overall, the primary goals were to ensure that members were spiritually cared for, involved in ministry within the early stages of membership, assisting them in identifying their gifts and talents and creating opportunities for them to use them to serve the church and disciple others.

CHAPTER 3

BELIEVING AND BELONGING: ASSIMILATION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

"Come, follow me". This call, as described in Matthew 4:19, was extended by Jesus to Simon, his brother Andrew and, later to others. The call was first a call to be a disciple of Christ. The meaning of the word "disciple" is rooted in the Greek word *mathētēs* which means, "…to increase one's knowledge or to learn by use and practice."[1] Edward D. Andrews, explaining discipleship in first century Christianity, says "This [a disciple] is not just a pupil, but also includes the sense of one who adheres to someone…one who follows, obeys, observes, sticks to, stands by this one, which is Jesus Christ for the Christian disciple."[2] As such, a disciple is one whose "…task is to learn, study, and pass along the sayings and teachings of the master."[3]

Second, discipleship was an all-inclusive call to anyone who professed that Chris is "…the Messiah, the Son of the living God".[4] Centuries before the rise of early Christianity, God designated the Jewish people as his chosen people. In keeping with God's desire to fellowship with his creation and, honoring the covenant with Abraham to make his descendants a great nation, God proclaimed to the Nation of Israel that "I will

---

[1] "Disciple," accessed January 11, 2015, www.blueletterbible.org.

[2] Edwards D. Andrews, *Early Christianity In The First Century* (Cambridge: Christian Publishing Houses, 2014), 23.

[3] Ibid., "Disciple".

[4] Matthew 16:16.

walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people."[5] In order to carry this out, God set up a system whereby the people could learn of his sovereignty, holiness and how to relate to and worship Him through ceremonial rituals, annual feasts and priestly sacrifices. Additionally, the system would show the people their natural inclination towards sin and the consequential barrier that sin constructs between them and a holy God. As such, they were to avoid, among other things, idol worship and, marriage to non-Jewish persons. To remedy sin, God appointed priestly intermediaries to enact recurring rituals that acknowledged and made atonement for the sins of the people. In return for their faithful allegiance and obedience to God's commandments, God promised to prosper their land, provide temporal resources and protect them from their enemies.

The close-knit association among the Jewish people had built-in understandings. For one, the association with anyone non-Jewish was not something to pursue. The Jewish people believed that many non-Jewish people were heathens, unclean and were considered culturally and socially inferior. Therefore, this all-inclusive call to Christian discipleship was unique in that it had societal and religious implications because it violated Jewish religious law and was a blatant disregard for their strict observance of the edicts that prohibited them to comingle with those outside their nation. In addition, the relationship that the Jews shared with God was not something to be offered to others to partake in. These understandings impacted assimilation in early Christianity.

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross ushered in the new covenant, which did not do away with the previous covenants, but instead fulfilled God's eternal goal for humankind to

---

[5] Lev. 26:12.

have a close and eternal relationship with God. In the new covenant, the priests did not have exclusive access to God, instead, Jesus became the High Priest and intermediary between creation and the Creator. As such, rituals and ceremonies would not be solely used to teach and guide us in the way of the Lord, instead, our hearts would be infused by God's Holy Spirit and the place where God would reside.

Under the new covenant all people were invited to become Christian disciples by eliminating rituals and strict cultural affiliation – which were the former defining lines for acknowledging God. Discipleship happened in the midst of a new community of believers, referred to by Jesus as the "Church". In early Christianity the word "church" did not refer to a building. Instead, when Jesus said "…I will build my church…" the word church translated to the Greek word ekklēsia which, in a general sense meant "a body of free citizens called out…". Therefore, the ekklēsia, describes a select, called out people who gathered for worship, testimony and fellowship. For the early church, believing in Christ and belonging to Him was evident in how the disciples responded to Christ and to other Christians. In that way their actions and how they lived their lives would set them apart from non- believers and, at the same time, connect them to the entire body of Christ. Making new disciples and assimilating them into the Body of Christ meant that Jews and Gentiles alike would need to relinquish the veneration of religious rules, idols, meals, feasts and rituals that were used as a measurement for "holiness" and to acknowledge God.

The spiritual and social transformation that the new Christians experienced would be evident when they prayed, worshipped God and fellowshipped together. In this new covenant "…there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ in all, and is in all."[6]

Acceptance of all people was the key in the early Christian community because authentic acceptance of other Christians was prerequisite for the close bond that God intended amongst Christians. In fact, "…the gospel bound believers to one another as well as to God." And, "reconciliation with God entailed reconciliation with others…union in the Spirit involved union with one another, for the Spirit was primarily a shared, not individual, experience."[7] As such, the acceptance of all people did not only deconstruct beliefs and practices that keep people separated but enabled the construction of the new Christian community. The interpersonal relationships that Christians developed were vital to personal and corporate spiritual growth. In this sense, the close knit relational bond found in the community of the Israelites, would be the foundation for Christianity. Discipleship through Jesus Christ paved the way for an unprecedented, new kind of spiritual relationship with God and all others.

Just before Jesus' accession he gave the disciples a command that became known as "The Great Commission". To commission is "an authoritative order entrusting a person or group with supervisory power or authority." The Great Commission was to

---

[6] Col. 3:11.

[7] Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches In Their Cultural Setting* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1995), 27.

"…go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit."[8] Jesus was basically directing the disciples to replicate themselves. That is, to teach everyone the same things that Jesus taught them and, fulfilling the Great Commission meant accepting everyone who accepts Christ. In order for the Great Commission to be effective, the early Christians unified in unprecedented ways that would be an attractive public relations campaign for potential new disciples. As new converts were baptized, their declaration of being a disciple of Jesus was evident as they healed people, delivered demoniacs and people were spiritually transformed. Discipleship, however, came at a cost as Christian persecution in the early century was common.

The writer of the book of Timothy declares "Yes, and all that live Godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution."[9] As the disciples continued their witness, Christianity spread and more people were converted. As Christianity grew, and churches were planted, new Christians faced opposition from the political and religious leaders of the Roman Empire whose power was threatened by Christianity's growth. In an attempt to stop the spread of Christianity, those who opposed the movement, organized brutal public persecutions that included Christians being eaten alive by lions and being burned alive. Christians killed by this kind of persecution considered it an honor to be martyred and, the persecutions actually contributed to the increase in disciples. Describing the impact that persecution had on the early Christians, Edward D. Andrews writes, "Christianity

---

[8] Matt. 28:19.

[9] 2 Tim. 3:12.

grew like wildfire in the first century and persecution was like throwing fuel on the fire, because it contributed to even faster growth."[10]

Contemporary Christians often speak of "fellowship" as it relates to church and other Christians. In that sense, fellowship is known as church-related activities, gatherings or a specific time that is set aside to greet each other. However, when fellowship is translated to the Greek word koinōnia it denotes "joint participation, association and intimacy".[11] With that understanding the first Christians shared an intimate association common to all believers and, fellowship, as noted by Jerry Bridges "…was not [Christians] devoting themselves to social activities but to a relationship that consisted of sharing together the very life of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit."[12]. Bridges went on to say, "They…entered this relationship by faith in Jesus Christ, not by joining an organization."[13]

The sense of belonging found throughout the teachings of the Apostle Paul is noted in the book of Acts where the disciples were described as being "...in one accord…" In the life of the disciples, being in one accord is the work of the Holy Spirit and results in the Christ-like attributes of peace and unity. In a natural sense humankind has the ability to be friendly, but the indwelling Holy Spirit connects Christians in a much deeper way where the needs of others become as important or more than our own. This

---

[10] Edward D. Andrews, *Early Christianity In The First Century*, 81.

[11] "Fellowship" accessed January 28, 2015, www.BlueLetterBible.com.

[12] Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice Of Koinonia* (Colorado: NavPress, 2012), 102.

[13] Ibid.

bond is described by the writer of the book of Luke this way: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had."[14] The sharing of material possessions signaled the beginning of the commitment to the body that surpasses one's own needs and desires. The Holy Spirit was blending Christians into one body as everyone cared for the other. The power of unity in a Christian body is evident when each member values others as equal and are willing to share their resources, emotions, time, energy and gifts to meet the needs of other believers.

UCLA seminary professor Joseph H. Hellerman conducted research on the social aspect of the early Christians and the familial nature of church membership. Hellerman says "We share our hearts with one another. This is the emotional attachment, the affective sense of closeness and intimacy that the Holy Spirit weaves into the lives of brothers and sisters in Christ who spend time together and share life and ministry together."[15] Acts 2:42 described fellowship amongst the new Christians this way, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." [16]

---

[14] Acts 4:32.

[15] Joseph H. Hellerman, *When The Church Was A Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision For Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009), 148.

[16] Acts 2:42.

It was through authentic fellowship that Christians understood the body of Christ as the "biblical community is first of all the sharing of a common life in Christ."[17] Describing ancient urban Christian relationships, author Wayne A. Meeks notes "…[the] groups enjoyed an unusual degree of intimacy, high levels of interaction among members, and a very strong sense of internal cohesion…"[18] God purposely created our Christian walk so that our growth would be dependent on mutual sharing and learning. To that point, Paul writes "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."[19] This means every Christian has something to contribute to the body of Christ which, when utilized, causes growth and edification of the body. The writer of the book of Peter puts it this way "Each one should use whatever gift you have received to serve others…"[20] As such, the community of Christians are equipped by God so that the body is empowered to nurture itself. As asserted by Jerry Bridges "The fellowship of our spiritual gifts is the using of our gifts for the benefit of the rest of the body and for the advancement of the kingdom of God."[21] The writer of the book of Acts describes the accelerated pace which the new church grew, he says "Those who accepted

---

[17] Ibid., 111.

[18] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World Of The Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 2003), 74.

[19] 1 Cor. 12:7.

[20] 1 Peter 4:10.

[21] Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice Of Koinonia,* 1146.

his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day."[22]

The early Christians were exhorted to "…not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."[23] Spiritual transformation impacts the mind, heart and soul and only comes through consistent anointed preaching, teaching, witnessing and, in fellowship with other believers. Transformation, therefore, is directly attributed to an act of God and the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The ancient Jews understood that God's spirit dwelt in the Holy of Holies and only the God-appointed priests were allowed to enter into God's presence. The penalty for dishonoring God's holy dwelling place was death. Spiritual transformation for the first century Christians was replaced as Jesus became the High Priest and the final atonement for all sin. God's spirit empowered the early believers with the ability to minister to others. The transformation of one person was a witness and testimony of the potential transformation of another.

Like modern day Christians, the first Christians were not perfect. They had to work to unify and conform their minds so that their actions reflect Godly characteristics. The indwelling of God's spirit through Jesus made the way for the empowerment of the church body. Unity was the result of their love for each other and their willingness to make disciples was manifested in their passion to grow and to help others grow. Maturity and growth were the end products. The spiritual transformation, fellowship and

---

[22] Acts 2:41.

[23] Rom. 12:2.

community is not meant to be isolated among a group of people, instead Jesus granted authority to the disciples and entrusted them with the ministry of making disciples. As such, "God is glorified when Christians grow in Christlikeness and when unbelievers are brought into His kingdom. Biblical community, then, incorporates this idea of an active partnership in the promotion of the gospel and the building up of believers." [24] Milt Rodriguez describes how the Christian community exists to fellowship with God and each other, to that point he says, "This is the life of oneness. This is the life of co-working and co-operation. This is the life of profound fellowship. This is a life of completed self-dedication to one another and laying down of life for one another. This is the inner life of God!"[25]

---

[24] Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice Of Koinonia*, 124.

[25] Milt Rodriguez, *The Community Life Of God: Seeing The Godhead As The Model For All Relationships*, (Rebuilders, 2009), 204.

CHAPTER 4

NEW MEMBER ASSIMILATION:

CLOSING THE BACK DOOR THROUGH SYSTEMIC MEMBERSHIP

MANAGEMENT

Assimilation, as described by Pastor Rick Warren, is "…the task of moving people from an awareness of your church to attendance at your church to active membership in your church." Warren goes on to say "the incorporation of new members into your church fellowship does not happen automatically. If you do not have a system and a structure to assimilate and keep the people you reach, they will not stay with your church. You'll have as many people going out the back door of your church as coming in the front door."[1] The "back door" is a metaphor used to describe how church members can leave church without anyone noticing or following up. This dynamic is attributed to an ineffective assimilation process. The "back door loss problem is a two-sided coin…the two sides are prevention and cure."[2] The likelihood of new members becoming inactive, complacent or leaving increases without interrelated systems and processes in place to monitor, check-in with and guide new members.

God gave talents, abilities and gifts to Christians to use to build the church. 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 reminds us that "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work

---

[1] Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 304.

[2] Joel D. Heck, *New Membership Assimilation: Practical Prevention Of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1988), 9.

in all of us. A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other." As God's

spirit does the "inside" spiritual work within each individual, and as each person is given

the opportunity to use their talents, abilities and gifts, each member grows into Christ-

likeness. When this happens, the church body grows – spiritually and numerically.

Ephesians 4:16 confirms that "He [God] makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As

each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body

is healthy and growing and full of love." Empowering members to serve God is built on

an effective, well-designed assimilation system. In this sense, the assimilation process

must be focused on calling, nurturing, teaching and sending. This process is intentional

and ongoing.

       All churches are tasked to effectively assimilate new members. For the church,

assimilation has two distinct features: connection to the local body and spiritual

transformation. Spiritual growth through bible study, prayer, serving in ministry,

attendance to worship, practicing the sacraments and frequent fellowship with other

members are the by-products of successful assimilation. Assimilation is the work of the

local church, however, assimilation is not simply getting members involved in the

activities of the church. In order to implement an assimilation process, church leaders

and members first, need to gain an understanding of church membership, the role of

leadership, small group ministry, and how the utilization of spiritual gifts impacts

assimilation.

       Following the scriptural mandate to "…go therefore and make disciples…" BCC

sets time aside to extend an invitation to non-members to join the church. As people join

BCC, I often wonder if new members actually understand that the church is not the building and they are not becoming members of a social club, denomination or pledging to uphold man-made traditions. Peter Masters, author of *Church Membership in the Bible*, defined the local church as, "…a special…spiritual family designed and intended by God for joining, so that those who belong are pledged and committed to its purposes."[3] The act of "joining" and "belonging" to church implies relationship and to "be connected with…[signifying] a very close dependence or bond."[4] This bond joins many into one body known as the church; as such, the people, not the building, are the church.

Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul said "…you [Christians] are the body of Christ."[5] The goal, therefore, is not to worship the institution of the church, instead "the journey upholds the institution as a means to an end and not the end in itself."[6] With that, the emphasis for new members is that the "church" is not a building but a community of people connected through faith. Diana Butler Bass describing how the transformative power of community churches, says, "…lively faith is not located in buildings…and structures. Rather spiritual vitality lives in human beings; it is located in the heart of God's people and the communities they form."[7] To that end, I agree with

---

[3] Peter Masters, *Church Membership In The Bible* (London: The Wakeman Trust, 2008), 8.

[4] Ibid.,11.

[5] 1 Cor.12:27.

[6] Dick and Burry, *Quest: A Journey Toward A New Kind of Church*, 34.

[7] Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity For The Rest Of Us: How The Neighborhood Church Is Transforming The Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 6.

pastor and blogger Carl Jones who asserts: "Church is the walking, talking embodiment of Christ…"[8]

And, "the church", as described by Dan Dick and Evelyn Burry, consultants on church leadership and congregational development, "exists…to reach out and receive people in the name of Jesus Christ, relate people to God, nurture and strengthen people in their faith and life, and send them into the world to lead transformed and transforming lives."[9] Through this connection Christians acknowledge and assume a new identity as a disciple of Christ by the repentance of sins, baptism and connection to a local church body.

It is incumbent on those who have been transformed to help transform others. In this way, the church body is a perpetual catalyst for spiritual transformation. Upon joining church, new members are set forth on a journey of transformative spiritual growth. "Spiritual transformation", as noted by church growth researchers Thom Rainer and Ed Stetzer, is a "non-negotiable for the Christian church" and, as such, developing a system by which members can experience spiritual transformation should be a priority for the church. [10] Rainer and Stetzer point out "transformation is at the heart of God's mission to humanity. He delights in moving us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light – and then empowering and directing us as agents of His kingdom."

---

[8]Carl Jones, "*When We Think Church Building,*" accessed, December 24, 2014, http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/when-we-think-church-building.

[9] Dick and Burry, *Quest: A Journey Toward A New Kind of Church*, 35.

[10] Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating A New Scorecard For Congregations* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 2.

Since 2010, more than three hundred new members have joined Brooklyn Community Church (BCC); an average of eighty-five new members per year. For a new start-up church, each new member was cause for excitement as many churches were experiencing dwindling numbers in membership or closing their doors. Interestingly, many of the people leaving church are not leaving because they lack a relationship with God, instead, large numbers of people actually feel disconnected from church. Julia Duin, author of "*Quitting Church: Why The Faithful are Fleeing*", labels this type of decline in membership as an abandonment of church. According to Duin, church abandonment is precipitated by situations such as church scandals, inefficient leadership, the quelling of supernatural spiritual gifts and controlling clergy. I agree and, would add that not engaging members in meaningful ministry and fellowship, as another reason for decline in membership. Duin goes on to say that "large numbers of men and singles are fed up with their needs never being addressed."[11]

While the number of people leaving churches has increased, I propose that the number of churches with casual or inactive members has increased as well. Casual members attend church but do not regularly serve in ministry or participate in fellowship. Overtime, if their status remains the same, casual and inactive members will most likely leave church. There are some inactive members who are intentionally inactive. They are, in fact, happy to participate in church in the most minimal way. Similarly, some people join church with the notion that the church is a social club or a place to casually gather each Sunday. For these members, giving money and selectively and infrequently

---

[11] Julia Duin, *Quitting Church: Why The Faithful Are Fleeing*, 23-24.

being involved in church life has become the norm. When these members sparingly give

of their time, talent and treasure, they oftentimes do so out of necessity or to avoid the

embarrassment of others knowing that they do not participate. In this sense, they engage

out of a sense of duty or to just get by. Thom Rainer describes their understanding of

church membership as "…aligned with country club membership" that shifts the focus

from service to self. Rainer goes on to say: "For these members membership is about

receiving instead of giving, being served instead of serving, rights instead of

responsibilities, and entitlements instead of sacrifices."[12] William Easum writing about

the destructive nature of individualism in the church says: "The body of Christ is

unhealthy when individual members function primarily on their own behalf. Such action

is mutiny. The scripture calls it sin."[13]

In every church there will likely be those who, by choice, remain on the margins

of church life. People cannot be forced or coerced into serving. Forcing members to

serve is not a good use of anyone's time – it is time consuming and exhausting. Further,

being forced to serve the church is not scriptural. The Bible tells us that, "Each of you

should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under

compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."[14] With that understanding, service to the

church is to be rendered joyfully and willingly. New members should participate in a

discussion and explanation of the benefits and expectations of membership. The benefits

---

[12] Thom S. Rainer, *I Am A Church Member: Discovering The Attitude That Makes The Difference* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 14.

[13] William M. Easum, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers: Ministry Anytime Anywhere By Anyone* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 54.

[14] 2 Cor. 9:7.

and expectations should be written in a place such as a new members manual for easy access and reference. The new member classes, for example, should cover all aspects of church membership that includes, among other things, a concise explanation of church doctrine, descriptions of the ordinances and their meaning, a listing of the ministries and how to get involved in ministry, a thoughtful biblically-based teaching and discussion on spiritual gifts followed by ample time for questions and follow-up. An effective assimilation process promotes involvement in ministry as part of Christianity and posits service to the church as an expectation and not an option.

Effective assimilation at BCC meant creating an atmosphere where members utilize their talents, gifts, experiences and passions. Many BCC members had left churches that lacked leadership and where the emphasis was on money and not people. These churches, as described by BCC members, were empty worship environments that were void of opportunities for spiritual development. Additionally, members described how their former church leaders made decisions without seeking their participation or input. Additionally, these members were not given the opportunity to receive leadership training or to lead. As a result, many would regularly attend church but, were not empowered to get actively involved in church.

On the other hand, assimilation is not simply about getting people involved in ministry – many churches have hundreds who are active in ministry but not developing into mature Christians. Spiritual growth researchers Greg Hawkins and Call Parkinson, comment on how activity is not a substitute for spiritual growth, the say, "Spiritual growth is not driven or determined by activities: it is defined by a growing relationship

with Christ. The goal is not to launch people into an assortment of ministry activities; it

is to launch them on a quest to embrace and surrender their lives to Jesus. "[15]

The problem of people leaving church is often masked by church leaders who use

the number of members on their church roll as a measure for church growth. An increase

in the number of members does not accurately reflect church growth. Net church growth

is measured over time by calculating the current average number of Sunday attendees and

comparing the result to the prior year's average attendance. The heart of assimilation,

however, is not based on the number of members on the church roll or how many people

attend church each Sunday. Author Albert Winseman argues that successful assimilation

rests on the number of members who are growing spiritually and are engaged in the life

of the church. Winseman notes "One reason United States congregations are in trouble is

that they have a low percentage of engaged members."

According to Winseman, 54% of those who attend church are not engaged in

church. [16] Unengaged members should be a concern for church leadership. Many

churches evangelize and recruit new members but do not pay much attention to them

after they join. In fact, right after a member joins is the most crucial time for

engagement. Addressing the need for churches to pay special attention to new members

soon after they join, Joel Heck says "…the first six months of a person's membership has

been consistently indicated as the most important time for the church to be actively

---

[15]Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 3215.

[16] Albert Winseman, *Growing An Engaged Church: How To Stop "Doing Church" And Start Being The Church Again* (New York: Gallup Press, 2006), 71.

involved in assimilation."[17] And, "…it is the church's responsibility to take the initiative in assimilating new people into the congregation."[18]

Hindrance to authentic spiritual transformation violates scripture and adversely impacts church growth. The decision to become a disciple of Christ is just the first step towards spiritual transformation. In some ways, the process of spiritual transformation can be likened to plant growth. Plants have a greater chance of maturing and blossoming when planted in an environment conducive to growth. Like plants, spiritual transformation happens best in an environment that supports learning and growth. God set the church as the environment that not only promotes spiritual transformation but sustains it.

In the church, God placed spiritual leaders such as pastors, teachers and deacons as frontline promoters of transformation and growth. Each leader, in consultation with God, and by the leading of the Holy Spirit, will know how best to create a growth environment for their unique ministry context. The task of the leaders is to equip God's people by allowing them to use their gifts within the church and to benefit from the gifts of others. Equipping or preparing God's people to serve the body of Christ requires a large measure of patience and love on the part of the leader because the manifestation of growth may take time before it is evident. This will mean including the paths to spiritual transformation in sermons, prayers, church meetings, bible study, printed material and conversations. These methods partnered with helping members discover the unique gifts

---

[17] Joel Heck, *New Membership Assimilation: Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care*, 17.

[18] Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 304.

and the value in giving their time, talent and treasure in ways that help them and others in the church grow. This process is descried in Ephesians 4:10 as "building up the church" leads to personal and corporate spiritual maturity and causes unity and growth in the church. This puts spiritual maturity at the helm of the church's mission and wraps it up in every task that supports the mission.

Barriers to assimilation generally emerge from within the church. Language is one barrier often found in church. Over time church members unintentionally develop phrases that are most easily understood by those who have been around church for a while. While this practice is not intentional, it is a form of exclusivity that can be off putting to new members. Hearing a series of acronyms and clichés during the course of a conversation is tantamount to listening to a foreign language. This makes participation difficult for those not familiar with church lingo. As noted by Joel Heck "How often do we use in-house words, abbreviations, and phraseology with new members, without first explaining to them? In a new members class for example, how often do we speak of justification, sanctification, the priesthood of all beliers and the like, expecting new Christians to understand these terms?"[19]

A lack of information is another barrier to effective assimilation. New members can become overwhelmed by the experience of joining church and may not be sure what happens immediately after becoming a member. New members often have questions such as how do I get involved? What are spiritual gifts? What is a disciple? Am I supposed to become one and how? Is ministry work just for those ordained? Where is

---

[19] Joel Heck, *New Membership Assimilation: Practical Prevention Of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care*. 13.

the bathroom? Where can I hang my coat? Is there children's church? When and where

is Bible study? Are spiritual development classes available? How do small groups

work? What is a group leader? What are their responsibilities? What are my

responsibilities as a new member? I think that when people join churches, they either

wonder about or ask some variation of these questions and more. New members should

not have to figure things out on their own. The more information provided during a new

members class or at another appropriate time, the more adjusted, informed and confident

new members feel. Information included in a welcome brochure or a one-page document

can be distributed upon joining. In this technology driven age, when someone is invited

to church, that person most likely will check out the church's website or Facebook page.

For that reason, church websites should be easy to navigate and include information

which pertains to parking, schedules for Sunday school, worship service and bible study,

children's church, new members class, small group information, a place for prayer

requests, sermon archive and a church calendar.

Another way to get information into the hands of a new member is to offer a short

five to seven minute face-to-face orientation after service to explain the next steps and

answer any of their immediate questions. Information is empowering and having access

to necessary information increases the likelihood of successful new member assimilation.

A third barrier to effective assimilation is the resistance to change. Resistance to

change from current members comes in the form of the protection of outdated practices.

Protection of outdated practices is what author William Easum describes as the "sacred

cow". Most churches have them – especially established churches. Using Webster's

definition, Easum describes the sacred cow as "one immune from criticism or attack,"[20]

The general response from sacred cows to new ideas and suggestions is "no". Their

responses often similar to the following:

- "We've never done it that way before."
- "Our church law will not let us do that."
- "It's too radical for us to change."
- "We've been running this church since long before you were born."
- "We do not do things that way."
- "We tried that before and it didn't work."
- "What you are suggesting is against our policies."
- "How dare you criticize what we are doing?"

Sacred cows are embodied in people, policies, procedures, old or no technology and

positional dominance. The twenty-first century church must be prepared to take on

sacred cows in order to implement assimilation strategies. I like the way Easum puts it:

> A new form of congregational life is dragging Christians kicking and screaming
>
> into the twenty-first century. The self-understanding, focus, corporate culture,
>
> leadership, organizational styles, and strategies are radically different from those
>
> experienced throughout the twentieth century. The future church offers new
>
> opportunities and problems and requires a new mindset.[21]

Obviously, churches must establish protocol to ensure order and decorum for the

benefit of everyone involved but, barriers and control disguised as polices and church

laws will stop new member assimilation and church growth. An intentional assimilation

process will require that one relinquish old habits and acquire new ways of thinking and

---

[20] William M. Easum, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers, Ministry Anytime, Anywhere By Anyone*, 11.

[21] Ibid., 17.

doing church. As such, church leaders must examine themselves and their church practices to determine if entrenchment in the status quo has impacted new member assimilation. Implementing change, for some leaders, will put them in direct conflict with influential church members who cling to systems and processes detrimental to the overall spiritual health of the church.

For the church spiritual gifts are paramount, so much so that the Apostle Paul exhorts his protégé Timothy: "do not neglect your gift…[22] and to the growing New Testament churches Paul wrote "We have different gifts…you should use whatever gift…to serve others." [23] Gifts are given to all people. As such, members bring an array of skills, talents and gifts to the church but some churches lack ways to uncover gifts, therefore, they remain underutilized. Spiritual gifts, as described by Pastor and author Erik Rees, are "a God-given special ability, given to every believer at conversion by the Holy Spirit, to share his love and strengthen the body of Christ."[24] Talents are often mistaken for a spiritual gifts. "Talents have to do with techniques and methods; gifts have to do with spiritual abilities. Talents depend on natural ability; gifts on spiritual endowment."[25]

Oftentimes new members feel that their "gift" pales in comparison to others. They feel this way, in part, because so often the church publically promotes and

---

[22] 1 Tim. 4:14.

[23] Rom. 12:6, 1 Pet. 4:10.

[24] Erik Rees, *S.H.A.P.E. Finding And Fulfilling Your Unique Purpose For Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 34.

[25] Ibid.

recognizes what it deems as the most valuable gifts. Musicians, singers, preachers and teachers usually fall into this category. Involvement in ministry is not just for those who the church erroneously promotes as highly gifted or highly spiritual. Spiritual gifts as noted by the Apostle Paul, are "…given to each of us so we can help each other."[26] New members will often say "I do not have a spiritual gift." One response to that statement is summed up this way: "If you are a believer, then you have the Spirit living in you. If you have the Spirit living in you, then you have spiritual gifts to use for God's glory and the benefit of others."[27] Gifts are given to edify the church, and "…can only be used to their full potential when empowered by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the life of every believer…and are yours for the express purpose of blessing the body of Christ…" Gifts, therefore, are "neither for you nor about you."[28]

Everyone has gifts, experiences, passions and talents that can be used to serve others and facilitate church growth. The skillful use of everyone's gifts will help the church mission come to life. Like any seed that is planted, spiritual gifts sprout with appropriate care and in an environment conducive to growth. With time and continuous nurturing, gifts will surface while members are involved in ministry and serving. Thom Rainer and Chuck Lawless contend, "…people of the church must know they are free to

---

[26] 1 Cor. 12:7.

[27] Ibid.,35.

[28] Ibid.,34.

respond to God's call. Leaders need to be very careful that they do not take on the role of the Holy Spirit. A member's sense of call from God needs to be taken seriously."[29]

Often after someone joins church, if a clear path for spiritual growth is not defined, the new member is left to figure out spiritual growth on their own or, worse, they become complacent. Too often churches are quick to involve new members in an array of activities but provide no classes or intentional means for members to grow spiritually. By not providing an appropriate and robust means for spiritual formation, churches are complicit in developing carnal, lukewarm Christians. New members who are left on their own will not know how to get started or they just will not. Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson propose a strategy that will launch new members on the path to spiritual growth which they describe as "the spiritual equivalent of jumpstarting a car…"[30] "Jump-start" is a phrase used to describe immediate (jump) and energized action (start). To jump-start, is to enliven or revive. Jump-start is used to illustrate the process used to transfer energy from a fully charged car battery to a dead battery. A full-charged battery is the power center of a car; when the battery is without energy it is dead, rendering the car inoperable - that is, it lacks the power or energy to run on its own.

Using the "jump-start" analogy, Hawkins and Parkinson, describe a process used to get people moving quickly on the path to spiritual growth. The goal of the process is "…to get people moving by providing a high-challenge, nonnegotiable path of first steps

---

[29] Thom S. Rainer and Chuck Lawless, *Eating The Elephant: Leading The Established Church To Growth* (Pinnacle Publishers, 2003), 76.

[30] Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*, 3189.

to engage people in a process of spiritual growth…"[31] The objective is to avoid spiritual

complacency and immaturity by getting people spiritually motivated early in their

conversion. Churches who use this and similar practices "…recognize that one of the

greatest challenges to spiritual progress occurs right at the outset…by employing this

practice, they tackle what may be the biggest obstacle to spiritual growth, which is

overcoming inertia in order to take those first steps – to just get moving."[32] Jump-start

processes can be incorporated into the new members orientation as specific classes for

the sole purpose of launching them into spiritual growth and discipleship. Hawkins and

Parkinson suggest three strategies to jump-start spiritual development and "get people

moving":

- Make the destination clear
    - New members should be clear that the church's priority is to make disciples and their understanding of the meaning of being a disciple.

- Make the spiritual jump-start non-negotiable
    - Participating in spiritual development programs or classes is expected and is prominent in all written material and verbal announcements.
    -
- Make the senior pastor the champion
    - Senior Pastors are the cheerleaders of spiritual development and must be seen as the promoter and encourager for participation in the programs or classes. [33]

There are many ways to jump-start members. Spiritual development as part of

assimilation has to be the priority for the church and, as such, leaders should seek the

Holy Spirit through prayer, meditation and fasting for specific techniques needed for the

---

[31] Ibid., 3189.

[32] Ibid., 3195.

[33] Ibid., 3228, 3234.

congregations they serve. The goal is to dispel the false notion that activity by itself equates to authentic spiritual growth. Today there are many active church members and not enough disciples for Christ. Unfortunately, new members who join churches that do not have a plan for developing disciples, get trapped in nonstop activities and, unbeknownst to them, will believe activity is what Christianity is all about. In fact, those who are spiritually immature will perpetuate spiritual immaturity in others. Numerous scriptures in the New Testament refer to discipleship or spiritual transformation as becoming "new" and "growing up". Spiritual newness and maturity is not merely the act of doing things differently instead, the writer of Colossians emphasizes that spiritual maturity is a process that begins by "putting off" the old nature or our natural inclinations. The old nature demonstrates thought patterns and behaviors that are contrary to the fruit of the spirit that is evident in spiritually mature Christians.

In some cases, raising money or an abundance of activities, override the importance of discipleship. Christians seeking to become spiritually mature are left empty and unsatisfied when activities or the emphasis on raising money takes the place of discipleship. For obvious reasons churches need money and activities and, in fact, money and certain activities are necessary in promoting and teaching discipleship.

The outcome of the Great Commission is discipleship. Discipleship should begin inside the stain glass windows and then move beyond the church doors. Leaders influence and impact the church by modeling discipleship which is evident in how they live their lives, deal with stress, respond to conflict and many other things. True disciples are a great testimony and an encouragement to the church body.

Christians who are truly seeking to grow, may not understand or know how to ignite their own spiritual growth, but they will know when they are not in an environment that promotes growth and, they will not stay in a church that is spiritually dead and not able to show them how to grow. Leaders must be persistent and continue to pursue practical solutions to combat the lack of spiritual maturity that so often plagues members when spiritual development is not part of an overall assimilation process. It is a disservice to the church when Christians are taught to organize multiple events but cannot quote scripture or when asked to pray publicly, are unable to carry out the request. Organizationally, churches need to balance discipleship with the other functions of the church. In other words, church activities should not take the place of discipleship.

For churches, spiritual growth and a sense of belonging are paramount, as such, Small Group Ministry is an effective and proven way to assimilate new members. A dynamic exists in small groups that is not found in the Sunday morning congregational setting. In smaller church settings, by virtue of the church size, members are likely to know each other well. In larger church settings it's not possible for all members to know each other and, at best, most members know each other by face recognition and not by name. For this reason, small group ministry is a benefit for larger churches. Small groups purposefully cultivate intimate fellowship, nurturing, spiritual growth, mutual love and encouragement.

Christine M. Anderson describes the inherent nature of small groups as "…a practical means for discipleship and the care of souls in which the people of faith were

empowered and equipped to care for one another…it is the spiritual equivalent of all for one and one and one for all."[34]

Craig Kennet Miller notes:

> Churches that understand the dynamics of change do not plug people into ready-made programs. Instead…members are invited to gather in small groups where they learn to live out the spiritual disciples of the Christian faith. Together they hold one another accountable and challenge one another to grow in faith.[35]

Small group leaders are chosen from church membership. Thomas G. Kirkpatrick says, "Effective group leadership requires particular abilities and developed skills."[36] Abilities and skills does not imply that leaders have superior skill sets. The apostles chose deacons from the pool of early Christians. They did, however, use criteria. Those selected were not perfect, but demonstrated that they were growing in the means of grace. As such, they were regular attendees to the preached word (modern day Sunday service), students of the word (attending bible study and Sunday school) and participated in Baptism and communion. Small group leaders must model the behavior that they expect of other members.

---

[34] Christine M. Anderson*, Life Together: Reclaiming The Ministry Of Small Groups*, ed. Michael J. Christensen with Carl Savage (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 51.

[35] Craig Kennet Miller, *Next Church. Now: Creating New Faith Communities* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1989), 73.

[36] Thomas G. Kirkpatrick, *Small Groups in the Church: A Handbook For Community* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 39.

Small group assignment should happen right after someone joins church so that the spiritual growth process is not stunted or, worse, stopped. Each congregation should determine how many people constitute a healthy number for their small groups. For new members and new converts, participation in small groups is crucial, to that point, Steve Gladen asserts: "…new believers are spiritual babies…they need love, attention, care, nurturance, and protection. New Christians need those same things."[37] "They get these things", Gladen went on to say, "from relationships with other Christians." There is no such thing as a solitary Christian".[38]

The design of small group ministry runs counter to individualism that has become so common in today's society. Individualism is the "…belief that all actions are determined by or at least take place for the benefit of the individual, not of society as a whole."[39] Many people join and attend church but choose not to fully assimilate because their individualism prohibits them from serving the church or others. Individualism is inconsistent with biblical principles as noted by authors Dick and Burry: "Christian formation is a corporate act and interconnectedness is at the heart of the church."[40]

Along that same vein, sociological studies refute the individualistic mentality and agree that humans have a built-in desire to be in fellowship and community. A study done by Chaeyoon Lim, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin,

---

[37] Steve Gladen, *Small Groups With Purpose: How To Create Healthy Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 71.

[38] Dick and Burry, *Quest: A Journey Toward A New Kind Of Church*, 37.

[39] "Individualism", accessed January 2, 2015, http://www.Dictionary.com.

[40] Dick and Burry, *Quest: A Journey Toward A New Kind Of Church*, 37.

revealed "…when people with similar levels of church attendance are compared, the key factors determining happiness are the social aspect of religion and a shared religious connection built around identity and belonging."[41] Further, churches are instructed to be in community with "one another" as found in scriptures where we are exhorted to "…love one another", "…stop passing judgement on one another", "…value others above yourselves…", "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other", "…spur one another on towards love and good deeds…"[42] As noted by authors Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin, "The group members live in close cooperation and fellowship with one another, sharing plans and needs, visions and sins, living in the light with one another. This is not a committee; it is not a party for mutual enjoyment. It is an opportunity to bounce off of other people the joys, pains, and discoveries that each one experiences."[43]

Small group ministry is the microcosm of the church body because its role is to produce a community of healthy, spiritually mature disciples for Christ in fellowship and support of each other. Along those lines, the writer of Ecclesiastics extols:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will

---

[41] Michelle Healy, *"Study: Happiness is Having Friends at Church,"* USA Today, accessed January 2, 2014, http://www.usatoday30.usatoday.com/yourlife/mind-soul/spirituality/12-07-2010 happyreligion07_ST_N.htm.

[42] John 13:34, Rom. 14:13, Phil. 2:3, Eph. 4:32, Heb. 10:24.

[43] Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies For Evangelism And Assimilation In The Local Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 100.

keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? Though one be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And, a threefold cord is not quickly broken. :[44]

In the small group setting, this is accomplished through specific time set aside for prayer and faith sharing designed to build up one another - these experiences edify those in the group. Small group is where peer-to-peer learning happens and provides a safe space to address the specific needs of the group members. Small group ministry dispels the notion that the pastor is solely responsible to minister to church members. As such, "small groups can provide a channel whereby members can embrace the philosophy of being on call to minister to one another."[45] Gladen contends, and I agree, that discipleship is relational and "anytime you encourage another in his or her faith, you also build your own."[46]

Further, when designed effectively, small group participation should move members from being a "consumer" of the church's "goods and services" – or an "entitlement mentality" to an owner of the church mission and an engaged member. [47] Engaged members are powerful sources of energy for the church and the core group which facilitates further church growth. In his book about how to engage members, author Albert Winseman says, engaged members are "spiritually committed" to the church.

---

[44] Ecc. 4:9-12.

[45] McIntosh and Martin, *Finding Them And Keeping Them: Effective Strategies For Evangelism And Assimilation In The Local Church*, 100.

[46] Gladen, *Small Groups With Purpose: How To Create Healthy Communities*, 72.

[47] Thom Rainer,*"The Main Reasons People Leave A Church,"* January 21, 2013, accessed November 24, 2014, http://thomrainer.com/2013/01/21/the-main-reason-people-leave-a-church.

Winseman goes on to say:

> These members are loyal and have strong psychological and emotional
> connections to their church or parish. They are more spiritually committed,
> they are more likely to invite friends, family members, and coworkers to
> congregational events, and they give more, both financially and in
> commitment of time. You need to develop more of these individuals,
> because it is the engaged who drive everything in your church.[48]

Spiritually committed members become engaged members; they are confident
assimilated people of faith who enthusiastically serve their church and community.

A well-organized assimilation process starts and ends with effective church
leadership, specifically the pastor. Describing leadership, Dr. John Maxwell says
"…everything rises and falls on leadership" and "…the leadership of any group or
organization will determine its success or failure."[49]

A concise definition describes church leadership this way:

> Effective Christian leadership is the process of helping a group embody in
> its corporate life the practices that shape vital Christian life, community,
> and witness in ways that are faithful to Jesus Christ and the gospel and

---

[48]Albert L. Winseman, *Growing An Engaged Church: How To Stop "Doing Church" And Start Being The Church Again*, 67.

[49] John C. Maxwell, *The Maxwell Leadership Bible: Lessons in Leadership From The Word of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 5,6.

appropriate to the particular congregation's setting, resources, and

purpose.[50]

As such, pastors lend credence to an assimilation process or trivialize it as

insignificant. Leaders are responsible for instituting and guiding the assimilation process

by helping members understand the meaning of the church as God's body, how to

welcome new members, the best way to help them grow and to include new members in

all aspects of church life. This kind of high impact assimilation requires the senior leader

to prepare Christians to work in ministry, cast the vision for assimilation and initiate

assimilation planning.

The pastor is a gift that God has given to the church. The pastor's job description

as outlined in the Bible is to "prepare God's people for works of service so that the body

of Christ may be built up [spiritually]…" Spiritual strength prevents the church from

being deceived by false doctrine taught by those with hidden spiritually destructive

agendas. Spiritual immaturity is harmful for the church. Herein lies the primary

assignment of the pastor that takes precedent over all other tasks - to "equip his [God's]

people for works of service..."[51] Not doing so stunts church growth. God gave the

church pastors "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry." The Greek

word for "perfected" is "katartizo"[52]. It means to prepare or to make one what they ought

---

[50] Don Ackerman, et al., *Effective Leadership In The Church* (Grand Rapids: Sustaining Pastoral Excellence, 2005), 17.

[51] Eph. 4:12.

[52] James Strong, *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary Of Bible Words*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 47.

to be. Organizing special church events, fundraising and fish-frys do not equip laity for

ministry. Russell Moy says that "empowering laity for ministry is more than just

matching people to the needs of the institutional church…laypeople are ministers and

priests called to serve God through their jobs, family and relationships."[53] In this way

pastors and church leaders are not seen as the church "headliners" or the only ones who

can pray, anoint with oil or lay hands on the sick. Pastors who do not delegate

responsibilities to the members will, over time, produce "overworked pastors and passive

pewsitters."[54] When this happens, the responsibility of church growth is placed squarely

on the shoulders of the pastor, and that is not the intention of the church.

Rev. Fred, referring to the BCC church leaders, often remarks, "We are raising a

church of leaders."[55] Growth takes time and requires patience on the part of church

leadership, therefore, Rev. Fred supports and encourages growth when he asserts that

"there are no mistakes; just learning opportunities and teachable moments." Through

encouragement and practice, BCC members are given permission to find their place

within ministry. Therefore, "the role of…leadership is not to say no…Rather, the role of

leadership is to set guidelines and boundaries and to put into place structures that will

enable new ministry to bear fruit."[56] It is a delicate balance between providing space and

freedom for growth and allowing the gifts to interconnect within the larger church body

---

[53] Russell Moy, *The Loss and Recovery Of Lay Ministry*. Ed. by Michael J. Christensen with Carl E. Savage, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 40.

[54] Ibid., 30.

[55] Rev. Dr. Fred Lucas, Founder and Senior Pastor, Brooklyn Community Church.

[56] Miller, *Next Church. Now: Creating New Faith Communities*, 73.

to "do the work of the ministry." The micro vision for BCC includes intentional discipleship, preparing members for ministry through relevant preaching, empowering teaching, and ensuring everyone has opportunities to serve the church – regardless of their prior ministry experience. As such, effective assimilation at BCC required the deconstruction of the member's beliefs about ministry participation. It excluded the notion that only those ordained can lead ministries or participate in worship service or minister to the sick and shut-in. A major goal of BCC was to shift attention from programs to an emphasis on people and ministry. Consequently, BCC members are trained to pray for the sick, anoint with oil, preach the word, and teach Sunday school. When the laity is trained and then given permission to do ministry, those who were once in the shadows will move forward and, over the course of time, begin to serve in the church.

As the church's spiritual CEO, the pastor, first and foremost, should be seen as the enthusiastic cheerleader for assimilation. The church – like any organization – relies on leadership to cast vision, empower, coach, guide and direct overall spiritual and temporal operations so that the organization reaches its prescribed goals. In church, leaders tout the importance of assimilation by casting the vision for church wide assimilation processes. The church's vision is important because it provides the overall direction given to the pastor from God.

Pastors are tasked to build the structure of church in ways that ensure members are clear about the church's mission, how the mission will be carried out and, the expected outcomes. As the visionary, the pastors' role is to guide processes and not lord

over people or dole out reprimands when processes are not followed to the letter.

Leaders are the visionaries. They have to take their lead from God and cast vision in

ways that help people grasp it, see it and then, ultimately own it. Vision has to be turned

into movement by making the vison a part of every activity of the church. This will give

members opportunities to make the vison their own.

Describing vision, religious researcher George Barna says: "Vision must be

viewed as a direction provided by God and as a strategic framework for ministry."[57]

Further, "vision for ministry is a reflection of what God wants to accomplish through you

to build His kingdom." [58] For a new church, vision is crucial as it serves as a reminder of

where the church is going and offers a glimpse of the future. In fact, Barna goes on to

say that "the purpose of vision is to create the future."[59] Further, he continues by saying:

> "The vision of the church is meant to be lived out at all times of the day and night
>
> by people in whatever circumstances they find themselves. Help your people
>
> understand the broad implications of the vision for their lives by explaining how
>
> they might capture the totality of the vision…"[60]

That said, in order to make vision come to life, it must be clear, understandable and

imaginable. When used as a verb to "cast" or "the casting" of vision means to "forecast"

---

[57] George Barna, *The Power Of Vision: Discover And Apply God's Plan For Your Life And Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 1438.

[58] Ibid., 296.

[59] Ibid., 476.

[60] Ibid., 1446.

something in the distance. Communication is key when casting vision. Barna describes

it this way:

> …organizations that have an efficient clear, reliable means of
> communication tend to be successful; those whose lines of communication
> are underdeveloped, imprecise or otherwise restricted are more likely to
> experience stagnation or decline. Churches are no different…growth is
> less likely to occur in churches where effective communication is a hit-or-
> miss affair.[61]

The vision should be in written format and be short and concise. Keeping it

before the congregation can be done by cleverly referring to it in sermons and teaching.

It should also be posted conspicuously on the church's website and included in their

documents. When communicated properly, the "forecast" of what is to be makes the

future tangible and desirable. Equally important, when the vision is casted effectively, it

will begin to impact the members so that living the vision is a daily reality. That means

the "vision must be viewed as a direction provided by God and as a strategic framework

for ministry…not simply a statement of nice ideas that might work if we are blessed."[62]

Leaders are the champions that tout the vision in ways that allow members to

visualize it before it comes to fruition. As such, leaders must believe the vision before

they can expect others to. This may mean that leaders "…learn new skills or to create

---

[61] Ibid., 1393.

[62] Ibid., 1437.

new systems within your church."[63] This may also mean doing church differently than what has been done in the past. Rolling out new ways of thinking and ways of doing ministry should be done in a manner that allows time for staff and members to process the change but not hold up progress. This could take months or even years. Barna describes the process this way:

> You will pay the price in terms of energy expended to establish the vision. People must be educated. Influencers must be influenced. Key workers must be retrained. New modes of communication must be developed. Ministries and programs must be redesigned to match the vision…This is a time to be stretched.[64]

Another reality is that, envisioning a new future for the church will not be welcomed by everyone. Some members will resist the new vision and, as a result, some members may leave the church. In this instance, Barna offers good advice, he says "Realize that the people who cannot [ultimately] accept the vision God has for the church are simply in the wrong church…"[65] The vision has to go forth and only so much time should be spend convincing resistant members to embrace the vision. If these members chose to leave the church, wish them well, pray for them and let them leave.

---

[63] Ibid., 1580.

[64] Ibid., 1601.

[65] Ibid., 1589.

Vision needs to move beyond the paper and into the practical realm of planning and implementation. The phrase "hope is not a strategy"[66] describes the lost opportunities churches experience when they do not invest time in planning and casting vision. In some churches the leadership feels that planning is too "business like" and will inhibit the work of the Holy Spirit and, as such, they keep their spiritual fingers crossed that things will work out. This results in a lot of activity but not much progress. Tony Morgan asserts the opposite when he says "hope is a terrible strategy to grow, develop, and multiply what God has entrusted to us as leaders. Too much is at stake"[67]

Planning an assimilation strategy for the church will require time, energy and team work. As previously stated, this process begins with the senior pastor. Casting the vision should be coupled with a series of teaching and preaching designed to reinforce the vision that spurs the congregation into action. Part of the planning process will first require gathering information about current processes. That information can be used to inform and create new processes. The senior pastor should initiate and lead a review of the church's current systems and processes in order to determine if these systems help or hinder intentional inclusion and spiritual growth. This should be done as a team in collaboration with other appropriate church leaders and members, and the goals should be spelled out to ensure that everyone understands the direction and the expected outcome. This would include a discussion of the meaning and purpose of assimilation. As well as how the group perceives the current assimilation process. The discussion can then be

---

[66] Tony Morgan, *Developing A Theology Of Planning* (Tony Morgan Live LLC, 2013), 30.

[67] Ibid., 42.

followed by the details of the vision, the goals, the steps needed to accomplish the goals, a timeline, and a dissemination of tasks and expectations. Leaders can create a panoramic view of the processes, thereby ensuring that those who participate represent a mixture of leaders and non-leaders. Each person will bring a different perspective and experience to the process. The new members perspective may be helpful because of their recent experience with the current assimilation process. For some churches this process may require churches to admit that members have left their church and, by and large, no one knows why or when they left. For the leaders, this may be difficult because they will need to recognize and admit that they have not given this aspect of church life the attention it needs.

Those involved in the process, should "walk the steps" of a new member so that they become familiar with the ministries that new members interact with during their first three, six or nine months and, how those interactions impact new member assimilation. One way to do this is to "flowchart" the process. Presenting the process as a pictorial will help to identify gaps and redundancies. Additionally, the flowchart will show which ministries are involved in the new member assimilation experience, which are not and which should be. Leaders should then introduce resources designed to correct the system and involve members in the entire design process.

Some ministries may be reluctant to participate in this comprehensive review because they believe the ministry that they lead does not directly impact new members. Leaders should take this as an opportunity to demonstrate the systemic nature of church. In 1 Corinthians 12:12 the Apostle Paul uses the "body" as the metaphor for the church.

In that scripture he says: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ." "A system", as described as by Dan Dick and Evelyn Burry is, "an interrelated group of processes that connect to accomplish a particular goal or outcome." Dick and Burry go on to say that systems can include "people, resources, raw materials, information, tools, gifts and skills...and when one part or process of the system is affected or changes, it affects the entire system."[68] The basic unit of the church is not the individual, but the church as a whole…"[69] "The church, therefore, is made up of individual ministries but those ministries constitute an interrelated system. Understanding the church as a body "symbolizes the organic, systemic, interrelated nature of the church."[70]

Working as a system, the church ensures that assimilation practices are threaded throughout all aspects of the church. Everyone from the parking lot attendant to the nursery workers to those who update the website, should be clear on how everyone's role impacts assimilation. "When members of leadership teams collaborate in order to accomplish what they discern is God's will, they experience the beauty of Spirit-given synergy. People feel as though they have made important contributions when they help move the group toward a meaningful end."[71]

---

[68] Dick and Burry, *Quest: A Journey Toward A New Kind of Church*, 61.

[69] R. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins, *The Equipping Pastor: A Systems Approach To Congregational Leadership* (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 1993), xviii.

[70] Dick and Burry, 61.

[71] George Cladis, *Leading The Team-Based Church: How Pastors And Church Staffs Can Grow Together Into A Powerful Fellowship Of Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999), 88.

Deciding on the best direction should be done prayerfully and strategically as every congregational context is unique. The senior pastor should not be the sole supporter of the assimilation process. Enthusiastic members and leaders who have bought into the assimilation vision, have key roles as they will serve as cheerleaders, guides and implementers of the process. Pastors must remind everyone to be flexible and not to be overly serious and rigid. Everyone must remain open to learning and relearning. Planning is time consuming and each step should be thought through strategically. That is, the congregation should be kept abreast of changes, allow ample time to implement, test processes, conduct periodic evaluation and allow time for group reflection. Once a church decides on a process, they should not over analyze or discuss the new process for an inordinate amount of time. Faith without works is dead. At some point you have to execute and trust that, during the implementation, the Spirit will bring to light what works best for your church. Pray, discuss the best approach with the team, get advice from other leaders and churches that have implemented similar processes and then, just do it.

When all of the systems of the church are working together, the Holy Spirit produces authentic spiritual connectedness and community. In that sense "assimilation leads to life transformation by giving people the means and opportunity to become maturing followers of Christ."[72] People who experience authentic community through church membership will likely stay connected to the church and, will enthusiastically

---

[72] Nelson Searcy and Jennifer Henson, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests Into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church* (Ventura: Regal, 2007), 310.

share their faith. True assimilation is visible and generates an excitement in members

that is contagious.

When assimilation is a priority, churches will design ministries to promote and

celebrate change as an ongoing process. This in turn not only promotes growth but

sustains it. As noted by Joel Heck "It will take some years for the impact to be felt, but

the assimilation of new members into the life of a congregation can prevent many of the

losses that occur each year."[73]

---

[73] Heck, *New Member Assimilation: Practical Prevention Of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care*, 10.

CHAPTER 5

ASSIMILATION PROJECT

The project Advisory Committee consisted of the Senior Pastor, Family Ministry

President and Vice-President, New Members Ministry Instructor and Administrative

Coordinator, Deacons Ministry Vice-Chair and a Lay Leader. All were members of

Brooklyn Community Church and integral members of church leadership. Because the

project focused on the Family Ministry and the New Members Ministry, it was important

to include the leaders directly responsible for the work of these ministries. In different

ways, each advisory committee member, regularly participates in formulating and

managing change within the church that impacts all members. I asked the following

BCC members to participate on the Advisory Committee and they accepted. They

Advisory Committee are:

Rev. Dr. Fred Lucas
Rev. Fred, Brooklyn Community Church, Founder and Senior Pastor, has served as
pastor, preacher, teacher, leader and community builder for forty-two years. BCC is Rev.
Fred's fifth pastorate. Rev. Fred is also the Founder and CEO of the Faith Center for
Community Development.

Deacon L. Priscilla Hall
Deacon Priscilla is the Vice Chair of the Deacons Ministry and Vice President of the
Women's Ministry, which is named The Sisterhood.

Deacon Marilyn Hunte
During the initial phases of the project, Deacon Marilyn held the position of full-time
church clerk. During that time Deacon Marilyn also served as President of the Family
Ministry and the Administrative Coordinator for the New Members Ministry.

Minister Veronica Price
Minister Veronica is the President of the Family Ministry. She is active in several BCC ministries, including Bible study, Sunday school, the mass choir and The Sisterhood.

Deacon Buren "Fuzzy" Figueroa
Deacon Fuzzy is the Vice President of the Family Ministry and a dedicated member of The Brotherhood (Men's Ministry).

Minister Bernadine Thomas-Williams
Minister Bernadine is the Instructor for the New Members Ministry and President of the Counseling Ministry. Minister Bernadine is also a member of the ministerial team.

Dr. Pulane Lucas
Dr. Pulane is BCC's First Lady and President of The Sisterhood. Dr. Pulane provided guidance on the design of the congregational questionnaire and the subsequent quantitative and cross-sectional analysis.

Barbara George-Frierson
Barbara is the Vice President of the Ushers Ministry and serves in the Dance Ministry.

During the initial advisory committee meeting, we reviewed the project prospectus, discussed effective assimilation and the ways we currently assimilate new members. The committee reflected on and discussed the rapid growth of BCC. The committee agreed that BCC was at a pivotal point in its growth process. Each new member represents a new soul with tremendous potential for Christian growth and development. Further, increased fellowship and unity facilitates a welcoming and spiritually nurturing church environment, which, by the testimonies of many current BCC members, was in stark contrast to what they had experienced at their previous churches. Many BCC members left their former churches – some transferred from large denominations- "…in quest for a church experience that better fits the deepest longings

of their hearts."[1] In that sense, our members were not looking for a church "constructed

on programs and rituals more than relationships."[2] Instead, they wanted to be a part of a

church where they felt they belonged, would experience spiritual growth and be able to

discern and utilize their gifts, talents, abilities, passions and experiences in service to the

church and the community.

As noted by Julia Duin, church programs "in and of themselves, are well and

good – but they are no substitute for a fleshed-out faith."[3] New members were, in other

words, "individuals seeking a clear sense of identity and purpose…" and, in fact,

"looking for a church that is focused on building relations with God and neighbor."[4]

In that sense, the committee recognized that there would be some members who are clear

about what they are seeking in their new church environment. On the other hand, new

converts and some not-so-new converts presented assimilation concerns because they

would need special attention and nurturing.

The committee recognized that all new members need intentional spiritual

mentorship and guidance, as well as opportunities for regular fellowship with other

believers and, an environment that supports learning and growth. As such, part of

assimilation is helping new members discover their spiritual gifts. With that as a

discussion starter, the committee discussed the biblical purpose of gifts found in 1

---

[1] Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursing The Dream of Organic Christianity* (David Cook), 101.

[2] Ibid., 32.

[3] Duin, *Quitting Church: Why The Faithful Are Fleeing*, 20.

[4] Dick and Burry, *Quest: A Journey Toward A New Kind Of Church*, 28.

Corinthians 12:1-11. One committee member raised concern about using the phrase "spiritual gifts" when speaking with new converts or those who are still discovering their gifts. The concern was that the phrase may be intimidating as some may feel the word "spiritual" doesn't apply to them. We agreed that more teaching was necessary on understanding gifts and their impact on personal and corporate growth.

The roles of each committee member was discussed. The roles of the Family Ministry President and Vice-President, the New Members Ministry Instructor and Administrative Coordinator would be hands-on. The remainder of the committee would act as advisors. The Family Ministry and New Members Ministry would meet to review the current assimilation practices and systems in place that either support or hinder the ministries' ability to assimilate new members.

New Members Ministry

The New Members Ministry is responsible for managing and conducting the new member's class and, is the first ministry that new members ideally make contact with. As such, Deacon Bernadine, New Members Class Instructor, is the "welcoming committee".

For BCC, the New Members Ministry is prominent in the development and implementation of an assimilation process because new members class is where a structured assimilation process is first presented. The New Members Ministry held a series of meetings beginning in October 2013 through April 2014 to review how the New Members Ministry impacts new member assimilation. First we reviewed all of the forms associated with the New Members Ministry and the New Members Booklet.

In early 2011, the New Members Ministry was officially organized and BCC conducted its first mass four-week membership class. All members who had joined up to that point participated. Since then all new members attend a four-week new members orientation class. The New Members Ministry is comprised of an Instructor and an Administrative Coordinator. The instructor teaches the new members class and the coordinator handles the administrative tasks for the ministry. The tasks were somewhat interchangeable, however the Administrative Coordinator was also the full-time church clerk therefore some tasks were already specifically her responsibility.

Deacon Marilyn, Rev. Fred and I reviewed the new member's process and, when necessary, made revision recommendations to the advisory committee. We began by reviewing the responsibilities of New Members Ministry and the new member's administrative process. The responsibilities follows:

1) Ensure each member, upon joining, completes the new Member Registration Card
2) Generate and mail the new member welcome letter from senior pastor
3) Update the New Members Directories and email new member information to associate pastors and various other leaders (as requested)
4) File New Member Registration Cards and Registration Forms
5) Update member's contact information – as needed
6) Teach New Members Class
7) Ensure New Member's complete the New Member Registration and the Steward of Time and Talent Forms
8) Track New Member class attendance and follow up with reminders for those who miss classes
9) Upon completion of New Members Class, create and present new members with New Member Certificates
   The responsibilities of the New Members Instructor and Coordinator would

remain the same. Next, we reviewed the three forms that each new member is asked to complete during new members class. One objective was to become familiar with the new

members process and to identify how to streamline the way we manage and share new member data between the New Members and the Family Ministries.

The first form reviewed was the New Member Registration Card. When a new member joins church they are asked to complete a New Member Registration Card. This is done immediately after joining the church, while standing in front of the congregation. The 5" x 7" card has a place for contact information, email address, date of birth, marital status, and, a place to indicate if they are already a Christian or a new convert. The church clerk distributes the cards to the new members and collects them once they are completed. On the next business day, the church clerk transfers the contact information from the cards to the church directory. This information is then disseminated to key leaders. A welcome letter from the senior pastor is mailed to each new member (or family) and the church clerk schedules an appointment for the new member to meet with the senior pastor. During this meeting if a member expresses an interest in a particular ministry, the member is put in touch with the ministry leader right away.

Once the member begins the new members class, they are asked to complete the New Member Registration Form. This form captures up to twenty-eight pieces of data per member. One of the questions on the form is "what are your skills, talents and interests?" We decided to move that question to the back of the form and include two additional questions. The three questions are:

1) What are your skills, talents and interests?
2) What other ministries should we consider starting at BCC?
3) Do you have any suggestions or questions concerning any aspect of BCC?

The objective was to capture information from new members in their own words that would give leaders information to help minister to them and, also assist them in deciding what ways they could participate in a ministry. The New Member Coordinator would then compile the responses in a database and share with the appropriate church ministry leaders. Another intention was to capture this information and be able to match church needs with the skills and interests of BCC's members. The Membership Directory, which is published each time a new member joins, was the only membership directory that I was familiar with. I learned, however, that the membership data are maintained on several different Microsoft Word documents in different categories. For example, one list contained all youth, another in chronological order, and several other lists.

BCC's growth required that we consider implementing a database in order to sort the increasing amount of membership data and disseminate member information to family group leaders in a timely manner. Maintaining multiple lists via a word processing platform increased the potential for human error throughout the lists and, it was becoming inefficient to continue to manually manage the membership data.

The New Members Administrative Coordinator was also employed as the Church Clerk. Given her other responsibilities, I was impressed with her ability to maintain multiple lists from week to week. As the church grew, managing those various lists had become overwhelming and inefficient.

The third form associated with the New Members Class is the Stewardship of Time and Talent Form. This form contains a list of all the BCC ministries, and explains stewardship, stewards of our time and talent and, has a place for new members to request more information about the ministries. Once the information is collected, the Administrative Coordinator passes the information on the form to the appropriate ministry leader(s). The forms are filed in the church office in alphabetical order.

Upon reviewing that process we discovered that there was no system in place to ensure new members had received the information they requested. And, because the Coordinator was also the church's full-time church clerk (and for a while the only church administrative person), receiving, tracking and disseminating information was quickly becoming a challenge. This was not a surprise as we knew that increased growth warranted a better tracking system. For that reason, part of this project would be to recommend a CMS (content management system) to the advisory committee.

We began to look into identifying a database program. The Advisory Committee overwhelming agreed that implementing a database was the best way to manage our membership data. That being said, the committee also understood that those managing the data would need to possess a specific skill set as it would require some basic understanding of relational databases. And, at some point, especially as the church grows and we begin to expect more follow-up from our leaders, need a dedicate staff person to coordinate information flow and ensure that data integrity is maintained. This would not be a position for a different volunteer each week as accuracy and consistency are key factors in database management.

Throughout all of the three new members registration forms, there was one obvious redundancy; each form asks for contact information. On the one hand, the New Members Registration Card is completed upon joining church, while standing in front of the congregation. Under that circumstance, the written information can be illegible. Having new members provide their contact information a second time may be helpful, but asking for it a third time would not be necessary. A database could eliminate this redundancy as we could design the form and, once the new members contact information is input into the data base, we could electronically pre-populate the Stewardship of Time and Talent Forms. When new members arrive, they would only need to verify their information and, if necessary, make changes.

The next big task was to review the New Members Manual. The New Members Class is a four-week class held each Sunday at the same time as Sunday school. The new members manual is twenty pages and double-sided. The lessons are entitled:

Lesson 1 – Who we are
Lesson 2 – What we believe
Lesson 3 – What we do Part I
Lesson 4 – What we do Part II

Lesson 1 covers: Church Mission, History, Leadership, Ministries and What it Means to be a member of the BCC Family

Lesson 2 covers: The Apostles Creed, Church Covenant: Major Doctrines and Beliefs of the Christian Faith

Lesson 3 covers: Stewardship – Part I: Our Testimony, Time, Talent and Treasure (25 Questions and Answers on Tithing)

Lesson 4 covers: Stewardship – Part II: Our Testimony, Time Talent and Treasure (25 Questions and Answers on Tithing)

The first page of the manual is a table of contents (although not labeled as such). The senior pastor's biography is a stand-alone document at the beginning of the manual and is not tied to any of the lessons. The last page of the manual is a "tithing table" that lists sample weekly and annual salaries along with the corresponding tithing percentages ranging from 2% to 20% for each income level. Scriptures about tithing are also included. The purpose is to remind members of the biblical mandate to tithe and to provide calculations for a variety of incomes. Space is provided on the back cover for members to jot down notes.

The revisions for the manual included: content structural changes such as adding a Table of Contents with page numbers for each lesson and rearranging text so that the page breaks between chapters. And reorganizing the text to get better use of the space on the page and for ease of reading. Overall, the manual is text heavy; the nineteen page manual contained only two graphics or photos – the church logo on the first page and a photo of the first family.

After reviewing the manual page by page, we discussed how to include a lesson or, at least, an intentional discussion on spiritual development and using one's gifts, talents, passions, experiences and interests in service to the church. Adding these two segments could mean increasing the lessons from four to six weeks or we also considered the best way to reorganize the lessons. After some discussion, it was decided that increasing the number of classes was not the best option because six classes would be more classes than we were comfortable with. At the same time the advisory committee wanted to include spiritual development and gifts as part of the new members class. As

an alternative we discussed ways to reorganize the lessons so that, for example, reorganizing Lessons 1 and 2 – which are a Welcome Letter and the list of ministries and the names of ministry leaders – could be stand-alone pages at the beginning of the manual. We would then ask encourage new members to read this section on their own.

We discovered that Lesson I included "What It Means to be a Member of BCC Family", but we did not see any specific information that speaks to that topic in the manual. This information, we decided, could be included in the Welcome Letter along with the "privileges and benefits" of membership. Allowing new members to review this section at their convenience, would free up some time for a detailed discussion on spiritual development and gifts.

My preference was to offer two classes devoted to spiritual development and gifts. These topics are important discussions to have with new members so that they begin to think about their own spiritual development and their gifts. In addition, discussing spiritual growth during new members class, and not offering it as a separate class, was my preference. We perpetuate what new members misunderstand or do not know if these topics are not addressed from the outset. Currently, the new members class lasted 45 minutes; however, that didn't seem to be enough time to include both spiritual development and gifts in one lesson. In addition, with limited instructors available, it was not feasible to add the additional lessons.

In the manual there is a section entitled "Ministries and Leaders" which lists the ministries and the names of the ministry leaders. After reviewing the ministries, we

decided to add a brief description of each ministry for more clarity and for the benefit of

new members. For example, the objective and tasks of Missionary Ministry or Social

Action Ministry may not be entirely clear by the ministry name. By providing this

information up front, new members can better discern in ministry they would like to

serve in.

     With the inclusion of the three questions on the registration form, we needed to

figure out how to compile and analyze the results and how best to disseminate the

answers and who would receive it. Tracking and recording the attendance of the New

Members class attendance had lapsed so we thought it we be best for the administrative

coordinator to restructure the attendance tracking and then notify the Family Ministry

Group Leaders if a new member had not completed their classes. Additionally, after

class, the New Members Class instructor will ensure that completed registration forms,

the attendance sign-in sheet, and the stewardship form are handed to the administrative

coordinator to update church records.

     I thought it would be beneficial for the Advisory Committee to know how many

of our current members are involved in ministry. The Advisory Committee discussed

several ways to compile that information. One suggestion was for the Group Leaders to

ask their individual group members. Another suggestion was for the President of the

Family Ministry, and to one other person, call each member and ask them. My

suggestion was for the information to come through the Group Leaders so that BCC

would limit the number of people contacting the members, and it should be the

responsibility of the Group Leader to now that kind of pertinent information about each member.

One Advisory Committee member felt that gathering this data would add more time to the project and result in unnecessary delays. However, I believed otherwise as I felt it would be helpful to have the current data associated with assimilation to support our efforts. My rationale was that I didn't want the advisory committee to begin a process based on assumptions; and having current statistics would give the advisory committee a better grasp of the number of members serving in ministries. We discussed a few different ways to complete this task but decided not pursue it as we were approaching the completion of this project.

The other revision to the manual was to tweak the language in the "What We Believe" section. This section was chock full of language that, for some new members, may require additional explanation. The "What We Believe" lesson is vital as it allows new members to be clear on what they believe in relation to what the church believes.

The "Church Covenant" and "What We Believe", include words not used in everyday language that do not easily convey their meanings. We reviewed Lesson II "What We Believe" and included in parenthesis the meaning or antonyms for words such as omniscient, omnipotent, sanctification, justification, redemption and other words that may pose confusion. Additionally, an explanation accompanied each sentence in the "What We Believe" section and included scriptural support. Currently "What We Believe" is presented in paragraph form as follows:

<u>What We Believe</u>

In the sufficiency and authority of the Holy Scriptures; the supremacy of God, a living, omniscient *(knowing everything)*, omnipotent *(almighty with unlimited authority)*, and eternal Spirit; the Holy Trinity, one God, manifested in three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit); the corruption of human nature through sin, and the availability of eternal redemption *(to release from blame or debt)* through faith in Jesus Christ, whose precious blood and sacrificial death on the cross is the only satisfaction for the sins of humankind; sanctity *(holiness)* of the Sabbath Day *(Sunday)*, the first day of the week, commemorating the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb; centrality of preaching the Good News; the primacy of the local church, an independent and autonomous part of the universal Body of Christ, making and nurturing disciples and ministering to the world; the ordinances *(ordained by God)* of believer's baptism by immersion upon repentance and confession of saving faith in Jesus Christ and the Lord's Supper, as instituted by Christ with instructions to continue in His Church; a spiritual, social and holistic ministry that liberates and empowers; the reality of the Holy Spirit of Christ in today's world; the reality of the afterlife; and the eminent return of our Resurrected Savior."

We revised the content information into shorter statement that included the corresponding scriptures. A few examples are listed below:

We believe in the supremacy *(having more authority than anyone else)* of God**,** a living, omniscient *(knowing everything)*, omnipotent *(almighty with unlimited authority)*, and eternal Spirit.
- o **Romans 11:33 – "**Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" (ESV)
- o **Psalm 147:5 –** "Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure." (ESV)

- **Revelation 1:8** –"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end says the Lord God. I am the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come, the Almighty One." (NLT)

We believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
- **John 3:16** – "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but eternal life." (NLT)
- **Luke 2:11** - "For there is born to you this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." (NLT)
- **1 John 4:9** – "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." (ESV)

We believe in the presence and works of the Holy Spirit.
- **Acts 4:31** – "And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spoke the word of God with boldness." (ESV)
- **1 Corinthians 3:16-17b** – Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." (ESV)
- **Galatians 5:22-23a** – "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control…" (KJV)

In summary the manual included the following:
- Table of Contents
- Welcome Letter, which included the benefits and privileges of membership
- Language relevant to the 21st century understanding
- Sections on spiritual development and gifts
- Simplify "What We Believe" to include scripture references in sentence format
- Include ministry descriptions along with the names of the ministry leaders
- Make new members manual available in electronic format – for those who prefer an electronic version

The New Members Ministry contributed revisions to the manual over the course of three to four months. The revisions, I assumed, would be done by the church clerk but, as it turned out, the church clerk had little time beyond her primary responsibilities and other ministerial tasks. Similarly, the New Members Instructor could not help with the new members manual revisions because the revisions required an understanding of formatting electronic documents that she did not possess.

The revisions to the manual were completed within two months but the final approval

was postponed for a few months. By the time the revisions were approved the new

members administrative coordinator resigned due to health issues. Subsequently, the

revisions to the new members registration forms were completed and are being used in

the new members ministry. However, several other changes that were discussed have not

been fully implemented and are as follows:

- New Members Class lesson on spiritual development and gift
- Developing a repository for the answers to the three new questions on the registration form and developing a tracking mechanism for new member ministry interest information that is passed on to ministry leaders.
- Tracking attendance, following up on members absent from new members class and passing this information along to family ministry group leaders
- Organizing a New Members Reception or some public recognition event

Although the administrative coordinator resigned, the instructor was able to continue

to teach the class but was not able to implement the class and due to changes due to the

lack of the administrative skill set and the inability to sustain that needed structure. It

was disappointing that all of the changes could not be implemented during the project as

we had spent an enormous amount of time reviewing, revising and thinking through

improvements. We needed more instructors for the New Members class so the senior

pastor solicited assistance from the pool of current deacons and leaders, but no one

volunteered. The next suggested step was to ask the Sunday school teachers (they

currently have enough teachers so that each teacher only teaches once a month) to lead

one new members class per month. The advantage to having Sunday school teachers act

as instructors for the new members class is that first, Sunday school and new members

class are conducted simultaneously, so the Sunday school teachers would not be investing

any additional time, second, the lessons are recurring and, therefore, would not require any additional time for preparation. And third, the Sunday school teachers are accustomed to being at church on Sunday morning and therefore their reliability is well-established. The disadvantages were that first, the Sunday school teachers, by their desire to teach Sunday school, also have a desire to learn; instructing a new members class would mean relinquishing an opportunity to attend Sunday school. Second, at this juncture, the Sunday school teachers also happen to be involved in several other ministries so instructing new members class would increase their tasks. Consequently, one or more of them may relinquish the new members instruction as they may find that, along with their other ministry work, that it is too much to do.

I approached two leaders individually – one is a Sunday school and the other is a minister. I explained the vision for the class instructors and they volunteered to teach one new member class per month. The new instructors are slated to begin on March 1, 2015. The challenge of not having an administrative coordinator for the new members class remained a concern. Therefore, we are currently in the process of identifying a person or persons with the skill set and reliability necessary to handle these responsibilities. This position is crucial as the person will not only be the conduit for information sharing and follow up but will also have access to the member's personal information, so we would need to be very thoughtful about this appointment.

And finally, the New Members team discussed having a new members reception. The envisioned reception would happen after service, once every three months and would include refreshments and special recognition of the new members. I asked the new

members class instructor to lead the planning for the reception. We hoped that the initial

reception would take place in the spring but the planning would not happen right away

and eventually the reception was postponed until the fall. It was my intention to

empower the new members instructor and the administrative coordinator to take the lead

in planning the reception but, it seemed that they were not comfortable organizing such

an event and, as a result, the reception was put on hold. The Advisory Committee felt

that a new member's reception is a vital mechanism for assimilation. Therefore, we plan

to revisit the planning of a reception when this project is completed.

Advisory Committee Updates

I presented project updates at the monthly leaders meeting. In this way, the

leaders were current on the project's progress and showed that it had the support of senior

leadership. Because of the church's growth and that we were continually developing new

leaders, I thought that it would be more effective to give progress reports in ways that

would capture attention and help everyone better understand the new member's process.

For that reason I chose to give updates and reports using graphics, Power Point

presentations and charts. The ultimate goal for presenting the numbers and data this way

was for the leaders to understand our growth and its impact on ministries. Discussing

data can be bland and hard to grasp if not shown in ways that captures attention and is

interesting. It was especially important because, although many of our leaders had been

with BCC since its inception, some were not aware of the information we collect from

new members and how that information is disseminated.

These updates also served as an opportunity to solicit suggestions from those not directly associated with the project. The first update included an overview of the project and a PowerPoint handout that included:

- A definition of assimilation and how it impacts every area of church life
- Congregational growing patterns
- Congregational demographics by gender and age group

There were many comments made on the need for all ministries to monitor members and to encourage their participation. The information was so well received that I thought it would be helpful to present a similar analysis on the New Members ("Membership Profile") each month during the deacons meeting. This report will share data such as: membership growth since previous month or report, number of members who transferred from other faith traditions or churches, reasons for joining, age ranges, gender, family composition and the number of new members who reside in Fort Greene, how many commute, how many are baptized and how many are not and how many joined ministries.

The Advisory Committee also decided that once the administrative revisions were complete, we would create a flow chart to show the new member's step by step process and how the proposed changes will impact their assimilation experience and their understanding of church membership.

Bible Studies

In September and October 2014, I conducted three Bible studies, which focused on assimilation. For the benefit of those not familiar with the project, I began the study

with an overview of the project which included time for questions and answers. I

presented a definition of assimilation and included examples intentional assimilation.

I then posed three questions and invited everyone to share their answers. The three
questions were:
1) Why did you leave your former church?
2) Why did you join BCC?
3) How many years were you a member at your former church?

We had an in depth discussion about how people are no longer blindly loyal to

churches, nor are people remaining in church just because it is the church that their

family or grandmother attends. These three questions stimulated an interesting

discussion about how and why people leave church, even those who have held

membership at a particular church for many years. For some, their former church had

been their only church membership. Some left churches that had been a part of their

family history for generations. For many people, those loyalties longer existed. The

results of the questions showed that 38% left their former church because of the lack of

leadership and 34% left because of the lack of spiritual development, which they

identified as "no spiritual depth", "felt spiritual atrophy" and "unfocused preaching and

teaching". Additionally, 25% named a number of "other reasons" why they left their

former church. The "other" reasons listed were: "I didn't fit in", "too political", "lack of

resources", "losing members" and "too many cliques".[5]

Results from the second question - "Why did you join BCC?" – showed that 45%

joined BCC because they felt that they would experience spiritual growth and 20% felt

---

[5] Bible Study Results, Brooklyn Community Church, June 2014.

that there were opportunities to work in ministry. These numbers suggested that people want to grow and that they are searching for a church and leadership that will help them in this quest. These sessions gave members an opportunity to hear each other's stories of frustration and victory. I then shared national statistics conducted by Thom Rainer and Gallup on "Why people attend church", "Why unchurched people join church", and "What keeps youth active in church". Similar to our data, the top three reasons cited for joining or attending church were: good leadership, increased opportunities for ministry involvement and spiritual growth and guidance.

During the second bible study meeting I included an interactive activity, therefore, I wrote a skit entitled "The Point of Contact". Prior to the skit we discussed the "characteristics of an assimilated person". [6] The objective of the satirical skit was to show how visitors (potential new members) are impacted by several ministries during their first visit. I did not give any advance notice about the skit but, at the start of the bible study, I asked for two volunteers to act out the roles. The skit centered on a visitor to a church who, after service describes her experience to a friend. Not all of the interactions were positive. The main character describes the negative interactions or potential "assimilation touches" that began with the parking lot attendant, then the greeters, ushers, deacons and then finally, the pastor's lack of recognition of visitors. Before the end of the skit, a member "saves the day" by befriending the visitor and inviting her to the after-service fellowship.

---

[6] David Durey, "*Attracting And Assimilating The Unchurched In The 21st Century*" (DMin. diss., 2000) 2.

After the skit we discussed the systemic nature of assimilation and the "assimilation touches" that happen regularly in churches. Using photos taken at BCC, I created a slide show to depict the "assimilation touches" at BCC.

The topic of the third Bible study centered on the impact that friendship has on assimilation. The lesson was taken from chapter six of the book entitled "*Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church*"[7]. The study focused on friendship in church and its impact on assimilation. Statistics consistently confirm that new members are more likely to assimilate when they make new friends at church or their friends already attend church.

Family Ministry

During the first full year BCC formed the Family Ministry. Like small group ministry and the class system, the Family Ministry is comprised of lay and ordained servant-leaders, known as "group leaders", who provide members with spiritual leadership in the form of prayers, spiritual guidance, fellowship and encouragement. In the Family Ministry, group leaders are assigned to minister to families as well as individual members. An entire family is generally assigned to one group leader instead of assigning members of the same family to different leaders. The group leaders work closely with new members to ensure that they have adequate and appropriate opportunities to engage in church life. Additionally, group leaders convey the member's special needs or situations to the Senior Pastor and/or other appropriate ministry leaders.

---

[7] McIntosh and Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies For Evangelism And Assimilation In The Local Church*, 75.

The tasks of the Family Group Leaders are:

- Monitor worship attendance
- Pray with members
- Watch over members
- Communicate with the membership periodically to inquire as to their well-being
- Encourage new members to become involved in the church's ministries, attend new members class, bible study and Sunday school
- Assist new members and families where possible without being intrusive
- Keep the Senior Pastor informed of the status of membership
- Visit with the sick and shut-in members and submit information to the church office for the bulletin
- Minister to the bereaved
- Render the testimony from the Family Ministry Leader at the funeral of members

The Family Ministry sub-committee was initially comprised of the Family Ministry President, Deacon Marilyn, Deacon Fuzzy and myself. Much like the New Members Ministry, the Family Ministry met to review its current practices and began by reviewing the ministry's purpose, goals and the responsibilities. Ideally, after the New Members Ministry, the Family Ministry is the first point of contact for new members and, by design, can have the most impact on member assimilation. Originally, the ministry's structure and objective was similar to small group ministry in that the membership was divided amongst the deacons and membership was distributed by zip code. In time, lay leaders were invited to become group leaders and, at that time, the distribution protocol transitioned from zip code to assigning members to group leaders that the members were friends with or related to. Ideally, new members were assigned to a group immediately after joining. Since this was done by family and friend affiliation, it was not difficult to assign someone to a group as many new members came to BCC as the result of a personal invitation. For those who did not have those kinds of affiliations, other criteria

such as age, zip code, profession, etc. was used to determine the best group fit for them. The original Family Ministry President resigned a year before this project began, subsequently, the church clerk assumed responsibility for the ministry. The church clerk did an amazing job getting to know the membership because she also managed the new membership registration and as the full-time church clerk, received calls from church membership and arranged for new members to meet with the pastor. As such, she could literally recall details about each member and family. She was a "human" membership database – this skill would be priceless as we began to assign members to group leaders. However, there were challenges.

First, as previously mentioned, the Family Ministry President at that time was also the full-time church clerk, the New Members Ministry Administrative Coordinator, a Group Leader and a Deacon. Needless to say she was overwhelmed. As a result, some problems surfaced. First, during our review, we discovered that there were more than 30 members who had joined over the course of several months but were not assigned a group. Second, regular group leader meetings lapsed because none of the leaders attended the meetings. And, third, group leaders were not consistently responding to email requests for updates on their group.

While the ministry president routinely monitored the group assigned to her and regularly sent senior leadership written comprehensive updates summarizing the results of her bi-weekly outreach, there were no reporting mechanisms in place for the other group leaders. And, the ministry presidents' requests to the leaders for outreach results were unanswered.

After the first meeting we updated and refreshed the text in the Family Ministry group leader's job description, and the objectives and mission of the ministry. We circulated the document to senior leadership, myself, and the ministry leader, and all changes were approved. Before we could begin to address the structural issues in the Family Ministry, we had to relieve the church clerk of the leadership responsibility and appoint new leaders. Deacons Veronica and Fuzzy agreed to become President and Vice-President respectively. Because of her extensive knowledge of the membership, Deacon Marilyn agreed to remain on the team to help transition the new leaders and to provide guidance on membership group assignment and the overall functions of the ministry.

The first task was to get a sense and understanding of the membership. We approached the membership list with questions such as:

- Who is assigned?
- Who is not?
- Who are the irregular, inactive and away members?

This process would take about four months to complete because the ministry president and vice-president were basically rebuilding the ministry. They were, however, very invested in the project and committed to ensuring that our members were cared for. Still, there was a deep learning curve. Nonetheless, we recognized that the Family Ministry is the hub of new member assimilation so everyone agreed that investing quality time in getting the ministry up and running was a priority.

Group Leaders

The Family Ministry President and Vice-President (ministry leaders) began by reviewing the list of group leaders. The group leaders had not met on a regular basis

therefore, the ministry leaders did not want to assign any members to groups until they had established which leaders would still serve. After speaking with each group leader, the ministry leaders gave the group leaders the opportunity to opt out of leadership; some accepted the offer, others said they were not aware that they were group leaders. The ministry leaders then asked the congregation for volunteer group leaders and received a favorable response. Although the volunteers were enthusiastic about leading, many had no prior church leadership experience. For that reason, I suggested creating a "new group leader orientation". While I didn't think we should bombard the new group leaders with an abundance of information that they may not initially need, I didn't want the new group leaders to begin this important work without guidance, training or an understanding of their commitment and the ministry's expectations. To address this concern, we discussed partnering an experienced leader partner with a new leader, in addition, we discussed creating a "New Group Leader FAQ" (Frequently Asked Questions) handout. We also decided that the ministry leaders would each mentor fifteen group leaders. Mentoring this many group leaders was not ideal. The ministry leaders preferred mentoring five to seven leaders, nonetheless, they understood the importance of periodic one-on-one guidance and that new leaders receive scheduled trainings.

Although the leaders were now on board and everyone understood their assignment, we could not schedule a group leaders meeting until the entire membership were assigned and those members, whose group leader had opted out, were reassigned. At this point, the group leaders: 1) knew that they could opt out of leadership at any time, 2) knew their mentor, 3) understood the importance of providing spiritual care for all

members and, 4) were informed that the ministry leaders were in the process of assigning the entire membership to groups. Each leader was assigned a group number in order to better track the groups and, the leaders began the enormous task of assigning the unassigned new members which, by the time this process began, had grown from about thirty members to more than fifty. Additionally, the ministry leaders had to reassign those members whose group leaders had opted out.

Group Membership

With Deacon Marilyn's help, we restarted a process that actually began several months prior to this project, and that was identifying the inactive and irregular members. For clarity, we defined inactive members as members who do not attend worship service or other church events and are not involved in ministry. Irregular members were defined as those with inconsistent attendance to worship service, church events and are inconsistently involved in ministry. We also created a category entitled "away members". The "away members" were college students and those temporarily or permanently out of the state that have requested to remain on the church roll. The "away members" are considered active in that they support the church financially and worship with BCC when they are in town.

Using the list that Rev. Fred and Deacon Marilyn compiled, we used two charts to organize the names and contact information for the inactive and irregular members. The list included 37 irregular members and 17 inactive members. We then determined the group leader assignment and, with assistance from Deacon Marilyn, compiled all of the previous outreach.

Deacon Marilyn was our best source of membership information as she had been

involved in outreach to the inactive and irregular members in the past. We shared this

information with Rev. Fred. We kept detailed records of the results of the outreach. The

timeline played out this way:

November 18, 2013	List compiled with previous follow-up and outreach	
December 19, 2013	Advisory Committee recommends a letter be sent to inactive and irregular members letting them know we miss them and asking them to contact the church	We also asked members who might know some of the inactive and irregulars to reach out to them
February 11, 2014	Letter sent	
March 18-20, 2014	Outreach via in-person visits, phone calls and emails	
April 9, 2014	Based on the response, advisory committee recommends which members to drop from membership	Outreach continues via individual members and by members of the advisory committee

Figure 4: Timeline and Outreach Strategy to Inactive and Irregular Members

Rev. Fred encouraged the advisory committee to continue outreach to the inactive and

irregular members and to revisit the inactive and irregular member's status by the end of

the year.

With the group leaders on board and a well-defined membership list, the president

and vice-president began to assign and reassign members. Once the membership was

assigned, a letter was sent from the ministry leaders to every member letting them know

the name of their group leader and the purpose of the Family Ministry. Additionally,

each group leader received a list of their group members along with the member's contact

information. The list also identified the inactive and irregular members. The ministry

leaders then scheduled a series of face-to-face and conference call meetings with group

leaders. The structure of the meetings would include reports from each group leader and

sharing of best outreach practices. These meetings proved to be productive in that leaders learned from each other by utilizing peer-to-peer guidance and training. And, as leaders reported on their groups, we found that some members had mistakenly been assigned to two groups. Another advantage for the group reports was that some of our group leaders who live in the Fort Greene community – where BCC is located – often see irregular and inactive members at the grocery store or in the neighborhood and, although the member is not assigned to them, they take time to find out how they are doing. They can then report back to the leader assigned to that member. We also discovered that some group leaders were close friends of members who were assigned to other leaders. This helped as friends can outreach in ways that group leaders with less familiarity with the members cannot.

In addition to group-style reporting, the family ministry advisory sub-committee discussed creating a formal written reporting system. After some discussion, the ministry leaders decided to postpone using written reports because the group leaders had gained momentum and the ministry leaders wanted to maintain it. Therefore, they thought it was best to postpone any formal reporting system. For the monthly follow up reports, the leaders were instructed to send a short narrative report by email. It was more important for the group leaders to get accustomed to reporting, even if that meant oral reports for the time being. The method of the report was not the priority. Before this project ended, the project leaders proposed a form that has several spaces to record outreach dates, times, results and follow-up. At the close of this project the form was approved and distributed to the group leaders.

Congregational Questionnaire

The Advisory Committee wanted to survey the congregation to get feedback on BCC's current assimilation practices and to ascertain from the membership how they felt about their assimilation experience. I researched a survey tool that we adapted that was created by Hartford Institute for Religion Research. In April 2014, the advisory committee distributed approximately 80 surveys and received 23 completed surveys or 25%. The Advisory Committee examined the results of the entire survey. Those who responded revealed that they had positive assimilation experiences and felt that they had numerous opportunities to participate in ministry and for spiritual growth. Additionally, studies reveal that members who have friends that attend the same church are generally more active in church and attend church more regularly. The survey revealed that 91% of the most active respondents had 7 or more friends at BCC. Samplings of the results are depicted below.
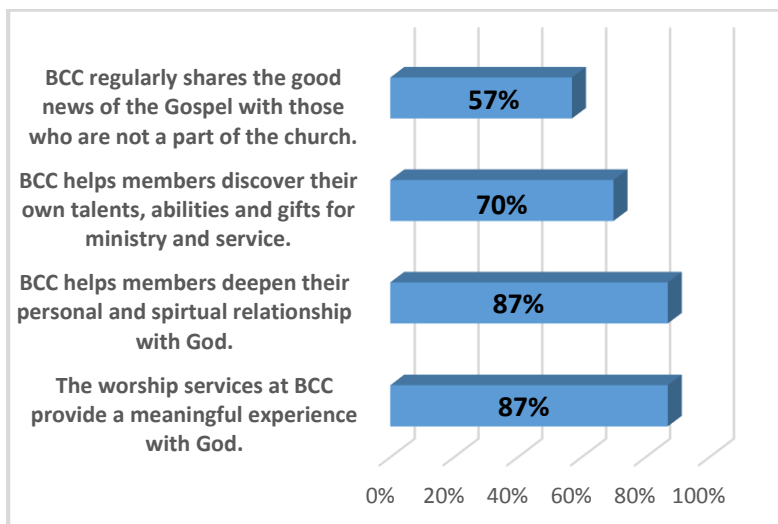
Figure 5: Congregational Survey Statements Regarding Spiritual Growth Opportunities at BCC and the Corresponding Results
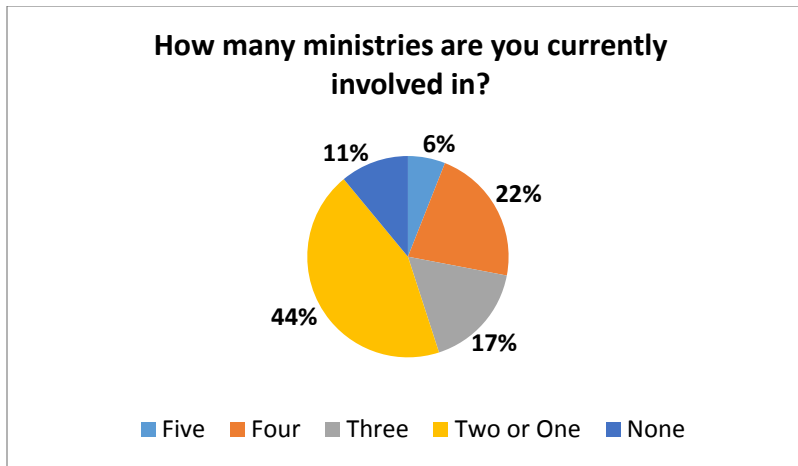
How many ministries are you currently involved in?

6%

11%

22%

44%

17%

■ Five ■ Four ■ Three ■ Two or One ■ None

Figure 6: Congregational Survey Question Regarding Ministry Involvement

Over the past year, has your participation in ministry increased, decreased or remained the same?

9%

9%

13%

47%

22%

■ Increased

■ Remained the same
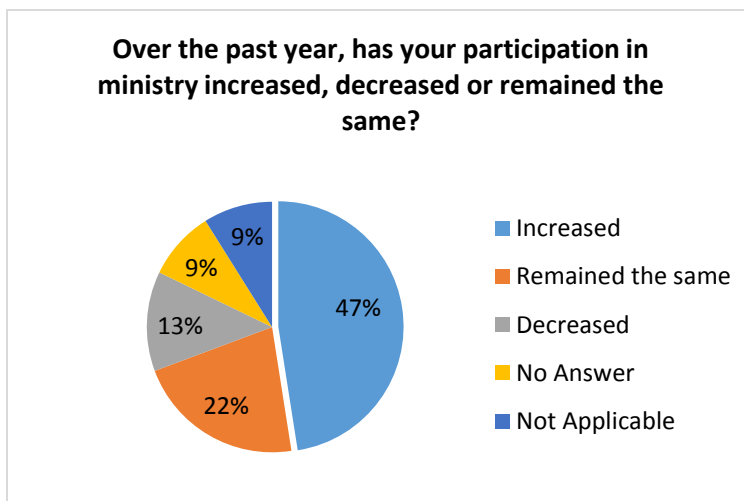
■ Decreased

■ No Answer

■ Not Applicable

Figure 7: Congregational Survey Question Regarding the Increase or Decrease in Membership Ministry Involvement

Database

The New Members Registration Form and the Stewardship of Time and Talent

form contain all the information needed to assist leaders in getting to know the members

and understanding how best to minister to them. Gathering and disseminating new

member information was the key to effective ongoing ministry to new members. The

Advisory Committee knew from the outset that maintaining membership data would require a database and personnel who could coordinate and manage the data. With that, we formed a sub-advisory committee for technology. The sub-committee consisted of the BCC Media and IT Director, the Administrative Assistant to the Senior Pastor and me - the Pastor for Church Administration.

The sub-committee began the search by developing a database "wish list" which outlined the features we absolutely had to have, such as multiple ways to sort and report data, a user friendly interface, administrative controls to protect and secure data and remote access to membership data via smart phone applications, iPads and laptops. We investigated several database solutions that were geared towards church administration. We narrowed our search down to four solutions. We then scheduled on line demonstrations and invited the music director, and the pastor for outreach ministries to participate. We would have invited other appropriate leaders but the demonstrations were done during the daytime hours and most leaders are not available because they work.

After about three months, we selected Servant Keeper. The database was installed in January 2015 and we are currently in the process of migrating our data from several Word documents to the new database. The administrative assistant to the senior pastor has taken on the task of doing the hands on migration, although the IT director and I continue to work with her as a team. Because the administrative assistant's first priority is to the senior pastor, I anticipate, at some point, BCC will need to hire staff to manage membership data or recruit a qualified volunteer. The key to this assignment will be to

have a skill set consistent with data management. Managing membership data has to be

monitored daily and the dissemination of reports and data has to be timely and accurate. I

anticipate the build-out of the database that will incorporate reports and membership data,

will be completed in March 2015.

CHAPTER 6

PROJECT SUMMARY

As previously mentioned, this project began at a pivotal time in the life of BCC –

a newly formed church. As such, the project was well-received by the church leaders

and, overall, was a blessing to the congregation, it was also well received by the

members. Needless to say, there was excitement about formalizing our assimilation

process. Rev. Fred had extensive experience in church growth therefore, assimilation

was a part of BCC's culture since the church began. As such, all members and ministries

were tasked with keeping up with the membership, however no formalized membership

tracking process existed within the New Members and Family Ministries.

Over the course of three years, these two ministries experienced changes in

leadership. The most recent leaders, although hard workers and dedicated to the mission

and development of BCC, did not possess the administrative or computer skill sets

necessary to manage these two vital ministries. As such, tracking new member's

attendance to new members class and assigning members to family groups had lapsed.

Ideally, the skill set needed to manage both of these ministries are follow-up and follow-

through skills, the ability to manage people, chair meetings, create agendas and draft

meeting minutes, word processing skills and, be able to evaluate and improve processes.

As BCC's current church growth trend continues, we will need to increase our leadership

capacity to keep pace with our church growth.

My vision for the project was for the advisory committee to create an assimilation process that began with the New Members and Family Ministries. Those two ministries are the first stops for new members and, as a church I believe that new members should be afforded spiritual guidance and fellowship from the outset. The Advisory Committee was committed to developing an intentional assimilation system. For those reasons, I looked forward to exploring processes that included, among other things, tracking mechanisms, recruiting and training new leaders, a plan to promote spiritual development and, a campaign to encourage members to become involved in ministry.

After this project began, I gained a better understanding of the infrastructure and administrative challenges that existed in the New Members and the Family Ministries. Both ministries are vitally important to new member assimilation and I applaud the leaders for taking on the responsibility. With that being said, instead of putting what I envisioned in place, we basically had to rebuild both ministries from the ground up. When the ministries began three years ago, the Family Ministry leader developed a basic membership group assignment plan – which was good. However, plans and processes require follow-up, revision and time to evaluate its effectiveness. As much as I wanted to move past the ground level work and move on to developing leaders and improving processes, I accepted the fact that rebuilding the ministries was part of the process – a major part. And, to fully appreciate how the ministries functioned, I needed to be a part of the process. With that, I put aside my initial expectations and dealt with the current reality of the ministries as all processes hinge on a stable administrative infrastructure.

Stabilizing the infrastructure meant we would need to eventually address the skill set of our leaders. When the new leaders were appointed – which happened about half way through the project timeline - their learning curve postponed improvements for an additional two months. Again, as much as I wanted to move the project at a quicker pace, I had to move in a way that allowed new leaders to transition and give them time to acclimate to their new assignments. Also, I did all of the necessary revising and updating because the leaders in place at the time did not have computer skills. While I was glad the changes would get done, this process was time consuming and I wasn't expecting or planning to make these updates.

In looking at the growth trend at BCC, it would necessary to recruit additional instructors for the New Members Class so that we could relieve the current instructor of the sole responsibility of teaching every Sunday. One suggestion was to ask the Sunday school teachers to volunteer to teach one new members class per month. This was a good suggestion, as the new members class is a recurring class, which eliminates the need for weekly preparation and, because the teachers had taught at BCC since the inception of Sunday school, the teachers had already established their reliability. I agreed that there needed to be additional teaching and administrative capacity within the new members ministry, however, I also felt that having Sunday school teachers also teach new members would add more responsibility to leaders who are already managing or working in multiple ministries. Still, I realized we needed to address this concern and waiting for the ideal situation was not an option. So far, two leaders have volunteered to become instructors. One is currently a Sunday school teacher and the other is not. The new

instructors will begin soon and we plan to develop a training for new members instructors.

There were several areas of improvement that I look forward to completing as this project closes. The first is to create spiritual development classes and a discussion on utilizing individual gifts. My suggestion is that these classes either be part of the new members class or be offered as stand-alone classes. Because we lack instructors for any additional classes, the best option may be to include a chapter in the new members orientation manual on spiritual development and spiritual gifts.

At this point we are in a place where more can be done to help assimilate new members. For example, we need to distribute a "welcome brochure" to new members at the point of joining. A short, detailed and concise trifold, or something similar with "what's next" information such as the time of new members class, an explanation of the family group ministry, what's available for children, youth, women, men and a schedule of Bible study, Sunday school other church activities.

After the appointment of the family ministry group leaders, the ministry gained momentum and made some progress. The advisory committee is pleased that all of our new members have been assigned to a group and a tracking system is in place. The committee advocated for training for the new leaders, and as a result, the group leaders implemented training and mentoring for group leaders. Plans are one thing but, appreciating the various aspects of what is involved in day-to-day ministry is equally important. Setting a solid administrative foundation is the key to the success of any new process and, any stress points that are not addressed will be felt throughout the system

and, deteriorate the foundation. Additionally, when considering new processes, time has to be built into the process for leaders and others to adjust to their new responsibilities. The Advisory Committee was aware that as BCC grew, we would need to improve the efficiencies of these ministries. Improving systems includes testing scenarios to determine the potential obstacles.

The strength of this project was found in the enthusiasm and zeal that was exhibited by Rev. Fred, the members of BCC and the Advisory Committee. From the outset, everyone was fully on board with ensuring that we provided the best congregational care for our new members.

I was amazed at how God took a situation that I had experienced years ago to plant a seed within me that would blossom into a ministry project that I continue to feel such passion for. As I reflect on the project, the scripture found in the book of Esther comes to mind; it reads "And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"[1]

---

[1] Esther 4:14b.

Please see appendices (pages 112-182) in a supplemental file entitled appendices.pdf

WORKS CONSULTED

Ackerman, Dan, et al. *Effective Leadership in the Church*. Grand Rapids: Sustaining Pastoral Excellence, 2006.

Anderson, Christine M. *Life Together: Reclaiming the Ministry of Small Groups*. ed. Michael J. Christensen and Carl Savage. *Equipping the Saints: Mobilizing Laity For Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2000.

Miller, Craig Kennet. *Next Church. Now: Creating New Faith Communities* Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1989.

Andrews, Edwards D. *Early Christianity In The First Century*. Cambridge: Christian Publishing Houses, 2014.

Banks, Robert J. *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches In Their Cultural Setting*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1995.

Bass Butler, Diana. *Christianity For The Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006.

Bridges, Jerry. *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia*. Colorado: NavPress, 2012.

Bullard, George. *10 Factors of Congregational Survivability, Vitality, and Vibrancy*. Chalice Press, 2013.

Cladis, George. *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999.

Creps, Earl. *Reverse Mentoring*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.

Dick, Dan R. and Evelyn M. Burry. *Quest: A Journey Toward A New Kind of Church*. Nashville: Disciple Resources, 1999.

Duin, Julia. *Quitting Church: Why The Faithful Are Fleeing*. Colorado: Bondfire Books, 2013.

Durey, David. Dissertation title "*Attracting and Assimilating the Unchurched in the 21st Century*", 2000.

Easum, William M. *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers: Ministry Anytime Anywhere By Anyone*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.

Gladen, Steve. *Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011.

Heck, Joel D. *New Membership Assimilation: Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1988.

Hawkings, Greg L. and Cally Parkinson. *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

Hellerman, Joseph H. *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community.* Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009.

Hemphill, Ken and Mike James. *V.E.L.C.R.O. Church*. Tigerville: Auxano Press, 2011.

Kirkpatrick, Thomas G. *Small Groups In The Church: A Handbook for Creating Community*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995.

Lucas, Rev. Dr. Fred. *Personal Biography*, Brooklyn Community Church.

Linder, Eileen W. edit. *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 2012*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012.

Masters, Peter. *Church Membership in the Bible*. London: The Wakeman Trust. 2008.

Maxwell, John C. *The Maxwell Leadership Bible: Lessons in Leadership form the Word of God*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002.

McIntosh, Gary and Glen Martin. *Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church.* Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992.

Meeks, Wayne A. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

Morgan, Tony. *Developing a Theology of Planning*. Tony Morgan Live LLC, 2013.

Moy, Russell. *The Loss and Recovery of Lay Ministry*. ed. Michael J. Christensen and Carl E. Savage, *Equipping The Saints: Mobilizing Laity For Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.

Precept Group Inc. *Ministry Area Profile 2012*. Study Area: 11205.

Rainer, Thom S. *I Am A Church Member: Discovering the Attitude that Makes the Difference*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013.

Rainer, Thom S. and Chuck Lawless. *Eating the Elephant: Leading the Established Church to Growth*. Pinnacle Publishers, 2003.

Milt Rodriguez. *The Community Life of God: Seeing the Godhead As the Model for All Relationships*, Rebuilders, 2009.

Rees, Erik. *S.H.A.P.E. Finding and Fulfilling Your Unique Purpose for Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.

Ryken, Leland, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Downers Grover: Inter Varsity Press, 1998.

Searcy, Nelson and Jennifer Henson. *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests Into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church*. Ventura: Regal, 2007.

Stetzer, Ed and Thom S. Rainer. *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010.

Stevens, R. Paul and Phil Collins. *The Equipping Pastor: A Systems Approach to Congregational Leadership.* Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 1993.

Strong, James. *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996.

Viola, Frank. *Reimagining Church: Pursing The Dream of Organic Christianity* Colorado Springs: David Cook, 2008.

Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

Wayne A. Meeks. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, New Haven: Yale University Press: 2003.

Winseman, Albert. *Growing An Engaged Church: How To Stop"Doing Church"And Start Being The Church Again*. New York: Gallup Press, 2006.

Website Publications

Healy, Michelle. Happiness is Having Friends at Church. *USA Today* (2010). Accessed January 2, 2015, http://www.usatoday30.usatoday.com//yourlife/mind-soul/spiritualit/12-07-2010 happy religion07_ST_N.htm.

Jones, Carl. When We Think of the Church as a Building: 3 Consequences that come from viewing the Church as a place. *Relevant Online Magazine* (2013). Accessed December 24, 2014, http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/when-we-think-church-building.

Rainer, Thom. The Main Reasons People Leave a Church. *Thom Rainer.com Blog*
(2013). Accessed November 24, 2014, http://thomrainer.com/2013/01/21/the-main-reason-people-leave-a-church.

Website Resources

www.Blue Letter Bible.com

MetroTech BID, Accessed November 5, 2014,
http://downtownbrooklyn.com/about/metrotech-bid.

Project Matters: A Joint Project of City Lore and the Municipal Art Society, "*Places That Matter,*" Accessed November 12, 2014, http://www.placematters.net/node/1857.